

# Artist Statement: The Ties That Bind

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## Introduction

Reflecting on aspects of family, identity and cultural myth, my work attempts to translate memories and oral histories into tangible form on cloth, creating pieces that visually trace a story through different generations. Positioning textiles within a communication paradigm, my work examines the relationship between authorial intention and viewer interpretation of visual narratives, building on the history of cloth as a narrative form.

Semiotic theory is applied as a generative and analytical tool within my work, as narrative, whether spoken, written or visual, is an act of telling, the transfer of meaning from one to another. I develop ‘visual paradigms’<sup>1</sup> from which to select imagery, then combine imagery on cloth to form ‘visual syntagms’ to create meaning. When the compositions are complete, the next step is to test audience perceptions of the work and how this correlates with my authorial intention as the maker. Consciously or not, all artists and designers make what Saussure<sup>2</sup> terms ‘paradigmatic’ and ‘syntagmatic’ choices in the construction of their work. Meaning is generated from the paradigmatic and syntagmatic differences between signifiers, the first dealing with selection and substitution, the second using combination and arrangement to organise signs into codes.<sup>3</sup> The paradigmatic and syntagmatic analysis of visual signifiers to incorporate in my work leads to the creation of ‘micro narratives’, small compositions of images, marks and colours, which are intended to generate specific meanings when read together. The relationships between these micro narratives then inform the construction of the main narrative content for the textiles I create. Commutation tests<sup>4</sup> are also carried out by changing an element in the compositions and examining whether this changes the meaning of the images it is grouped with. This leads to successive cycles of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction to formulate the visual narrative within the final textile work.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew, S. (2013) ‘The Medium Carries the Message? Perspectives on Making and Viewing Textiles,’ *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 12: 2, pp. 195–221.

<sup>2</sup> Saussure, F. (1983) *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Duckworth (originally published in 1916).

<sup>3</sup> Fiske J. (1990) *Introduction to Communication Studies*. London: Routledge, p.19, describes a code as ‘a system of meaning common to the members of a culture or subculture’.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes, R. (1967) *Elements of Semiology*. London: Jonathan Cape (originally published in French by Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1964).

This process was put into practice in the creation of the ‘The Ties That Bind (I) and ‘The Ties That Bind (II)’, a series of textile panels that strove to communicate the story of John Edgar Bell, a British Quaker and pacifist in World War I, who had been imprisoned for refusing to fight on religious grounds when compulsory conscription was introduced. John’s story was told by his daughter in a one to one interview, and a small number of family photos were provided that became the main components of the visual narrative (Figure 1).



Figure 1: *Examples of the family photos provided by John Edgar Bell's daughter.*

The authenticity of the representation of this oral history can be questioned, since it relies so heavily on anecdote for content, and as the maker of the work, I lack the direct experience of the events being described. But this should not negate trying to communicate the story in a visual form via analogical signs (images and textures). After all, Liss notes that “the inauthenticity of the postevents’ speaker is inevitable, indeed necessary, for stories and memories to

become public”.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, by noting that analogical signs “involve graded relationships on a continuum. They can signify infinite subtleties that seem beyond words”,<sup>6</sup> Chandler suggests that such signs cannot be related to a standard syntax in the way linguistic signs can. Film theorist Nichols agrees that “the graded quality of analogue codes may make them rich in meaning”<sup>7</sup> but emphasizes that their semantic precision is reduced. However, Kress and van Leeuwen argue that by examining the grammar of visual practice, a social semiotic theory of representation can be developed.<sup>8</sup> Whilst drawing parallels with linguistic forms, they note that visual communication, has, in some instances, better forms of visual grammar by which to express meaning to an audience.

### **The Oral History**

At first John Edgar Bell would not speak to his family of his imprisonment, and recounted the experiences and conditions of his ordeal to his children only years later. The imprisoned pacifists were treated harshly. They were stripped of their civilian clothes; army uniforms were thrown into the cells. To wear the uniforms was to agree to conscription, so they refused. John’s health deteriorated rapidly. In the final year of the war he agreed to sign up for non-combatant service and was released from prison. Despite this action, there was much lingering resentment towards him - as to other conscientious objectors and their families - during World War I and the post-war period. The social exclusion the family faced due to John’s pacifist beliefs continued. This took the form of graffiti, such as painted ‘X’ marks scrawled on the door of their home, and more direct verbal and written abuse. With so many people experiencing personal loss, there was much resentment that John’s family were not sharing in such pain. The family moved to a different area, from Saltaire to Denholme (both in West Yorkshire), but the abuse continued when the local community discovered that he had not fought.

