

Fluid Memories: Cultural Rememberings of the 2005 London Bombings

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Film

Introduction

On the 7th of July 2005, four bombs detonated on the London transportation system, killing 52 people plus the four suicide bombers, and injuring about 700 commuters. The London bombings amplified the feelings of fear, suspicion and disbelief that developed as a consequence of the earlier attacks on US soil on the 11th of September 2001, and in Madrid on the 11th of March 2004. There is no doubt that all of these attacks were heavily mediated in the immediate aftermath, thereby providing coherent narrative frameworks to make sense of the violence.

In this article I shall consider various cultural practices, whose discourses are mediated through different technologies, in order to further understand the creation of new meanings by objects of cultural memory. Taking as specific case studies Davinia Douglass' pictures and the London Bombing Memorial in Hyde Park, I will broadly outline the peculiar media ecology of the 7/7 attacks, and shed light on the on-going process of working through the trauma of terrorism. I shall suggest the possibility of fluid memories that leave a certain margin of flexibility in their interpretation and, at the same time, give closure and restoration to the previous condition. This article ultimately aims at reading how cultures reinterpret traumatic events to establish their identity and orientate their future. It is my argument that the 'interpretative flexibility' offered by these objects provides a palliative function against post-7/7 anxiety but, on the other hand, they respond to the urgency of shifting from mourning to back-to-normal state.

The context

According to Steven Brown and Andrew Hoskins, 'insecurity seems a particularly late modern malady'.¹ The increasing feeling of uncertainty is a key characteristic of late modernity and terrorism certainly contributes to the constant state of anxiety of the present day. Zygmunt Bauman even argues that we live in a state of

'liquid fear', where societies are actually governed by global terror in its multiple forms; nuclear fear, political violence, biological and natural disasters, and such like.² Mass media reflect the propinquity of terror by reporting terrorist atrocities and filtering propaganda material from the terrorist organisations, but their control and censorship rarely alleviate the spreading of fear. Moreover, media play an important role in the memorialisation process, since in our media-saturated era they become active producers of memory objects, namely iconic pictures, videos and audio recordings. In fact, as Nancy Wood argues, 'media now function as the key vectors of cultural memory, and the most proliferating source of images and narratives of the past'.³

Differently from previous attacks, the London bombings saw a rapid circulation of images recorded by survivors and rescue teams, which were later picked up by mainstream media. In minutes, hours and days mobile video recordings, photographs and audio files proliferated, submerging the websites of the main newspapers and broadcasters with pieces of the so-called 'citizen journalism'. This element differentiates the 2005 London bombings from the attacks at the World Trade Centre in 2001. Specifically, camera phones with better resolution, more availability of wireless hotspots, 3G technology and the increased velocity of dissemination, contributed to the circulation of more grassroots information and, thus, memories. For instance, the picture taken with Alex Chadwick's phone camera was recycled in many news websites and daily papers; the image of commuters leaving a derailed train through a smoke-filled tube tunnel even became one of the greatest news images of the last 100 years according to *The Guardian*.⁴ Amateur short films made by tourists in Manhattan and audio recordings shaped to a certain degree the unfolding memory of 9/11; the telephone calls

1. S. Brown & A. Hoskins, 'Terrorism in the New Memory Ecology: Mediating and Remembering the 2005 London Bombings', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 2:2 (2010), p.89

2. Z. Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006). See also Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) for an extensive understanding of changes in late modernity.

