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Deconstructing the Heroic Myth of the War Correspondent – Chris Ayres's Memoir War Reporting for Cowards

1. The Myth of the Heroic War Correspondent

"As much as I was terrified [...], I also felt slightly elated – heroic, in fact, for agreeing to go to Iraq" (119). With these words, the British war correspondent Chris Ayres describes his feelings upon his decision to report on the Iraq War for his newspaper, the London *Times*, in 2003. As this quote from his memoir *War Reporting for Cowards* (2005) suggests, war reporters not only play a role in the creation of a heroic narrative of war, but are also often assigned the status of heroes themselves. As David Welch notes in the introduction to his study of war reporting, the "popular image of the war correspondent in the public imagination is of a gallant, heroic figure bringing us impartial reports from conflict zones around the world" (xiv), and this image has been the focus of increasing scholarly attention in recent years.[1] The anthropologist Mark Pedelty summarises what he calls the "professional myth" (128) of the war reporter with three catchwords, "adventure, independence, and truth" (39). It is central to the perceived heroism of the war correspondent that he is believed to be motivated by a higher moral cause, that he is risking his life for the selfless aim of exposing the lies of government and military and bringing the public the truth about the events of war. In films and books, war reporters are also usually presented as "lone rebels" (Pedelty 30), as acting independently and with "a great degree of willful agency" (Pedelty 130). In line with the idea of the reporter as an independent agent, the myth of the heroic war reporter is strongly linked to individual reporters who have been assigned the status of icons, for example Martha Gellhorn, Ernie Pyle, Michael Herr or David Halberstam.[2] In addition, the "abiding cultural fascination with war reporters has been nurtured by public figures such as Stephen Crane, Winston Churchill, Rudyard Kipling, Ernest Hemingway, and Ian Fleming joining the trade", as Mette Mortensen notes (332). This list of famous war correspondents also shows that the profession has long been dominated by men and is still associated with traditional ideals of masculinity, even though there are many female journalists working in war zones today.

Autobiographical texts by war correspondents play an important role in the construction of the myth of the profession. As Mark Pedelty observes, these texts generally "portray war correspondents' work as frenetic, occasionally insensate, yet ultimately heroic. Once past the obligatory self-deprecating statements of the introduction, the focus turns to the reporter's courage, cunning, and professional conviction" (29–30). The personal accounts that journalists publish after the war do not present an accurate impression of their daily working routines in a conflict zone (see Pedelty 39). Instead, the authors of memoirs necessarily select some past experiences while failing to mention others; they structure and interpret these experiences and thereby create a certain image of themselves (see Depkat 24). In talking or writing about their own war experience, reporters also tend to rely heavily on existing fictional and non-fictional representations of the profession; in Pedelty's words, "they fit their [...] experiences into the narrative structure of traditional war correspondent legends" (129). In this way, the texts tend to perpetuate existing stereotypes and myths surrounding the war reporter.

Chris Ayres's memoir about his experiences in the Iraq War, however, clearly present an exception to this rule: He employs the genre to deconstruct the heroic myth of the war correspondent, as will be shown in the following. Ayres was in his late twenties when he received the assignment to cover the Iraq War in 2003, and – like many of his colleagues – he had no previous experience in war reporting at this point:[3] As the

biographical note at the beginning of his book tells us, he worked as a media business and Wall Street correspondent before taking over the job of US West Coast correspondent for the *Times* in 2002, a position which mainly consists of covering the Hollywood celebrity scene. Despite this lack of experience, Ayres was asked by his editor to take part in the embedding programme that had been devised by the US Pentagon to give a large number of journalists access to the American troops during the Iraq War.[4] He was placed with a US Marine Corps unit, which he accompanied in the first week of the invasion. While the *Times*'s more experienced war reporters, who operated outside the embedding scheme, were unable to reach the frontlines when the fighting began, Ayres found himself in the middle of the action and was able to observe combat first hand (see Ayres, *War Reporting*, 250 and 260).[5] His reports appeared in the *Times* almost daily and received a lot of attention.[6] Nevertheless, he decided to give up his position as an embed after nine days with the Marines. Ayres left his unit and returned home before the American troops reached Baghdad.

Shortly after his return, Ayres wrote an article entitled "The Story Not Worth Dying For" for the *Times 2* (a *Times* supplement), in which he explains his decision to cut his assignment as a war reporter short and calls his premature departure an "act of cowardice" (5). This article later evolved into the full-length book *War Reporting for Cowards*. In publishing his war experiences, Ayres is part of a larger trend on the book market. A whole "surge of war memoirs" (Whitlock 134) by journalists appeared in the wake of the Iraq War.[7] However, Ayres's text stands out among his colleagues' works: As the book's title already suggests, he has written a parody of the traditional war reporter memoir. In casting himself as an anti-hero, a coward "running away from [...] war" (287), he reflects and questions popular stereotypes of the heroism of war reporting.

