

Monuments of Terrorism: (De)Selecting Memory and Symbolic Exchange at the Interface Between Westminster and Raqqa

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Contemporary conflict is conducted across multiple visual fronts, as the old visual symbols of conventional warfare and remembrance are increasingly replaced with digital images. Focusing on three events in the summer of 2015: the attack on tourists in Tunisia, the blowing up of the Temple of Bel in Palmyra, Syria, and the construction of a replica of the destroyed Arch of Triumph from Palmyra in Trafalgar Square, London, this paper details the symbolic exchange between the so-called Islamic State and western governments. Through an examination of the visual representation of violence enacted towards individual holidaymakers and ancient tourist sites, this paper details how the attack on a holiday resort in Tunisia was recast through a master narrative of war where the military repatriation of civilians represented the dead tourists as fallen soldiers. It will examine the visual record of the destruction of the Temple of Bel, by the Islamic State (ISIS), arguing that this action gained international legitimacy through the validation and complicity of the visual frame provided by satellite images from the United Nations. Finally, it will discuss the replication of the Arch of Triumph, from Palmyra, in Trafalgar Square as a further example of the instrumentalisation of counter-iconoclasm.

In this paper I suggest that the new monuments to terrorism are images of the events themselves, rather than simply physical memorials built for remembrance, and that these new monuments to terrorism circulating within the virtual landscapes of the internet, become the new sites of collective memorialisation

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enacted through repeated viewing. The three examples below offer new perspectives on the traditional memorial and monument, where the official and unofficial state attempts to visually reshape the narrative of recent history. By producing images and counter-images, they strive to fix, contain and continuously narrativise events in an act of controlled remembering. By charting these separate but connected events, this paper suggests that the defining memorial for and against acts terrorism is the digital image of the event itself.

Military Honours for Everyday Holidaymakers



Fig. 1: The image of the Tunisia attacker, Seifeddine Yacoubi, holding an AK-47 rifle, walking along the beach at Port El Kantaoui, in Tunisia moments after the attack.

On 25th June 2015, a Tunisian student, Seifeddine Yacoubi, walked along the beach in the popular holiday resort of Port El Kantaoui in Tunisia before opening fire on holidaymakers lying on sun loungers. Using a Kalashnikov previously concealed in a sun parasol, Yacoubi killed a total of thirty-eight foreign nationals, thirty of whom were British. This was the deadliest non-state attack in the history of modern Tunisia, with more fatalities than the twenty-two killed in the Bardo National Museum attack in the same country three months earlier. Within days of the attack in Tunisia, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, announced funding for a physical memorial to the victims to be situated within the United Kingdom (Gov.uk). The time between the announcement of a memorial and its

actual construction can often be many years. In this way the immediate announcement of a new monument to the victims of the attack in Tunisia promises a tangible, fixed site of remembrance, while simultaneously diverting the narrative away from the chaotic lawless uncertainty of the deadly attack on British nationals. Moreover, the announcement does not simply signify the state's desire to move on from the event, the announcement is itself an act of moving on where all further need for governmental action is tied into the proposed memorial. As Michael Rothberg has suggested, "The rush to memorialise is also a rush to forget. Making permanent is a form of forgetting" (72). Such events are momentary interruptions rather than shifts in the continual progress of state foreign policy, while the announcement of a new monument directs questions of the state's response towards a tangible site and shows the government to be responsive. To paraphrase Althusser's famous statement on the reproduction of the conditions of production, *the ultimate condition of remembrance, is the reproduction of remembrance itself*. The production of remembrance is the official reproduction of memory where the state and other non-state actors can attempt to cast past events within a politically useful frame. As Nelson and Olin have noted "...social turmoil breaks continuity with tradition and the immediate past, new monuments can represent an uncontested version of the past" (4). By building a physical monument to the Tunisia attack, the brutal act of a man randomly shooting innocent tourists on a beach gains the legitimacy, longevity and gravity of an act of war.

