



"Haiti Earthquake"

Photo: United Nations Development Programme.

Tent City Geography

Marita Sturken | New York University

The January 2010 Haiti earthquake led to the production of an enormous number of images of aftermath. Earthquakes as events are not easily realized by cameras, given that they are unexpected and unpredictable. A video or two emerged from surveillance cameras in Haiti that captured the violent shaking and the images of buildings collapsing, but for the most part the event was off camera, so to speak. Most of the visibleness of the Haitian earthquake was thus the depiction of aftermath, images of the rescue and recovery operation, of the dead lying in the rubble and the streets, the traumatized survivors, the buildings in ruins. As such, the earthquake was imaged as Haiti in a state of collapse in ways that seemed to affirm Haiti's status as a collapsed State throughout history. The images of the earthquake's aftermath largely reiterated preexisting notions about Haiti as a dysfunctional state, as a site of ongoing and relentless poverty, as chaos. And those images, like all disaster aftermath images, were also deployed to affirm concepts of human resilience, compassion, and generosity—spanning the full range from images of survivors, to aid workers, to Hollywood celebrities working telethons to raise money. These images pull toward iconic or metaphoric status in compelling ways—it is often difficult to see them as specific images of a particular moment in a disaster, rather than as icons of a larger story. When images are read down a semiotic chain toward their potential to signal the larger ideological and political frameworks that guide their connotative meaning, they can also participate in the reaffirmation of stereotypes that do not allow for nuance and complexity; this is

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especially so of images that acquire iconic status.

I would like to look at one image, posted by the United Nations Development Programme on the photo-sharing site Flickr, that seems to me to embody many of these contradictions.



Image: United nations Development Programme

The caption reads: Haitians set up impromptu tent cities through the capital after an earthquake measuring 7 plus on the Richter scale rocked Port au Prince, Haiti just before 5 pm yesterday, January 12, 2010.

What we notice first is the color: the bright patchwork of cloth that is providing temporary shelter in the middle of a square, the vibrant and kinetic quality of umbrellas and colored sheets stretched on frames to ward off the sun and rain. The movement and liveliness conveyed by the cloth creates a sense of aliveness, organization, and busyness. A view of the same scene from the ground would likely have conveyed chaos, struggle, and grief, but the view from above highlights form, shape, color, and a kind of mapping. It is a visually compelling image, one that has a certain level of aesthetic organization. The aesthetics of images of disaster has a long history of ambiguous ethical status. This image appears to have been reused by more than one weblogger to create a poster for Haiti relief efforts, one with the words “SOS Haiti” written across it.

This image is, importantly, an aerial image, a view from above that both provides a distance for the viewer and creates a typographical geography. We cannot see the people in the image with any precision. They are not individuals, rather we see how they congregate, where they are gathered, and the color of their clothing. The aerial view (taken perhaps from a plane or helicopter) renders visible several typographies—the grey forms of damaged roofs and the angled shapes of the hung cloth—yet it also masks specifics in its “god’s eye” view from above.

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Image: United Nations Development Programme

There are many other photographs of aerial views of the devastation in Port au Prince, and images of ruined slums have proliferated. Yet the image I have focused on takes those aerial images further in its composition. What makes it compelling is precisely the bricolage quality of the tent city: the sense of people making do, creating shelter, of life emerging from death. The colorful cloth is in vivid contrast to the framing view of the grey metallic roofs, the ruined buildings, and piles of debris that surround the tent city. The corrugated roofs are themselves, of course, emblematic of bricolage architecture in poor cities, the cement block homes with cheap roof materials that are the most vulnerable to natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes. The tents emerge like an island of activity amid the grey, crumbling ruins, evoking something new, something rising out of death.

I began by saying the image was posted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on Flickr, and that, in and of itself, is key to ways in which we might want to frame this image. Its circulation on a photo-sharing social network website by an aid organization speaks volumes about the complexity of the contemporary circulation of disaster images. It is credited to Logan Abbasi, a United Nations photographer who received attention for helping to save a man who had been buried in the rubble for a week (<http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/286074>). Aid organizations deploy images of disaster and disaster relief in increasingly complex ways and through increasingly diverse networks. In the photo-sharing context of a website such as Flickr, such images are arranged in sets and slide shows, and allow aid organizations to intermix aesthetically and visually powerful images such as this one with images of aid workers attending to the injured and walking through and assessing areas of devastation. Flickr allows us to see this image in a UNDP mosaic that includes images of relief helicopters, injured survivors in the hospital, aid workers surveying the damage, and former President Bill Clinton speaking at the United Nations about relief for Haiti, and allows us to link it to a map of Port au Prince. There

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are emotional disconnects, certainly, in the linking of these images; yet that aggregation is a key factor in the way many of us consume images today, moving from one to the next, navigating connections and linkages. The status of the individual image on Flickr and other photo-sharing websites is thus constantly mediated by its linkage and combination with other images. Both in their aggregation and in their status as individual images, the images of aid organizations are deployed into conventionalized narratives of redemption that legitimate the role of relief operations. These images, particularly when circulated in grids, slide shows, and image sets, absorb larger narratives of devastation and failed statehood into the story of rescue and resilience—affirmations of good work that are intended to generate donations.

I noted earlier that many images often pull us toward larger connotations down a semiotic chain, and this image is compelling precisely because of the way that it ultimately signifies hope—the hope embodied by the brightly colored cloth of the temporary shelter of the tent city. Of course, tent cities are sites of homelessness, of marginal living conditions, of no infrastructure, of life on the edge, of little hope. Tens of thousands of people reside in enormous tent cities in Haiti now where they are particularly vulnerable to the coming rains (one of them, with a population of 10,000, was named Camp Obama in an attempt to draw U.S. attention). Far from Haiti, we can be drawn to the hopefulness of this image because of the level of comfort it can provide through a narrative of life and hope emerging from devastation. Inevitably, its hopefulness and aesthetic pleasure operates to erase the deeper story of Haiti's fragile state of being, before and in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Marita Sturken is Professor and Chair in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University where she teaches courses in visual culture, cultural studies, cultural memory, and consumerism. She is the author of several books, including *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (University of California, 1997) and *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (with Lisa Cartwright, Oxford University Press, 2001, Second Edition 2009), and *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism From Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Duke University Press, 2007).