Although he was a skilled engineer, John could not find employment because of his pacifist stance during the war; no one wanted to work with a ‘Conchie.’ Eventually he secured a low-paying job as a lamp lighter. As a child, his daughter would accompany him on his nightly rounds to light the lamps. The

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<sup>5</sup> Liss, A. (1998) *Trespassing Through Shadows, Memory, Photography and the Holocaust*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.86.

<sup>6</sup> Chandler, D. (2007) *Semiotics: The Basics*. Abingdon: Routledge, p.48.

<sup>7</sup> Nichols, B. (1981) *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, p.47.

<sup>8</sup> Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2001) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, pp.1-14, and p.211.

social exclusion gradually abated, only to resurface many years later in World war II, when John's daughter had married. Because her husband was in a reserved occupation as an engineer, he could not fight for his country in that war. Although this was not due to conscientious objection, the associations with the past remained attached to the family for many years, as subsequent generations of families in their community learnt of John's pacifist stance.

### **Translating Oral History into Visual Narrative**

The translation of this oral history onto cloth began initially by working on paper with the family photographs, images of war, and associated visual symbols such as medals (Figure 2), later carrying out tests on fabric where the images were combined to carry specific meanings in the visual communication of the story.



Figure 2: *Sketch-book page*. Image copyright of the artist.

Although this experimentation involved only a tentative juxtaposition of image, mark, and meaning to focus the narrative direction, definitive elements emerged that informed the sequence, content and treatment of the final textiles, such as using a family portrait of a woman and child to start the narrative, and the use of stitching to cross out a medal image placed beneath them. Scott notes that using family photographs this way “permits one’s relationship to the snaps to remain associative, improvised, synthesising rather than successive. It allows patterns of metaphor and symbol to emerge. It allows temporal manipulations of experience (in the varying size of the image for example). But it remains bound to life’s chronology, to a life unfolding in stages.”<sup>9</sup>

The compositional development of John Edgar Bell’s story began to focus on three periods that spanned generations of his family: the period at the start of World War I, during which John Edgar Bell’s pacifist values led to the social exclusion of him and his family; the period of his imprisonment as a conscientious objector; and the period of post-war stigma that the family endured. The portrait of John Edgar Bell therefore became the central focus, establishing the objector as the protagonist in the visual narrative, voice unheard, behind the shadow of a barred cell window, surrounded by images to connote war, family and faith. Benjamin’s dialectic discussion of photography acknowledges the role and power of the portrait in the “cult of remembrance of loved ones,”<sup>10</sup> particularly given the melancholy conveyed by early portrait photography, and the need for this to be conveyed through the textile installations. But, at the same time, Benjamin perceives photographs as archives of memory that diminish true remembrance; replacing memory, securing the past in a static form, yet distancing us from our own ability to retrieve it. The textile installations are, in some part, an attempt to retrieve and present a unified visual history from fragmented oral testimony and family photographs. John Edgar Bell’s daughter, the primary contributor to the narrative, recalled her story based on her post-war experiences as a child, remembrance of her father’s recollections of his imprisonment, and the victimisation she experienced later, during World War II. The textiles attempted to secure this version of the past in a static form, to preserve it for successive generations of the family when those able to retrieve the memories would be gone.

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<sup>9</sup> Scott, C. (1999) *The Spoken Image, Photography and Language*. London: Reaktion Books, p.232.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, W. (1936) ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in Arendt, H. (ed.) 1969. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, p.226.