3. N. Wood, *Vectors of Memory* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999), p.9

4. Brown & Hoskins, p.97

of people blocked in the towers or on the United 93 flight remain central to the way we remember that event. It is only later, however, with mobile technological advances, that it became a much more widespread phenomenon or, as Steve Brown and Andrew Hoskins have argued, it generated a new memory ecology.⁵

Photographic Recollections in the Present
Nevertheless, one of the most iconic and recurrent images of the London bombings comes from traditional media, namely from a professional photographer of the Associated Press. The picture shows Davinia Douglass being shepherded from Edgware Road tube station, with a gauze mask covering horrific burns; it was widely published at the time in newspapers such as *The Independent*, *The Times* and in the tabloids. The image was often displayed in association with the pictures of train wreckage and the exploded bus of Tavistock Square, or together with the picture of John Tulloch's bloodied face. Chosen because of the sensationalistic logic that runs the media, these images demonstrate on the one hand how vulnerable we are. On the other hand, they show the manner in which the media insinuates itself into the collective process of sharing and articulating what will become the object of memory.

This photograph is of particular interest because of its re-use in a more recent context, during the 2010 anniversary of the attacks when Douglass decided to be interviewed and recount her story. On this occasion, her picture was not associated with images of the attack or the aforementioned survivors' pictures. The July 2005 picture was followed by three other photographs taken during different phases of Douglass' recovery, which show the slow healing of her burn marks. The last one of the series published five years after the attacks reveals her remarkable physical healing; almost no scar tissue is visible on the left side of her face, which was initially scorched by the fire surge that engulfed her carriage. By framing the image within the context of the anniversary and the process of recovery, the act of memory becomes an act of working-through the trauma and calming the anxiety post 7/7.

The act of remembering the suffering of others through this picture relates to what Marianne Hirsh defined as 'postmemory', a space of remembrance where the traumatic experience or its memory is adopted by others as one's own.⁶ As much as the first picture represented

death and terror, so the new contextualisation says 'I am alive and I have survived'. The last picture of Douglass underlines the palliative and restorative potential of the first one, which was initially characterised as traumatic and hence in need of empathic viewers. In its recuperation of a foregoing order and normality, the image positions itself along the Werenotafraid.com phenomenon, a website which groups pictures of Londoners that give testimony to the will of living without fear after the terrorist attacks.⁷ Whereas viewing the 2005 picture becomes an act similar to witnessing trauma, the 2010 photographic series attempts to limit the traumatic memories without making them go away. In fact, the sign and symptoms of trauma remain, as they are caused by a source being driven underground, but the group of pictures accentuates the possibility of a life without fear rather than after fear. These cultural objects, however, are not subordinate to a sole memory, but leave space for interpretation. In a sense, they become fluid memories (liquid using Bauman's terminology) adapting to new contexts in the light of the present.

Monumental Memories

The London bombings also remain a unique traumatic event with regards to the rapidity of the commemorative practices associated with it. After just four years, the effort to honour the victims of the attacks produced an official memorial established in London's Hyde Park on the 2009 anniversary. Architects Carmody Groarke, in consultation with the families of the victims, designed the memorial consisting of 52 stainless steel cast pillars, each one representing one of the victims. The memorial to the fallen has minimal accompanying text to provide a discursive framework. Each pillar lists the date, time and location where each victim was caught in the bombings, and they are grouped into four clusters to remember the four explosions. A further separate plaque reads: 'In memory of those killed in the London Bombings, 7 July 2005', and lists their names in alphabetical order.

The 7/7 Memorial follows a dominant tendency in recent monumentality, where abstraction becomes the common denominator for the commemoration of victims of atrocities and wars. According to Brown and Hoskins, the archetype for this kind of commemorative architecture is Maya Lin's monument to the Vietnam War

5. Brown & Hoskins, p.2

6. M. Hirsh 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, Spring (2008), p.103

7. See www.werenotafraid.com and C. Weber, 'An Aesthetic of Fear: The 7/7 London Bombings, the Sublime, and Werenotafraid.com', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 34:3 (2006), pp.683-710



The London Bombing Memorial in Hyde Park, July 2011, photographs by Elena Caoduro.

