

NARRATIVE AND IMAGE IN THE COMMEMORATION OF WAR: THE BLOG OF L.T. SMASH

Michael Keren, University of Calgary

Introduction

As I begin to write this article, in May 2004, the 60th anniversary of D-Day is approaching and the media, always impressed by dates like the sixth of June, is beginning its campaign to commemorate “the longest day.” On American PBS television, an American veteran is shown on Omaha Beach simulating the landing before the cameras. The impressively fit man in his eighties is frog leaping while aiming an imaginary rifle at the rocks overlooking the landing area. He then throws himself on the ground, rolls in the sand while still aiming the imaginary rifle, and – how not - is confronted by a former Wehrmacht veteran machine gun operator who seems a bit lost at the occasion, yet nods his head in agreement when told how exciting the reunion must be. On Canada Television’s morning show, in the weather segment following the news, a group of Canadian veterans who landed on Juno Beach are listening to a song composed in their honor by a young woman, which is interrupted within 10 seconds by the weather report. And in another television show, a young interviewer asks a uniformed World War II veteran a set of standard questions while showing clear disinterest in the historical event that made her producers initiate this interview.

On May 30, New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd provides an even more historically disinterested and patronizing account of the opening of the World War II memorial in Washington D.C. two days before:

“As a native Washingtonian, I felt sad to see L'Enfant's empty, perfect stretch of mall, elegantly anchored by the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, broken up. And while heaven knows we could use a triumphalist moment about now, the architecture seemed so ugly for such a beautiful victory, and so 19th-century German for such a 20th-century American ode to heroism. But when I went Friday and saw all the adorable World War II veterans rolling in wheelchairs, walking slowly with canes or on their own, sitting on the benches that encircle the fountains, taking pictures with children and grandchildren, meeting up with their old buddies, the memorial was suddenly a lovely place to be. It may not be perfect as a piece of architecture, but it's perfect as a showcase for the ordinary guys who achieved the extraordinary. Thrilled with their moment in the sun in their usual humble way, inspecting the memorial they earned 60 years after D-Day, they looked in that setting as shining and valuable as jewels in a Tiffany's window.”¹

However embarrassing their encounters with the media often are, many veterans are taking part in them. Veterans associations are putting pressure on the media, as well as on governments and civil society institutions, to run programs, build memorials, announce commemoration days, and finance war museums, as part of their urge not to be forgotten. This urge, identified all over the world,² has a multitude of psychological and organizational reasons: the obligation to fallen comrades, the need to make sense of a traumatic experience, the willingness to revive the excitements of one's youth, the usefulness of public exposure to securing pension and health benefits, the sense of owning a unique heritage that ought to be shared with the next generations, etc. Although the commemoration of war often involves an account of its horrors, especially by novelists, poets and artists,³ it also frequently emphasizes virtues associated

¹ Maureen Dowd, “An Ode to Clarity.” *New York Times*, May 30, 2004.

² See T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper eds., *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³ See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

with it, such as heroism, sacrifice, bravery, comradeship, abolition of class barriers, devotion to a higher cause, and ingenuity.⁴

Traditionally, these virtues were considered building blocks of the nation state, which therefore encouraged select veterans' groups to turn their war experiences into social memory, defined as "an artificial recollection of some experiences by some groups, institutions, or individuals in society organized according to recognizable scripts and having a moral dimension".⁵ The experiences recollected along a moral script by military forces allowed the nation state to endow itself with the virtues exhibited in the veterans' legacies.

This process has been analyzed in various studies, notably George Mosse's *Fallen Soldiers*, in which he showed the role of the virtues attributed to the fallen in World War I in the construction of interwar nationalism by European intellectuals.⁶ In another study, Omer Bartov has shown how small military elite units took up the traditional role of the hero-king in providing the rest of the mass with an example of heroism. Claiming that the elite ethos of groups such as the French Foreign Legion, the British SAS, or the American Green Berets has always been a highly potent myth, Bartov nevertheless highlights the importance of that myth to the contemporary nation state:

"The Homeric hero, the medieval knight, the SS officer, the French paratrooper, all represent a view of human existence, reflecting and molding a

⁴ See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

⁵ John Nerone, "Professional History and Social Memory." *Communication* 11, no. 2 (1989): 92.

