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After September 11: Photography, Memory and Cultural Diplomacy

Liam Kennedy
University of Birmingham

The photographic image proliferated around the events of September 11 and their aftermath. Photography not only documented the events of the day, it transformed them into potent symbols and iconic reference points, and was instrumental in communicating and cathecting the trauma of a citizenry - its function was not only evidentiary but also testimonial and mnemonic.

While an appeal to memory is crucial to the testimonial role of American photography in the wake of September 11 it also points up the instability of this role. David Harvey has noted that whereas the attack on the World Trade Centre was reported across the world as an attack 'upon the main symbols of global U.S. financial and military power' it was not interpreted this way by American media that emphasised 'an attack upon "freedom", "American values" and the "American way of life"'.[1] These differences in interpretation are also potential differences in ways of seeing which are exacerbated by frames and contexts of representation. As Susan Buck-Morss observes: 'The staging of violence as a global spectacle separates September 11 from previous acts of terror….The force of these images was that they entered simultaneously multiple fields of communication within the global public sphere, with highly varied meanings, from terror to triumph.[2] ' The dissonance of meaning may be difficult for many Americans to comprehend or accept but it is a common enough feature of a geo-political environment in which horrors compete for media coverage, and in which an act of memory for one community is deemed an act of forgetting by another.

The United States State Department was cognizant of this dissonance as it enjoined the 'P.R. war' with media sources in the Middle East after September 11. Patricia Harrison, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, was instrumental in convincing initially sceptical State Department chiefs that a photography exhibition could be an effective diplomatic weapon in countering 'misinformation' about the United States, arguing that it was necessary to 'convey to foreign audiences the physical and human dimensions of the recovery effort, images that are less well known overseas than those of the destruction of September 11'[3] To this end Harrison worked with the American photographer Joel Meyerowitz to construct a touring exhibition of his photographs of Ground Zero. The exhibition was launched by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington in February 2002. It is intended that 25 identical sets of the exhibition will travel to more than 60 countries by the end of 2005, many of them in the Middle East and North Africa. (The images are also displayed online http://www.911exhibit.state.gov). Backed by the U.S. State Department and regionally promoted by US embassies and consulates the exhibit is clearly intended to shape and maintain a public memory of the September 11 attacks and their aftermath.[4]

Meyerowitz was a canny choice to convey what Harrison terms 'the physical and human' dimensions of Ground Zero. Under the auspices of the Museum of the City of New York he is constructing an archive which will eventually contain about 10,000 photographs 'documenting the painful work of rescue, recovery, demolition and excavation' at Ground Zero.[5] The 28 photographs chosen for the travelling exhibitions depict the everyday nature of much of this

work and indicate the magnitude of the task. Skilled in the aesthetics of both street and landscape photography Meyerowitz conjoins these to produce some striking illustrations of life and work at Ground Zero. Using a 1944 8x10 wooden box view camera he works not to capture a decisive moment but to depict a scene suffused with detail and inviting empathetic contemplation. What Meyerowitz very deliberately photographs is the scenery of trauma. The gravitas imputed by the style is supported by the photographer's interview comments on the 'spirituality' of Ground Zero, the act of 'salvation' being carried out by the workers there, and his sense of it as a 'Forbidden City', a space of primal sensations and sights. In Meyerowitz's words, 'I've seen things down there that you can only see if you keep going'.[6]

In part, of course, such statements serve to underline the photographer's privileged perspective in relation to the horror only he can truly see (a trope of much war photography, but also reiterated by many photographers close to the World Trade Centre on September 11) and struggle to represent in the visual dispatches he sends back. But this perspective is also thoughtfully reworked in Meyerowitz's images which use scale, colour and frame to manipulate our viewing; our eyes move across the images, searching for what we may not be sure, but mimicking the search going on in the images by the fire workers, police and others at the scene. Every spot of colour emanating from the masses of twisted steel and debris catches our eye - we sense the moral ambiguity of looking. This camerawork takes some risks, acknowledging beauty in the scenes, and flirting with the elegiac elements inherent in photography, but this can work to disturb the story of recovery he wants to support and transcend the frames of reference he invokes. In one interview he refers to his role as documentary historian by stating: 'I will be Matthew Brady'. Brady's images of the ruins of Charleston after the Civil War do link to the representation of the ruins of Ground Zero in suggestive ways, referring us to a national trauma. However, the overall scale of Meyerowitz's scenes with human figures dwarfed by mountains of rubble might prompt some to think of Piranesi's images of the ruins of Rome, referring us to a loss of empire.

After September 11 is a richly encoded exhibit, the meanings of which cannot be contained by Meyerowitz's documentary ideal nor securely tethered to the mnemonic functions projected by the State Department. I doubt the exhibition can activate cultural memory across the world in a way that touches a universal chord of human empathy. But the effort to do so indicates a belief in the 'democratising reality' of the photographic image which, though motivated in this instance as propaganda, is deeply articulated in American culture and evident in much of the photographic representation of September 11 and its aftermath.[8]

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[1] David Harvey, 'Cracks in the Edifice of the Empire State', in *After the World Trade Center: Rethinking New York City*, eds. Michael Sorkin and Sharon Zukin (New York: Routledge 2002), 57.

[2] Susan Buck-Morss, 'A Global Public Sphere?', *Radical Philosophy* 111 (January/February 2002), 3.

[3] Patricia Harrison, 'Traveling September 11 Photo Exhibition Unveiled in Washington', 27 February 2002, U.S. Department of State: International Information Programs, http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/02022802.htm

[4] This is clear enough from the words of Colin Powell in his launch speech: 'We send these chilling photographs out to the world as a remembrance and as a reminder, a remembrance of

those who perished, and a reminder of our commitment to pursuing terrorists wherever they may try to hide'. 'Remarks by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell at the Launch of the Educational and Cultural Affairs Exhibit, "After September 11th: Images from Ground Zero"', U.S. Department of State: Office of the Spokesman press release, 27 February 2002.

[5] 'After September 11: Images from Ground Zero: About the Exhibit'. http://www.911exhibit.state.gov/index.cfm

[6] Vince Aletti, 'Site Specific: With Joel Meyerowitz in the Forbidden City', *The Village Voice*, 2 November 2001, 13.

[7] Hamilton Kahn, 'Archival Instinct Draws Mayerowitz to "Ground Zero"', *The Provincetown Banner*, 4 October 2001, 5.

[8] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*