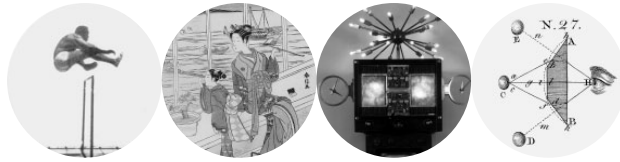# journal of visual culture

Scroungers and Superhumans: Images of Disability from the Summer of 2012: A Visual Inquiry

Liz Crow

Abstract

Through the summer of 2012, two opposing sets of images dominated the British press. Welfare benefits reform met the Paralympics, the former casting disabled people as scroungers, the latter as superhumans. Seemingly independent yet intertwined, the images create a collective picture in the mind of what it is to be disabled. This collective imagining shapes and reinforces government policy on austerity cuts and benefits reform, with profound influence upon the everyday lives of disabled people. Caught between the two conflicting image sets, disabled people's real lives are rendered invisible, even as they feel the full force of the images. This visual inquiry examines how the dominance of such images might practically be contested by creating counter images which reveal a very different and more truthful imagining of what it might be to be disabled.

Keywords

austerity • benefits reform • disabled • disability • London 2012 • Paralympics • representation • visual activism • welfare benefits

Through the summer of 2012, two opposing sets of images dominated the British press. Welfare benefits reform met the 2012 Paralympics, each with consequences for the public's perception of disability and the lives of disabled people.

Over the past two years of benefits reporting, I had watched with a sense of the gathering storm as a pattern of narrative and response took shape. As the Paralympics drew near, a new set of images began to emerge: the light

to the dark of benefits. I watched from a very particular position: that of the benefits claimant, fallen through the gaps and making my way towards my own appeal. From where I sat, a collision of images seemed inevitable, with myself and other disabled people caught in the crossfire.

Added to the direct pressures of benefits reform, I felt a weight of expectation and judgement from the images. Neither set of images said much about me, yet they became deeply personal. Since there was no way to escape the heat of the images, I decided to try and make sense of their power.

Collating the images, I analyse them here against a backdrop of visual inquiry theory. I consider the process through which their meanings are made, how they shape and reinforce a collective 'picture in the mind' of what it is to be a disabled person. I look beneath the surface to examine their real-world impact. Finally, I explore possibilities for contesting these images and for disabled people's creation of counter images, in order to tell a different kind of story of what it is to be us.

Image Set 1: The Benefits Claimant

The two sets of images that dominated the British press during the summer of 2012 could scarcely contrast more. The first consists of widespread images of disabled people as welfare benefits claimants set against a context of comprehensive benefits reform and a massive 30 per cent cut from the national disability benefits budget (Edwards, 2012).

Two interwoven themes emerge from the images: fraudster and scrounger. The first is a portrayal of working age non-disabled people charged with defrauding the state through benefits secured for non-existent impairment. Family snapshots and grainy surveillance video show claimants 'caught' taking pleasure in leisure activities most likely precluded by their alleged impairment: playing golf, digging gardens, on a rollercoaster.

Scrounger reporting, in contrast, focuses on 'workshy' disabled people 'languishing' on benefits in preference to work, in a shift of gaze from non-disabled fraudster to disabled parasite. Generalised reporting replaces specific offences. Amorphous, documentary-styled photographs modelled by actors show people with generally invisible and non-specific impairments in passive scenarios, such as reclining whilst watching television or clutching their back whilst grimacing. In this representation, scrounging is portrayed as another version of fraud.

The style of images from both themes, and their positioning within the news media, posits them as unconstructed evidence (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). Often appearing in tabloid newspapers as front-page headlines, this is a style of coverage that drives a powerfully negative message (Schwartz, 1989). Associated with a hardening of public attitudes towards claimants, an unprecedented two-thirds of the population states that benefits are so generous as to discourage job-seeking (Goulden, 2012), and estimates of

fraud range between 50 and 70 per cent (Briant et al., 2011), as much as 230 times the Department for Work and Pension (DWP) figure of 0.3 per cent (Department for Work and Pensions, 2011).

