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Abstract

Visual images deserve our critical attention more than ever. In this commentary, I draw together the papers in this Special Issue on Diversity in gender and visual representation. The collection here is 'diverse' in terms of the breadth of visual representations, and through the methodological interdisciplinary approach of its contributions. I consider the overlaps within this diversity, and identify the contribution that these articles make in opening up discussion of activism, the body, history and emotions. I conclude with particular attention to how this Special Issue highlights the importance of returning to the politics of visibility, and how collectively these articles ask us to question the costs, limitations and possibilities of being represented in today's visually mediated societies.

Introduction

'Vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all perspective gives way to infinitely mobile vision, which no longer seems just mythically about the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice' (Haraway, 1991, p. 189)

Approaching visual representation in today's image-saturated society is a daunting task. There has been a visual turn in social media, through which the meanings of every personal moment, thought and feeling can be transmitted (posted, tweeted, hashtagged) to wider public spheres through visually mediated and networked intimacies (Schwarz, 2011). Social networks like Facebook visually represent concepts like 'friendship' back to us: in 2015 they launched their advertising campaign Our Friends on their YouTube channel, which received nearly 250,000 views in its first month. In celebrity culture, one visual image can produce an abundance of other texts and images. In 2014, for example, Paper (a print magazine) chose to 'Break the Internet', with an image. Kim Kardashian was used as the model to reproduce Jean-Paul Goude's 1976 photograph Carolina Beaumont. The image's highly sexualised and racialized meanings were overridden in a public disgust at how a 'new mother' could be pictured nude. But what was also notable about its visibility during 2014 was how intertextual and hyperlinked it became: embedded in every blog commentary and news piece, it was reproduced and spoofed endlessly. The Kardashian image appeared alongside 'The Fappening', in which young female celebrities, including Jennifer Lawrence, had their personal devices hacked in order to access naked images of them. Lawrence, amongst others, called the hacking a 'sex crime', and evidence of an increasingly visible and visual 'rape culture' (see Ferreday, forthcoming, for further discussion of rape culture).

In public spaces too, screens dominate (McCarthy, 2001), so that for example, we can get our daily news simply by passing through busy train stations, which now often come with large suspended television screens. I first learnt of the chemical attack on Damascus in 2013, and other global catastrophes, in passing through Birmingham New Street station. Horrific images appeared on giant screens, without audio, so that the only way of making sense of what was shown was by reading the texts on the screen. Meanwhile, each train journey means invariably sitting behind someone watching a film or television program on a smart phone or

tablet, changing the way we consume moving images and visual narratives. Visual surveillance has also raised new concerns, issues and possibilities. The developments in camera technology and CCTV now means that facial and retinal recognition is possible. Dystopian films of only a few years ago (e.g. Minority Report, Enemy of the State) now seem even closer to the subjective experience of everyday life and the kinds of technological developments that have shaped it (Kammerer, 2004).

As feminist theory has suggested, the personal has always been political (Hanisch, 2006). If this is the case, then the visual is too. In Haraway's (1991) account of the 'persistence of vision', the scopic regime of contemporary techno-visual culture is a highly gendered one. And as suggested by the range of examples above, the gluttony of this gendered visuality has been put into full practice, giving the impression that we are (like the masculine subject) all-seeing and all-knowing. Everyday images, both the extraordinary and mundane, give the impression of truthful, unmediated, objective representation. At the same time, the viewer has also become a neoliberal subject: the self-knowing, self-reliant viewer is a media-savvy image consumer, able to individually critique and resist images of social media, celebrity culture, public pervasiveness and surveillance. We have an apparent 'choice', for example, to watch television 'on demand', 'anywhere, anytime'. In contrast to this mythical omnipresent god-trick, Haraway's (1991) situated knowledge proposes that vision is partial, 'to be about particular and specific embodiments' (p. 190). 'In this way', she argues, 'we might become answerable for what we learn how to see' (p. 190).

