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Photography after the incidents: We're not afraid

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Abstract

This article will look at the use of personal photographs that attempt to convey a sense of social activism as a reaction against global terrorism. Moreover, I argue that the photographs uploaded to the site "We're Not Afraid", which began after the London bombings in 2005, presents a forum to promote the pleasures of western cultural values as a defence against the anxiety of terror. What is compelling are the ways in which the Website promotes, seemingly, everyday modalities through what may be deemed as the domestic snapshot. Nevertheless, the aura from the context of these images operates to arouse the collective memory of terrorism and violence. It promotes photography's spectacular power.

To begin it is worthwhile considering the ways in which the spectacle of terrorism is mediated. For example, the bombs activated on the London Underground and at Tavistock Square on the 7th of July 2005 marked the day that London became a victim of 'global' terrorism, re-instilling the fear projected by the media to be alarmed and to be suspicious. In the shadow of the terrorist events of September 11, as well as the Madrid Bombings in 2004, the incidents once again drew attention to the point that in the Western world 'we' again can be under attack. Furthermore, the news media plays a vital role in mediating the reality and the spectacle of terrorist attacks in the display of visual 'proof'. After the London bombings of 7 July 2005, the BBC Website encouraged photo submissions of the incidents, under the heading "London Explosions: Your Photos", thus promoting citizen journalism. Within six hours the BBC site received more that 1000 photographs. According to Richard Sambrook, director of the BBC's World Service and Global News division, "people were participating in our coverage in way we had never seen before" (13). Other news Websites, such as Reuters and MSNBC also set up a similar call and display of the incidents. The images taken by everyday people and survivors, suggest a visceral response to the trauma of terrorism in which they became active participants in the reportage.

Leading British newspapers further evoked the sensational terror of the incidents through the captioning of horrific images of destruction. It contextualised them within the realm of fascination and fear with headlines such as "London's Day of Terror" from the *Guardian*, "Terror Comes to London" from the *Independent* and "Al-Qa'eda Brings Terror to the Heart of London" from the *Daily Telegraph* ("What the Papers Say"). Roland Barthes notes that "even from the perspective of a purely immanent analysis, the structure of the photograph is not an isolated structure; it is in communication with at least one other structure, namely the text — title, caption or article — accompanying every press photograph" (16). He suggested that, with the rise to prominence of 'the press photograph' as a mode of visual communication, the traditional relationship between image and text was inverted: "it is not the image which comes to elucidate or 'realize' the text, but the latter which comes to sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image" (25).

Frederic Jameson raises a very important point in regards to the role the media plays in terror. He suggests that the Western media is not only affected by a permanent condition of amnesia, but that this has become its primary 'informational function' (20). Hence, terror images are constantly repeated for their affect. "When combined with the media, terrorism's reality-making power is astounding: its capacity to blend the media's sensational stories, old mythical stereotypes, and a burning sense of moral wrath" (Zulaika and Douglass ix). Susan Sontag, in her 2003 book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, also discusses the assault of images (116). She argues that "the iconography of suffering has a long pedigree. The sufferings most often deemed worthy of representation are those understood to be the product of wrath, divine or human" (40). Furthermore, globalisation has profoundly changed the rhetoric of terrorism in which the uses of photographs for political means are ubiquitous. Sontag argues that "it seems as if there is a greater quantity of such news than before" (116). Nevertheless, she stresses, "it seems normal to turn away from images that simply make us feel bad" (116).

Rather, than the focus on images of despair, the "We're Not Afraid" Website provides a reaction against visual assaults. The images suggest a turning away from the iconography of terror and suffering to a focus on everyday western middle-class modalities. The images on the site consist of domestic ritual photographic practices, such as family snapshots. The images were disseminated following what has been referred to as the 'incidents' by the British press of the attacks on 7 July on the London transport system. Significantly, rather than being described as an event, such as the September 11 terrorist assaults were, the term 'incidents' suggests that everyday modalities, the everyday ways of being, may not be affected despite the terror of the attacks. It is, perhaps, a very British approach to the idea of 'moving on' despite adversity, which the Website advocates. The Website invites the general public to upload personal photographs captioned with the phrase "We're not afraid" to "show that terrorists would not change the way people lived their lives" (Clarke).The Website began on 7 July 2005 and during the first week the site received, at times, up to 15 images a minute from across the world (Nikkah). Notably, within days of the Website's launch it received over 3500 images and 11 million hits (Clarke).The images taken by everyday people and survivors, suggest a visceral response to the incidents. These images seem to support Susan Sontag's argument from *On Photography*, in which she argues that photography is mainly a social rite, a defence against anxiety, and a tool of power (8). The images present a social activism for the predominantly white middle-class online participants and, as such, is subversive in its move away from the contextualised sensational images of violence that abound in the mainstream press.