⁶ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

social and political reality by practicing their image of war on the battlefield, and striving to adapt the reality of their civilian environment to their martial ethos".⁷

In recent decades, however, with the decline of the nation state as a main molder of virtues, the turning away of intellectuals from historical narrative, the objection to war commemoration in civil society (e.g., by feminist groups objecting to the masculine heritage it perpetuates), a general anti-war sentiment, and the dominance of popular culture in many spheres of life, veterans find it harder and harder to initiate acts of commemoration.⁸ Their moral scripts can hardly compete with the rhythm of rock music, the noise of video arcades or the speedy communication on MTV. This is familiar from other attempts to reach out to the young in parental sermons, anti-smoking ads, or history lessons in schools, but no scenes seem more frustrating than those of a war veteran telling war stories to an inattentive youth, or a memorial day devoted to shopping: "Ask an average American when or what Armistice Day is and you'll likely to draw a blank state; ask about Veterans Day and you're not likely to do much better. One of those awkward anniversaries that insist upon being tied to a specific date, unsuitable for shuffling off to a nearby Monday to satisfy car dealers and department stores, November 11 has become an orphan holiday."⁹

Veterans not only feel orphaned but also often perceive their heritage as being distorted by popular culture, as indicated by the many controversies stirred

⁷ Omer Bartov, "Man and the Mass: Reality and the Heroic Image in War." *History @ Memory* 1 (Fall/Winter 1989): 116.

⁸ See Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum." *History and Theory* 36 (1997): 44-63; Jacqueline Scott and Lillian Zac, "Collective Memories in Britain and the United States." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 57 (1993): 315-331.

⁹ Stephen Budiansky, "Have We Forgotten to Remember?" *U.S. News & World Report* 119, November 13, 1995. P. 20.

over this matter. In the U.S., a famous controversy concerned the National Air and Space Museum's plan in 1994 to exhibit the Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. This led to a huge public scandal steered mainly by the Air Force Association, which ultimately resulted in the abolishment of the exhibition by the Smithsonian Institution.¹⁰ In Canada, a famous controversy concerned the 1992 CBC documentary series *The Valour and the Horror*, produced by Brian and Terry McKenna, who depicted several World War II battles, formerly made into symbols of Canadian bravery, as catastrophic blunders. The outrage by veterans led to a high profile public investigation by a Senate subcommittee that ended in strong denunciation of the series, to the dismay of artistic communities and the press.¹¹ Another controversy concerned the decision by the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa to allocate funds for a Holocaust gallery. Although Canadian soldiers took part in fighting the Nazis and liberating Jews, many of them felt that the Holocaust had little to do with Canada's military history.¹²

The frustration by veterans over the neglect or distortion of their message is frequently leading them to put their faith in the agents of popular culture themselves. Feeling that time is running out, they fight a last battle over memory by placing their heritage in the hands of popular song-writers, charismatic storytellers, professional organizers of public events, creative museum designers, loyal academics and other agents expected to disseminate it in a

¹⁰ Martin Harwit, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of Enola Gay* (New York: Copernicus, 1996).

¹¹ David Taras, "The Struggle over *The Valour and the Horror*: Media Power and the Portrayal of War." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 28 (December 1995): 725-748.

¹² Barbara Amiel, "Controversy over a Delicate Matter." *Maclean's* 110, December 29, 1997. P. 13.

public sphere considered more and more hostile.¹³ This has become a widespread tactic in “the politics of recognition,”¹⁴ but it bears a heavy cost. As in the case of Holocaust survivors whose tale has been adjusted to mass tastes in cinematic productions like “Schindler’s list” and “Life is Beautiful”, the representation of war in Disneyland-like museums or weather segments on morning TV becomes self-defeating. The alliance between war memory and popular culture is unholy because it tends to freeze the war experience in a set of images, thus depriving it of its social context - a necessary condition of memory.