Despite the significance of visual images in contemporary culture, there has arguably been a dearth of visual analysis. Previously the analysis of visual representations had been important in a range of disciplines, but especially in gender studies. But more recently the focus on the internal composition of the image has gone missing from academic accounts, and 'representation' has become a mistrusted (or at the very least, old fashioned) word in an

academic culture that has turned more to the 'non-representational' (e.g. Thrift, 2008). Contemporary visual methods textbooks have been preoccupied with participant's self-produced images. This shift is both important and understandable in a participatory web-2.0 culture, where new technological developments mean that anyone with a camera phone can make and share images with an immediacy and accessibility that overshadows all other techno-visual developments. By comparison, groundbreaking books such as Hall's collection in Representation (1997) seem somewhat dated. For some, visual analysis became a marker of the academe's 'interpretosis': a frantic and neurotic interpretation of everything, in order to find 'origin' (Virilio, 1994; Colebrook, 2002). But rather than interpretosis, the interpretation of the visual seems to be missing altogether: and we appear to be immobilised by the overwhelming visibility of the visual.

Moreover, the analysis of visual representation has long been one of the defining features of feminist and gender studies. However, our previous language for making sense of gender and visual representation seems to have lost its critical edge: concepts like 'objectification' no longer seem to quite explain the multidimensional event of objectification, while sentences such as "women are objectified in/by the media" have become so commonplace and overused that they come to mean very little at all. Analysis of advertising too has had to move on from the image, where 'pervasive advertising' (from the cookies and bots that track our visits to websites, to the smell of fresh baking in the supermarket) means that previous accounts of print advertising, informed by accounts like Williamson's (1978), have lost a sense of purpose. In short, what is needed is an approach that does not throw the representational baby out with the bathwater: an approach that makes representation mean something again.

Re-imag(in)ing the visual

The essays collected here demonstrate a way out of the impasse, by refocusing our attention back to visual representation. The collection here is 'diverse' in terms of the breadth of visual representations, and through the methodological interdisciplinary approach of its contributions. Taken together, they speak to the importance of paying attention to visual representations in gender studies. And although distinct and divergent in approach, they all pay attention to the visual mediation of our worlds through concepts of the body, emotions, history, and activism. However, possibly the most original and unique aspect that brings together these widely divergent contributions is the way they demonstrate the continued importance of debating how (or who) to see.

One of the important themes that connects these diverse papers is the body. In some of these contributions, this body is textually constructed. For example, Ricciardelli and Afful's contribution most obviously draws attention to the 'weightiness' of how the body is represented through the text in online forums. In their contribution that analyses fat activist blogs we see how their data produces a discursive resistance to anti-fat 'body beautiful' representations, which takes place against a backdrop of increased attention to the body through forms of online feminist campaigns (e.g. Everyday Sexism). Their contribution does pay attention to these fat activist's accounts of the limitations of the material body (e.g. the difficulties of finding clothing in stores that limit sizes above 14s). However, where their analysis makes a significant contribution to the field is in documenting how fat activists construct the body, in the sense that fat activism blogs often contest neoliberal accounts of fat acceptance as a 'choice', 'lifestyle', or through a crude return to biological essentialism. In doing so, Ricciardelli and Afful identify a challenge to notions of personal responsibility perpetuated by medical healthism models, through which bodily weight becomes a matter of national concern that then has to be managed by the individual (Riley, Evans & Robson, forthcoming).