Compared to today's mass image production and circulation, pre-1940s visual culture of conflict was limited to paintings and physical monuments. These monuments, situated throughout the country, were easily recognisable due to a similar shape and style. However, societies collectively remember through repeated rituals of remembrance rather than simply through artefacts and objects. On Remembrance Day the rituals of a minute's silence, the laying of wreaths and the sounds and atmosphere created during the event are rituals that might be understood as "... exercising cognitive control by providing the official version of the political structure with symbolic representations of, for example, 'the Empire' or 'the Constitution' or 'the Republic' or 'the Nation'. Such rituals are read as a kind of symbolic collective text" (Connerton 50). Our new 'collective text' is constructed from pixels and binary codes rather than stone or bronze. These monuments are not sited within public parks or gardens but within online image databases visually representing the event itself and are instantly accessible to anyone with a computer and internet connection. Images, such as the one of Seifeddine Yacoubi (see Fig.1), are the magnet around which collective memory of large events gravitate, whether a royal wedding or a marauding firearms attack on a tourist beach. The circulation of images within the image economy is partnered by an increased receptivity due to the image viewing capacity of smartphones and advanced connectivity. Moreover, the act of witnessing, commenting on and sharing images of extreme violence allows for increased interaction and participation

between the viewer and the image-event itself. This new dynamic allows for such events to retain an omnipresence in the form of shared memory via collective, networked interaction. The borders between new images and old stone monuments are separated due to new media's direct visual connection to the image-event which is now ritualised collectively in real time. As Connerton makes clear, memory "...is more than a story told and reflected on; it is a cult enacted. An image of the past, even in the form of a master narrative, is conveyed and sustained by ritual performance" (70). The 'cult enacted' can be seen as the collective ritual of not only remembering but *participating* in the event itself through sharing, commenting and tagging images. This is heightened by the continuous repetition of the images on 24hr news channels, social media and internet video platforms. This image-based ritual establishes patterns of collective, synchronised witnessing and forms a collective, singular memory built from the limited images of the event, as people often remember where they were during specific national ruptures. As Avishai Margalit suggests:

A common memory...is an aggregation. It aggregates the memories of all those people who remember a certain episode which each of them experienced individually...A shared memory, on the other hand, is not a simple aggregate of individual memories. It requires communication. A shared memory integrates and calibrates the different perspectives of those who remember the episode...into one version (51).

The images, narratives and labels of an event are aggregated to suit the established master narratives already in place such as the War on Terror. As Angharad Closs Stephens has noted in relation to the 2005 bombing of the London Underground, the labeling of terrorist attacks numerically or with singular, catchy names helps to calibrate all the random aggregated events into an ordered sequence, supporting notions that a war on terror or Islamic terrorism can be framed and responded to via traditional military means:

Another function of the slogan 7/7 is that it ties what happened on 7th July 2005, into a number of other 'events': '9/11'; '11/3'; 'Bali'; 'Istanbul'; '21/7'. In this way, '7/7' has been placed within and contributes to the (re)production of a seemingly continuous sequence that has come to appear self-evident, straightforward and uncomplicated. Yet in stringing these dates and place names together, we conjure a particular view of global politics, and often forget the broader geographies and histories involved in different events at various sites (4).

Out of single events, a few images appear which are then quickly disseminated and recontextualised ad infinitum where images visually represent the real event and repeat across media platforms. From this set of images usually one iconic image emerges which is able to reduce the complexity of such events into a

single, memorable frame.¹ In the case of the Tunisia attack, it was of Seifeddine Yacoubi walking along the beach at Port El Kantaoui (see Fig.1.). This image, like the old monuments used to, acts as a signifier of the larger event and gets repeated in a visual ritual via television programmes, news reports and on social media, not only in the aftermath but also on the event's anniversary. These types of images blur the borders between reality and fiction, often replicated in what Caldwell and Lenoir have termed 'The Military-entertainment-complex', whereby the boundaries between gaming, simulation and real military conflict dissolve (Lenoir and Caldwell). In this way, images of politically significant events have the potential to be inscribed on the collective visual memory across multiple planes—events like 9/11, the torture of Abu Ghraib detainees or the murder of Lee Rigby to name just a few key examples. Where once the state could orchestrate the ritualised remembrance of past conflict and offer 'cognitive control', the new digital images and their public participation form a semi-autonomous entity which is far harder to control.² In this way, the state is often required to create its own symbolic counter-images to events. A recent example of this is the filming of the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue during the Iraq war and the leaked footage of his hanging. A more domestic node in the visual culture of conflict, was the collaboration between the White House and Hollywood who constructed entertainment narratives in support of the War on Terror. If memorials are about remembering, then this new mass of divergent images are a way of directing memory towards a particular narrative. Moreover, due to visual entertainment, connectivity and images of political events emerging simultaneously via digital feeds on smartphones, it is harder to discern the separation between what constitutes the memory of a real single, definable political event and its visual entertainment-based representation. In this way, images of war and political violence are used as reminders of the continuation of endless conflict which helps support the long-term official state narrative.