Narrative vs. Image Commemoration

In order to clarify and advance this contention, let me propose a typology differentiating between two types of war commemoration: narrative commemoration and image commemoration. In chapter 23 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle deals with poetic art that is narrative in form. In this kind of art, the plot must be constructed, as in a tragedy, on dramatic principles. It should have for its subject “a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it”.¹⁵ Aristotle differentiates this form of art from historical compositions, “which of necessity present not a single action, but a single period,

¹³ See Jay M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ Barry Schwartz and Todd Bayma, “Commemoration and the Politics of Recognition.” *The American Behavioral Scientists* 42 (March 1999). P. 946.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Translated by S. H. Butcher. The Internet Classics Archive: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

and all that happened within that period to one person or to many, little connected together as the events may be”.¹⁶

This distinction between a narrated tale and episodic history provides a useful typology differentiating between “narrative commemoration” referring to a war story with a beginning and an end rooted in a civilian context, and “image commemoration” referring to the freezing of the warrior’s image while ignoring or defying the civilian surroundings. The representation of war by the means of popular culture tends to turn away from narrative toward image commemoration, but this involves a distortion rather than commemoration of soldiers’ war experience. Though every memory – personal or social - involves a degree of distortion, image commemoration can be demonstrated to incorporate an in-built element of falsehood.

Such a demonstration involves, of course, serious methodological problems. For one, we have no independent knowledge of soldiers’ consciousness, which we learn about through the mediation of war correspondents, officers making speeches at fallen soldiers’ graves, novelists and other makers of memory who may strip that experience from one context and place it in another, or place it in no context at all. Our means to learn about the ways in which warriors comprehend their experience before it turns into memory (and before they turn into “veterans”) are very limited. Even soldiers’ letters, diaries and oral testimonies, the most authentic material at our possession, are often mediated by family members choosing letters for display,

¹⁶ Ibid.

publishers deciding which diaries are fit to print, or researchers taking the oral testimony.

This is where I would like to introduce a new medium which may be helpful in overcoming these problems. I refer to “blogs,” a short term for “weblogs, online diaries published on the World Wide Web. This medium came into being in the mid 1990s when web designers put up personal journals at their home pages and linked to each other. In 1999, tools were introduced which enabled people who were not skilled in web design to create and manage their own blogs and the phenomenon burgeoned. Today, hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of blogs are produced in all five continents.

As a research tool, this medium allows for a partial observation of soldiers’ consciousness before the mediators step in. The recent war in Iraq has been the first in which soldiers were given access to computers allowing them to post their immediate thoughts and impressions in their blogs . We are thus given the opportunity to have a rare glimpse at memory’s “ground zero,” i.e., at the very moment in which consciousness turns into memory. Obviously, the perceptions of individuals are no *tabula rasa* - soldiers’ most fundamental observations are falling into previous cultural narratives, myths and tropes that frame the way in which war is perceived. As Ashplant and others have shown, “responses to war are formed in relation both to personal experience and to pre-existing narratives. The latter may relate to personal history – as a family story about a father’s or grandfather’s war, for example, which influences the attitude of the children to later conflicts. Or they may circulate within the wider arena of the nation. In either

case, part of their subjective hold may lie in the way in which, in the remembrance of one war, they draw upon key 'pre-memories' or 'templates.'"¹⁷ However, even when such templates are at place, blogs allow us to identify them before the larger frames transforming individual perceptions into social memory are applied.

The following online diary by a soldier in the Iraq war, although no "representative sample" – as no life is - makes us realize how much our collective memory of war, affected by the mass media and popular culture, is distant from the soldier's experience, so strongly rooted in a narrative beginning and ending in a concrete social context.

L.T. Smash¹⁸

On December 9, 2002, a blogger nicknamed "The Indepundit," made the following announcement:

"MY EMPLOYER has offered me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take on a leadership role in a major international venture. This project would bring a significant increase in pay and benefits, but would also involve incredibly long working hours and extensive travel; in other words, I would be "living out of my luggage" for the next several months.

After consulting with my loved ones, I have come to the inescapable conclusion that this is an offer I simply cannot refuse. While my new work will undoubtedly bring untold stress, hardships and tribulations, the challenges are ones that I feel must be met, and the rewards will be legion. I have accepted the assignment" (9.12.02)

Most readers did not guess that the employer was the U.S. Naval Reserve and that the diarist was mobilized to serve as an officer in the Iraq war. While

¹⁷ T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper eds., "The Politics of War Commemoration: Contexts, Structures and Dynamics." In *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, op. cit. p. 34.