However, the discursive body is also an embodied one, as evident in different ways across this Special Issue. Welch demonstrates, for example, the iconicity of the body's representation in her historical analysis of The Death of the Maiden. By interpreting the historical context of the image of death in Reformist art alongside contemporary erotic gothic coffin calendars, Welch's analysis suggests that these images are meant to provoke a visceral sexual arousal in the viewer. Like Sontag (2009), Welch's analysis reminds us of the tight conceptual links between sex and death. There is something reminiscent in this analysis that places us in historical context: for example, in the way the AIDS campaign of Thatcher's 1980s government anticipated the embodied experience of fear following a period of 'sexual liberation' (Watney, 1997). Likewise for Welch, historical religious transitions are embodied in the emotional, visceral, affective response to The Death of the Maiden; first in the form of sexual arousal being a reminder of ones own sins, and later in the coffin calendar imagery as a (near) secular celebration of life and the living. Frith's analysis of the visualisation of women's orgasm also pays attention to the felt body. In her contribution, the visual representation of women's orgasm bears a contentious relationship to internal bodily experience. Women's orgasms thus create a suspicion of authenticity, whereby the bodily experience, even when 'proven' through a range of scientific truth claims, are deeply mistrusted and so socially constructed through the dichotomy of the 'real' and the 'fake'. The mistrust of women's embodied experience has produced what Williams (1989) referred to when visual representation 'attempts to solicit what it can never be sure of: the out-of-control confession of pleasure, a hard-core "frenzy of the visible"' (p. 50). Moreover, Frith notes that this visual representation of frenzied pleasure, whether interpreted as 'real' or 'fake', requires a deepening of women's 'emotional work' in the intimate realm.

For Frith, the emotional work of producing a visual representation of the orgasm, both in women's accounts of intimate relationships, and on screen through pornographic

representation, means that there is no genuine 'orgasm' that can be only experiential, but that the orgasm is always already mediated and social. The centrality of emotion throughout this Special Issue is demonstrative of a much wider turn in the humanities and social sciences; its importance throughout this collection reflects the way that emotion has become a particular concern for those interested in normalisation of gender roles (e.g. Wetherall, 2012). For example, Sandercock's article explores the 'emotionality and affectivity' (p.X) in what has emerged as a 'transnormative' narrative within the teenage comedy and dramas Glee and Degrassi. In exploring representations of trans* youth, Sandercock draws attention to both the 'tragic' and 'assimilative' storylines that trans* characters are entangled in, which often work to reinforce hetero- and cisnormative gender relations, as well as racialising stereotypes: for example in the normalisation of transphobic bullying, which while they make visible trans* experience, do not critically reflect on the actions and reactions of non-trans* characters. Like Ricciardelli and Afful's analysis of individual responsibility, the tragedy of the character becomes personal and internalised. These show's emotionally charged narratives call to the (assumed) young, sympathetic, liberal audience, often without attempts to question the dominant gender ideologies that mean these tragic and assimilative storylines can still make sense.

The importance of visual representations for laying the ground for normalcy, or assimilation, is also evident in the accounts that the papers provide of activism. Steele and Shores' contribution demonstrates a normalcy, for example, in the activism of celebrities, and specifically in the anti-sex trafficking Real Men Don't Buy Girls campaign. In their article, the authors deconstruct the message proffered by Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher's DNA Foundation, which hired a string of high-profile male celebrities who endorsed the claim that 'real men' do not engage in the sexual exploitation of trafficked young girls and women. Throughout the campaign, male celebrities (including Sean Penn, Justin Timberlake and

Jamie Foxx) engage in traditionally feminine activities, but in ways that reinforce their heterosexual hegemonic masculinity. For example, Timberlake is imagined as taking care of his appearance by shaving with a chainsaw, and Kutcher does his own laundry by throwing dirty socks in the bin. By trivialising, discrediting and dismissing traditionally coded feminine activities, the masculinities of the 'real men' celebrities remain intact.

Like Sandercock's article, then, Steele and Shores demonstrate through their visual analysis the strength of normativity and the pull of dominant ideology. What is perhaps most fascinating about these campaigns is that, like the Kardashian image, Real Men Don't Buy Girls intertextually alludes to other popular culture references: most notably the masculinity-mocking Real Men Don't Eat Quiche that was popular in America during the time of the 'new man' figuration (see Gill, 2003 for further discussion of new man representations). Real Men Don't Buy Girls borrows these codes and conventions in order to privilege a few celebrity men for being able to humorously undermine their own masculinity for the cause of anti-sex trafficking. These 'skits' are then set in the wider framing of heteronormativity, where the campaign includes a to-camera piece from Eva Longoria, who informs the viewer that other heterosexual women prefer this 'real man', and asks the viewer to make a similar judgement of his masculinity.

