



# Photographs of Solidarity and Archival Memory in the Miners' Strike 1984–1985

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## Photographs of Solidarity and Archival Memory in the Miners' Strike 1984–1985

The paper discusses the cultural memory of the Miners' Strike 1984–1985 and questions the role that photographic documents can play in the process of memorialization of the events. The photographs of solidarity groups composed of women and LGBT people taken by Format agency photographers and currently held in archives have been largely understudied. The paper discusses whether revisiting these neglected photographic documents taken at the time might enable for a reassessment of the cultural memory of the miners' strike from the perspective of female photographers.

'On 18 June 1984 I was watching the evening news and saw footage of a mass picket at the Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire in which thousands of men were chased up a field by mounted police. The image of this pursuit stuck in my mind and for years I wanted to find out what exactly happened on the day with a view of re-enacting it or commemorating it in some way'.<sup>1</sup>

British artist Jeremy Deller recalls the time that as a teenager he sat in front of the television and watched the violent clash between striking miners and riot police in the Yorkshire mining village of Orgreave in June 1984. The Battle of Orgreave, as it became known, was a defining moment in a year-long strike that British miners started on March 6, 1984, in response to the National Coal Board's announcement of the imminent closures of pits. Fearing that many more closures would follow, miners in Yorkshire, Wales and Scotland also went on strike in solidarity with Yorkshire colleagues. The battle was one of the several violent confrontations between striking miners and riot police and signalled a turning point in the country's labour relations and the future of trade unionism. Seventeen years later, Deller gathered together former miners, local communities and re-enactment societies to re-stage the violent conflict. The re-enactment took place on June 17, 2001, in front of an audience and was later disseminated as a feature-length film by Mike Figgis, a book of oral history and an archive.<sup>2</sup>

The reception of the re-enactment in contemporary art magazines and the history of art literature differs, raising questions about the ethical and political underpinnings of the work and its subsequent iterations. Various descriptions include 'history painting from below',<sup>3</sup> 'the epitome of a participatory art',<sup>4</sup> and even a potential contribution to 'the demise of "political art"',<sup>5</sup> Deller's work in its diverse forms – a performance, a film, a book and an archive – 'multiplies and redistributes the art historical categories of history painting, performance, documentary and archive, putting them into dialogue with community theatre and historical re-enactment'.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as Deller's *Battle of*

*Orgreave*, in its diverse forms, is disseminated on different media platforms, it constitutes – alongside other retrospective representations of the events such as biographies, memoirs, films, documentaries and exhibitions – the cultural memory of the strikes. As the growing literature at the intersection of cultural memory studies and social movements has shown, this occurs through the complex process of remediation, whereby semiotic carriers are reiterated and adapted by a wide range of actors in the aftermath of an event and across a plurality of media shaping and reshaping the ways in which an event is remembered.<sup>7</sup> In Figgis's film, the memories of the participating miners play a fundamental role in shaping this re-enactment, which was conceived as a form of commemoration. At the same time, black and white photographs of the actual events are flashed throughout the film, juxtaposed with the re-enacted scenes and pointing to the crucial, yet largely understudied, role of photography in the process of memorialization of the miners' strike.

As sites of cultural memory, photographs often provide the basis on which past conflictual events have been narrated, interpreted, visualized and remembered, contributing to the understanding of them and the shaping of our collective memory. Repetition is essential in this process, in that specific images are chosen to be repeatedly reproduced across a wide range of media and, as a result, they become more memorable than others. Some are totally forgotten, and a few acquire iconic status. As 2024 marks the fortieth anniversary of the strike, questions about the choice of images to be repeatedly and widely reproduced in commemorative exhibitions and across the media will once again be pertinent. Commemorative events and exhibitions organized by different institutions tend to be exercises in 'remembering', a process that is often influenced by 'forgetting' attesting to the contentious nature of collective memory. Memories of marginalized groups, photographs – or other agents of memory – can 'fall out of the frames of attention, valuation and form', which is what Assman has described as a 'passive form of cultural forgetting'.<sup>8</sup>

