

Response

The politics of photographic aesthetics: critically documenting the HIV epidemic among heroin injectors in Russia and the United States

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For his birthday I brought Hank a copy of this image of himself taken while he was searching for just the right spot in his camp to hang the American flag (Fig. 1). I offered to buy him a drink but he refused, insisting on treating me to one instead, explaining that he had just been paid for moving furniture that day. We hunched down on our heels, leaning against the red brick wall of the corner liquor store and drank out of brown paper bags—he a Cisco Berry fortified wine and me a beer.

When I handed him the picture he went silent and stared. I was worried he did not like the photograph, or worse, might take offense to it.

Finally, he put his hand to his brow, half-covering his eyes and spoke, ‘Ain’t that a shame! A

goddamned Vietnam Vet. Damn, Jeff, look at how skinny I am. I look like Viet Cong. Y’know, when I put myself back together, I’m gonna help the homeless.’ [Jeff’s Fieldnotes, June 1997].

Hank is a 50-year-old homeless heroin addict. For over 6 years, we have been conducting participant-observation fieldwork in San Francisco, CA among a network of some 25 men and women who live on the streets. Most of them are over 40, and their lives revolve around obtaining heroin. They also smoke crack and drink fortified wine. Using tape recordings, fieldnotes and photography we are documenting their everyday struggle for dignity and survival.



Fig. 1.

Symbolic violence

Hank's answer surprised us at first. Without fail, when Jeff shows an image to one of the homeless addicts in our network their first reaction is to express concern and shock at how unhealthy they look—skinny, old, wrinkled, dirty, tired and in need of a shave-and-a-haircut. What surprised us in this instance was Hank's third-person-removed, classification of himself as 'a goddamned Vietnam vet' and his disassociated promise to 'help the homeless.' On the one hand, Hank's response was thoughtfully acknowledging Jeff's intention: to create images that might foster critical social engagement through an emotional aesthetic—empathy, horror, awareness and anger—by documenting extreme levels of social suffering in the heart of the American Dream. Indeed, Hank's reaction was almost flattering. At the same time, however, he may also have been engaging in what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu identifies as symbolic violence treating himself as a clichéd object of pity—the homeless Vietnam vet—and by vowing righteous, up-by-his-own-bootstraps redemption.

Hank's response illustrates how photography takes on its meaning through the context in which images are presented, via the subjectivity of the viewer, and the ideological constraints of the larger society. Strong photographs oblige viewers to ask questions about what is going on outside of the borders of the image—a suggestive lack of information can provide the impetus for critical thinking fueled by personal interpretation. Photography's strength comes from a visceral, emotional response. This also renders photography vulnerable to what the viewer projects. Its ability to spark Rorschachs gives photography both its power, as well as its problems. The onus of control moves to the eyes of the beholder. Captions and narrative or analytical text, consequently, can be essential to engage the dialogue between the image and the reader to clarify political, cultural and social meanings. Many photographers abdicate responsibility for how their pictures are used. Some even consider the desire to control images to be a form of censorship. They celebrate the viewers freedom and absolve themselves of any responsibilities for the consequences of their work.

Ranard's argument and aesthetics

John Ranard's photo essay and text (Ranard, 2002) takes on the responsibility of conveying a clear, polemical and important message denouncing the social suffering caused by police repression of injection drug users in Russia. Through the combination of his images and his text, he argues persuasively in favour of harm reduction and against criminalisation. He demonstrates

the needless destruction of thousands of young lives due to punitive public health policy.

An especially effective passage in the essay is the photo of the young men dilating their pupils to avoid arrest (Ranard, 2002, Fig. 7). Viewed alone out of context the photograph is confusing. Two men might be wrestling; one might be stabbing the other in the eye or trying to inject a drug through the other's eye membrane. The caption, however, effectively clarifies, 'Eye drops made from crushed anti-indigestion pills are mixed with water to counteract constriction of the eye pupils, a sign of heroin use, and enough to be stopped by the police. Every metro underground has a cell with police to stop and arrest the intoxicated.' The caption makes the picture come alive. It engages effectively an urgent public health debate and a neglected human rights crisis. Instead of the tension of seeing a needle being poked into someone's eye, one sees the solidarity of two youths in fear of state-sanctioned repression. There is also an erotic sensuality in the choreography of the men's bodies that humanizes them and renders them more vulnerable. The viewer winces in sympathy, anticipating the discomfort of the squirted concoction on their own eyeball. At the same time, the still-burning cigarette dangling from the fingers of the young man about to receive the douche in his eye suggests the routinisation and normalisation of this survival strategy—that is, "the 'state of emergency'... is not the exception but the rule (Benjamin, 1968: 257)."