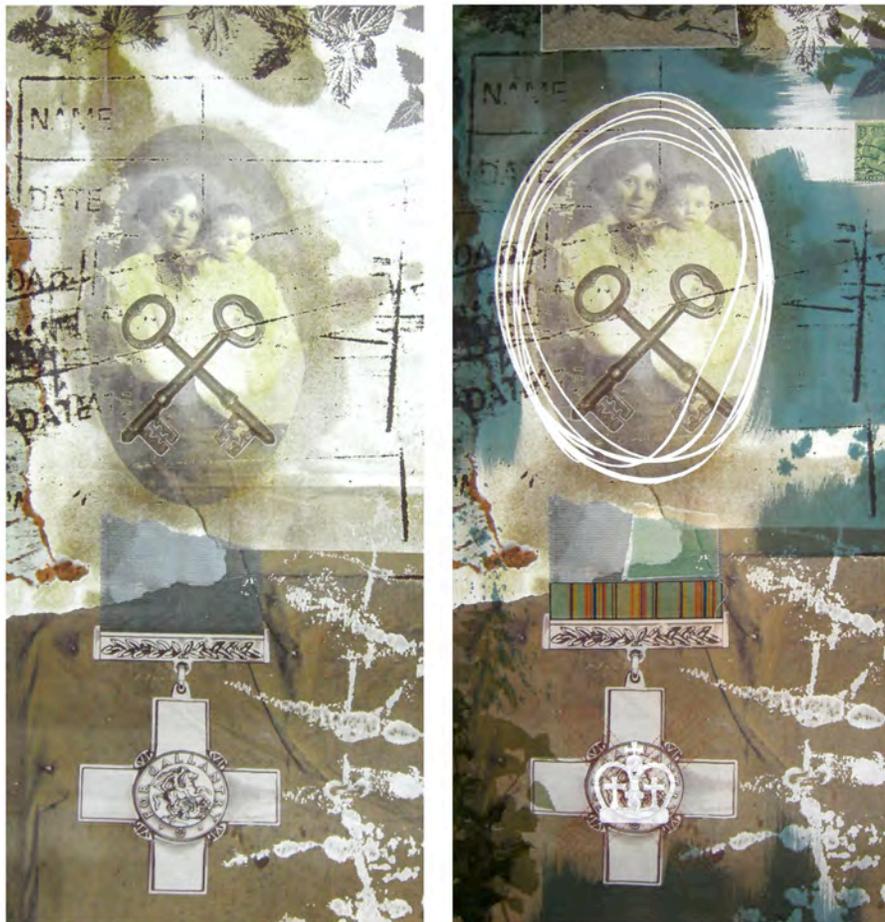


Figure 3: *Left: details of digital additions to the collage background. Right: with additional screen print, stitch and bonded fabric additions.* Image copyright of the artist.

The physical separation of the narrative into three panels for ‘The Ties That Bind (I)’ enabled a staged construction of meaning to be established for the viewer. The family photographs were a vital element in the construction of this visual narrative. However, the encoded authorial intentions for the images relied heavily on their compositional juxtaposition with other elements to create meaning beyond basic significations of the maternal or familial. A visual syntagm had to be created in the first panel to communicate that the family had been singled out for their pacifist beliefs in wartime. This began by positioning beneath the mother and child a crossed-out medal to connote lack of bravery, and by positioning the pattern for a military uniform over the image of another female relative from the period (Figure 3). Stamps were included to identify the period

and connote ‘for king and country’ (Figure 4). White crosses, incorporated as symbols of Christian faith, emerged as common elements across all the panels as the work progressed. Additional elements such as a white feather (a symbol of cowardice), and keys to symbolise imprisonment and release, were also included to develop the narrative content.



Figure 4: *Stamp detail from ‘The Ties That Bind (I)’*. Image copyright of the artist.

Viewer responses to ‘The Ties That Bind (I)’ were examined in relation to their overall interpretation of the visual narrative and the meanings conveyed by individual images, and groups of images, within the panels. Following analysis of viewers’ interpretations of the ‘The Ties That Bind (I)’, the work served as a ‘visual paradigm’ from which images, colours and surface treatments could be selected or rejected (with alternatives sought) for the development of a second iteration of the oral history in textile form as ‘The Ties That Bind (II)’. Several images were excluded from the second textile development, primarily due to the extent viewers aberrantly decoded<sup>11</sup> these elements when viewing ‘The Ties That

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<sup>11</sup> Aberrant decoding occurs when the viewer’s reading is very different from that which the encoder intended. The phenomenon of differences in reading that derive from differences in experience was termed as ‘aberrant decoding’ by Eco, 1965 (Fiske, Introduction to Communication Studies, p.78).

Bind (I)’. In order to improve the communication of the oral history in visual form, viewers’ interpretations were essential, leading to the selection, rejection, or substitution of images to be used in ‘The Ties That Bind (II)’.