The images supply a cumulative narrative of criminality and moral bankruptcy. In the five years to 2010/11, *Daily Mail* coverage of disability benefits 'cheats' is recorded as increasing five-fold whilst, across the press, of all political persuasions, articles portraying disabled people as economic 'burden' multiply, and pejorative language (skiver, cheat, feckless, and so on) rises (Briant et al., 2011). *The Sun* launches a 'crusade' to 'Beat the Cheat', setting up a telephone line for readers to report on neighbours (Talsania, 2012). The overriding message is uncritical support for welfare reform, embedded in an account of rampant fraud and the necessity for taxpayer unity against a national threat.

The moral character of non-disabled fraudster and disabled scrounger are both under suspicion, but neighbourly surveillance is experienced unequally. The fraudster's claimant status, in the absence of identifiable impairment, is largely unrecognisable to their neighbours, so it is those with visible impairments who find themselves in the spotlight: was the wheelchair user seen walking? Did the person with the white stick cross the road unaided? Was the neighbour who said they are ill seen out shopping? (Begg, 2012). A single case of fraud is implied to incriminate all disabled people, whether claimant or not.

Disabled people feel the press message as a mounting threat (Disability Rights UK, 2012). To widespread anxiety about benefits reform, is added surveillance, misinterpretation, disenfranchisement and hostility (De Wolfe, 2012), in a style of reporting that defames a community. At its extreme, an interview with the Minister for the DWP suggests that disabled people are responsible for the entire recession (Newton Dunn, 2010).

Some disabled people and supporters seek to manage the hostility by presenting a counter image: the disabled person as victim. In online newspaper comments pages, they reprise a contemporary version of traditional charity imagery, portraying us as defenceless and pitiable. And whilst it might lift immediate public opprobrium, to cast ourselves as vulnerable when hate crime is rising plays a dangerous game.

Image Set 2: The Paralympian

The second set of images emerges in the run-up to London 2012 and could scarcely contrast more. The largest Paralympic Games ever, the most accessible and best attended in its 64 years (Topping, 2012), is promoted and reported on an unprecedented scale: over 500 broadcast hours and the most widely reported news in print (Journalisted, 2012). It is a stark contrast with the benefits reporting that is taking place alongside: light to the dark of benefits, confrontation transformed to celebration.

As official broadcaster, Channel Four's mission is to 'transform the perception of disabled people in society' (Office for Disability Issues, 2011: 4). Matching the Paralympic motto of 'empowerment, inspiration, achievement', it represents a shift from the Games' rehabilitative roots to world-class athleticism. The International Paralympic Committee, meanwhile, makes public its aim to use sport to contribute to 'a better world for all people with a disability' (International Paralympic Committee, 2003: para 5).

Media coverage is launched through an advertising campaign from Channel 4. 'Meet the superhumans' is emblazoned, bold, across a larger-than-life glossy photograph of athletes, sleek and streamlined: swimmer, cyclist, runner, wheelchair rugby player. Looking the viewer in the eye, they challenge them to dare to look back, dare to pity.

With the Games underway, a torrent of images appears reflecting the superhuman mantra in a celebration of disabled people's endurance and athleticism. Impairment is on view as never before in a matter-of-factness of visibility. Hesitant early reporting is replaced by an assured weave of sporting triumph and individual 'overcoming'. As the medal count rises, disabled athletes are feted as heroes. Top of the bill are backstories of shark bite, railway tracks, terrorism and war (Lusher, 2012; Lydall, 2012); amputees with high-technology prostheses are the centre of interest. For spectators seduced by glamour, the transformative powers of technology make them the apotheosis of superhuman.

In a saturation of images, Games organisers and press predict these are images that can change attitudes forever (Moreton, 2012).

At the closing ceremony the Games are heralded as having 'lifted the cloud of limitation' (Coe, 2012, in Collins, 2012: para 1). The press ponders how extraordinary it is what, with determination, disabled people can do (Phillips, 2012). The Paralympics spotlights a group who are at last 'acceptable' to a broader society. For most disabled people, it will become an image to cleave to, for those who can.

Pictures in the Mind

The two image sets – heroic Paralympian and immoral claimant – could hardly be more different, yet have so much in common. Viewed together, they replicate the ancient binaries of disability; they are 'positive' and 'negative', a tale of extremes: overcoming and inspiring versus flawed, burdensome and tragic.