2. Ayres's Caricature of the Heroic War Correspondent

Ayres begins his memoir by outlining his preconceptions about what he terms "real" war correspondents (105). These "real" reporters, however, are reduced to mere caricatures in his narrative, and their description serves to draw attention to the stereotypical nature of popular images of the war correspondent, as the following passage from the book exemplifies:

> My name is Chris Ayres, and I never wanted to be a war correspondent. To me, war reporters were a different species: fearless and suntanned outdoor types who became Boy Scout leaders at school, studied Latin and Urdu at Oxford, and probably knew the correct way to eat a sheep's penis at the table of an African warlord. I felt a mixture of envy and bafflement at their careers. (17)

In this humorous and exaggerated depiction, Ayres takes on the perspective of an average civilian who admires the war reporters' heroic deeds from afar. By describing war correspondents as "a different species", he presents them as men who stand out from the masses, who are distinguished by their extraordinary personalities. In Ayres's imagination, war correspondents are not only courageous, but also physically fit and attractive, and they combine leadership qualities with intellectual superiority. The image of the war reporter eating a sheep's penis with African warlords evokes the exotic setting of a classic adventure tale and serves to emphasise the hero's strong masculinity, considering that in some cultures the consumption of genitals is believed to increase man's virility.

The fact that popular images of war reporters are profoundly shaped by traditional male gender stereotypes is emphasised repeatedly in the text. Ayres refers to countless male war correspondents that he looks up to, but never mentions any of the famous female war reporters such as Martha Gellhorn, Kate Adie or Christiane Amanpour. His role models thrive in situations of mortal danger, endure pain and injury heroically and have a tendency to display macho behaviour. To illustrate this, he cites two famous war reporters of recent times. The first one is "a lunatic called Anthony Loyd" (17), a *Times* journalist who became known for his coverage of the wars in Yugoslavia during the 1990s. Ayres describes Loyd as

> a heroin addict who had left his job as a platoon commander in the British Army for a career in journalism because, he later confessed, he saw it as a "passport to war". To me Loyd's life seemed like an endless, heart-pounding sequence from *Apocalypse Now* – but with no "stop" button to end the action. (17–18)

Loyd clearly is what Ayres elsewhere calls a "*war type*[...]" (119), who – having been a soldier himself – feels completely at home in the military

world. Throughout his book, Ayres draws a parallel between war reporters and military heroes, arguing that both seem to enjoy the excitement of battle and follow an "inverted logic" (78) which is summarised in the formula "safety is bad, danger is good" (78). Described as a heroin addict and a lunatic, Loyd is not only characterised as standing outside society, he is also presented as the epitome of a "war junkie", who seeks the adventure and danger of war for the personal thrill it provides and lacks a "normal" sense of self-preservation.

The second professional role model Ayres names in his memoir is Martin Bell,

> the BBC man in his trademark white linen suit, who took a direct hit from mortar shrapnel while reporting live from Sarajevo in 1992. "I'm all right, I'll survive", were Bell's stoic words as he collapsed into a pool of his own blood. There was a thrilling, implicit machismo to Bell's work, betrayed by the title of his memoirs: *In Harm's Way*. Bell, always the self-deprecating hero, could barely bring himself to mention the incident in the book. (17)

Whereas Loyd is represented as a reckless adventurer and "lone wolf", Bell, in his white suit, is introduced as a British gentleman, who shows a "stiff upper lip" even when being wounded and who risks his own life in order to bring the world the news of the war. However, Ayres associates both reporters with a certain machismo. While Loyd openly admits that he is enjoying the risks of war, Bell seems to downplay the danger in his own self-representation, which only makes him appear even more heroic and thus serves to increase the fascination surrounding his profession.

