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REALISM VS. REALITY TV IN THE WAR ON TERROR: ARTWORKS AS MODELS OF INTERPRETATION

Much of what is associated with the so-called "War on Terror" bears a relation to images. While society is increasingly media savvy, these images tend to be produced and consumed in such a manner that spectators are left little room and even less encouragement to engage in critical thinking as an intermediary act. The proliferation of new technologies for the production and distribution of images (= camera phones and the Web) have added new elements to the equation worth consideration. This article attempts to open up a space for reflection using a combination of theoretical contextualization (largely by way of Jean Baudrillard) and artistic example. The practice of art making is thus cast as a productive tool for sense-making on the part of those producing and consuming images associated with the so-called "War on Terror."

> …the distinction between civil and military is tending to disappear, like that between private and public. […] Hence the advent of a third type of conflict, after "civil war" and "war between nations": namely, war on civilians… (Virilio 27)

If we are in the midst of a "war on civilians" as Paul Virilio claims, one which sees citizens physically besieged by terrorist acts and symbolically attacked via images of those acts, then the proliferation of camera phones creates an unprecedented situation whereby large numbers of "photographer-witnesses" (Susan Sontag's term) become de facto war photographers. War photography is a practice beset by ethical challenges and thus we are likely to have to wrestle with the questions it poses on an increasingly large scale, both as producers and consumers of imagery.
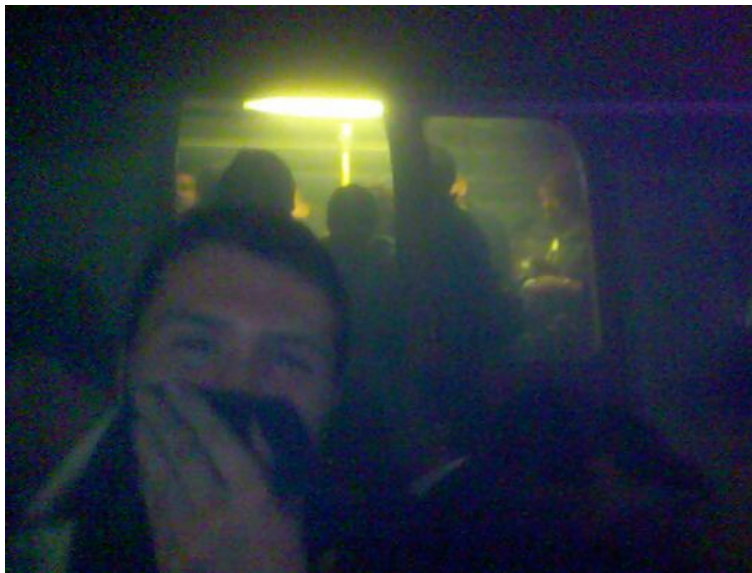

Fig. 1. Eliot Ward, "Untitled" 2005, *Washingtonpost.com.*

Sontag vs. Baudrillard

How do images such as this photograph by Eliot Ward (Fig. 1) – one which became iconic of the 7/7 attack – mediate our experience of it, that is, if not constituting an event in and of themselves? In Evans Chan's article *War and Images: 9/11/01, Susan Sontag, Jean Baudrillard, and*

Paul Virilio, he recounts a theoretical tit for tat that occurred between Sontag and Baudrillard going back to a performance of *Waiting for Godot* that Sontag staged in Sarajevo in the early 1990s.

Following Chan's lead, I've cast a hypothetical exchange between Sontag and Baudrillard concerning war photography in general. Sontag's lines are extracted from her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), while Baudrillard's statement is taken from his essay *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2001). The question to get the ball rolling is: Do images such as Ward's (Fig. 1) make the event real? First Baudrillard:

> The role of images is highly ambiguous. For they capture the event (take it as hostage) at the same time as they glorify it. They can be infinitely multiplied, and at the same time act as a diversion and a neutralization (as happened for the events of May 68). […] The image consumes the event, that is, it absorbs the latter and gives it back as consumer goods. Certainly the image gives to the event an unprecedented impact, but as an image-event. ("L'Esprit")

Sontag replies:

> To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment…It assumes that everyone is a spectator. (109-11)

> Photographer-witnesses may think it more correct morally to make the spectacular not spectacular. But the spectacular is very much part of the religious narratives by which suffering, throughout most of Western history, has been understood. (80)

If one grants Sontag a victory, it comes with two qualifications. First, in an image-event such as that of 7/7, both the producers and consumers of imagery are likely to be "a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world." While there is a tendency to refer to the media as an "it" or a "they," we are no longer permitted the luxury of this separation. We *are* the media, as Ward's mobile phone photograph clearly demonstrates. Second, the idea that an understanding of suffering in the war on civilians is to be found in "spectacular religious narratives" is highly suspect considering the fundamentalist rhetoric of the so-called "War on Terror."