¹⁸ <http://www.lt-smash.us/>

-serving in the Naval Coastal Warfare Group providing security to coalition ships unloading military cargo in the Kuwaiti Port of Shuaibaon, he continued to publish an online diary, but for security reasons did so under the assumed name, borrowed from a Simpsons episode, L.T. Smash. With many soldiers on the battleships and on the ground having access to E-mail, the US military could not effectively ban blogging but the same guidelines that were set for E-mail were applied, namely, soldiers enjoyed the openness of the medium while having to respect the rules of operational security, i.e., refraining from giving out locations, names of units or commanding officers, etc. This war blog became very popular, with over one million people estimated to have visited it during the eight months the diarist spent in service.

According to the blogger, the online diary served as a means of keeping his family and friends up to date on his adventures, so much so that when he became too busy to post every day, he got a stern email from his father warning him he must post every day as mother is worried about him. He then realized that his family and friends were not the only ones who followed his adventures; he was getting 6000 hits per day. This made him engage in an open chat with thousands of citizens at home who sent their questions, comments, greetings, and blessings. Here is a small sample:

“Q: You’re such a brave man. Good men are hard to find. You military guys are into physical fitness, right? I like brave, strong men like you. I’ll bet you’re good looking, too.

A: Mrs. Smash sure seems to think so.

Q: Can I send you care packages?

A: No, thanks -- Mrs. Smash, Mom, and Dad send me everything I need, and a PX trailer recently opened up at my camp. We get so many cookie crumbs through the mail now that I'm worried about gaining all the weight that I've lost, and the hand-written valentine cards from all of the elementary schools have really brightened up the tent.

Q: What about that guy in your unit who never gets mail – can I shower him with cookie love?

A: He's already taken care of. In fact, that guy now gets more care packages than most of the rest of us. We hate him now. But thanks for the gesture.

Q: Pay no attention to all those war protestors. Most of us are behind you 110 percent!

A: What war protestors? I have yet to see one out here. Not sure they actually exist." (13.3.03).

This exchange is rather amazing - for the first time in human history, a soldier in war was communicating in real time with the citizenry back home (One can only speculate how this exchange would have looked like had the means been available during the Peloponnesian or Napoleonic wars). Moreover, at every stage of the war, thousands could follow the soldier's thoughts and feelings about his comrades, his superiors, the food, the army routines, the weather, the enemy, the family back home, etc. Even the letters he received from his wife were posted in the blog, allowing Internet surfers to learn, for example, that while the sink in the guest bath of the Smash family had to be replaced in April 2003, the hole patched in the wall required putting in a new wall tile and consequently a new shower door, a new shower faucet, a new medicine cabinet, and a new floor tile were installed, as well as new doorknobs and light fixtures. This spelling out of one soldier's life may not mean much by itself but it reveals, as I shall now

demonstrate, how distant the soldier's experience is from the way it is commemorated in the public discourse of war.

Citizen in a Republic

The departure note of December 2002 is accompanied by a quotation from Theodore Roosevelt's "Citizen in a Republic" address of 1910 in which the virtues of war are expressed in full glory:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." (9.12.02).

L.T. Smash gets in no time into the soldier's mood, but the mood, and the style in which it is conveyed, differs a great deal from the above image. For instance, when he finds out that his unit will not be home for Christmas, the blogger composes one of those soldiers' songs that, not surprisingly, turns into an instant hit:

"Christmas here means nothing,
Another day will pass.
I won't be home for Christmas,
But Saddam can BITE MY ASS!" (8.12.02).

Before the move overseas, L.T. Smash is preoccupied with all those last minute civilian affairs that must be taken care of, such as purchasing some more life insurance. This is an obvious preoccupation for a reserve unit, which even when marred “in dust and sweat and blood,” is composed of mail carriers and small business owners, laborers and engineers, cops, attorneys and one NASA employee. The war rhetoric of presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to George W. Bush omits most of the issues discussed in this online diary, such as the difficulty to avoid the temptation to scratch the itchy site of a smallpox vaccine in one’s body, the hard choice between trying to swallow the hot dog stew on rice or remaining hungry, and the enchantment over meeting soldiers of different backgrounds:

“About a week after arriving in [the] country, I began to notice that there was a small group of people wearing a slightly different uniform. From their funny accents, their use of the word ‘leftenant,’ and the rather silly habit of saluting with their palms out, I quickly ascertained that they were British.” (4.2.03).