These papers collectively pay attention to diversity in visual images by brining together accounts of the body, emotion, history and activism. However, drawing all the papers together, one overriding theme seems most significant. In Frith's account, the representation of women's orgasm, through 'the flesh' or through the screen, makes the body visible and knowable, and therefore within the realms of governance and quantification. Both Sandercock and Steele and Shores' demonstrate the dominance of particular modes of representation that delimit and render invisible alternative ways of challenging gender norms. Welch's article deconstructively reveals the invisible, demonstrating an historical repetition that shapes

contemporary ways of representing women as the symbol of life, and the historical religious transitions that underpin this representation. Historical analysis in her account 'allows us to apprehend the real, to see and understand our present environment, [which] itself comes from a distant visual memory without which there would be no act of looking' (Virilio, 1994, p.62). And Ricciardelli and Afful show how the actions of bloggers attempt to reclaim bodies that have been both invisible and hyper-visible in a contemporary culture that orients towards the slim, toned, curvy body as both medically and aesthetically favourable. What seems to be at the heart of each contribution is the way in which the body, emotion, history and activism are made visible, and raise questions as to what's rendered invisible as a result.

Visibility... at what cost?

We live in a highly visual culture, one where the dominance of the 'vision machine' means that we are given the impression that we can see infinitely from nowhere (Haraway 1991). To write this, even, I Google-imaged pictures of erotic gothic coffin calendars, YouTubed clips of Glee and Degrassi, and read the blogs of fat activists. As I read through the articles collected here, I thought repeatedly of the Kim Kardashian photograph, reflecting on what it meant when only an image could 'Break the Internet', as well as the ways in which the boundaries of the public and private divide are constantly undermined by the dominance of the screen in my own and other's visually mediated life.

But with so much visual stimuli, there is only a limited amount of images to which we can meaningfully pay attention. Indeed, more often than not, visual representation can only rely on the already available cultural norms of intelligibility that are at our disposal. More than ever, the dominant modes of visualisation force us to see the world in particular, limited and problematic ways, and their immediacy of meaning gives us a sense of instantaneous knowing, making it all the more urgent to pay attention to diversity. Collectively the articles

in this Special Issue address this diversity, while showing that a limited visual analysis of an image, viewed out of context, and only with a concern for the internal composition of that image, is no longer an adequate methodological approach to understanding the complexities of visual representation in contemporary society. As this collection demonstrates, what is needed is a partial and interdisciplinary perspective that takes responsibility for what we learn to see, and for what is made visible (Haraway, 1991, p.190).

The collection here demonstrates the importance of returning to the politics of visibility. This has been discussed elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences. For example, Casper and Moore's (2009) account of the invisible bodies of contemporary surveillance culture make use of the analytic of 'missing'. The use of 'missing' in their account points towards the affectivity of the invisible: those bodies that are missed. Gordon (2008) has similarly alerted humanities scholars to the need to explore the ghosts of culture, those things that still haunt the imagination, or which remain invisibly present: when blindspots come into view (p. xvi). These blindspots have also been illuminated by questioning how previously invisible subjectivities are made visible in the context of a normative gendered scopic regime, so that for example mediated representations of same-sex female desire between women often conform to heteronormative gender scripts that reinforce male heterosexual fantasy (Diamond, 2005; Gill, 2009). These relatively new visual representations demonstrate some of the costs of visibility, whereby it becomes too easy to point towards heightened visibility as a marker of a liberal and tolerant society, without paying full attention to the implications and consequences of these representations. To overcome the current paucity of visual analysis in gender studies and beyond, it is a methodology based on these kinds of (in)visibilities, like the ones presented here in this Special Issue, that might allow us to construct more robust accounts of the politics contemporary visual culture and its tightrope of visible, invisible and hyper-visible.

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