Models and Events

If one is to accept the responsibility of being both a producer and consumer of imagery in the war on civilians, one is challenged to walk a fine line. In the case of Ward's image (Fig. 1), the hypothetical exchange between Sontag and Baudrillard helps sets the stage for some of the questions it poses. An immediate question becomes: Is it possible to engage with this image without becoming a vessel for the symbolic violence of the terrorist act? To conclude "no" without qualification and to shut one's eyes, is to opt out of society as it exists today. To conclude "yes" without acknowledging the degree to which such an image can affect us is naive.

The question then becomes one of establishing productive models of interpretation. In his book *The Rule of Metaphor*, Paul Ricoeur draws a distinction between speculative (theoretical) and poetic discourse, the latter possessing allowances that have to be unceasingly qualified in the former (359-71). In this manner, the present article asserts that there is unique and valuable insight to be gained in the discourse of the poetic (= art making). Baudrillard asserts that the terms in such discourse "*respond* to each other beyond the code. It is this response that [is] ultimately deconstructive of all codes, of all control and power, which always base themselves on the separation of terms and their abstract articulation" ("Requiem" 285).

Artworks as Models of Interpretation

The following artists are but four examples of many who have wrestled with their respective forms and displayed an acute awareness of the challenges we now face with increasing intensity in regard to images.

Jeff Wall

Moving chronologically, the first artist is Jeff Wall. In particular, one might look at a work that Sontag analyzes in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a piece from 1992 entitled *Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)* (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Jeff Wall, detail from "Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)" 1992, *Tate Modern.*

Here Wall conflates the documentary and the cinematic – the latter in the sense of a staged and hyperreal tableaux – in effect shattering a widely held assumption in war photography, namely that we as viewers can understand the absurdity of the atrocities of war. As Sontag points out, it is the lack of interest that the dead troops have in both the living in the photograph and us as viewers that projects this concept to the spectator.

Ward's image (Fig. 1) is cinematic as well, but while it conveys something of the trauma suffered by the 52 people who lost their lives on 7/7, it does not confront with the sheer brutality of the act. What Wall's piece suggests is that even if it did, even if we were presented with the images from 7/7 which were deemed too "graphic or intrusive" (Vickers) for us, would the images be capable of telling us something about the reality the victims experienced? If the answer is "no," then what is the function of these types of images? Do they aestheticize suffering as part of an exchange system? Citing Wall himself:

> The site from which the image originates is always elsewhere. And this 'elsewhere' is experienced, maybe consciously maybe not, in experiencing the image. […] To me, this experience of two

places, two worlds in one moment is a central form of the experience of modernity. It's an experience of disassociation, of alienation. In it, space – the space inside and outside of the picture – is experienced as it really exists in capitalism: there is always a point of control, a projection, which is inaccessible. […] I see it as an analogue of capitalist social relations, which are relations of dissociation. (Barents 29)

Gillian Wearing

A second artist worth considering in the present context is Gillian Wearing. In particular, her body of work entitled *Signs that Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You To Say*, from 1992-93 prefigures many of the questions raised by the reality TV phenomenon that emerged in the late 1990s. In the *Signs that Say…* project she invited subjects to have a hand in how they were represented by her as a photographer. She did this by asking them to write their preferred message on a piece of signage which they held up as she photographed them. The results invariably arrest one's predispositions for interpreting the subjects based on their appearance. This is especially strong in the photograph entitled "I'm desperate" (Fig. 3), which has become iconic of the project as a whole.