According to the site's creator, London Web designer, Alfie Dennen "the idea for this site came from a picture of one of the bombed trains sent from a mobile phone to Dennen's own weblog. Someone else added the words 'We're Not Afraid' alongside the image" ("'Not Afraid' Website Overwhelmed"). Hence, in Dennen's Weblog the terror and trauma of the train images of the London underground, that were circulated in the main stream press, have been recontextualised by the caption to present defiance and survival.

The images uploaded onto the Website range from personal snapshots to manipulated photographs which all bear the declaration: 'We are not afraid'. Currently, there are 770 galleries with 24 images per gallery amounting to around 18500 images that have been sent to the site. The photographs provide a crack in the projected reality of terrorism and the iconography of suffering as espoused by the mainstream media.

The Website claims:

> *We're not afraid* is an outlet for the global community to speak out against the acts of terror that have struck London, Madrid, New York, Baghdad, Basra, Tikrit, Gaza, Tel-Aviv, Afghanistan, Bali, and against the atrocities occurring in cities around the world each and every day. It is a worldwide action for people not willing to be cowed by terrorism and fear mongering.

It suggests that:

> The historical response to these types of attacks has been a show of deadly force; we believe that there is a better way. We refuse to respond to aggression and hatred in kind. Instead, we who are not afraid will continue to live our lives the best way we know how. We will work, we will play, we will laugh, we will live. We will not waste one moment, nor sacrifice one bit of our freedom, because of fear.

> We are not afraid.
> ("we're not afraid.com: Citizens for a secure world, united against terror.")

The images evoke the social memory of our era of global terrorism. Arguably, the events since September 11 have placed the individual in a protection mode. The photographs represent, as Sontag espouses, a tool against the anxiety of our time. This is a turn away from the visual iconography of despair. As such, rather than images of suffering they are images of survival, or life carrying on as usual. Or, more precisely, the images represent depictions of everyday western middle-class existence.

The images range from family snaps, touristic photographs, pictures of the London underground and some manipulated images all containing the words 'We're Not Afraid'. Dennen "said the site had become a symbol for people to show solidarity with London and say they will not be cowed by the bombings" ("'Not Afraid' Website

Overwhelmed"). The photographs also serve as a form of protection of western middle-class values and lifestyle that may be threatened by terrorist acts. Of consideration is that "personal photographs not only bind us to our own pasts – they bind us to the pasts of the social groups to which we belong" (Gye 280). The images on the site may be described as a "revocation of social power through visibility" and as such photography is considered a "performance of power" (Frosh 46). Barthes asserts that "formerly, the image illustrated the text (made it clearer); today, the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination" (25). The images loaded onto the Website "We're Not Afraid' assumes notions of resilience and defiance which can be closely linked to Anglo-American cultural memory and imagination.

Significantly, efforts to influence 'heart and minds' through support of touring exhibitions were common in the earlier days of the Cold War. Sontag argues that "photographic collections can be used to substitute a world" (162). The images exalted a universal humanism, similarly to the images on the "We're Not Afraid" site. Many exhibits were supported throughout the 1950s, often under the auspices of the USIA (United States Information Agency). A famous example is the photography exhibit 'The Family of Man' which travelled to 28 countries between 1955-59 and was seen by 9 million people (Kennedy 316). It contained 503 images, 273 photographers from 68 nations "it posited humanity as a universal ideal and human empathy as a compensatory response to the threat of nuclear annihilation" (Kennedy 322). Significantly, Liam Kennedy asserts that, the Cold War rhetoric surrounding the exhibition blurred the boundaries between art, information and propaganda. The exhibition has been critiqued ideologically as an imperialist project, most notably by Allan Sekula in which he states "the worldliness of photography is the outcome, not of any immanent universality of meaning, but of a project of global domination" (96).

In more recent times an exhibition, backed by the US State Department titled 'After September 11: Images from Ground Zero', by photojournalist/art photographer Joel Meyorowitz travelled to more than 60 countries and assisted in shaping and maintaining a public memory of the attacks of the World Trade Centre and its aftermath (Kennedy 315). Similar, to 'The Family of Man', it adds an epic quality to the images. As Kennedy points out that:

> To be sure this latter exhibit has been more overtly designed as propaganda, yet it also carries the cachet of 'culture' (most obviously, via the signature of a renowned photographer) and is intended to transmit a universal message that transcends the politics of difference. (Kennedy 323)

The Website "We're Not Afraid' maintains the public memory of terrorism, without the horror of suffering. With a 'universal message' similar to the aforementioned exhibitions, it attempts to transcends the politics of difference by addressing the 'we' as the 'everyday' citizen. It serves as a gallery space and similarly evokes western romantic universal ideals conveyed in the exhibition 'The Family of Man', whilst its aesthetic forms avoid the stylististically captured scenes of 'After September 11'. As stated earlier, the site had over 11 million hits in the first few weeks; as such the sheer number of viewers exceeds that of any formal photographic exhibition. Moreover, unlike these highly constructed art exhibitions from leading professional photographers, the Website significantly presents a democratic form of participation in which the 'personal is political'. It is the citizen journalist. It is the 'everyday' person, as evidenced in the predominant snapshot aesthetics and the ordinariness in the images that are employed.