Unlike their physical counterparts, images as memorials can also easily be manipulated and recontextualised to encourage public support for reactive state policies such as increased security and surveillance. Although in the aftermath of the Tunisia attack the government's tangible response was largely pastoral, the state did use the images of the attack to support its master narrative against the threat of Islamic terrorism by instrumentalising the victims of the attack. The

¹ In the case of the attack in Tunisia, it might be the image of a blood-stained sun lounger, or the grainy image of a man walking up a beach with a Kalashnikov that depicts the real memorial. For 9/11 the lasting iconic image is of the second plane hitting the South Tower of the World Trade Centre in New York.

² It should be remembered that for all the proposed opportunity for freedoms and connectivity, the internet's public and popular communication hubs are run by large multinational corporations with the algorithmic control over what is and is not visible depending on a user's profile.

bodies of the victims were flown back to the United Kingdom in a military C-17 cargo plane to RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire. For the last eighteen years, the same type of plane has brought dead soldiers back from Afghanistan and Iraq, beginning a process of ritualised repatriation that has made famous places like Royal Wootton Bassett. Located in a clearly visible spot on the airstrip, the coffins of the victims were taken from the cargo plane in the same way as soldiers who have died in overseas wars. The coffins were carried out by six soldiers in parade ground uniform, slow marching with synchronised footsteps towards a queue of awaiting black hearses.³

The images conformed to the visual conventions in which this type of event is typically represented. Recognisable images, with their studio-based commentary and ongoing live footage, are not dissimilar in style to other visualised state traditions, such as royal weddings and state funerals. The decision to award the victims a military-style procession is a symbolic act directed at the receptivity of the UK public's shared memory. This is the ritual act of repatriation as a memorial-image, a counter-monument in the form of the counter-image to that of the violent image of the Tunisia attack already in circulation. Such images elevate the random gun attack by a lone individual into an act of war by reinscribing the dead tourists with the symbolism of fallen soldiers. These images of repatriation serve a dual purpose - as a site for public ritualised remembrance of victims of the terrorist attack and as state-sanctioned images infused with the visual narrative of an ongoing war.

Image as Monument

Approximately two months later, on August 30th 2015, ISIS raised to the ground the ancient site of the Temple of Bel at Palmyra, Syria. The destruction was announced via a collection of before and after images released by ISIS over social media and then picked up and disseminated globally through mainstream media channels. Like the images of repatriated civilians of the Tunisia attack staged by the UK government, these pictures were carefully choreographed by ISIS themselves and also directed towards mass circulation. The documentary-style pictures showed men placing large blue barrels within rooms and among the tall columns of the Temple of Bel, while the final image in the sequence is a wide-angle landscape of the explosion on the horizon.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbMCIPL4zM>



Fig. 2: Image released by ISIS on social media showing the destruction of the Temple of Bel, Palmyra, Syria.

Although this set of images was circulated first by ISIS on social media, they were far from quick snapshots even if they were meant to appear so. One of the images depicted a landscape shot over a section of Palmyra with a large mushroom cloud rising above it (see Fig. 2). Taken from a distance, this final shot in the sequence attempted to offer evidence of the explosion by including contextual visual markers specific to Palmyra within the visual frame, while the images of the explosion cloud resonated with western audiences familiar with news footage of military air strikes and Hollywood war films. The mushroom cloud politically resonates with historical images of nuclear tests in the Pacific Ocean and the bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. Such images are the longed-for symbolic currency of all ambitious 'rogue states' wishing to gain the power attached to nuclear weapons. Paradoxically, the fear of nuclear weapons getting into the hands of terrorist organisations echoes the democratisation of political image production from the state and mass media to individuals and terrorists. Capable of creating and disseminating their own political visual narratives, ISIS momentarily lays symbolic claim to being considered a real state. The symbolic efficacy of images like these, displays the visual capacity of contemporary terrorist organisations to insert their own, carefully constructed images into the information network. In doing so, they symbolically strike out against the visual hegemony of western states.

