Recovering the past: a photographic exhibition on the consequences of war

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Abstract

In this article I argue that, like textiles, photography can be a way to "stitch voices" together. The article is based on an interview with the photographer Ian Alderman and a review of his travelling exhibition *Recovering the past*. In his photographs, Alderman superimposes black and white images of groups of Australian soldiers who fought during the Great War, and colour images of contemporary deminers during their daily work in the fields of West Flanders. As with conflict textiles, Alderman's photographic "collages" create objects that draw attention to the immediate and long-term consequences of war. Because of this focus on the effects of war, his photographs can be considered as 'aftermath photography' (Möller, 2016). This article first introduces commonalities between photography and textiles. Then, it presents some of the exhibition photographs, connecting them with audience responses and themes that emerged from the interview.

Keywords: Photography, Textiles, First World War, Aftermath, Art and War

Photography, textiles and the aftermath

Ian Alderman is the author of the project *Recovering the past*.[1] He was born near Winchester and spent most of his life in London. His photography is inspired by the work of Cartier Bresson, Jacques Henri-Lartigue, O. Winston Link and Frank Hurley. After several years of work in advertising for the automotive industry, in 2010, he started to work on the photographic project *Recovering the past*, which has been exhibited in different European countries and is currently touring Australia (Alderman, 2020).

Recovering the past is an exhibition consisting of 25 photographs in which the photographer superimposes black and white images of soldiers on colour ones. The photographs connect in an original way two groups of soldiers that never met, but dealt with the consequences of war in two different ways: one in fighting the war and another one in demining the ammunitions left over by that war.[2] Prior to presenting the exhibition, it seems important to underline the similarities between conflict textiles and this exhibition's photographs, two mediums that draw attention to the consequences of war.

In showing the consequences of war, both conflict textiles and the photographs of *Recovering the past* employ a technique based on collaging different pieces of images together. *Arpilleras*, for example, are reminiscent of collages, offering a perspective in which the viewer seems positioned both inside and outside the image at the same time (Andrä et al., 2020, p. 347).[3] The same can be said about Alderman's photographs, where viewers are placed both inside and outside the frame, in a sort of silent dialogue with the photographed soldiers. In this way, the objective of the photographs is to involve the viewers rather than simply to inform them

(Särmä, 2015). This involvement translates into the viewers' response that, as we will see, adds meaning to the photographs.

Based on these characteristics, the photographs of the project *Recovering the past* look like compositions made on textiles. It is not a coincidence that in photography the technique of superimposing, overlapping and combining multiple images is called 'stitching' (Li et al., 2018, p. 967).

The idea and the action of stitching produce another similarity that photographs and textiles share: materiality. Considering photographs (but also textiles) beyond their visual role (Edwards, 2009) means to acknowledge that these objects 'exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience' (Edwards, 2004, p. 1). They are material objects because they can be looked at, touched, felt and framed, and they are embedded in a collective experience attributing them meaning. Thus, it can be said that both photographs and textiles are objects that can play the role of 'social agents' (Porto, 2004, p. 113), capable of shaping collective identity (Campbell, 2003, p. 57) but also memory and emotions. Just as textiles can 'unsettle, and convey identities and emotions across countries and time periods' (Dolan, 2016, p. 152), photographs (and images in general) can generate support towards the depicted subjects or other kinds of feelings, such as pity or anger (Hutchison, 2014).

This emotional response also exists when looking at aftermath photographs, despite the temporal distance from the specific events that this kind of photography evokes. Through the memory of past events, aftermath photography represents an instrument that allows access to places and stories that otherwise would remain hidden. Joel Meyerowitz's photographic project, published five years after the 9/11 attacks, is an example of this kind of exploration (Meyerowitz, 2006). Through his photographs taken in the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Centre, Meyerowitz (the only photographer to be granted access to Ground Zero) revealed to the public the stories of those involved in cleaning up the devastated site.