Whilst the binary messages appear to be intrinsic to the images, in fact they are socially constructed codes (Mitchell, 2002), which enable viewers to make rapid 'common sense' readings based upon shared cultural understandings (Becker, 1974). Their context, along with accompanying headlines, frames the images and directs the viewer on how they are to be read (Price, 1994). Except for their intensity, their core messages would

merely modernise historic themes. However, their coexistence, combined with the unprecedented volume and compressed timescales of their reporting, takes them to new levels of influence. The speed and proliferation of online communications magnify this further.

In isolation, Paralympic coverage is an affirmative departure from traditional representations, yet its image borders are permeable. For most Paralympians are also claimants, whose benefits, in defraying costs of impairment and discrimination, are crucial to their athletic goals (Toynbee, 2012). This is absent from the discourse in which Paralympians are made virtuous by implied self-sufficiency, whilst other disabled people are absorbed into the scrounger rhetoric.

Despite their polarisation, both images tell a similar story: of individuals with impairments separated from their social context. Whether Paralympic success or claimant immorality, the individual is portrayed as soaring or plummeting solely through intrinsic will. From discrimination and poverty to elite training and sustained investment, the social context is made invisible.

It is the ignoring of social influences, above all other features of the images, that defines their meaning. The images glorify those who overcome disabling barriers (Hevey, 1992), and admonish the rest. It is a distorted, simplistic view of impairment and disability, in which Paralympians and claimants are viewed as bodily and socially equivalent, differences in their outcomes reduced to individual strength and choice.

In the absence of explicit social context, the images provide context for each other, so that the claimants' reflected shame raises the athletes' pedestal still higher. Whether fraudster/scrounger, Paralympian or victim, the images are a representation of disabled people as not fully human. Even the extreme heroism of the Paralympian cannot consistently be lived up to, whilst the fraudster/scrounger or victim must fail by default. What the images represent is a stripping of self that leaves us doubting ourselves.

Meanings constructed in the production of the images entwine with a process of interpretation brought by the viewer. Since meaning is influenced by the context in which images are viewed (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001), and by the viewer's particular identity, culture and experience (Ross, 2003), it changes for different audiences. What it is (or is not) to be disabled is not fixed, and Paralympic and benefits imagery shifts in meaning according to audience concerns. Against the pervasive tensions of austerity, the search for meaning is magnified. Hence, the scrounger rhetoric meets approval from a population that fears benefits fraud as a danger to national interests but, for those at risk of false accusation, it presents a threat. For many, the Paralympics is a positive new viewing of disability, yet it undermines disabled people who cannot conform to its exacting standards.

Although the images are not simply reducible to a fixed meaning (Lister and Wells, 2001), the messages at their core are so entrenched that, for most viewers, they remain the dominant interpretation. Since most of the

population claims to have little contact with disabled people (ComRes, 2010), non-disabled people's primary source of meaning about disability is the cultural media (Barnes et al., 1999), which teaches them to make sense of disability in culturally acceptable ways (Gilman, 1982). In the absence of compelling and sustained alternatives, the images circumscribe and reinforce the narrow range of interpretation (Ross, 2003), so that an under-informed audience is led by the dominant rhetoric.

Circulation figures for *The Sun* and *Daily Mail*, those newspapers with the most damaging disability rhetoric, are more than 15 times those of the primary counter reporters, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* (*N* = 4,416,817 versus 286,075) (ABC, 2012). Front-page tabloid headlines are viewed by many more via the newsstands and through social media circulation. The images do not merely reflect the world they report upon, but shape the ways in which we see and understand it (McQuire, 1998). Their power to mirror and frame disabled people's reality is huge.

Since the human mind is particularly responsive to meaning that is grounded in symbol and metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), the unambiguity and over-simplification of the two image sets convert readily to a generalised symbol of what it is to be disabled. In ceasing to focus on the individuals they portray – 'this' claimant or 'this' athlete – the individual stories conveyed through the images become a composite commentary on all disabled people (Ross, 2003).

In doing so, they extend beyond their material existence, entering the imagination to become a collective 'picture in the mind'. Drawing from the extremes of the two images, they create a shared cultural meaning of what a disabled person might be (Mitchell, 2005). That this is intangible makes its influence no less real (Pink, 2007). The image sets of disabled people convert to a symbolic shorthand – 'the heroic Paralympian … and the burdensome gimp' (Peers, 2009: 654) – against which flesh-and-blood disabled people are measured.