With regard to the miners' strike, the question about 'cultural forgetting', that is, which parts of the visual legacy of the strike have been, and still are, excluded, suppressed and forgotten remains open to debate. Returning to Deller's multifaceted work, the main emphasis in the narration of the events is given to the miners, predominantly male. It is the male miners' voices that are heard and their memories that became the basis on which the events were re-enacted. While this may be undeniably related to the fact that the vast majority of miners were men, the framing of events, both in the media contemporary to the strike, and in subsequent textual and visual narratives, foregrounds the male miner and his involvement in violent clashes with the police.<sup>9</sup> The contemporary press photographs, editorial cartoons and news reports deployed the metaphorical framing of the strike as an unfolding war 'in which the police are seen as victims of violence acted out by the miners', as Hart has shown.<sup>10</sup> In the years that followed, textual and visual narratives, including Deller's work, foregrounded similar visual narratives, leaving out of

the representational frame other figures, such as women, gays and lesbians, whose solidarity played a pivotal role in the development of the strike.<sup>11</sup>

A significant recent historical study on the role that women played in the strike highlights the fact that although women's role in the strike was acknowledged in the numerous documentaries and dramas that followed, women rarely featured at the centre of the narration.<sup>12</sup> Overall, the solidarity groups received limited attention in the vast literature on the strikes and their historical and political significance. In Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Tomlinson's book, the point is made that some exceptions appeared during the events of the twentieth and thirtieth anniversaries, in which women are put centre-stage.<sup>13</sup> The visual representations of the women's actions are also scarce and recent, notably the inclusion of the Format Agency photographers' documentation of women's and gay support groups in exhibitions, such as Tate Britain's 'Women in Revolt!: Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990' (2023–2024) and 'Photographic Protest: Resistance Through A Feminist Lens' at Four Corners (2022). Brenda Prince's photobook 'Women and the Miners' Strike Nottinghamshire 1984–85' is an important addition (2023).<sup>14</sup>

The great majority of photographs documenting the actions in support of the Miners' Strike were taken by Format Agency photographers. Established in 1983 by female photographers for female photographers, the agency documented events, issues and societal groups that received little representation in the mainstream media of the time.<sup>15</sup> Following the paradigm of other agencies that emerged in the post-war years, such as the Magnum Agency, Format photographers were fully aware of the ways in which photographs published in the mainstream press could achieve different interpretations, sometimes quite the opposite to those intended by the photographers. As a result, they became increasingly conscious of where their images were distributed and selective of the outlets that they made their reportages available for. Despite their diverse backgrounds, life and professional experience, the work of these photographers was influenced by feminist principles; they attempted to break down stereotypical representations of gender roles, by portraying marginalized communities, including women and women of colour, lesbian and gay communities and disabled people.

From the beginning of the strike, Format photographers focused on documenting the various activities of solidarity, such as the fundraising events, soup kitchens, assemblies, and political rallies, organized by women including the miners' wives. The support groups sprang up in the coalfield areas as soon as the strike started. One of the most prominent groups was the National Women against Pit Closures (NWAPC), which came together through 'a network of committed, long-time activists with strong connections to the left, including the Communist Party and the Women's Liberation Movement'.<sup>16</sup> The group raised funds through donations, street collections and events and organized

food parcels and communal eating.<sup>17</sup> Format photographers Raissa Page and Brenda Price documented these actions in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire, respectively. Some of their photographs were used by NWAPC for their campaign during the strike and are now stored in archives.<sup>18</sup>

