Fear Filter: Visualising the UK Terror Threat Level

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Images: <https://flic.kr/s/aHskLQW5U2>

ABSTRACT

This article explores the digital photo artwork Fear Filter which uses the UK Terror Threat Level as a source for a set of visualisation tools. It argues that the UK Terror Threat Level should be understood as part of the expansion of a range of security measures during the initial stages of the ‘War on Terror’, many of which seem to be more focused on the production of fear and the performance of security than actually improving security. It positions the artwork, Fear Filter, as offering a critical window onto these processes and putting them to creative use in devising a new configuration between photography, terror and security.

INTRODUCTION

Security measures in the UK take a variety of forms which are perhaps most visible at the UK border but since 1970 the UK government has also used a system of Threat Levels as part of its method to communicate the assessed threat from terrorism (Select Committee on Defence 2003). Initially the Threat Level was only displayed in government buildings and institutions, then in 2006 its status was changed and it has subsequently been displayed on the home office and MI5 web sites and published as a live RSS feed, used widely by news outlets and others (Select Committee on Defence 2003, MI5 Security Service 2018, Cabinet Office 2006). This change in the status of the Threat Level coincided with the expansion of a range of security measures particularly in the UK and US in the wake of terror related attacks both in the US and Europe.

Fear Filter (2018) is a digital photo artwork which aims to produce a new configuration of the relationship between photography, terror and security by exploiting the UK Terror Threat Level.

The Fear Filter artwork comprises of a mobile phone photo filters application for Android / iOS platforms and a digital photo stream of user generated images. Like comparable photo filters apps such as Flickr and Instagram the Fear Filter app includes built in filters that can be applied to photos. Rather than offering purely aesthetic adjustments the filters create a visualisation of the UK Terror Threat Level. Each filter corresponds to a different Terror Threat Level and is generated by gathering current and historical information about the UK Terror Threat Level from the web services of MI5, the UK security service.

Images can also be captioned, tagged and shared to the digital photostream from the app. Both the app and a publicly accessible web platform, https://www.fearfilter.uk, collate all the photos from the digital photostream.

Fear Filter is a both a self contained digital platform and uses a digital platform as artistic medium.

THE UK THREAT LEVEL

Throughout its use since 1970 UK Terror Threat Level has taken a similar form; a series of escalating, named levels and corresponding colours which currently mimic the generic green to amber to red colour schemes of many warning systems. Since its public use in 2006 the threat level has explicitly referred to the likelihood of a terror related attack. Prior to 2006 the Threat Level also referred to military threats and was obtusely called The BIKINI State. It used idiosyncratically named levels such as BIKINI Black Special which have now been replaced by more generic names: Low, Moderate, Substantial, Severe and Critical.

The Fear Filter app includes a suite of swipeable filters that represent each Threat Level since 1970 and the published Threat Level over time, these include a filter that responds to changes in the Threat Level in real time that uses the MI5 RSS feed.

Each Threat Level is represented by a filter which tints the photo based on colours defined by the home office. The filters also redact and pixelate a percentage of the image using a sliding scale where the severity of the threat correlates to the area of redaction. The higher the Threat Level the greater the percentage of redaction and the less of the original photo that is visible. The photo is also subject to a basic computer vision algorithm that identifies colors and objects in the photographic frame and targets them for redaction. Finally textual data is printed onto each image, this includes particular information about the Threat Level associated with each filter and EXIF data from the photograph; the location, aperture and other photographic specific information.

FEAR AS GOVERNANCE

In his discussion on security and terror Giorgio Agamben contends that since the birth of the modern state security has always been at the core of state politics and is one of the basic principles of state activity (Agamben 2009). Agamben stands at the end of a long line of thinkers that have considered the relationship between the state, security and fear. Thomas Hobbes’ seminal “contract” (1651) derives directly from his equation between fear and security; the fear that a civilisation without a “common power” (Hobbes 1651) will result in a life for everyone that has no security and is a constant state of war, with “every man against every man” (Hobbes 1651). Hobbes’ vision was that subjects should cede freedoms and be kept “in awe” (Hobbes 1651) to be protected from a life that would otherwise be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 1651, Ludlow 2014).