3. Reflecting the Construction and Perpetuation of the Heroic Myth

In presenting his ideal of the "real" war reporter, Ayres often refers to movies or books. The mentioning of the film *Apocalypse Now* in his description of Anthony Loyd and the reference to Bell's memoir *In Harm's Way* are only two of several examples. Thus, Ayres not only highlights stereotypical images of the war reporter, but also points to the construction and perpetuation of these myths in various forms of representation, especially in journalistic self-representation. He tells his readers that he has turned to other war reporters' memoirs in order to compare his own performance during the war with that of his famous predecessors: "I searched for books by Pyle, and other war correspondents, to convince myself that my conduct in Iraq hadn't been a total disgrace" (18)

However, the memoirs in which Ayres is looking for an authentic depiction of the war reporter's experiences tend to confirm the heroic myth of the war reporter. He shows this by focusing on the cover photographs of these books, which present the war reporters "in action" and which, to Ayres, already reveal the message of the memoirs:

> The book jackets [...] provided little reassurance. There was Pyle, his woolly hat and goggles pulled down over his military crew-cut, the cigarette wedged between his cracked lips. He was an "aw-shucks" Everyman – one of the boys. And the boys, of course, loved him. (18)

Ernie Pyle became famous during the Second World War for living and working alongside the troops and telling their story. His popular image as the "soldier's friend"[8] has shaped ideas about war correspondents to this day. In describing Pyle's picture, Ayres not only points out this additional aspect of the myth of the war reporter, he also deliberately turns the reader's attention to the role photographs play in conveying this myth. He emphasises Pyle's military appearance in the picture and reveals its connotations: It represents the ideal of the war correspondent as the friend of the enlisted men, who shares their hardships in order to chronicle their experience, thereby gaining their respect as well as their comradeship. Ayres then turns to another photograph which shows Vietnam reporter Neil Sheehan: "He was wearing black aviator shades and sitting, shirt unbuttoned and notebook poised, in front of a rifle rack: [...] the pen pausing for thought; the lip curled in disbelief and disillusionment" (18). Again Ayres concentrates on the fact that the picture represents an aspect of the myth of the war correspondent, in this case one which became dominant in the Vietnam War. While Sheehan's clothes and the rifles in the background signal that he is at home in the military world, the notebook and the serious expression on his face imply to Ayres that he is nevertheless a reflective critical observer, chronicling and criticising the horrors of war. By describing the connotations of the two pictures, Ayres reveals how the popular myth of the war reporter is encoded in photographs.

Ayres also shows that war correspondents still imitate these iconic images in their self-representation today. He demonstrates this by describing the picture of one of his colleagues who is also embedded with the US military:

> I later saw a photograph of Oliver Poole as an embed. Shirtless beneath an unzipped Army flak vest, he was casually smoking a cigarette in front of a blackened mural of Saddam Hussein. To his right, an Iraqi truck was on fire. His Goa necklace, I noticed, was still intact. He looked good – dashing almost. (251)

Posing shirtless and in military gear in front of scenes of destruction, Poole seems to embody the ideal of the courageous male adventurer. His open flak vest and his cigarette suggest a certain carelessness in the face of danger. To Ayres, the photograph clearly implies that Poole is a "war type" who effortlessly becomes part of the soldiers' comradeship. Ayres thus suggests that Poole's self-representation confirms the heroic myth of the war reporter and thereby perpetuates it.

4. The War Correspondent as an Anti-Hero: Parodying the Heroic Narrative

In writing a parody of the traditional war reporter memoir, Ayres consciously tries to avoid telling his own experiences along the lines of the "shared narrative of adventure, independence, and truth" (Pedelty 39) that usually shapes war correspondents' self-presentation. He presents himself as the antithesis to the stereotype of the courageous and tough war reporter, claiming to be a coward, not a hero. He thus appears as an Everyman figure who is thrown into war and completely overwhelmed by its reality. This idea is already conveyed on the cover picture of his book, which shows Ayres standing in front of a line of military vehicles in the desert, wearing a camouflage suit, a bulletproof vest and a helmet. The picture is staged in a similar way to the ones described above. However, whereas his colleague Poole succeeds in conveying a heroic impression, Ayres's photograph fails to achieve the desired effect because his uniform and helmet are far too big for him, already suggesting that he cannot measure up to the greatness of his role models. This impression is reinforced by Ayres's own description of his picture:

> And then I thought of the picture of me, somewhere in those miserable, windy marshlands, stuffed into an oversized chemical suit with a stupid blue helmet on my head, squinting myopically into the dust and the sun. I had even taken my glasses off, because I thought it might make me look cooler. But the message of the photo is clear: *I want to go home*. (18–19)

Ayres then moves on to explain why he is not suited for the profession of the war correspondent: He depicts himself as an unfit young man, a "neat-freak hypochondriac" (143) with an irritable bowel syndrome (43), who suffers from frequent panic attacks (31). The idea of working in the harsh environment of a war zone provides no attraction to him since he has never enjoyed outdoor activities, as he assures the reader: "In fact I was a camping virgin: I had never slept rough, or toasted a marshmallow over an open fire, in my entire life. What's more, I had never *wanted* to. I like carpets, central heating and goose-down duvets. Sod the outdoors" (146). He also has no interest in military culture, claiming that even as a child he failed to appreciate "the discipline and camaraderie of a pseudo-paramilitary organization" (147) which he experienced during his brief time with the Boy Scouts. In this self-deprecating characterisation, Ayres expressly presents himself as lacking all attributes that are commonly associated with the heroic war reporter: He shows neither physical nor mental strength and is anything but adventurous. He is simply "not the *type* who would become a war correspondent" (116; see also 136), as his girlfriend puts it.