Alderman, too, engages with the consequences of violent events that the general public might not know. Alderman, however, addresses consequences that took place a century ago. Like Meyerowitz, he obtained permission to follow officials, spending hours documenting their work in the battlefields. Instead of following first responders, Alderman shadowed Belgian soldiers still engaged in ridding the earth from First World War mines.

Recovering the past is an exhibition about the consequences of a war 'that we tend not to think so much about' (Alderman, 2020b). This statement places this exhibition close to the genre of aftermath photography, whose 'images […] show the consequences of war after the event' (Lisle, 2011, p. 873). Veronica Tello argues that aftermath photographs are those photographs representing 'vacant and/or ruined buildings and landscapes' (Tello, 2014, p. 555). Tello adds that '[b]y turning their lens to the scene of aftermath, these photographers

"studiously avoid" the aesthetics of the spectacular "news media image"' (ibid.), as one of the functions of these images is not sensationalism but commemoration. Due to its focus on memory, aftermath photography takes into account the immediate consequences of war. As a result, this type of photography mostly focuses on the destruction and emptiness caused by conflict (Neath, 2012; Tello, 2014; Möller, 2016).

In adding people to the photographs, Alderman fills this emptiness, showing not only the effects of war, but also a way of looking at these effects through the experience of the soldiers in the image. His photographs can be considered examples of aftermath photography, even if they depict places and people a century after the conflict ended.[4] In taking into account the temporal distance between the two groups of soldiers, the artist connects two generations of combatants dealing with World War I in two different ways: one generation fought and died in that war, while another generation is still involved today in removing unexploded ammunitions left over by that war. Through the technique of stitching together these two groups of soldiers, Alderman produces photographs that 'fill in blanks in our mental pictures of the present and the past' (Sontag, 1977, p. 23).

This connection between past and present shows that both textiles and photography can contribute to creating an artistic memory through the representations of past events in contemporary contexts. As artistic forms, they can 'provide spaces necessary to facilitate' contested memories and open a 'public conversation' (Nickell, 2015, p. 249). It is for this reason that this article includes visitors' responses to the exhibition, as these conversations represent an important moment of exchange and elaboration of historical memory.

Recovering the past

The exhibition *Recovering the past* depicts two groups of soldiers: the Australian soldiers (in black and white) and the Belgian soldiers (in colour). The colour photographs are Alderman's, who took them in fields and farms located in West Flanders, a major battlefield on the Western front during the First World War.[5] The black and white photographs come from the National Archives of Australia and were reproduced through their original negatives. Apart from the fields and the soldiers, the photographs show images of the unexploded bombs found by the deminers in West Flanders. The presence of deminers in the area dates back to 1920 when, a year after the war ended, Belgium 'set up a dedicated team with the job of clearing the ammunition. They thought it would take three years. That was the estimate. So, by the end of 1923 the job would be finished. This year is the centenary year, they have been there one hundred years and they are finding more and more now…' (Alderman, 2020b).

Unexploded ammunitions from the First World War might seem an important subject to explore in a photographic exhibition dealing with the consequences of war. Alderman, however, explained to me that this was insufficient material upon which to build his project; hence, he decided to add the Australian soldiers' images. According to him: 'Ammunition is the easiest consequence of war that everybody knows about, unexploded bombs. It wasn't enough for the exhibition. I wanted to make it more about people' (Alderman, 2020b).

In order to tell these people's stories, Alderman brings together the images of two generations of soldiers one century after the end of the First World War. He features these Australian soldiers, in order to explain who they were, and whom and what they left behind. At the same time, he also aims at linking them with contemporary soldiers, the Belgian deminers who risk their lives every day in dealing with the dangerous operation of demining bombs left by those who were in those fields before them. Thus, it can be said that Alderman distances his work from the abstraction of war to focus on 'the experience of war' (Edkins, 2003, p. 26) and its effects on human beings: 'We do not consider the people that become consequences of war, we just don't do it' (Alderman, 2020b).

Apart from the experience of the soldiers depicted in the photographs, Alderman and I also discussed how visitors responded to the exhibition and how this response was often surprising for the photographer, as it contained observations and interpretations he had not considered. Here, I will present two subjects that emerged from the artist's discussions with the visitors: the team effort and the absence/presence of women.