In the year of the fortieth anniversary of the events, it is crucial that we return to these archives in order to evoke alternative memories to the dominant visual narratives of the miners’ strike, which are formulated through the repetition of the same footage and photographs, to come to the surface. The reassessment of the events from the perspective of female photographers is in no way an attempt to claim that the voices of one social group should prevail over the others. It is rather a bid to ask for the potential of the ‘archival memory’<sup>19</sup> to feed into the collective memory and to question the role that photographic documents can play in the process of memorialization. Revisiting these less reproduced visual documents of the period may enable us to rethink the unique political alliance between the miners and solidarity groups by women and gays. Given the ability of photography to capture acts of defiance, unity and solidarity, these archival photographs are able to present us with a more hopeful narrative than the pessimistic official portrayal of one of the defeat of the miners, their unions and the absolute triumph of a neoliberal state. They might also act as a source of inspiration for current struggles against capitalism, sexism, homophobia and the exploitation of workers.

#### Notes

- 1 Jeremy Deller, *The English Civil War Part II: Personal Accounts of the 1984–85 miners’ Strike* (London: Artangel 2001), n.p.
- 2 Mike Figgis’s film *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001; a publication of oral history, see: Deller, *The English Civil War Part II*, and an archive, *The Battle of Orgreave Archive [An Inquiry to One is an Injury to All]*, 2004.
- 3 Jeremy Deller cited in Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (London: Verso 2012), 34.
- 4 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, (London: Verso 2012), 30.
- 5 David Beech, ‘“The Reign of the Workers and Peasants Will Never End”: Politics and Politicisation,’ *Third Text*, Vol. 16, Issue 4, 2002, 397.
- 6 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, (London: Verso 2012), 37.
- 7 Ann Rigney and Thomas Smits (eds.) *The Visual Memory of Protest*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2023), 15; Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (eds.). *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, (Berlin: De Gruyter 2009).
- 8 Aleida Assman, ‘Canon and Archive,’ in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 98.
- 9 Infamously, the violence in Orgreave was presented as being initiated by the unruly miners, rather than the government’s decision to send out mounted police. This was achieved by reverse editing the sequence of events on television news. See Tony Benn interviewed in Figgis, *The Battle of Orgreave*; also, see: Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 34.
- 10 Christopher Hart, ‘Metaphor and the (1984–5) Miners’ Strike: A Multimodal Analysis’, in *Discourses of Disorder: Riots, Strikes and Protests in the Media*, Hart, Christopher and Kesley, Darren (eds.) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 135.
- 11 The only exception is the interview with NWAPC activist Stephanie Gregory, which is included in both the film and the book publication. See Deller, *The English Civil War Part II*.
- 12 The publication is the first study of the women’s involvement in the strike from a historical perspective: Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Tomlinson, *Women and the Miners’ Strike, 1984–1985*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
- 13 *Ibid*, 230–31.

- 14 Brenda Prince, *Women and the Miners' Strike Nottinghamshire 1984-85*, (London: Café Royal Books 2023).
- 15 Format Agency was founded by Maggie Murray, Sheila Gray, Pam Isherwood, Anita Corbin, Jenny Matthews, Joanne O'Brien, Raissa Page and Val Wilmer. The group grew to over twenty female photographers and was active until 2003.
- 16 Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Tomlinson, 'National Women Against Pit Closures: Gender, Trade, Unionism and Community Activism in the Miners' Strike, 1984-1985', *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 32, Issue 1, 2018, 78.
- 17 Ibid, 78.
- 18 Carla Mitchell, Ruby Rees-Sheridan and Andrew Whitehead, *Photographing Protest: Resistance Through a Feminist Lens*, (London: Four Corners, 2022), Exhibition Catalogue, 20-21. Price's photographs are held at the Bishopsgate Archive along together with the majority of the Agency's material. Page's photographs are held in the Richard Burton Archive.
- 19 Aleida Assmann, 'Memory, Individual and Collective,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Goodin, Robert and Tilly, Charles (eds.), (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2006), 221

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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*The Battle of Orgreave*, directed by Mike Figgis, (London: Artangel 2001), DVD.

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