Fig. 3. Gillian Wearing, "I'm desperate" 1992-93, *Tate Collection.*

If Wall questions (among other things) the potential for a documentary image to convey the meaning of combat, Wearing questions the way one is predisposed to interpret images based upon one's cultural encoding and the power relationships inherent in the triangulation between subject, photographer, and viewer. If the external promise of reality TV is that it shows real

people, without artifice, its tacit goal is to shock audiences with the sensational qualities of raw footage. Just as Walker Evans would refer to photos as having a "documentary style" rather than being documentary, Joel Black sees reality TV as being driven by a "reality effect," by an explicit "truth as visible spectacle," in contradistinction to both perceptible and referential realism,

> today's sophisticated effects are increasingly used to produce heightened illusion of reality itself (crashes, disasters, wars, space travel, etc.) – of truth as visible spectacle, of reality as anything that is filmable, or, borrowing from recent French theorists, what I call the reality effect. […] As a graphic medium, film doesn't literally make things "real," of course. Documenting actual objects, characters, and events (referential realism), or even making objects, characters, and events seem real (perceptible realism), is altogether different from making them explicit. (8)

Wearing's work shows us that there is a difference between reality and realism in that what is explicit (the signs), invariably run counter to our implicit apperception of the subjects. In a playful reversal, it is the explicit information that tends to humanize the subjects.

The *Signs that Say…* project succinctly highlights the trap of reality TV from an ontological standpoint: it prefers reality to realism. Despite the reality effect produced by the events portrayed, situating a group of strangers in a competitive situation where they will be watched by millions of people has much to do with ritual and little to do with realism. All of this was concisely prefigured by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*:

Pierre Huyghe

The third artist who can tell us something about the complexity of inhabiting our landscape of images is Pierre Huyghe, and in particular, a work entitled *The Third Memory* (1999). In many ways, Huyghe picks up where Wearing leaves off and extends her line of inquiry regarding photographic representation, first objectively into the realm of cinema and then subjectively into the realm of identity. If Wall's work compels one to question the potential of documents to convey a true understanding of war and Wearing's work disambiguates reality effects and realism, Huyghe's work juxtaposes the real-time of direct experience against the cinematographic time that is extracted from direct experience as surplus-value (capital) (Masséra 125).

Fig. 4. Pierre Huyghe, "The Third Memory" 1999, *UVA Art Museum.*

Taking the film *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) as the starting point for this project, Huyghe contacted the man whose story is portrayed in this film, John Wojtowicz. Wojtowicz (played by Al Pacino) committed the 1972 bank robbery that would become the subject of *Dog Day Afternoon.* As in Wearing's *Signs that Say…* project, Huyghe's *The Third Memory* involves "reappropriating the

representations that speak in our place and name" (Masséra 95); however in Huyghe's work the difference between reality and realism becomes a hall of mirrors that boggles the mind.

Having asked Wojtowicz to deconstruct Pacino's performance, Huyghe films Wojtowicz stepping through the motions of the actual event noting places where Pacino got things wrong. Viewers in this installation are shown Pacino's portrayal of Wojtowicz as well as Wojtowicz's reappropriation of himself, side-by-side in a two-channel video projection (Fig. 4). However, the degree to which "the image, the fiction, the virtual, infuses reality" (Baudrillard "L'Esprit") is only fully fettered out when one takes into account the background information conveyed by critic Jean-Charles Masséra, in the curatorial statement *The Lesson of Stains*, itself a palimpsest of Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. Masséra quotes Wojtowicz:

> Before we went to rob the bank, what you don't know in the movie is that we sent to see *The Godfather*, because that had just come out in New York for the first time and that was August 22, 1972, so it inspired Bobby and Sal and also myself. We watched Marlon Brando and Al Pacino and that's where I got the idea of the note… (117)

Huyghe's starting point is the realization that Hollywood is as much inside us as outside us. He then suggests that by reappropriating our image of ourselves, we might come to retake parts of our identity from this chimera.

Banksy

The fourth artist performed two spectacular art interventions in 2005 which gained headlines around the world. While Banksy is routinely labeled a graffiti artist, there is a good deal more to his strategy than one usually associates with this genre. For example, in one of his interventions, he applied graffiti to the West Bank barrier in Israel. In a BBC article that describes him as a "guerrilla artist," Banksy's spokeswoman Jo Brooks said: "The Israeli security forces did shoot in the air threateningly and there were quite a few guns pointed at him." ("Art").

One of Banksy's latest exploits, executed just prior to his "attack" on the West Bank barrier (he refers to himself as an "art terrorist") consisted of surreptitiously installing his own work in four of New York's most prestigious museums in a single day. This image (Fig. 5) was installed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in March 2005.