Veterans in Washington, DC.⁸ The abstract construction is constituted of a bold cut into the ground with the names of the veterans inscribed into black granite, which reflects the surrounding landscape. Whereas Lin's striking tribute was controversial at that time for the lack of pompous majesty and nationalistic or militaristic symbols, more recent examples find their strength exactly in this minimalism and in the lack of images of war. The London Bombings Memorial bears more resemblance to other contemporary memorials, which turn to abstraction; for instance, the various installations in the Berlin Jewish museum.

James E. Young, who coined the term 'countermonuments', recognises the problem of how to do justice to loss and give these dramatic events perpetual remembering.⁹ He also claims that this new kind of memorial embodies an inner contradiction.¹⁰ On the one hand, they are still seen as 'an essentially totalitarian form of art or architecture', but on the other hand, their abstraction makes them disappear, challenging previous ideas of monumentality.¹¹ The monument in Hyde Park belongs to this tradition and allows visitors to walk around and lay flowers, letters and tributes in no obvious designated area, giving extreme freedom to the work of remembering. The space is carefully arranged to encourage visitors to do the work of recollection without the support of a fixed narrative or set of images and words. Therefore, I suggest that the 7/7 Memorial provides some openness to interpretation.

8. Brown & Hoskins, p.100

9. J.E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000)

10. James Young in an interview with Adi Gordon and Amos Goldberg at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem on 24th May 1998, retrieved from www1.yadvashem.org/odot.../Microsoft%20Word%20-%20203659.pdf (accessed 15 April, 2011)

11. Ibid

Personal and collective memories cohabit in the same space, which is at the same time individual (there is a pillar for each victim) and cultural (the monument is a work of art for the whole community).

In summary, the memorial constitutes an attempt to satisfy the need for integration of the traumatising event of the past, leaving liquid memories to take form according to the individual visitor's experience. The dynamics of remembering and forgetting of the London bombings operate continually through personal recollections and commemorative rituals, like the annual ceremonies and special events around the memorial. However, as Andreas Huyssen has noted for Germany's recent obsession with monuments and memorials, 'the more monuments there are, the more the past becomes invisible, the easier it is to forget: redemption, thus through forgetting'.¹² Hyde Park hosts several other memorials, the Holocaust memorial, 'A Walk for Diana', the Diana Memorial, The Norwegian War Memorial and several others. There is, therefore, the actual risk of engulfing the memory of 7/7 in the proliferating 'memory boom' of our postmodern society, which can only be avoided by an active work of personal memory. Moreover, it could be argued that the memorial was a premature act. Some families did not know at the time the details of the death of their loved ones; investigations and hearings were still underway especially regarding the delays in rescuing. Hence, only the future will tell whether the memorial becomes a victim of the 'seduction for monumentality', in which the monumental migrates from real to mediated image, from material to immaterial, and ultimately into the

12. A. Huyssen, 'Monumental Seduction' in M. Bal et al (eds), *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), p.205

digital realm.¹³

Conclusion

Traumatic experiences cannot be fully remembered nor forgotten by the community who experienced them. They enter the collective subconscious, a cultural substrate, before re-emerging in multiple forms: cultural objects, traditions and myths. As Aleida Assmann argues, however, memory is not an anchor for salvation against time, but is the most reactive sensor of its flowing.¹⁴ Scars require remembering, continuity and commitment. Therefore, the two case studies analysed

13. Ibid

14. A. Assmann *Ricordare. Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), p.15

demonstrate the possibility of fluid memories, which are not static but are instead able to evolve, leaving a certain degree of 'interpretative flexibility without in any way compromising the tragedy'.¹⁵ In the course of this article I have shown how different media, including a series of photographs and a monument, frame the terrorist attacks with their own open narrative. All these memories exist in a continuum of cultural memory. Davinia Douglass' picture and the Hyde Park memorial also reveal how cultural memorisation is therefore an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and rewritten as it shapes the future.

15. Brown & Hoskins, p.103

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Web Resources

www.werenotafraid.com <accessed 30/06/11>