The team effort

In the photographs, the Australian and Belgian soldiers are located in the same field. Obviously, only the Belgian ones are actually in the field, while the Australians are "stitched" there. The two groups of soldiers, however, seem almost to exchange a sort of dialogue. The presence of the Australian soldiers does not look odd in the picture; on the contrary, it seems completely

natural. The reason for this is that Alderman took the photographs in West Flanders having already in mind which photographs of Australian soldiers he would have positioned there. In this way, the two military groups do not look estranged, but interlaced in an interaction that could be perceived as a team effort: 'One of the things that I have never ever thought of, but so many visitors have told me […] the number of people who said it's really clear the team effort going on in the photographs, that the Australians are helping the Belgians' (Alderman, 2020b).

This team effort is particularly visible in a photograph representing the Belgian soldiers on the right side of the image excavating ammunitions from the soil, and three Australian soldiers bringing boxes to them. The photograph can be interpreted in several ways, but when looking at it, the Australian soldiers almost appear like ghosts coming to the rescue of their Belgian counterparts.[6]

The interpretation that viewers offer of the photographs gives them an unexpected meaning, one that Alderman did not foresee. The link between the two groups of soldiers appears then indissoluble, even though they belong to two different places and times. The way the soldiers are placed in the photograph and the interaction deriving from it suggest that Alderman employs an approach through which war is 'studied up from people and not down from places that sweep blood, tears and laughter away' (Sylvester, 2012, p. 484). The presence of the soldiers on what was once a battlefield and what it is today is a way to tell a story made by people and their own experience of war, as combatants and as deminers.

Bringing these two groups of soldiers together produces a different way of remembering the Great War, freeing it from those 'memorial tropes' (Edkins, 2003, p. 108; Zarzycka, 2017) that make us familiar with certain events, without showing us the event itself. In other words, in connecting the two groups of soldiers, the photographer creates a revisitation of events under a contemporary gaze, and offers a different perspective of the consequences of the Great War. This perspective involves the idea that a century has passed, but we still deal with what that war has left behind. Thus, the photographs seem to invite us not only to remember those who died, but also to not forget those who are still working to get rid of the dangerous remains of that war.

The absence/presence of women

When talking about the visitors' response to the exhibition, Alderman observes that 'all the best things that have ever been told about the photographs are from women. They engage with the pictures in a way that men don't do or can't' (Alderman, 2020b). This engagement of the female gaze makes women 'seeing-subjects' of the photographs (Gallagher, 1998, p. 11) and allows them to offer an additional meaning to an exhibition in which visual representations of women are absent.

Alderman argues that the main reason for this absence is that he could not find good quality photographs of women in the Australian archives. The only photographs of women he found were mostly of war widows but because of the poor quality of the images, he could not stitch them in the colour photographs (Alderman, 2020b). Still, we talked extensively about the absence of women in the photographs to the point that their presence could not be ignored.

During the interview, Alderman commented on letters, newspaper articles and poems found in the Australian archives in which women were expressing the damage and loss that the war had brought into their lives. These written elements added new voices and stories to the photographs to the point that women "appeared" in the frame. More specifically, in 'emptying the image of elements that make it self-evident and fit into pre-existing discourses and familiar interpretations' and in making it more reliable on 'textual and contextual information', we give it a 'poetic quality' that refers to 'something that is not seen' (Monegal, 2016, p. 259).

In considering this additional archival material and in contextualising it, these women and the consequences that the war had on their lives become evident, beyond the stories of the men represented in the photographs. Thus, the absence of their body does not translate into the absence of their story. Due to an 'aesthetic of absence and presence' (Bolatagici, 2016, p. 131), they are not invisible but they find their way into the image. The 'remembered-or-imagined body' (Baker, 2016, p. 123) becomes an interpretive key to associate what is present and seen with what is absent and unseen.