In the televised meetings between President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, in which an image of cooperation between the two countries has been drawn to remain in public memory for years to come (just as photographs of Churchill and Roosevelt seated side by side at the Atlantic Conference play a role in our public memory of World War II), the detailed story of that cooperation has been abridged by the two world leaders and their image makers, but not by “L.T. Smash”:

“If you have to interrupt someone with a foreign accent and ask them to repeat themselves every now and again, that’s not so bad. But when some lad from the back streets of Newcastle is trying to send vital

information over a radio circuit that sounds like two tin cans and a length of string, that's a real challenge. I'm sure they would say the same about a Texas twang or a New England drawl." (9.2.03).

In other words, the tale of war as experienced by the soldier is hardly apparent in the public memory of war. Take love for instance. Families of fallen soldiers are sometimes publishing love letters, and moviemakers often picture soldiers reading love letters to the sound of a harmonica, but the ongoing pain of love and longings cannot be expressed in the moral scripts that make up the collective memory of war. To illustrate it, here is the blog's entry on Valentine Day in February 2003:

"Happy Valentine Day! If you have a special someone in your life, do me a favor. Spend a little more quality time with that person today, just for me. I know how it can be. When you have that person close at hand, there can be a tendency to take them for granted. Things are a little different, however, when you're separated by over 7000 miles. I would give just about everything right now just to hold her hand, or give her a big hug and tell her everything will be alright. But I can't" (14.2.03).

The soldier's experience involves too many dimensions to be abridged into a set of images. Here is another entry titled "Just another day," which provides a rather comprehensive narrative of a warrior's life adhering to nature, work, God, and power:

"The sunrise this morning was beautiful. There was dust in the air on the eastern horizon, magnifying the sun into the large, bright orange orb that seemed almost too big to fit off the ground. I was almost too busy to notice. Almost, but not quite. I paused for a few moments, to soak it all in. Then I got back to work. We're sharpening the sword...I pray that God will show mercy to anyone who stands in our way. Because we won't." (17.2.03).

Or consider this entry:

“After work today, a buddy and I grabbed a couple of cold beers, sat down on a park bench, and talked about football while watching the girls walk by.

OK, the beers weren’t cold. They were room temperature. And they were alcohol free. Oh, and the park bench was actually a concrete barrier. And there weren’t many girls in the vicinity.

But we did talk about football.

It was a nice break, anyway.” (6.3.03).

This is not to suggest that the image of the brave warrior promoted in “Citizen in a Republic” must be replaced by another image, say, of the American soldier in Iraq as an “anti-hero,” or as a pawn in a chess game. My argument is that any image does not capture the narrative unfolding in this online diary. The diarist himself is often ambivalent about any image that could be drawn of him. “I’m not a hero,” he writes at one point, “That is to say, I don’t think of myself that way. I don’t seek out danger. I’m not the type of guy who is always looking for the next adrenaline rush, or the latest thrill sport. I generally avoid dangerous activities” (22.2.03). On the other hand, he is no coward either, he writes. What then is he? This is exactly what cannot be answered – no image can replace the life story unfolding here of an American Navy reservist drafted shortly before Christmas of 2002 to serve in the Iraq war, definitely not one following a moral script. And the diarist is the first to realize this:

“There is no way to avoid this conclusion. I’m told to wear body armor and a helmet. I carry a weapon. We build fortifications. I lug a pack full of chemical protection gear everywhere I go. I’ve received so many shots, I feel like a pincushion. Sometimes, when I have a moment or two to think about it, I feel a bit scared.” (22.2.03).

Yet, most of the time, he does not have a minute or two to think about the existential issues that come up in the rhetoric of political leaders, retired generals and – lately - talking heads on television, which are then fused into public memory. This is not to say that L.T. Smash is unaware of his existential condition; only that his consciousness about it develops as part of the story he takes part in day after day: “I’m here because I was called” (22.2.03), he rightly concludes.