Ayres achieves a comic effect by juxtaposing descriptions of his heroic role models with depictions of his own failings. For example, he tries to imagine how he himself would have reacted if he had been shot like BBC reporter Martin Bell during the Yugoslavian war: "I hated to think of the piercing, girlish squeal, followed by the involuntary bowel movement, that would have been broadcast into the homes of BBC viewers if it had been me in Sarajevo instead of Bell" (17). During his whole time with the Marines, Ayres remains unable to live up to his ideal of the courageous war reporter. His own inadequacies become especially obvious in moments of danger, for example in a scene in which he is digging trenches in the desert, while suddenly artillery is firing nearby: "Naturally, I tried to react with a mixture of machismo and nonchalance. It didn't work. Nearly every blast made me drop my shovel and involuntarily scream, 'WHAT THE FUCK WAS

THAT?'" (9). Ayres also claims that he never managed to bond with the Marines of his unit, therefore failing to follow in the footsteps of his role model Ernie Pyle. He tells us that the captain who was responsible for him "wasn't happy about having a foreign journalist riding with him on his first combat mission" (11) and describes how the Marines enjoyed making fun of him:

> My heavy blue flak jacket [had] the word "PRESS" inscribed on it in large reflective white lettering [...]. Buck, Murphy and Hustler would find it amusing to walk up to me, poke me in the chest, and say, "I'm pressing!" They also enjoyed pointing out that my jacket was possibly the only blue thing anywhere in the southern Iraqi desert – if not the entire country – and was therefore guaranteed to draw fire from even the most junior and inexperienced Iraqi marksman. (6–7)

Ayres interprets these jokes as proof that the Marines – a unit with a pronounced heroic and masculine habitus – do not take him seriously as a war reporter. They clearly perceive him as a civilian who does not know how to behave in a war zone. Ayres thus claims that, contrary to Pyle and Sheehan, he remained an outsider during his stay with the military, unable to really understand the Marines' experience.

Most importantly, however, Ayres contradicts the traditional heroic narrative by questioning his own agency as a war reporter. In his book he reveals how much his daily work is shaped by the institutional structures of the media world, a fact that is rarely mentioned in war reporters' memoirs, as Mark Pedelty notes (130). Ayres highlights the pressures he has to face as a young and relatively inexperienced journalist by comically exaggerating these aspects. Large parts of his narrative are dedicated to chronicling his difficult first steps in the profession: He recounts his time as a young and unpaid intern at the London office of the *Times* (chapter 4) and his stint as a business reporter, during which his main task was to rewrite news items published in other media outlets (51–52). He then claims that when his editor Martin Fletcher offered him the chance to become a war correspondent, he felt that he had no choice but to accept this offer:

> I didn't have to do any of this. But I was scared: scared of losing my new career as a foreign correspondent; scared of someone else taking my place and doing well; and scared of squandering an opportunity that many reporters worked their whole lives to get. It was essentially a form of cowardice that was pushing me to Iraq. (143)

Here Ayres highlights the strong competition amongst journalists and identifies the fear of losing his job as his main reason to become an embedded reporter. Rather than presenting himself as being independent in his actions, he emphasises the professional hierarchies within which he operates, quite without the autonomy often associated with the heroic. His superiors are granted a considerable presence within his narrative, since Ayres gives detailed accounts of the telephone conversations he has with his editors during his stay with the Marines (see, for example, 220, 250 and 260). He also repeatedly mentions his fears that his reports might be rejected by his editors and will not be printed, which in his eyes would signal a beginning downturn in his career (see, for example, 250 and 264). Ayres presents these concerns regarding his career as his major driving force. On the other hand he fails to cite any idealistic reasons for becoming a war reporter, such as a wish to reveal the truth. As a consequence, his depiction – despite being comical – succeeds in foregrounding elements of the reality of the profession that remain hidden in heroic representations of war reporting.

