

Moving Pictures: Visual Culture/Visual Activism in the Health Humanities

Therese (Tess) Jones, PhD
 Center for Bioethics and Humanities
 University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus

“The whole world is watching.”

National Committee to End the War in Viet Nam, 1968 and Occupy Wall Street, 2011

In his recent book, *How to See the World*, Nicholas Mirzoeff opens with a snapshot of the visual world in which we live. It is a world where one hundred hours of video are uploaded every minute to YouTube and where six billion hours are watched every month (that is one hour of video for every person on earth); where Americans take more photographs in two minutes than were made in the entire nineteenth century and where a total of one trillion were taken in 2014. All of these images, Mirzoeff writes, are our way of trying to see and make sense of a world actually too big to see but crucially vital to imagine—this is now the study of *visual culture*. Moreover, many of these images such as the cellphone videos of police brutality in the US or the student protests in Hong Kong play a central role in rallying social and political response. Such *visual activism* confronts deep-seated hegemonies like racism, encourages silenced voices to emerge, and works as a catalyst for reform.

In this session, we will explore visual culture and visual activism in the context of three health and human rights movements of the 20th century—breast cancer, AIDS, and disability rights—which foreground the critical practice and political strategy of producing visibility and deploying testimony in forms such as documentary, video, photography, and poster art. We will consider the difference between looking and witnessing; how visual images influence attitudes towards patients and impact health policy; what is the balance between inciting moral outrage from exposure to images and inducing compassion fatigue from over-exposure to them.

Reading Materials:

Articles

- Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, (Power Institute Publications, 1988).
- Douglas Crimp, "AIDS Activist Graphics: A Demonstration," from *AIDSDemographics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).
- Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Right to Look," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Spring 2011).
- Richard Sandell and Jocelyn Dodd, "Activist Practice," from *Re-Presenting Disability* (Routledge 2010).

Poetry

- Langston Hughes, "I Look at the World."
- Denise Levertov, "Seeing for a Moment."

Assignment:

Please provide two- to three-paragraph responses to the following questions:

(Choose either #1 or #2)

1. Consider how visual representations have impacted not only attitudes and behaviors towards certain individuals and groups but have also shaped public policies as well as social and educational approaches.

Provide an example (visual work), and describe why you selected it and how you believe it has affected (reinforced? challenged? subverted?) such policies and approaches.

2. Videos, as activist practices, are now ubiquitous and often serve as counter-surveillance in public and social spaces including the clinic. This kind of resistance challenges the usual vectors of power and undermines the neat distinction between the watcher and the watched. But are there negative and unforeseen consequences?

Provide an example of an audio/video recording that prompted you to consider both the intended and unintended consequences of such counter-surveillance practices.

3. Visual activism can be described as politically directed practices aimed at catalyzing social, political, and economic changes. How can and have such technologies served public health?

Provide an example and a brief discussion of how and why.

4. Nicholas Mirzoeff distinguishes between the complexes of visibility--classifying, separating, aestheticizing--and the right to look, the right to the real. In health humanities, we often consider the difference between looking and witnessing. How do you understand that difference?

Write a short narrative (prose or poetry) to illustrate.