The multitude of meanings in a photograph make it risky, arguably even irresponsible to trust photographs of marginalisation, suffering and destruction to a sometimes reckless public. Letting a picture speak its thousand words can result in a thousand lies. Captions and text as Ranard's essay demonstrates effectively are essential. Without the text much of the meaning of the photographs would be lost or maybe even turned upside down. This is especially pertinent when photographs are aesthetically beautiful such as Ranard's. His pictures draw us in. We want to know more about the individuals in Ranard's black and white images who live behind a veil of silent, but evocative loneliness: a young man sits pensively on the edge of a bathtub in a sterile room, his face expressionless and in profile, while another patient stands in front of the window, an anonymous silhouette (Ranard, 2002, Fig. 3); Two guards, (are they protecting or intimidating the photographer?) stand watch over inmates in a segregated prison ward. The prisoners sit on bunk beds, somewhat stiff and unyielding, almost strangely docile. Deathly ill, they peer through their metal bed frames which have become prison bars (Ranard, 2002, Fig. 6); A young man sits alone on his hospital bed, a syringe between his fingers, the sheets are bunched-up at his feet as his bare emaciated legs prepare for an injection. Next to him an institutional nightstand is littered with dirty cups and

dishes (Ranard, 2002, Fig. 5); All the hospital and institutional prison pictures critique the Russian government's success at imposing a fictional repressive order amidst a rampant that is causing massive suffering for a new generation of youth coming of age under neoliberal democratic rule (Ranard, 2002, Figs. 5 and 6).

Practicing good enough photo-ethnography

Photography by photojournalists or documentarians is a medium which combines visual aesthetics and realistic information to offer partial glimpses of very different, inaccessible worlds. It is critical, consequently, that this kind of photography be liable to intense scrutiny and profound suspicion, especially when it has a social message about blood, sweat and tears. Photographers as messengers are conduits for power through different worlds and across class and ethnic divides. They inevitably risk becoming agents of betrayal and collusion or simply pornographic voyeurs: the upper class spying on the lower class with their cameras. It is much easier to shoot down than it is to shoot up. Following the French philosopher Michel Foucault's insight on the power of social engineering and surveillance à la Bentham's 18th century panopticon prison, the photographer 'sees everything without ever being seen' (Foucault 1995) often at the service of domination.

These contradictions are unresolvable, but trust in the work and intentions of the photographer is essential for the possibility of a progressive agenda. One corrective is to force the invisible hand of the photographer into the

public. Jeff has tried to address this by developing a long-term intimate relationship with the subjects in his photographs through ethnography. We watched the nature and tenor of his photographs change as he became as much of an ethnographer as he had been a photographer. Many great photographers will say that social or personal relationships make no difference—a picture speaks for itself. We have found, however, that a long-term ethnographic relationship that combines text with photographs creates a medium that is more than the sum of its parts analytically, politically and aesthetically. If the relationship to art and aesthetics can be maintained without subordinating or objectifying the subject matter or the individuals represented in the photographs the work becomes even more effective.

Postmodern theory has debunked the moralising Enlightenment discourses that have hegemonised the past two and a half centuries of art and intellectual thought. Civilization brought us colonialism, holocausts and neo-liberal global politics. Moralistic repression of drug addicts as well as hyper-sanitised biomedical treatment of drug addicts is a classic expression of 19th century Enlightenment thinking. With this in mind, there will always be an impossible, contradictory tension in photography—between exploiting versus giving voice; manipulating versus denouncing injustice; stigmatising versus dignifying, objectifying versus humanising—especially once again with images that confront social suffering.

Documentary photography is most engaged in these contradictions and obviously has a long, mixed history. It emerged out of fine art, journalism, social activism, science—including phrenology, physiognomy and eu-



Fig. 2.

genics—and public administration including both public health and criminal justice (Sekula, 1989; Tagg, 1988). Photography as surveillance, identification and human classification, most notably created genocidal archives from the Nazis to the Khmer Rouge.

Taking social suffering and moving it into museums and making it fine art, as exemplified at the global level by the work of Salgado (2000) or in the US inner city by Richards (1994) and Goldberg (1995) is a contradiction in terms. It is, however, also a subversive tool for provoking *conscientisation*. On the one hand there is the danger of the pornography of violence where ‘... people seem to have an enormous capacity to absorb the hideous and go on with life, go on with business—terror as usual (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, in press).’ There is also a demobilising, stifling of action as viewers think they have taken a political stance by going to see the art. Benetton’s advertising campaign in 2000 offers an extreme case of manipulating images of suffering when they displayed billboards of a man dying of AIDS. They claimed the image both sold their product and also ‘raise[d] awareness of an important issue and also raise[d] awareness that your company cares about that issue’ (Simon, 2000). Similarly, Apple Computer’s mass marketing campaign to ‘Think Different’ sports black and white portraits of the Dalai Lama, John Lennon, and the United Farmworker’s Union organizer Cesar Chavez with their profitable logo (Fig. 2).