In terms of its use of images, ISIS is typically associated with beheading videos, where such acts of extreme violence are inappropriate for broadcast on mainstream media. To navigate the issues of censorship, the media showed a still image

of before the beheading. This image retained a visual consistency, whereby a hostage in orange boiler suit knelt in front of a masked man dressed in black. As the videos were too graphic for public broadcast, these still frames represented the beheading and became recognisable and symbolic of the war on ISIS. Another set of images associated with ISIS became the filmed acts of iconoclasm, whereby the blowing up of the Temple of Bel and the smashing of ancient statues can be viewed as a symbolic beheading that bypassed censorship and could be shown on daytime television. The act of filming the destruction of sites of proposed idolatry clearly provide a useful set of images for ISIS to support their extreme ideological position, while advancing their image-based psychological warfare against the West. In calling the destruction a war crime, UNESCO director Irine Bokova inscribes the monument with human characteristics as most war crimes are assumed to be enacted against human populations (Director-General Irina Bokova firmly condemns the destruction of Palmyra's ancient Temple of Baalshamin). The symbolic images and anthropomorphic labelling garnered a strong reaction from the general public to the destruction of a site they potentially knew little about.

A key component of the public's response to the images was not necessarily based on the cultural and historical value of Palmyra but rather on its visual appearance in what Alois Rigel termed 'age value'. Age value, as opposed to historical value, is based on a simple visual reading of the site in question as being old and therefore being of value without needing to understand the actual historical context or significance. As Rigel has noted "Age value ... has one advantage over ideal values of the work of art: it claims to address everyone, to be valid for everyone without exception" (74). By attacking age value within the image economy, ISIS maximises the circulatory capacity, and thus the receptive potential of the images as a medium that can be read and understood by all people. Where it can "... address the emotions directly; it reveals itself to the viewer through the most superficial, sensory (visual) perception" (74).

Most notably, the images of the destruction of the Temple of Bel became a new frontline in the war against ISIS, where the images became a pivotal point in the direct exchange between ISIS and the West. The inability of ISIS to gain visual air power, to move above the horizon, was countered with images from satellites. The United Nation's satellite images of the before and after destruction at Palmyra attempted to re-establish visual dominance that Eyal Wiseman has referred to as the "politics of verticality". In the global hierarchy of images, the pictures symbolically represent the conflict, where ISIS claims to control the ground while the West postulates control of the airspace. We know that there were many fractions and states at play in the war on ISIS, however, the images shown in the West described a demarcated conflict with firm lines between friend and enemy, Us and Them. This form of "vertical sovereignty" (Steyerl 23), has been vital in the war on ISIS where the West fears the probable torture and death of captured soldiers and the images that would follow. In this way the 'image war'

continues the war from a physical distance rather than ‘boots on the ground’, where images from drones, satellites and fighter jets can form a culture of visual dominance. The images of the repatriation of victims from the attack in Tunisia and the destruction of Palmyra are labelled as acts of war by the visual frames through which they are viewed. Images of mushroom clouds, soldiers carrying coffins, or satellite images of bomb sites all offer a mimetic frame through the visual language of war. As Judith Butler suggests, “Although framing cannot always contain what it seeks to make visible or readable, it remains structured by the aim of instrumentalising certain versions of reality” (xiii). The oscillation of the symbolic imagery between the West and ISIS, is war conducted by other means which supports master narratives and specific versions of reality.

Image Becomes Flesh

The destruction of the Temple of Bel in Palmyra was observed via an additional third visual frame. Prior to ISIS’s capture of Palmyra, cameras were distributed to volunteers near sites deemed at risk of iconoclasm around North Africa and the Middle East. These special cameras register the topography of key structures in three-dimensions, transforming the pixels into a physical replica. Embedded in London’s tourist heart, Trafalgar Square, the simulacrum was only possible due to new digital archeology whereby metric photography captures an object and via the process of spherical photogrammetry, renders its quantitative data, which in turn can then be combined with triangulation to produce a three-dimensional digital object. In an act of prophecy, which enabled its symbolic resurrection through its reproduction, the Arch was photographed at its original site prior to its destruction. Capturing the exact dimensions and topographical area of the Arch of Triumph at Palmyra, the data was converted into CAD files for exact replication by automated marble cutters in a quarry in Italy for the Digital Archology project. The project, a collaboration between Oxford and Harvard universities, *The 100 Image Database*, as well as the Dubai-based *Museum of the Future*, *The Institute for Digital Archaeology* and UNESCO was privately funded at a cost of around US \$2 million. As His Excellency Mohammed Abdullah Al Gergawi, Director of Dubai Museum of the Future Foundation, says about the reasoning behind the project:

By using digital techniques to map and preserve monuments and other aspects of shared human history, we are able to ensure that nobody can deny history or dictate that their narrative or ideology stands above the shared story of all humanity and our shared aspiration to live together in harmony (World Government Summit).