### Contexts for Display

The textiles were exhibited at UK sites, deliberately without provision of a title or content description. The ‘Ties That Bind (I)’ was displayed in 2007 at Walford Mill in Dorset (a contemporary craft gallery), Lloyds Bank headquarters in Birmingham, Manchester Museum of Science and Industry (Figure 5), and Saltaire United Reformed Church. Self-administered questionnaires were placed with the installation and the researcher also undertook one-to-one voice recorded interviews with 46 participants at the sites. The ‘Ties That Bind (II)’, a reworking of the visual narrative, was later displayed in 2008 at Manchester Museum of Science and Industry and the Bankfield Museum and Art Gallery, West Yorkshire (Figure 6). Self-administered questionnaires were again available with the installation.

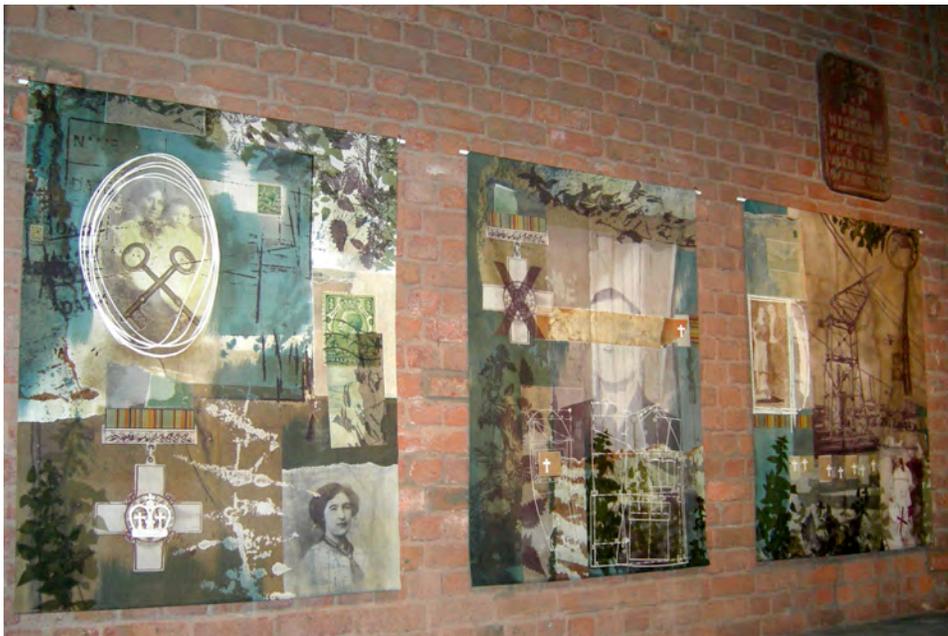


Figure 5: ‘*The Ties That Bind (I)*’ in situ at Manchester Museum of Science and Industry. Image copyright of the artist.



Figure 6: *'The Ties That Bind (II)'* in situ at the Bankfield Museum and Art Gallery. Image copyright of the artist.



Figure 7: *Image detail from the development of the 'The Ties That Bind (II)'* centre panel. Image copyright of the artist.

## Viewer Perceptions

From over 450 responses to the textile installations that were collected, it was clear that collective memory around history was triggered through the combination of images and colours within the compositions. Their similarity to sepia photos from old albums and war documentaries functioned as intended, with viewers drawing on their experience of what constitutes ‘official’ images of history and historical narratives in the media in order to read these as signifiers of the past.

An altered form of autobiographical memory was also present within the responses to the textiles. Viewers wrote and spoke about their memories of past family members from the period they perceived the work to be about, and those family members’ experiences in relation to the images they viewed on the cloth. One participant noted that the image of a woman (in the centre panel of ‘The Ties That Bind (II)’, Figure 7) reminded them of “an old photo of someone I knew who was in some kind of internment camp as a child in WW2,” while another responded: “Faith, families, hardship in days in the past. War, hope. Reminds me of my grandparents’ early life as they have similar pictures in their albums.” In most cases, viewers positioned their responses to, and interpretations of, the work as ‘authentic’ by describing memories of wartime experiences that they had gathered through informal oral history conversations with their own (or friends’) family members; what I would describe as ‘legacy memories.’

