



# Digital Conference Paper: Comics & Conflicts (2011)

**Paper Title:** The first Afghanistan war through the glare of *the Photographer* and Emmanuelle Guibert

**Author:** Isabelle Delorme

---

**Conference Title:** Comics & Conflicts: Stories of War in Comics, Graphic Novels & Manga

**Dates:** 19/08/2011 – 20/08/2011

**Location:** Imperial War Museum, London

---



Download provided as part of Comics Forum's  
Affiliated Conference scheme.

Download URL: <http://comicsforum.org/scholarly-resources/affiliated-conferences/comics-conflicts-2011/>

## The first Afghanistan war through the glare of *the Photographer* and Emmanuel Guibert

Isabelle Delorme

### Introduction :

For me, Emmanuel Guibert is one of the most famous French authors of comic books. He is working in different styles varying from hyperrealistic to Clear Line. This writer and illustrator was born in Paris in nineteen sixty four. He is well known for two books, *Alan's War* and *The Photographer* but he also works for a child audience.

*The photographer*<sup>1</sup> is an impressive and very human way to show how war could impress landscape and population. It is taking place during the first Afghanistan's war, which opposed the Soviet Union to the Afghan Mujahideen between nineteen seventy-nine and nineteen eighty-nine.

It was originally published in France between two thousand and three and two thousand and six.

In July nineteen eighty six, (p6) photojournalist Didier Lefèvre joined a team of Medecins Sans Frontières (MSF/Doctors Without Borders) and followed them into Afghanistan for their medical and social mission.

Here, just at the beginning of the comic book, at page six-the book contains two hundred sixty seven pages-the photographer is going to present himself and we discover the principle guiding of this graphic novel : a mix of drawings and photographs.

The mission is led by a woman, Juliette Fournot, who speaks the local language, and is dressed as a man and has the respect of the French and the local warlords.

The graphic novel has three parts : the trip in, the medical mission, the trip out. Part one begins at Peshawar, in Pakistan where the photographer, Didier, meet the MSF team. From Peshawar they walk for three weeks to reach to the north of Afghanistan through very high mountain passes with a caravan of armed Mujahideens hiding from soviet eyes. Part 2 is a heart-rending depiction of human suffering in the MSF clinic. Part 3 follows Didier near catastrophic attempt to walk back to Pakistan without the MSF Team, culminating in the nightmare photographs of his horse and the landscape, lost in the night and in the mountains, where he expected to die.

---

<sup>1</sup> Guibert, Lefèvre, Lemerrier, *The Photographer, into war-torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders*, First second, 2009

To what extent is a comic book a mean to represent the war ? I'm going to present you with an analysis of *the photographer*. My presentation will explore two dimensions : one, the innovative character of this graphic novel and two, the way the author represents the war not through combat action but through the effects of the war on people and landscape.

### A singular album

*The Photographer* is a singular comic book because of the large extent to which photographs are used. All the photographs are in black and white except for one. They are interwoven with texts and drawings by Emmanuel Guibert. Sometimes, the photographs take the whole page, *p80* when the author wants to insist especially and consider that photographs are more efficient than words. For example, the last page of the first volume is the photography of a peaceful place, where a mujahideen has been buried two years ago. He was a member of the caravan of Doctors without borders which has been machine-gunned from the air. Damages of war are recorded in the landscape in many ways.

Some photographs are very hard to look at, as the next one (*p119*). It shows us a very seriously wounded young man, Amrullah, sixteen, who had the lower part of his face torn off by shrapnel from an artillery shell. The reader doesn't need words to understand the sufferings of the population and the great difficulty the doctors have to operate in rudimentary conditions. This operation shown here has lasted eight hours without any interruption for the surgeon.

Many of the photographs are directly reprinted from contact sheets.

*P120*, this page is immediately after the photograph of Amrullah, and we can see the work of the nurses and the doctors during the operation.

Maybe it is a way for Emmanuel Guibert to point out to us, just in one page, as many details as he can about one event.

Emmanuel Guibert has chosen among the four thousand negatives taken by Didier Lefevre those he wanted to use for his album and he has been helped by a graphic designer, Frederic Lemercier.