The capacity of these images to label and consign cannot be underestimated. Benefits and Paralympic imagery cast the viewer in different roles, the former as voyeur, the latter as spectator, but both are a position removed from the person whose image they interpret. In framing disabled people as 'other', the images set disabled people apart (Mols, 2012; Stanton, 1996), becoming the filter through which they are understood and misunderstood (Mitchell, 2002). Through repeated references to 'we', the taxpayer, 'they', the claimant, to 'they', the superhumans, 'we', the ordinary mortals, both sets of images drive a wedge between disabled people and the rest.

The power of images to shape a community's perception is well known from another more sinister era. Paralympic imagery carries a trace of *Olympia*, the Leni Riefenstahl film of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, with its commanding aesthetic of an idealised physical type (Viggiano, 2011). Contemporaneously, National Socialist Party images portrayed disabled people as economic burden and less than fully human, readying the citizenry for a programme

of mass-murder that decimated the disabled population (Crow, 2010). Current benefits coverage is charged with this same discourse. For National Socialists, the body's state mirrors that of the mind (Mosse, 1996) so that, just as with Paralympic and benefits images, the body comes to indicate an individual's moral character.

In visual inquiry texts, there is much attention given to the construction and interpretation of images, but little discussion of the real-life consequences of the images for their subjects. This is the place where images extend beyond what they mean to what they *do* (Mitchell, 2002).

For disabled people, caught between two conflicting symbols, our public identities shrink to fraud and scrounger, victim or hero. Consigned to the invisible gulf, we face a barrage of images that reflect and bolster government policy on austerity cuts and benefits reform. Even as the real lives of disabled people are disappeared from the picture, the collective imagining leaves us simultaneously exposed to its crossfire, exerting a heavy toll.

Real-Life Impact

As welfare reform pushes forward, it becomes clear that the most serious flaws of this collective picture are incorporated within the new system of benefits. The classification system that assesses entitlement to support also situates disabled people outside their social context. Impairment is taken as an indication of employability, without reference to discrimination, support or job availability. Whereas classification has always been integral to the welfare state, this new shift isolates claimants fully from their social context.

Paralympics classification, whilst administratively separate, overlaps in philosophy, with both systems built upon an image that accords with Paralympic representation. Quantifiable biomechanical descriptors, such as strength, flexibility and balance, are measured to allocate athletes fairly to competition, and to determine claimants' eligibility for financial assistance (Department for Work and Pensions, 2012b; Tweedy and Bourke, 2009;).

For the Paralympians, these measures broadly fit, with their impairments (amputations, visual impairment, restricted growth, etc.) and their athletic activity (power, endurance, etc.) both quantifiable. Claimants, however, with typically more complex, hard-to-quantify impairments (chronic, fluctuating and life-limiting conditions) (Department for Work and Pensions, 2012a), struggle to fit these mechanistic criteria, which also fail to accommodate the broad range of employment activity. Built upon an erroneous image of disability, benefits classification is made unfit for purpose.

For those assessed, it is vital to match the auditor's 'picture in the mind' of what it is to be disabled. If the prevailing image does not represent us, then we fall through the net. Classification influences athletes' medal chances; for the claimant, it determines their chances in life. Not only do they risk being

found inappropriately 'fit for work', as is happening in large numbers, but also being subject to the press charge of scrounger.

It is a cruel conundrum that in misrepresenting ordinary disability benefits claimants as scroungers, the same images also very often render them ineligible for the benefits that they are entitled to claim. The narrative of fraudster/scrounger, through representation and real-world application, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The fraudster/scrounger imagery, in particular, has been nourished and reinforced by a 'long campaign of misinformation', uncorrected and indeed, fed, by government briefings (Quarmby, 2012: para 7). In building and sustaining this collective picture in the mind, whilst also playing upon widespread public fears in a time of austerity (Chong and Druckman, 2007), these briefings and their consequent images have fuelled the rise in hostility towards disabled people.

In four years of financial crisis, the figures for hate crime against disabled people have climbed. By the summer of 2012, they have doubled and over half of disabled people have experienced disability-targeted hostility, aggression or violence from a stranger (Riley-Smith, 2012). The fraudster/scrounger rhetoric is a key player (Briant et al., 2011). Hate crime researcher, Katharine Quarmby, writes: 'If you have a group that is blamed for economic downturn, terrible things can happen to them' (Quarmby, 2012, in Riley-Smith, 2012: para 5).