Indeed, when people at home were hearing the news about the army rolling through Baghdad, the diarist was engaged in “just another day of work. Like the day before.” (6.4.03). And when embedded journalists transmitted images of the victorious men and women, our diarist fantasized, as soldiers have always done, about his first day off in four months: “I think I’ll sleep in. Then maybe I’ll read a book. Or play a game on my computer. Or watch a movie in the morale tent. Then sleep some more.” (7.4.03). Interestingly, as this very fundamental account of army life appears on the World Wide Web day after day, the thousands of readers following it do not absorb it easily, possibly because of their conditioning to a more concise version of “army life” offered in such movies as “The Longest Day.” As L.T. Smash writes, “Several people have written to ask me ‘are you for real?’ Yes.” (15.4.03).

From Narrative to Image

As the fighting begins to wind down, the diarist is increasingly preoccupied with the discrepancy between his experience and its representation in the various

means of communication and cultural production that are already working in full vigor to turn it into social memory. On May 4, he reports of his walk to the library (a couple of shelves in the corner of a tent) where the cover photo on the April 7 edition of TIME magazine showing two Marines in combat near Nasiriyah catches his eye. One marine is shown aiming his rifle at a distant target while the other “got that classic thousand-yard stare of a man who has just suffered the terrible shock of violent combat” (4.5.03). The bold headline asks: “What will it take to win?” The diarist is angry over the use made of the image of a soldier to serve the political agenda of a news magazine. He is also angry over “the **flawed assumptions** of the war strategists” (4.5.03), such as their praise of Arab news channels, while his own experience taught him that many Arabs treated these channels as providing comic relief. Whatever the truth in this matter, the discrepancy between the soldier’s impressions from the war and the way it is being represented now frustrates him. This explains why despite the great sorrow he expressed over a comrade who lost his life, he refuses to participate in Memorial Day activities at the end of May. The following excerpt illustrates the difficulty to undergo the transformation from individual sorrow to public mourning:

“Yesterday was Memorial Day, and of course we had some observations here. There was a morning service that I couldn’t attend because I was working. Probably wouldn’t have attended anyway—I don’t really have the emotional energy for memorials right now. I’ve already thought quite a bit about the young men and women who died in the conflict and reflected on the many who did so in previous wars. It’s hard to forget about them here, where the machinery of warfare is just part of the everyday background, and weapons are anywhere.” (27.5.03).

To him, the memory of fallen comrades is rooted in “the everyday background.” It is part of a narrative that is largely overlooked during Memorial Day ceremonies. The public ceremonies can also not capture his personal feelings on that day, for this is also his anniversary day, and he feels great longings: “If I were at home, I would have something special planned. I usually buy her chocolates and a nice card, which I present to her in bed in the morning, before I leave for work. Once I had flowers delivered to her office...But I’m not at home this year. I’m over 6000 miles away living in a tent in the desert.” (27.5.03).

The strongest expression of the gap between the soldier’s narrative and the images constructed, first by military and political officials, then by popular culture, can be found in L.T. Smash’s lengthy description of a tour of the battle ground after the intense fighting is over. This is a fascinating account of soldiers loaded up with weapons, helmets, body armor and cameras, being driven to the killing fields of Iraq as a means to construct a shared memory that would exceed the personal narratives they developed in their minds. As if foreseeing the commemoration efforts of the future, the diarist asks “if a few years from now there will be any monuments or markers for the battle that was fought here, or memorials to the fallen soldiers” (16.5.03). Overlooking an empty stretch of desert where some major fighting took place, he understands that this may one day turn into one of those historic battlefield parks “where tour guides in period costumes explain the tactics of the opposing generals, and the hardships their brave soldiers faced.” (16.5.03). This ironic entry is not too remote from reality for the guide relates the desert war to the image it is, and will be, most associated

with: that shown on television. As he is quoted to say: "If you stand right here, you can check out the same sight lines you might have seen during the battle on CNN." (16.5.03).

The process of forming the image of the Iraq war in accordance with the abstractions provided to the public on CNN and other media began right away. On May 2, 2003 President Bush made a victory speech aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln in which the swiftness of the victory has been emphasized in spite of the continued killing of hundreds of coalition soldiers in the battlefields of Iraq. "In this battle", declared the president in presidential fashion, "we have fought for the cause of liberty and for the peace of the world. Our nation and our coalition are proud of this accomplishment, yet it is you, the members of the United States military, who achieved it. Your courage, your willingness to face danger for your country and for each other made this day possible. Because of you our nation is more secure."¹⁹ Obviously, presidential addresses do not incorporate the narrative of any single soldier who participated in the war; it could not be expected of President Bush to mention the new floor tile installed in the Smash home a month before. What is interesting, however, is the degree to which the images constructed in this presidential speech and other forms of public discourse began to overwhelm L.T. Smash's narrative of war even in his own mind.