What this statement carefully neglects to say, is that the reconstruction does in fact make available new narratives and ideological positions, which are specifically enabled by the reconstruction of a specific site destroyed by a terrorist

organisation. Moreover, it raises questions about ideological and post-colonial concerns as to who decides which sites, artifacts and physical aspects of the 'shared story of all humanity' should be valued and recorded above those of others?⁴



Fig. 3. Replica of The Arch of Triumph, Trafalgar Square, London. <https://search.creativecommons.org/photos/7b1a55bf-3fd4-49ec-8ff4-9d662f75ea3d>

The process of transforming the gaze into a physical object takes the power of the image and places it literally into a new dimension in a process of symbolic resurrection. It moves the image from digital to physical representation, where the image becomes flesh supporting a narrative of transubstantiation by turning pixels

⁴ Similar debates continue in relation to 'heritage' sites such as Auschwitz, as to whether sites of extreme violence like this should be preserved or simply left to decay.

into stone. This symbolic event transformed the tragic destruction of the Temple of Bel into entertainment via spectacle and illusion, as one monument disappears in Syria under a puff of smoke, it reappears in London right before your very eyes. Just as the frame of military repatriation was cast over the images of the victims of the terrorist attack in Tunisia, so too the reconstruction of the Arch of Triumph becomes instrumentalised for political, and also, in this instance, capital gain. This new technology allows for the extraction of raw commodities (topographical data) and their refinement, in a classic neoliberal spin on the economics of scarcity, by turning catastrophe into ideological and financial profit.⁵ The more 'at risk' or even completely destroyed the object of veneration is, the rarer and more valuable their CAD files potentially become.

The reconstruction of the Arch of Triumph is presented as a symbolic flag-bearer of the master narrative of power triumphing over adversity, while simultaneously advertising neoliberal ideology and the market's ability to not only secure the future, but to reconstruct the past. It is not clear how these new digital blueprints of ancient sites will be regulated or who owns them. This poses the question, are they for sale and if so could they be built and rebuilt for whoever wants or can afford them? This is not dissimilar to the common process of iconic architectural landmarks being replicated in other locations throughout the world, where for example, the Eiffel Tower is replicated in over fifty countries worldwide. As Jean Baudrillard claimed, "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real" (12). In a similar way to the Fallen Monument Park in Russia, where over nine hundred monuments and statues from the Soviet era are gathered, the digital remains of acts of iconoclasm may go on to form a new theme park comprised of replica monuments destroyed by terrorism. If the images of the attack in Tunisia and the repatriation of the victims were their lasting digital memorial, then the reconstruction of the Arch of Triumph is the next stage in this process, where advances in human cloning or DNA replication mean that symbolically, not only could the Arch be re-built but the humans victims could be 're-built' too.

Conclusion

Attacks on the spaces and places of leisure is not a new tactic by terrorists. In recent years, pubs, concert halls, shopping centres and sports stadiums have all been targeted. Such locations, as with those mentioned above, have been weaponised – not only in the acts of terror or reconstruction/repatriation, but also within the ongoing symbolic conflict enacted through an image war. The tourist sites and civilians who visited them have become instrumentalised. This has

⁵ For more on capitalism's ability to profit from disaster see: Naomi Klein's, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Penguin 2008)

resulted in the once fixed boundaries between civilian and combatant, between sites of leisure and combat zones becoming increasingly indistinguishable. The old certainties of a clearly defined physical frontline in war are now as rhizomatic and multidirectional as the digital networks that carry their images. The recasting of dead tourists as soldiers, of ancient sites becoming military targets, and officially labeled 'war crimes', are all symbols of war played out within the visual frame in front of a hyper-connected audience. These images are the lasting monuments to terrorism. Cast in pixels and stored online, they can be revisited instantly by anyone, recirculated during anniversaries, or used to provide visual context during similar kinds of events. These images retain the dynamism of the events they capture, while holding the potential for manipulation by all sides of the narrative. Participation through the interaction with images, helps blur the boundaries so that our sense of reality becomes increasingly open to manipulation and coercion.

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