For immersed within the name-calling of superhuman/fraudster/scrounger/ victim lies an unease of greater magnitude, a deeper message of the social value placed upon disabled people and the function that disability can serve within a society. The images, in their polarisation, are symbols not only of mythic disability, but of what we as a society value and abhor. Against a backdrop of austerity, they combine in a metaphor for hope and warning: the Paralympians symbolising a 'triumph of the will' over harsh times, the claimants simultaneously providing a scapegoat and a rung on the ladder lower yet than our own. As emblem, the Paralympic superhuman has found its converse in the disabled person as subhuman.

In a new system of benefits that has been charged with contributing to the deaths of 32 people each week (Sommerlad, 2012), these are the values that underpin continuing and widespread public support for reform. They are the same values that underpin the accompanying rise in hate crime, and that lie behind a raft of other justifications: segregated education and threats to independent living, selective foetal screening for impairment and the rush to legal rights for assisted suicide. They are values rooted in history, yet experienced by contemporary disabled people as a daily threat. Beneath the benefits rhetoric, is a challenge of 'our right to inhabit this planet, our right to exist' (Bashell, 2012: 1h 33').

The summer of 2012 provided a collision of images. A small glimmer for those who can match the abiding images of the Games, they threaten a

heavy backlash for the majority of disabled people who cannot comply. In the aftermath of the Games, the volume of coverage subsides but its impression remains, the sharp divide between superhuman and fraudster/ scrounger/victim etched onto the landscape.

Talking Back

To understand the process of constructing images and their meanings is the first phase in their deconstruction. Alone, it is insufficient to overturn the deep-seated visual and political cultures that cause such harm (Mitchell, 2002), but it does reveal the temporal dimension of images (Bach, 2007), leaving them open to the possibility of change.

Part of the process of change is a questioning of what the images really tell us. Paralympics and benefits images, and the structures and behaviours enacted in their likeness, tell us little about disabled people, and far more about their non-disabled producers who are perpetuating a cultural rhetoric so deeply embedded that they may not even be conscious of it (Lister and Wells, 2001; Pink, 2007).

In teaching producers and viewers to look more consciously at 'received' images, in giving them tools to decode images for themselves, we can encourage 'oppositional reading' (Hall, 1980[1973]: 138), whereby new meanings emerge to contest dominant ideologies (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). And since disabled people, exposed to the same cultural influences as the general population, are also steeped in the dominant readings of such images, teaching ourselves to see disabled people differently is also a vital part of contesting images.

For those of us at the sharpest end of the images, a more strategic approach is needed, not only to negate the impact of damaging images, but also to take charge of them and steer their influence. If the dominant images of disability are unrecognisable and harmful to the people they claim to represent then, as disabled people, we must construct a deluge of counter images of our own.

These are the images of 'ordinary' disabled people, of people who work and play, run homes, raise children, and so on. However, whilst offering an alternative to the prevailing messages, they can be no more than a partial view, of disabled people able to conform. Alone, such images allow to continue, untouched, the values that confine others to the invisible gulf.

We also need images that reverse the spotlight more definitively to tell a different story, to question the imperative of conforming to an impossible image. These are images that show disabled people who live in ways that are beyond convention: images of flesh-and-blood disabled people who show what those who cannot conform can be in a system that treasures diversity. They are images which reflect dignity back to ourselves and demonstrate

that we are of worth. It is not that people like us do not exist, but that we do not appear in the public gaze.

And we need to create images that confront in more direct and provocative ways. We need images that use the process of meaning-making for effect, working with and subverting the existing binaries in order to create images that confront and disturb the viewer's familiar readings.

To challenge prevailing images through such 'visual activism' is a 'talking back' (Garland-Thomson, 2009: 193) that turns the process of making meaning into a tool for creating more just meanings. It is a producing of images from out of the invisible gulf.