Fig. 5. Banksy, "Untitled" 2005, *Wooster Collective.*

In *Requiem for the Media*, Baudrillard suggests that: "Reciprocity comes into being through the destruction of mediums per se." and goes on to quote from Jerry Rubin from his book *Do It*, saying: "People meet their neighbors for the first time while watching their apartment houses burn down" ("Requiem" 284). Later in this same essay, he names "transgression" as the method by which communication prevents itself from becoming reabsorbed into a defense of the system of codes within which it speaks. While he specifically suggests a transgression of the distinction between producer and consumer, one might also apply high and low culture as a viable set of oppositions. As if prefiguring Banksy, the example of this transgression that Baudrillard offers is graffiti:

> Graffiti is transgressive, not because it substitutes another content, another discourse, but simply because it responds, there, on the spot, and breaches the fundamental role of nonresponse enunciated by all the media. Does it oppose one code to another? I don't think so: it simply smashes the code. It doesn't lend itself to deciphering as a text rivaling commercial discourse; it presents itself as a transgression. ("Requiem" 287)

Of all the tools that artworks may offer as we attempt to interpret images such as the photograph by Ward (Fig. 1) presented at the outset of this essay, it is perhaps Banksy who presently has the most to offer us. The strength of Banksy's art is not located entirely in his stencil art or in his hijacking of museums, but in his ability to use the media that he is immersed in as tool to project a rejection of fear. If fear is the emotion that has given carte blanche to radical groups who have used the relativism of the media as an open platform for their ideologies, then perhaps we can start to assess our engagement with images accordingly. In other words, does the image in question inspire fear and consumption (its handmaiden) or does it promote ones ability to engage with the world? Does the image only unite us in our separateness (as Debord would argue) or

does it foster identity in the face of dissociation, context in the face of decontextualization, realism vs. reality TV?

For example, shortly after the attack of 7/7, a Website entitled *We're not Afraid!* <http://www.werenotafraid.com> appeared which invited users to publish photos of themselves beside the tagline "We're not Afraid!" (Fig. 6) The site was set up by London based Web Designer Alfie Dennan as a means of promoting solidarity among Londoners who refused to be terrorized by the attack. In a BBC interview less than a week after the 7/7 bombings, Dennan states:

> It is very unusual for Londoners to be afraid. They are showing that they are not going to react to this by fear. […] I set up the website to give people a voice online, to show their distaste for this tragedy, and have received a huge response – I've been amazed.

The genesis of the project was actually the collaboration (or mob-logging) between two mobloggers. Initially, Dennan posted an image of a bombed out train. Next, another user added the text "We're not Afraid!" This in turn, compelled other users from around the world to begin expanding on this theme with their own personal variations. As of the writing of this essay, the *We're not Afraid!* gallery contains over 18,000 photos and continues to grow. Here one finds a bit of both Wearing and Banksy's art work as a cultural context. Wearing's in that the subjects in these photos are choosing how they want to be represented, Banksy's in that the Internet becomes the platform for publication and the message is defiantly pro-civilian.
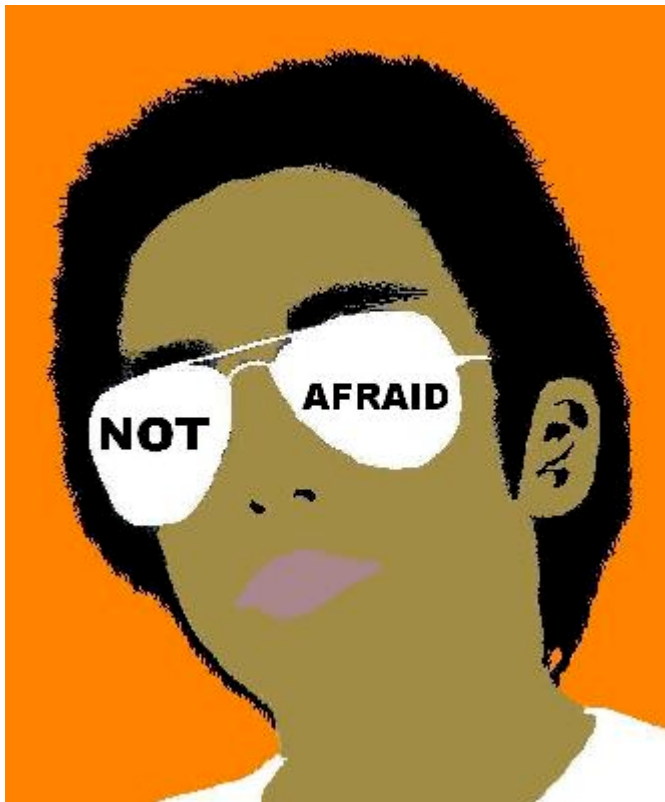

Fig. 6. Michael De V, "Untitled," *We're not afraid!*

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