Kris Cohen, in his analysis of photoblogging suggests that this aesthetic emphasises the importance in "photoblogging of *not* thinking too much, of the role that instinct plays in the making of photographs and the photoblog" (890). As discussed, previously, the overwhelming response and contributions to the Website within days of its launch seems to suggest this. The submission of photographs suggests a visceral response to the incidents from the 'people' in the celebration of the 'everyday' and the mundane.

It also should be noted that "there are now well over a million documented blogs and photoblogs in the world", with most appearing since 2003 (Cohen 886). As Cohen suggests "their newfound popularity has provoked a gentle storm of press, along with a significant number of utopic scenarios in which blogs feature as the next emancipatory mass media product"(886). The world-wide press coverage for the "We're Not Afraid' site is one key example that promotes this "utopian vision of transfigured citizens and in Benedict Anderson's well used term an 'imagined community" (Goggin xx). Nevertheless, the defiant captioning of the images also returns us historically to the social memory of the London Blitz 1940-41 in which the theme of a transfigured community was employed and in which the London underground and shelters became a signifier for the momentum of "We're Not Afraid'.

Barthes explained in *Mythologies* about the "the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history" (11). What I want to argue is that the mythology surrounding the London bombings articulated in the Website "We're Not Afraid' is determined by 20th Century history of the media and the cultural imaginary surrounding predominantly British values*.** *The British Prime Minister at the time, Tony Blair, asserted that "qualities of creativity built on tolerance, openness and adaptability, work and self improvement, strong communities and families and fair play, rights and responsibilities and an outward looking approach to the world that all flow from our unique island geography and history." ("Blair Defines British Values"). These values are suggested in the types of photographs uploaded onto the activist Website, as such notions of the British Empire are evoked.

Moreover, in his address following the incident, "Blair harkened back to the 'Blitz spirit' that saw Londoners through the dark days of Nazi bombing during World War II — and, by association, to Winston Churchill, the wartime leader whose determined, moving speeches helped steel the national resolve" ("Blair Delivers"). In his Churchillian cadence he paid "tribute to the stoicism and resilience of the people of London who have responded in a way typical of them". He said Britain would show "by our spirit and dignity" that "our values will long outlast" the terrorists. He further declared that "the purpose of terrorism is just that. It is to terrorize people and we will not be terrorized" ("Blair Delivers").

The mythology of the Blitz and "the interpretive context at the time (and for some years thereafter) can be summarized by the phrase 'the People's War'—a populist patriotism that combined criticism of the past with expectations of social change and inclusive messages of shared heritage and values" (Field 31). The image conveyed is of a renewed sense of community. The language of triumph against adversity and the endurance of ordinary citizens are also evoked in the popular press of the London incidents. *The Times* announced:

> Revulsion and resolve: Despite the shock, horror and outrage, the calm shown in London was exemplary. Ordinary life may be inconvenienced by the spectre of terror, yet terrorism will not force free societies to abandon their fundamental features. An attack was inevitable. The casualties were dreadful. The terrorists have only strengthened the resolve of Britain and its people. ("What the Papers Say")

Similarly the *Daily Express* headline was "We Britons Will Never Be Defeated" ("What the Papers Say"). The declaration of "We're not afraid" alongside images on the Website follows on from this trajectory.

The BBC reported that the Website "'We're not afraid' gives Londoners a voice" ("Not Afraid Website Overwhelmed"). The BBC has also made a documentary concerning the mission and the somewhat utopian principles presented. Similarly discussion of the site has been evoked in other Weblogs that overwhelmingly praise it and very rarely question its role. One example is from a discussion of "We're Not Afraid" on another activist site titled "World Changing: Change Your Thinking". The contributor states:

> Well, I live in the UK and I am afraid. I'm also scared that sites like We're Not Afraid encourage an unhealthy solidarity of superiority, nationalism and xenophobia – perpetuating a "we're good" and "they're evil" mentality that avoids the big picture questions of how we got here.
> Posted by: John Norris at July 8, 2005 03:45 AM

Notably, this statement also reiterates the previous argument on cultural diplomacy presented by theorists in regards to the exhibitions of 'The Family of Man' and 'After September 11' in which the images are viewed as propaganda, promoting western cultural values. This is also supported by the mood of commentary in the British press since the London bombings, in which it is argued that "Britain and the British way of life are under threat, the implication being that the threat is so serious that it may ultimately destroy the nation and its values" (King).