Responses to the textiles were markedly different between older and younger generations. Unsurprisingly, only a few interpretations were given that demonstrated personal experience of war, and these were from the oldest respondents. For example, one viewer noted: “As someone of 86 years, it brings back a mixture of memories – sad & happy – of WW2,” while another reflected on: “Human conflict, war, the role of women as opposed to men and the power of the state in war time. The trio of works adds up to a very depressing view of humankind, which unfortunately rings too true to someone born in 1936.” Older participants aged 59 and upwards associated the visual narrative with loss to a greater extent than did participants from younger age groups. A 77-year old interpreted the textiles as “War - women left behind. Tragedies of war - destruction of humankind.” One 59-year-old participant suggested that the textile represented “missing family in war time”, whilst another 59-year old stated: “All three panels indicate loss to me. Loss of life/loss of sight or limbs through war. The images of poppies and crosses indicate the futility of war, the loss of a whole generation of young men. The image of a paper pattern over the photos also indicates the loss of an industry, ready-made clothes, tailoring in Leeds.”

In contrast, responses from younger participants featured a broader range of interpretations of the textiles, relating them to social changes of longer duration

than the war. An 18-year old participant described the textiles in terms of “The contrast between past and present. Change over time. Nature ‘vs’ the developed world.” A 29-year old noted: “The interplay of peaceful and more reflective aspects of progress, development, industry. Industry – important for the welfare of people but also contributes to e.g. wars (for resources, motivation). A provision of better equipment (better ways of conducting wars).” The themes of “immigration, sacrifice, heritage” and of “religion formalised – Victoria/20<sup>th</sup> century, social history” were mentioned by participants in their thirties.

Viewers’ responses to ‘The Ties That Bind (I)’ particularly demonstrated that several images created more aberrant decoding than others, and some readings of images within the work were unexpected. The crossed-out medals were the most influential signifier within the textile panels. However, participants’ shared cultural memory of what medals represent proved so embedded, that they generated interpretations related to war, bravery, heroism, gallantry and death, rather than to the meanings of lack of bravery, or being non-heroic, intended by incorporating medals that had been crossed out. This reading of the crossed-out medals was prevalent across ages and genders at all the sites. Due to the extensive aberrant decoding of the crossed-out medals, they were not selected for use in ‘The Ties That Bind (II)’. Further, because the small white crosses in ‘The Ties That Bind (I)’ mainly generated readings of gravestones and death, the scale of the crosses was increased, and they were made more ornate, so as to resemble church altar crosses (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Image detail from ‘The Ties That Bind (II)’ final panel, incorporating a portrait of John Edgar Bell’s daughter and her son. Image copyright of the artist.

The formal and informal portrait photographs incorporated into both designs had been intended to show members of the family before, during and after the war, and to focus on the imprisonment of the objector in the centre panels. Viewers responded to these photos by making a number of different associations to the past, drawing on personal memory and shared cultural memory to inform their readings. However, few of these were consistent with the narrative I intended to communicate as the maker of the work. One viewer aged 57 noted that ‘The Ties That Bind (I)’: “Reminds me of my family (grandmother, aunt, uncle, cousins) who worked in Salts Mill. The size of the looms in the weaving shed always amazed me and the power they generated.”

As responses on the meaning of the textiles were examined, the impact of family history and cultural background on interpretations of the visual narrative emerged. For example, one viewer, aged 37, provided a well-elaborated narrative in which the overall meaning of ‘The Ties That Bind (II)’ was: “The struggle of non-British man travelling to Britain on work related journey. He is out to earn to maintain his family, however, encounters problems and is left with choice to go without much or stay and prosper with new family. He ends up doing the latter, which involved breaking his marital oath and religious law, and separating him from previous family. Ultimately his new offspring inherit British status.” When examining the meanings that viewers attributed to the textile installations, only a limited number interpreted the visual narrative as relating to the imprisonment of a conscientious objector. One stated: “The overall impression is of an ancestor of yours who was misunderstood when he became a conscientious objector in WW1. He was shown the white feather and was ‘obliged’ to become an active participant. He was subsequently taken prisoner of war and interned for a long time. He always was an enigma to his family who misunderstood his motivations and his change of personality when he returned home from his ordeal.” Another noted: “A man separated from his family because he is a conscientious objector – imprisoned – then released, but bearing the scars of the whole ordeal.”