The presence of women in the photographs is not tangible, but arises from archival texts and from the women who visit the exhibition. These additional voices shape their presence in a way that encourages viewers to think about women's place, role and loss. Therefore, the interpretation of the photographs ushers their existence into the exhibition. Texts, captions and also discussions around the photographs, represent a 'missing voice, and [are] expected to speak for truth' (Sontag, 1977, pp. 108–109). Thus, women's voice is not missing anymore, but it is found through the written stories of those who survived the war and the oral interpretation of those who visit the exhibition today.

Conclusion

The article has shown that through its sense of 'intimacy, alterity, and ephemerality' (Brown, 2014, p. 14), photography shares many characteristics with conflict textiles, such as technique, emotion, materiality and memory. The article has also argued that the exhibition *Recovering the past* can be considered an example of "aftermath photography", as it aims at illustrating the consequences of war. In these photographs, the artist juxtaposes colour, and black and white photographs of two groups of soldiers to show, through their experience of war, what the First World War has left behind a century after its conclusion.

From my conversation with Ian Alderman, different interpretations of the exhibition emerged. The first interpretation came from the intention that the photographer sought to express through his work. This intention especially focused on displaying the consequences of the First World War via two generations of soldiers who never met, but dealt with its effects in two different times and ways.

The second interpretation was offered by the visitors' feedback and observations that linked the two groups of soldiers in the frame. The exchange between the visitors and the artist added new and unexpected meanings to the images. For example, some visitors were especially interested in the relationship between the black and white and the colour photographs of soldiers. The reflection on this relationship created ideas such as solidarity, collaboration and teamwork. This collaboration emerging from the two groups of soldiers could also be considered the result of stitching together black and white images with colour ones. The contrasting colours of the images bring together the two groups of soldiers. The Australians in black and white seem almost to come to the rescue of the Belgians, the latter dealing with the consequences of a war fought by the former. The two groups interact in a silent dialogue whose words are imagined by the photographer and the visitors. This imaginary interaction produces ideas of collaboration and solidarity between the two groups, which seem to understand and care for each other.

Finally, another interpretation developed from the archival material consisting of letters and newspaper articles that the artist shared during the interview. These texts contributed to enriching the artist's initial intention, as they allowed to add women into the frame. As most images 'deploy an implicit dimension' and consequently a hidden narration (Gunthert, 2016, p. 124), the texts and captions associated with the photographs contributed to their interpretation, giving space to women's war experience.

Recovering the past plays with opposing concepts, such as visible/invisible, absence/presence, said/unsaid, creating new ways of perceiving and remembering the First World War. Alderman stitches old and new images in the photographs, but leaves us the task of "stitching together" the meaning and the stories behind them.

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[2] These photomontages are present in the work of other photographers, who try to link past and present events. An example is Sebastian Maharg's photographic project *Pasado en paralelo* (Parallel past). In these photographs, Maharg superimposes Google Street colour screengrabs with black and white images from the Spanish Civil War. Through this project, the photographer aims at remembering the past in places where people carry out their daily activities (Maharg, 2020).

[3] The *arpillera* is 'a three-dimensional textile picture composed of colourful scraps of cloth sewn onto hessian, complete with an embroidered frame' (Andrä et al., 2019). The *arpilleras* represented scenes of repression and poverty taking place during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile (1970s–1980s). The ecumenical group of VicarÍa contributed to shipping secretly the *arpilleras* outside Chile, so that the international community could know about the abuses of the dictatorship and the suffering of those women whose family members were arrested and made to disappear (Adams, 2013, p. 17).

[4] Recovering the past shares a similar temporal approach with the exhibition *Conflict, Time, Photography* which was displayed in Tate Modern in 2014. In this exhibition, the photographs were 'ordered according to how long after the event they were created, from moments, days and weeks to decades later' (Tate Modern, 2014). As Alderman's exhibition, *Conflict, Time, Photography* aimed at exploring the consequences of war through the passing of time.

[5] The Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) were deployed in West Flanders and suffered '38,000 casualties in a period of just eight weeks' (Jolly, 1999; Alderman, 2019).

[6] The reference to ghosts is a subject often found in aftermath photography together with concepts such as absence, disappearance, decay and ruins (Litchfield, 2014).

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