The significance of the Website is that it represents a somewhat democratic medium in its call for engagement and self-expression. Furthermore, the emancipatory photography of self and space, presented in the "We're Not Afraid" site, echoes Blair's declaration of "we will not be terrorized". However, it follows similar politically conservative themes that were evoked in the Blitz, such as community, family and social stability, with tacit reference to social fragmentation and multi-ethnicity (Field 41-42). In general, as befitted the theme of "a People's War," the Blitz imagery was positive and sympathetic in the way it promoted the endurance of the ordinary citizen. Geoffrey Field suggests "it offered an implicit rejoinder to the earlier furor—focusing especially on brave, caring mothers who made efforts to retain some semblance of family under the most difficult circumstances and fathers who turned up for work no matter how heavy the bombing had been the night before" (24).

Images on the Website consist of snapshots of babies, families, pets, sporting groups, people on holiday and at celebrations. It represents a, somewhat, global perspective of middle-class values. The snapshot aesthetic presents, what Liz Kotz refers to as, the "aesthetics of intimacy". It is a certain kind of photographic work which is quasi-documentary and consists of "colour images of individuals, families, or groupings, presented in an apparently intimate, unposed manner, shot in an off-kilter, snapshot style, often a bit grainy, unfocused, off-colour" (204). These are the types of images that provide the visual gratification of solidarity amongst its contributors and viewers, as it seemingly appears more 'real'. Yet, Kotz asserts that these type of photographs also involve a structure of power relations "that cannot be easily evaded by the spontaneous performance before the lens" (210). For example, Sarah Boxer importantly points out that "We're Not Afraid", set up to show solidarity with London, seems to be turning into a place where the haves of the world can show that they're not afraid of the have-nots" (1). She argues that "there's a brutish flaunting of wealth and leisure" (1). The iconography in the images of "We're not Afraid" certainly promotes a 'memorialisation' of the middle-class sphere. The site draws attention to the values of the global neoliberal order in which capital accumulation is paramount. It, nevertheless, also attempts to challenge "the true victory of terrorism", which Jean Baudrillard circumspectly remarks is in "the regression of the value system, of all the ideology of freedom and free movement etc… that the Western world is so proud of, and that legitimates in its eyes its power over the rest of the world".

Self-confidence is conveyed in the images. Moreover, with the subjects welcoming gaze to the camera there may be a sense of narcissism in publicising what could be considered mundane. However, visibility is power. For example, one of the contributors, Maryland USA resident Darcy Nair, said "she felt a sense of helplessness in the days after 9/11. Posting on the We're Not Afraid may be a small act, but it does give people like her a sense that they're doing something" (cited in Weir). Nair states that:

It seems that it is the only good answer from someone like me who's not in the government or military…There are so many other people who are joining in. When bunches of individuals get together – it does make me feel hopeful – there are so many other people who feel the same way. (cited in Weir)

Participation in the Website conveys a power which consists of defiantly celebrating western middle-class aesthetics in the form of personal photography. As such, the personal becomes political and the private becomes public. The site offers an opportunity for a shared experience and a sense of community that perhaps is needed in the era of global terrorism. It could be seen as a celebration of survival (Weir).

The Website seems inspirational with its defiant message. Moreover, it also has postings from various parts of the world that convey a message of triumph in the 'everyday'. The site also presents the ubiquitous use of photography in a western cultural tradition in which idealised constructions are manifested in 'Kodak' moments and in which the domestic space and leisure times are immortalised and become, significantly, the arena of activism.

As previously discussed Sontag argues that photography is mainly a social rite, a defence against anxiety, and a tool of power (8). The Website offers the sense of a global connection. It promotes itself as "citizens for a secure world, united against terror". It attempts to provide a universal solidarity, which appears uplifting. It is a defence against anxiety in which, in the act of using personal photographs, it becomes part of the collective memory and assists in easing the frustration of not being able to do anything. As Sontag argues "often something looks, or is felt to look 'better' in a photograph. Indeed, it is one of the functions of photography to improve the normal appearance of things" (81). Rather than focus on the tragic victim of traditional photojournalism, in which the camera is directed towards the other, the site promotes the sharing and triumph of personal moments. In the spotlight are 'everyday' modalities from 'everyday people' attempting to confront the rhetoric of terrorism. In their welcoming gaze to the camera the photographic subjects challenge the notion of the sensational image, the spectacle that is on show is that of middle-class modalities and a performance of collective power.

Note

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