In ‘The Ties That Bind (II)’ a crossed-out British flag was juxtaposed with the family photographs in panels one and panel three to more strongly connote the family’s perceived lack of patriotism, and to allude to the crosses that had been painted on the door of their home, singling them out within their community (Figure 9). Although the brush mark ‘X’ was printed on top of the flag, it generated negative connotations in relation to the portrait photographs. That is, viewers interpreted the juxtaposition of the ‘X’ and the family images as referring to family-related separation and loss. The subdued colours of the flag, its size in relation to the photographs, or even the positioning of the brush mark, may have made the flag less recognisable and altered how it read; one viewer even

misinterpreted the flag as a gate. At a primary level of signification<sup>12</sup> the flag did denote 'British', 'national' and 'country' to most viewers. The secondary level of signification, the connotative meaning viewers interpreted from the image, was split between negative and positive associations. These included: "Ambiguity of serving England, propaganda," "Rejection of nationalism," "Rejected by church and country," and conversely, "Flying the flag for Britain" and "Patriotism, home."



Figure 9: 'The Ties That Bind (II) Panel 1'. Image copyright of the artist.

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<sup>12</sup> Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*.

Barthes notes that variations in viewers' readings of imagery are not arbitrary, but 'depends on different kinds of knowledge – practical, national, cultural, aesthetic – invested in the image by the reader'.<sup>13</sup> This premise is extended by Storey<sup>14</sup> who suggests that whilst viewers' knowledge is historical and cultural, it is also informed by individual differences such as 'race', class and gender. The communication transition from denotative meaning to connotative meaning is therefore only possible because of the accumulated knowledge and personal experiences that inform an individual's reading of a single image, or collection of images. Those generating an image, or editing how it is presented, rely on their conception of what is common knowledge to craft an image from which they hope viewers will read the intended connotative meanings Fiske has observed that: "When an artist produces a message for a defined audience using shared codes – when, that is, s/he produces a narrowcast message – s/he can expect that the range of meanings negotiated by the audience will be very limited. Their decoding will be approximate to the encoding. But if that message is read by a member of a different culture, who brings different codes to it, aberrant decoding will produce a different meaning."<sup>15</sup> In this instance, viewers' aberrant connotative readings of the images, in conjunction with the medium of the images' production and the context of viewing, proved to be influenced by generational knowledge based on their prior experiences. Readings of the crossed-out medal and flag, meanwhile, exemplified the deeply embedded, culturally and historically informed understanding that many viewers have of these images. Despite the inclusion of these very specific signifiers, a plurality of readings of the visual text and significant areas of aberrant decoding were nonetheless generated.

## Reflection

If my aim at the outset of this project was to faithfully represent the story of John Edgar Bell and to have this representation faithfully interpreted by others, then this study of viewers' readings raises serious questions. Viewers' multiple and frequently aberrant readings of 'The Ties That Bind' textiles could be perceived as a failure in the selection of signifiers and the composition of visual syntagms during the construction of the textiles, an illustration of the semantic imprecision of analogue codes, noted by Nichols.<sup>16</sup> With very definitive negative marks such as the brush mark 'X' over the British flag included and still only limited viewer

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<sup>13</sup> Barthes, R. (1977) *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana, p.46.

<sup>14</sup> Storey, J. (1993) *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, p.83.

<sup>15</sup> Fiske, *Introduction To Communication Studies*, p.78.

<sup>16</sup> Nichols. *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media*, p.47.

consensus achieved, the question is raised as to how great the level of redundancy of an image must be, and how clear its relationship to other signifiers, in order to create a unified reading of the oral history in visual form across different generations of viewers. But is a unified reading possible, or even desirable?

In noting that: “to interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it.”<sup>17</sup> Barthes points this inquiry in a different direction, one of appreciating the plurality of generations and how they develop meaning from cultural signifiers. It was clear from viewers’ interpretations of the textiles that multiple factors within ‘generational cultures’ informed readings of the visual narrative, with viewers’ age, personal experience and historical knowledge mixing with dominant cultural codes in this process. Whilst the visual images in ‘The Ties That Bind’ textiles lacked the semantic precision of language to faithfully convey an oral history, they provided the means by which viewers’ could negotiate their own readings, enriching their experience of engaging with the textile works and the task of interpreting oral history through a visual form.

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<sup>17</sup> Barthes, R. (1974) *S/Z*. New York: Hill and Wang, p.5. Originally published in French by Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1970.