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

Therese (Tess) Jones, PhD
Center for Bioethics and Humanities
University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus
• 100 hours of video uploaded every minute to YouTube
• 6 billion hours watched every month (1 hour for every person on earth)
• Americans take more photographs in 2 minutes than were made in the entire 19th century
• Worldwide total of 2.5 trillion photos taken in 2016 (90% with smart phones).
...trying to see and make sense of a world too big to see but crucially vital to imagine...this is the study of visual culture
...confronting racism, encouraging voices, catalyzing reform... this is the work of *visual activism*
Organization of Today’s Session
Part I

• Define / Describe Visual Culture and Visual Activism
• Three Health and Human Rights Movements of 20th Century
• What Worries You Most? Medical Student Advocacy Project
Part II

• Discussion of Readings and Guiding Questions

Where is the line between looking and witnessing?

What is our responsibility? and whose interests are being served?

How do and can visual images influence attitudes towards patients and impact health policy?

Where is the balance between moral outrage and compassion fatigue or outright callousness?
From Visual Culture to Visual Activism

“look art act,” Antje Schuhmann
“Stop Looking at Us; Start Listening to Us”
Social Media, Anti-Iconography, Identity as Performance

How we see others...
How we see ourselves...
Who has the power and the privilege to see or not be seen...
“The relations between what is visible and the names that we give to what is seen as well as what is invisible and kept out of sight.”
Visual Activism

“The intersection of pixels and actions to make change.”
AIDS, Breast Cancer, Disability Rights
Cultural Representations and HIV/AIDS
The Names Project: AIDS Memorial Quilt
ACT UP / AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power

SILENCE = DEATH
Let the Record Show...(1987)
Let the Record Show...
How to Survive a Plague (2012)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sf_RkR3qm1A
The Die-In: Then and Now
“You Can’t Look Away Any More” (1993)
Jo Spence
Narratives of Disease (1991)
in search of a language counter to biomedical discourse and mainstream media
Matuschka and Visual Activism
Obsessed With Breasts (2000)
The Scar Project: Breast Cancer is Not a Pink Ribbon (2011)

Media Representations of Disability

- Invisible Minority
- Visible Stereotypes

Victim
Hero
Threat
Unable to adjust
One to be cared for
One who should not have survived.
David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, Filmmakers

• visibility and invisibility
• passing and coming out
• accessibility and silence
• mainstreaming and isolation
• civil rights and public neglect
• independence and institutionalization

• [link](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5rWHA0KcFc)
“We are stunned and alienated when disability appears to us...we stare in fascinated disbelief and uneasy identification.”
“Real art has the capacity to make us nervous,” Susan Sontag
The very structure and activity of observation is asymmetrical. By seeing and saying, we dominate, objectify and appropriate.

- Foucault on the clinic
- Sontag on photography
- Mulvey on film
- Haraway on vision itself
- Garland-Thomson on staring.
"Witnessing, Bystanding, Onlooking, Participating"
What Worries You Most?

I worry about dying too young to see my kids grow up—they're 14, 15, & 8. I've got trouble with my heart because of the drugs. I don't want to be here again, but I can't stay away.

Chief Complaint: Chest Pain   Age: 45   Sex: M   Acuity: 2

my daughter and her substance abuse

Chief Complaint: Ascites   Age: 49   Sex: F   Acuity: 3
What Worries You Most?

“...disturbing not only the visual status quo but also the ethical status quo...”
Visual Arts / Visual Activism *du jour*:
“This is America,” Childish Gambino (Donald Glover)
1. How visual representations impact attitudes / behaviors and shape public policies / social and educational approaches.

From “Activist Practice,” Sandell and Dodd

“...representation matters. These predominantly negative and damaging conceptions have...shaped public policy, approaches to education, employment and welfare; they have framed interactions between disabled and non-disabled people and provided the justification for continuing forms of prejudice, discrimination and oppression.”

“...what Stuart Hall terms the ‘dominant regime of representation...the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which difference is represented at any one historical moment.’”
2. Ubiquitous and counter-surveillance videos challenge power and undermine distinction between watcher and watched unless they don’t.

From “The Evil Demon of Images,” Baudrillard

“It is precisely when it appears most truthful, most faithful and most in conformity to reality that the image is most diabolical. The immense majority of...images are thought to bear witness to the world with a naïve resemblance and a touching fidelity. We have spontaneous confidence in their realism. We are wrong. They only seem to represent reality, events, faces. Or rather, they really do conform, but their conformity itself is diabolical. There is a kind of fatal strategy of conformity.”

From “The Right to Look,” Mirzoeff

“The ultimate paradox of counterinsurgency is that the measure of its success is its permanent continuation. The more paradoxes proliferate, the greater the uncertainty and hence the continued need for counterinsurgency. Far from being an accident, incoherence is a policy.”
3. Opportunities and challenges of visual activism in service of public health.

From “Activist Practice”

“How then can unequivocal support for social-contextual, progressive ways of thinking [about health] be combined with approaches to interpretation and engagement that would resist ‘moralising didactism’ and instead open up rather than close off multiple possibilities for [viewers] to engage?”

From “Right to Look”

“The case of New Orleans shows that simple visibility or media coverage does not ensure any change in political practice. Where once consumer and subcultural practices seemed to offer new modes of resistance, now themselves thoroughly commodified, the task is more paradoxical.”
Sharing Stories of Looking and Witnessing

“Seeing For A Moment”
Denise Levertov

“I look at the world”
Langston Hughes