In early June, while still in the Port of Shuaibaon, someone discovered his writing skills and he was therefore assigned the task of putting together the history of the deployment. He realized right away that this would require a

¹⁹ CNN.Com/World. 2 May, 2003.

different form of writing than in his journal in which the narrative of his war experience has been laid out. “yes, it’s an important task, and one I take seriously”, he wrote. “But it’s not nearly as fun as keeping a journal. I have to stick to the bare facts – I can’t really express myself.” (3.6.03).

But what are the “bare facts”? aren’t they embodied in the narrative found in the journal, in contrast to anything the soldier will compose from now on by demand of his superiors? It is interesting to observe how naturally the blogger accepts the subordination of his war experience to the historiography that is now being constructed with his assistance. As he puts it, “Some future historian might one day crack open the history that I’ve been assigned to write, and he or she might wonder how it FELT to be part of this operation. Unfortunately, there will be no cross-reference to be found in that history to this one-or to the book that I’m compiling around these journal entries.” (3.6.03). He even raises the possibility that in the future he may be denied access to the records of his own memories: “A few weeks ago, I got an email from the Library of Congress requesting permission to archive this weblog for an historical record of the war, which I of course granted. It would be interesting to visit the Library one day, just to see if I could get access to my own words.” (3.6.03).

The question whether in the future the soldier will have access to his own memories, in a real or metaphorical sense, is not an obvious one, for L. T. Smash is fast to adopt the public images by which the war is being presented in the public sphere. Between June and late August (when he will return home and resume his blogging as civilian), the journal is filled with long entries that are

more in line with the president's victory speech on the USS Abraham Lincoln than with the diary as we followed it for several months. These entries are marked by the wishful thinking that characterized the public discourse about the war during these months: "We launched a campaign to liberate Iraq, and thousands of Bin Laden disciples were urged to come to the defense of Baghdad. But terrorists armed with Kalishnikovs and RPGs were no match for laser-guided bombs and heavy armor. We slaughtered them by the thousands." (23.6.03).

At one point the blogger writes an open letter to the president, which could have just as well been written by a presidential speech writer: "Mr. President, I am writing to you, as a mobilized reservist, to express my appreciation for your courage and leadership as Commander-in-Chief. In the face of tremendous pressure and even outright opposition from both home and abroad, you have maintained your resolve and kept your oath to defend America and all that she stands for. Along the way you must have endured many moments of loneliness and self-doubt, but in the end you did your duty. You did the right thing. Thank you." (2.6.03).

There is no reason why a soldier, filled with patriotic feelings, should not post on his blog a note of thanks to his commander in chief. What I refer to, however, is the fast transition from a diary describing in detail the life story of a civilian turned soldier to a set of statements consistent with the image constructed of the war, mainly by political leaders. This transition can be

illustrated by comparing the soldier's refusal to take part in Memorial Day ceremonies in late May, as he needed no commemoration effort to remind him of his fallen comrades who were part of his life narrative, and his entry on the 4th of July, when he tied his own motivation to serve in the military to a slogan appearing on a national monument:

"It's not the most visited monument in Washington, but it is easily one of the most impressive. Built of marble and granite, and reflecting the architecture of his home in Monticello, the [memorial](#) to the author of the Declaration of Independence and our third President lies due south of the White House, across the tidal basin from the National Mall. As you climb the granite steps and pass underneath the marble dome, the statue of Thomas Jefferson stands tall before you. Surrounding the base of the dome, in deeply inscribed roman lettering, is the following declaration:

**I HAVE SWORN UPON THE ALTAR OF GOD ETERNAL HOSTILITY
AGAINST EVERY FORM OF TYRANNY OVER THE MIND OF MAN**

This is a mission statement for all Americans, and every person in the world who loves Liberty.

This is why I serve." (4.7.03).