Emmanuel Guibert is full of admiration for Didier Lefèvre's reporting and was very disappointed by the fact that the work of his friend was not known, as is mentioned at the end of *The photographer*. *P262* : "On December twenty seven, nineteen eighty six, the French newspaper *Libération* published six of his photographs in a two page spread. Of the four thousand photos he brought back, getting six published seems like a dizzingly small fraction. But it was a privilege : many of his subsequent remarkable photo stories were never published".

That's why Emmanuel Guibert proposed to Didier Lefèvre to prepare this graphic novel together with Frederic Lemercier.

It's a success : in twenty eleven the book has sold more than three hundred thousand. The graphic novel has been translated into fourteen languages and has received many prizes. It was selected as one of the "essential" comic book at the international BD festival of Angoulême in two thousand and seven. In twenty ten, the Photographer received the Will Eisner award in the category best US edition of International Material.

The representation of the war through its effects on people and landscape

This comic book is ambiguous for me because war is omnipresent in the graphic novel but it's not showing war in a classic manner. We are just behind the front line of war and we never see land operations, killings or murders. The population and the team of MSF are afraid of soviet fighters, but we never see them. For me, one particular moment illustrates this ambiguity : it's the scene when Didier is talking with the team about the soviet doctors : *p115-116*.

However, even if we never see fights, weapons and all the arsenal of war is omnipresent in the graphic novel, as we are going to discover now.

Men are always armed. *P98*

That would be normal for us when they are escorting their leader but even they are sleeping or praying, these fighters are keeping their weapons. It is even more startling when we see them standing in arms next to the surgeon who operate on one of their companions.*p121*

Mines are an another sort of weapons and cause terrible damage to the population. Didier Lefèvre is afraid for them for afghan people, especially for children, and also for himself. When he is lost in the mountains and sincerely believes that he is going to die, he is very careful to stay on the path in order to avoid mines. *P219*

Weapons are part of life in this war, especially for men, and we never see women with weapons. Sometimes, men looks like human weapons, as we can see on this vignette *p 67* : as we can see, this man is heavily charged. He has to carry his own luggage and a bundle a half dozen of antitank shells.

The heavier missiles are carried by animals, especially donkeys and mules

Weapons are also used in unexpected manner, as we can observe here. The action is happening during the trip into Afghanistan : *p 89-90 The fighter is going to throw a grenade in the river.*

When there is war in a country, some of it's people flee and become refugees.

Isabelle Delorme : The first Afghanistan war through the glare of *the Photographer (Guibert-Lefèvre-Lemercier)*

Afghanistan is the country which has known the most important exodus in the world since nineteen eighty. In two thousand and nine, there are more than six millions of afghan refugees, this is the second national group in importance after the Palestinians. *p12, p69*

This is the ordinary life of refugees, when they are not living in a camp : men, women, children, on the road, with heavily loaded animals. We sense that the journey will be long and dangerous and nobody knows when it will end.

Of course, when there is war, a lot of people are wounded or die. The book shows it to us but always with sensitivity and humanity, this the great strength of Emmanuel Guibert, who is a really generous and very intelligent man, and this graphic novel is also a reflection of his manner of thinking.

In september nineteen eighty six, there was a massive bombing on a village close by. The situation was terrible, there were lots of wounded or dead people. Didier, as well as the reader, is very impressed by the damages down to the population and by the great efficiency of the team of doctors, who are themselves appalled by the bombings and the consequences they have had on the population. We can see with this graphic novel that doctors are really engaged and that photo and video are accurate means to denounce the war and its consequent loss of life.

*P136* As Didier has been taken four thousand photographs, Juliette Fournot, Jamila for the afghans people, has made several videos, and excerpts are available with part three of the graphic novel, in the french version of the Photographer.

#### Conclusion :

For me, the Photographer is a very great graphic novel, human and engaged. The mix of drawings and photographs, the precise and sober words of Emmanuel Guibert are an excellent way to make the reader perceive the image and the reality of Afghanistan's war.

The representation of war in this comic book is very interesting and innovative because war is not the unique subject of the book and the human being is at the centre of the graphic novel.

We can also see that peace is very present in this war-torn country. Peace is present in human relations, inside the team, in the attention of the medical team for their patients, in the caring by the Afghans for their close ones, wounded or not, especially in the intergenerational relationship.

But peace is always going with war, as Didier discover when he arrives in a beautiful landscape *p78*.