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Panizza Allmark

*Edith Cowan University*

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Photography after the Incidents: We're Not Afraid!
Panizza Allmark

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 Twisting 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 than 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-Qaeda 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 iv). 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 subsersive in its move away from the contextualised sensory images of violence that abound in the mainstream press.

According to the site's creator, London Web designer, Alie 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 mainstream 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' ("Not Afraid' Website Overwhelmed"). The images represent 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 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 images 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 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 evoked 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 exhibition ‘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, 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 Meyerowitz 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 transcend 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 stylistically 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 seriousness that it may ultimately destroy the nation and its values” (King).

Kris Cohen, in his analysis of photoblogging suggests that this aesthetic emphases the importance in “photoblogging of ordinariness in the images that are employed. The Website follows on from this trajectory.

The London bombings of 7th July 2005 has been described by the BBC as ‘We’re Not Afraid’. The BBC has also made a documentary named “The London Incidents”. The London bombings has been described by the BBC as “The London Incidents”.

The Mythology of the Blitz and the “improposable” in the 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:

Revelion 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 ideals. 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).

http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/rt/printer...
The significance of the Website is that it represents a somewhat democratic medium in its call for engagement and self-expression. Furthermore, the emancipatory photograph of self and space, presented in the "We're Not Afraid" site, echoes Blair’s declaration of "we will not be terrorised". However, it follows similar politically conservative themes that were evoked in the Blitz 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 a sense of 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 of 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, the spectacle that is on show is that of middle-class modalities and a performance of collective power.

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 (1), in which the camera is directed towards the other, this 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, the spectacle that is on show is that of middle-class modalities and a performance of collective power.

**Note**

Themes from this article have been presented at the 2005 Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Conference in Sydney, Australia and at the 2006 Association for Cultural Studies Crossroads Conference in Istanbul, Turkey.

**References**