For Hobbes and others security is ensured by the threat of violence and the fear that attends it, either from the sovereign or from other citizens (Hobbes 1651, Weber 2009). An alternative view is that rather than being a by-product of the threat of violence, fear is a political tool where leaders, governments or even militants dictate what should be the object of fear and use it to dominate political agendas (Ludlow 2014, Robin 2004). In this model the object of fear is often directed at the other, typically an external force (Svendsen 2008) or groups perceived as other, as typified by the ongoing War on Terror. The impossible practicalities of providing security in this context, against what George W Bush described as a threat “to the very idea of civilised society” (Svendsen 2008) is encapsulated by Brian Holmes, who, describing the difficulty and absurdity of making secure a whole society contends that the result is “vertiginous paranoia” and a “security panic” that produces a proliferation of “eyes, ears, cameras, snooping devices, data banks, cross-checks and spiraling analytical anxiety” (Holmes 2009). In less hysterical terms Louise Amoore describes a similar phenomena (also referring to the US) as “watchful politics” (Amoore 2007).

SECURITY THEATRE

The change of the status to the UK Threat Level in 2006 could be thought of as belonging to the expansion of the security apparatus that Holmes and Amoore describe and to a suite of relatively recent counter terror measures where their symbolic presence and visibility seems more important than actually improving security (Schneier 2009). This includes many of the prominent security measures that we are now familiar with, such as the ban on carrying liquids through airport security, full body scans at airports (Levenson 2018), the many instances of harassment of photographers (Vallée 2009).

These and the UK Terror Threat Level might be considered to be examples of Security Theatre. Where in each of these cases the appearance or illusion of security far outweighs the effect in increasing safety or reducing the risk of a terrorist attack. Where security measures are either palliative or merely a form a mimesis (Schneier 2009, McHendry 2016).

Security Theatre might partly be seen as a counter spectacle to the symbolic character of much contemporary terrorism, where the production of the rhetorical visibility of security is more important than undertaking actions that actually make people secure (Schneier, 2009). This seems to be reaffirmed by the vague advice about the Threat Level offered by MI5, “Threat levels in themselves do not require specific responses from the public” (MI5 Security Service 2018). Whilst this is a compelling view it completely eschews the impact of affective security measures for effective measures. A competing perspective is that the affects of security are not mere theatre, and performances of security can generate and regulate affect (McHendry 2016). For a passenger at a UK airport or UK Border port the performance and ritual of security practices is both material and palpable, where the border is embodied in the successful negotiation of performance, “removing shoes, emptying bags, submitting to a scan, being searched, waiting in orderly queues, pressing fingers on readers, repeating personal information in precise, clear and unequivocal terms.” (Amoore & Hall 2010). The UK border is affectively instantiated in the performance of the passenger.

Both Holmes (2009) and Amoore (2007) also cite the rapidly growing use of image and data surveillance techniques, including the interweaving of digital and image based technologies into “soft images” (Henning 2018) including facial and gait recognition software and biometric identity cards and passports (now common in UK airports).

Fear Filter exploits the confluence of the security theatre of the UK Threat Level, data and image recognition technologies and digital photography to reformulate the relationship between photography and terrorism.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND TERROR

Many of the most celebrated photographs of terrorism put victims, perpetrators, event or place within the frame of the image, producing what Henry Giroux calls “The Spectacle of terrorism” (Giroux 2007). Fear Filter uses a different methodology; superimposing a visualisation of the UK Threat Level onto all photographs irrespective of their subject, or of their framing. Rather than using the imagery associated with terror and terrorism Fear Filter uses a computational equation, a visual placeholder for the UK Terror Threat. The photo becomes a record of this pervasive form of security theatre, rather than a recorded image of terrorism, closely echoing James Der Derian’s assertion that “we see terrorism everywhere in real time, all the time” (Derian 2005). The ubiquitous network technologies that make this possible, mobile internet and live http streaming have also resulted in terrorism taking on a “highly optical character” (Derian 2005) with images and image data at the centre of the Spectacle of Terrorism and images and image data at the centre of a set of technologies that are part of the “watchful politics” described by Amoore (2007). Fear Filter sits between these practices catching the points of intersection to transform everyday photography into a record of the contemporary tension between fear and security.

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