It is not only the structure of the media world, however, that Ayres presents as limiting his agency. He also exposes the problems of being positioned within a unit of the US military, thereby offering a criticism of the Pentagon's embedding scheme. In several scenes Ayres highlights the extremely passive role he has as an embedded reporter. On the one hand, he is completely dependent on the military for protection. This becomes especially clear in a scene in which the team of Marines he accompanies gets lost in the desert and suddenly encounters an Iraqi. Since it is unclear whether the man is a civilian or an enemy combatant, Ayres fears for the worst:

> *Shoot him*, said a voice in my head. *Just shoot him.* I felt disgusted with myself. The Iraqi was probably terrified; we'd probably just turned his family into "arms and legs and pink mist", as the faceless infantry commander had boasted. What I *should* have been thinking was, *Interview him; get out and interview him.* But I was more interested in staying alive than staying objective. (226)

Ayres's reaction to the Iraqi indicates that he has completely lost his journalistic impartiality and is unable to stop himself from taking over the US military's perspective of the conflict. The scene also shows that Ayres is in no position to investigate the situation. He is well aware that his task as a war correspondent should be to tell both sides of the story, but he has no opportunity to do so. Instead he appears as a helpless spectator of the events who rarely leaves the protection of the military vehicle. As a consequence, he is forced to rely entirely on the Marines for information:

> I had no idea what was going on. Buck made sure that the only information I got was what I heard on the Humvee's radio or saw with my own eyes. […] My battlefield perspective, therefore, was about as useful as Baghdad Bob's. My mum knew more about the war than I did. Sometimes I felt as though all I did was stand next to the guns and describe how loud they were. *Was that worth dying for?* (258)

Ayres's depiction implies that critical reporting is impossible in his position as an embedded journalist since the military provides hardly any information and he is left without any means to verify it. He has become a mere mouthpiece of the military: "I might as well be paid by the Marines" (258). Ayres self-depiction as an antihero thus also serves to reveal how much the American embedding scheme reduced war reporters' agency as well as their journalistic independence.

To conclude, Ayres's unconventional idea of writing a parody of the traditional war reporter memoir can be considered a clever marketing decision, a strategy to make his book stand out among the many autobiographical texts that were published by journalists in the wake of the Iraq War. However, Ayres's use of the parody also shows a high level of journalistic self-reflection. He is aware that any form of self-presentation runs the risk of merely reproducing popular myths about the war reporter. By comically exaggerating existing stereotypes and contrasting them with images of an antihero, he deconstructs the heroic myth of the war reporter. On the one hand, he reveals the popular images of the adventurous male war correspondent to be cultural constructs which are perpetuated in texts as well as photographs. On the other hand, he highlights the institutional structures within which journalists operate (and which limit their agency) and thus succeeds in presenting aspects of the reality of war reporting that are concealed by the myth. Furthermore, by refusing to present himself as a heroic war reporter, Ayres makes a conscious choice to tell the story of the Iraq War through the eyes of an ordinary civilian. His perspective on the violent events is not that of a brave hero but that of a passive and helpless observer who is completely paralysed by fear. This also means that, despite being embedded with the US Marines and having a limited perspective on the war, he never comes close to glorifying the American war effort or the actions of the soldiers. His use of irony and satire can thus be seen as a means to assert his own critical detachment.

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1 See, for example, Mark Pedelty's anthropological study *War Stories*, in which he contrasts the heroic image of the war reporter with the daily routines and practices he has observed during his field study of foreign correspondents in El Salvador. Also see Barbara Korte, who has analysed images of war reporters in fiction and memoirs.

2 Phillip Knightley's history of war reporting, *The First Casualty*, offers a detailed account of the many legends surrounding these and other correspondents.

3 See, for example, the journalists Oliver Poole and Katherine Skiba, who also published memoirs about their first experiences as war reporters.

4 For detailed information on the embedding scheme, see Lewis et al. In his memoir, Ayres offers an explanation why he received the assignment despite his lack of experience in war reporting. He suggests that before the war most newspaper editors feared that the embedded reporters "would be stuck with units deliberately kept far away from the fighting" (105). Therefore, editors like the *Times*'s Martin Fletcher decided "to put young, inexperienced reporters in the American scheme, *just in case* they were needed" (106).

5 All page numbers for Ayres's memoir *War Reporting for Cowards* refer to the 2006 edition published by John Murray.

6 His articles even gained him a nomination as "Foreign Correspondent of the Year" at the British Press Awards in 2004 (see Ayres n. pag. [biographical note]).

7 Randy Dotinga aptly summarised this trend in a review for the *Christian Science Monitor* in 2005: "Near-instant memoirs about the Iraq war are all the rage" (14).

8 See Ray E. Boomhower's biography of Pyle entitled *The Soldier's Friend*. On Pyle's image as "the GIs' friend", see also Knightley (357).

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