Since the representations of disabled people within these new images are beyond the experience of many viewers, we need to extend beyond simple presentation of the images to guide viewers in their interpretation of what a disabled person might be. Given that selective perception attunes viewers particularly to notice images that reinforce their existing perceptions (Linn, 2003), the images we produce to contest must work much harder. Reaching viewers with counter images is a difficult task relative to the distribution by mainstream press of the images we seek to contest. Not only do we need to become our own producers, but our own distributors too. Beyond social media, we communicate most immediately when we take the images direct to the viewer. In presenting our images in public spaces, we reach the 'accidental audience', those people who would never actively seek the images that counter entrenched beliefs.

In doing this, we can also make use of the fact that, beyond the images we consciously create, our bodies and our ways of living may create the most compelling images of all. These images may be more complex to decode because they are less the stuff of symbol, rather a moving, shifting, intangible living alongside. But it is the living alongside that goes deepest of all (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008).

Simply to be visible in public spaces is not enough, for to change dominant notions of disability is not a passive process. Rather, the more we become actively visible, creating selves which counter, contest and engage as we move through public spaces, the more we demonstrate a decoding of images in its most profound and active sense. In a time of increasingly hostility, to be publicly visible carries risk; however, to counter the images, it has become more crucial than ever. In making ourselves visible, we proclaim flesh-and-blood images that embrace the complexity and multi-layered identities of disabled people. They produce an opposite reading from the tunnelled down, focusing in, of those images that dominate; it is a refracted representation which places to the fore the subject's meanings of what it is to be them (Holliday, 2004).

In the maelstrom of the summer of 2012, when Paralympics and benefits imagery collided, there was another image set, more varied, harder to pin down, but vibrant and vital in the public spaces it inhabited. Into the

invisible spaces, campaigners and protesters, disabled people and allies, formed the most compelling picture of all. Timing a season of protest to coincide with the height of Paralympics and benefits coverage, they sought to draw maximum press coverage to their campaign for justice and human rights for all disabled people in a time of austerity and welfare cuts (DPAC, nd). In doing so, they showed what they were made of.

In defence of a community, what they showed were skills and strategies amassed, abiding compassion, organisation and resilience on a scale to move mountains. They revealed imagination and humour, alliances built, agendas shaped, the bearing of witness and feeding of courage. They showed honesty in their fears and a rejection of defeat. And, at their core, they refused to comply with an image that can never fit. In their gathering pride at answering back and their quiet knowing that it is not disabled people who are wrong, this is a group of disabled people from out of the invisible gulf, demonstrating that our response to events is what defines us best of all. Within these images of campaigners and activists are also more truthful images of a community, images which offer the possibility of a very different collective imagining, entirely visible if only people think to look.

Epilogue: A Note on Re-presentation

In producing a work of visual inquiry, it is important to consider how my own process of re-presentation might impact upon the reader. My hope is to create a text that readers will 'experience reflexively and self-consciously … in ways that encourage or inspire [them] to reflect on the meanings they give to the texts' (Pink, 2007: 152). Whilst the obvious solution might be to show the actual images I describe, rather than to mediate them through my own language-based interpretation (Strecker, 1997), I have instead decided to exclude them altogether.

The two sets of images are my starting point for the essay, yet the essay is about the broader collective meaning and impact that surround them. It is less that the images are absent, and rather that the essay is located in the unexamined 'negative space' that surrounds them; this is the subject on which I write.

My argument is that there is a collective 'picture in the mind' (reinforced, but not created, by the images) – that 'everyone' knows what fraudster/ scrounger, victim or Paralympian means, without needing material images to point to. Indeed, whilst the image stories of individuals come to represent 'all' disabled people, my aim is to shift the reader's focus away from individual stories and onto that collective picture. In compelling readers to draw on their own mental stock of images (Newbury, 2011), I demonstrate to them how powerfully embedded the images are within the psyche. As one reader commented, 'I love the idea about [not including] pictures because of course I had lots of them running in my mind as I was reading' (Gorrell Barnes, 2012: para 1).

My hope is that, as readers recognise how powerfully embedded the images are within their own minds, their next encounter with similar images in the public realm will encourage them to look harder, and differently. In doing so, readers might just become the first stage in 'talking back'.

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Liz Crow is an artist-activist working in film, performance and text, using the power of creative work as a tool for change. She is founder of Roaring Girl Productions and a doctoral candidate at the University of Bristol's Graduate School of Education.

*Email***:** liz@roaring-girl.com