Thus, by the time we reach L.T. Smash's last entry on his military experience, we are already immersed in images that, while still part of a personal blog, seem to be taken from the annals of popular culture. Consider how strongly the personal emotions conveyed in the following paragraphs resemble familiar images in war novels, staged stills pictures, Hollywood films, and other media describing the return of soldiers to the arms of their loved ones:

"We formed up in four rows at the foot of the staircase, while our loved ones watched from behind the security cordon, about 50 meters away. I searched the faces in the crowd, but I couldn't see her—had she not gotten the word about our early arrival?

We were called to attention, and the senior officers went through their routine, saluting and saying important sounding stuff.

Then the CO turned to address the troops.

“Mission complete. Naval Coastal Warfare Group One, HOORAH!”

“HOORAH!”

“DISMISSED!”

The formation dissolved. Families and sailors rushed forward, into a melee of hugs and tearful reunions.

Where was she? I felt a knot forming in my stomach, as I began to worry that she hadn't learned of our early arrival--Suddenly, off to my left, I heard a familiar voice: “SCOTT!”

Standing before me was The Most Beautiful Woman on Earth, surrounded by my family.

I dropped my bags, and closed the final yards in long, quick strides.

I was home at last” (26.8.03).

Conclusion

In *The Triumph of Narrative* Robert Fulford cites studies in various areas considering the functions of narrative to human development. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz believed that humans are symbolizing, conceptualizing, meaning-seeking animals possessed by a drive as pressing as more familiar biological needs to make sense out of experience and to give it form and order. Ethical philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre wrote that humans create their sense of what matters, and how they should act, by referring consciously or unconsciously to the stories they have learned, which constitute important dramatic resources. And language and cognitive scientist Mark Turner argued that telling stories is not a luxury or a pastime but part of developing intelligence. Stories are the building blocks of human thought, they are the way the brain organizes itself.

Narrative, Fulford concluded,” is selective, and may be untrue, but it can produce the telling of events occurring in time; it seems to be rooted in reality. This is also the reason for the triumph of narrative, its penetration and in some ways its dominance of our collective imagination: with a combination of ancient devices and up-to-the-minute technology, it can appear to replicate life.”²⁰

While Fulford may be overoptimistic about the triumph of narrative, his description of it fits well the blog analyzed in this study. In following the online war diary of one soldier in the Iraq war we have indeed been exposed to events occurring in time and rooted in reality. The narrative unfolding in L.T. Smash seems rather close to the soldier’s reality if only because his daily routine is spelled out in great detail. Never before have we been given such access in real time to the ongoing thoughts, feelings and deeds of a soldier during combat. This study has also revealed however an interesting transformation; once the war began to wind down, the narrative began to give way to a set of images. The distinction between “narrative” and “image” is not clear-cut – a war narrative may include images and an image of war may take the form of narrative. But this typology, based on Aristotle’s distinction between an historic tale and an episode, is helpful in identifying an important process. The more the soldier distances himself from the experience of war, the less he tells a story rooted in historical context and the more he participates in the construction of images disconnected from that context.

²⁰ Robert Fulford, *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture* (Toronto: Anansi, 1999). Pp. 15-16.

This is particularly apparent when popular culture takes over. War novels, war movies, war monuments, war memorabilia and the like, even if taking the form of a narrated tale, mostly provide a generalized image of the soldier, the military unit, the army, or the nation. For example, statues of soldiers all over the world represent virtues attributed to combatants – strength, courage, or beauty – which may approximate the tale of some combatants but these statues cannot replace the tale. The detailed and complex narrative of the soldier cannot be abridged into any set of images. National leaders, embracing the virtues attributed to fighters as moral lessons for the nation, have made wide use of abstract images of the soldier, especially in speeches like “Citizen in a Republic”. And popular culture has cooperated with those leaders in transforming soldier’s tales into textual or visual images that have often abandoned the spatial and temporal context of war. This may be a necessary outgrowth of commemoration; the representation of war in political speeches or artistic displays can hardly be expected to incorporate the detailed, often tedious, story we followed in L. T. Smash. Yet it is this story that constitutes the soldier’s experience, which implies that no commemoration project can ever capture it in full or, in other words, that the experience of war may actually be unmemorable. We may thus conclude with the unhappy note that in today’s world, veterans have a good chance to be forgotten, for their narrative can hardly be replicated by the means of popular culture, which, for better or worse - shape our public sphere.