Recognizing these deep contradictions and pitfalls to keep from being paralysed politically, analytically and aesthetically we advocate humbly practicing a ‘good enough’ version of photo-ethnography following anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ call for a ‘good enough ethnography’ that allows critical engagement with the violent injustices of everyday life in the face of paralysing, depoliticising postmodernist critiques.

Everyday violence and ethnographic intimacy

Pictures of pain, loneliness, and drug consumption in their natural environment require the photographer to develop relationships of trust, solidarity and empathy. Our first reaction to the mood of Ranard’s images was the familiar, frenetic urgency that pervades the daily life of the homeless heroin injectors that we are documenting in San Francisco, CA. The addicts in our network are embroiled in a constant hustle for drugs and money—begging, working, or stealing. Their relationships balance on a tightrope of mutual solidarity and backstabbing, usually in the context of searching for a place to sleep, escaping from police harassment, and seeking their next supply of drugs or finding their next meal. Everything is always tinged with a layer of dirt, grime and physical suffering. Dope sickness, abscesses, rashes, flues and colds are omnipresent. Unlike the youthful

students, isolated prisoners and young tattooed sex workers in Ranard’s photos, the homeless heroin addicts in our scene have almost all escaped HIV infection, despite their long careers of injecting on the street. They are all hepatitis C positive, however, and they are frequently hospitalised for weeks or even months on end by serious, sometimes deadly diseases, most notably cirrhosis of the liver and necrotising fasciitis. Some are now even hit by geriatric illnesses: prostate cancer, osteoporosis, emphysema, heart disease and dementia. The biggest killer of all among San Francisco injectors young or old, is straightforward heroin overdose.

Referring back to our opening photograph and vignette, the ethnographic context and even the meaning of the accompanying fieldnote excerpt becomes a more nuanced political critique when one learns in more intimate ethnographic detail that Hank had been classified 4F ‘unfit for military duty.’ According to his sister, ‘He didn’t want to go in the Army. He fixed [injected] into both his hands right before going in for the interview [giggling]. He went in with his hands looking like balloons.’ Thirty years later, Hank evokes with pride the fact that he suffers from PTSD from battling the Viet Cong. Our oral histories with him suggest that his ‘PTSD’ stems from childhood beatings by an alcoholic father. The most legitimate identity for middle-aged, white homeless heroin addicts in the US is that of the Vietnam vet—it is their only chance of mollifying their pariah status.

US inner city apartheid in black and white

It was only an hour before we left for the hospital to visit Petey that Jesse asked Hank if he would hit him in the neck (Fig. 3). Jesse did not have anything to inject with: no needle, no water, no cooker, just the dope. Hank took out two syringes and handed one to Jesse. He then began to cook the dope while teasing Jesse for being ‘a good for nothing,’ for having no supplies. Not wanting to leave me out of their moral economy of sharing, Hank threw me a bag of cookies and got to work on Jesse:

‘Steady now; that’s right; you’re in. Go ahead! Come on!’ [Jesse whispered] I strained my eyes to barely make out a red plume of blood flooding into the barrel of the syringe that Hank was angling into Jesse’s jugular.

‘Moby Dick! Thar she blows.’ Hank chuckles as Jesse cautiously pulls his thumb out of his mouth, keeping it safely poised directly in front of his lips ready to start blowing on it again lest he need to puff back up his veins should Hank’s needle slip out of his jugular.



Fig. 3.

The injection completed smoothly, Jesse massages the spot and rasps a soft thanks. He then closes his eyes to appreciate the initial speedball—heroin-cum-cocaine-rush. His cheeks tense, making it almost impossible for him to speak. He points instead in slow motion towards the blackened bottle cap which has just served as his cooker, ‘You can have the cotton, Hank. Take it; it’s all yours.’

Hank eagerly pokes his needle into the moist used cotton filter lying at the bottom of Jesse’s cooker and draws back on his syringe plunger. The liquid residue left over from Jesse’s jugular injection only fills a tiny corner of Hank’s syringe chamber—less than 10 units. Hank lifts the cotton up on the tip of his needle and angrily pinches it between his filthy fingers while at the same time gently pulling back on his plunger. He is determined to suck out every last precious drop from the moist cotton and gains almost five extra units.

Hank did not bother probing for a vein. He simply plunged his needle up to its hilt right through his t-shirt into his upper arm. He grimaced as the cocaine lacing the heroin speedball burned his muscle tissue.

A police siren wailed from two blocks away prompting all of us to sit up nervously. As soon as it passed however, Hank began cursing Jesse for not having left him a wetter cotton with more residue and complained about having forgotten that cocaine had been added to the heroin. When Hank walked out of the encampment he rattled off a slew of racist epithets. I seized the opportunity to get him to lay out in detail his essentialised

understanding of drug preferences by race; of propensities for generosity by race; of propensities for crime versus work by race; and even of preferences for intravenous injection versus intramuscular injection by race. [Jeff and Philippe’s Fieldnotes]

Counter intuitively this is a photograph of social solidarity and racial tension. Hank is doing a favour for Jesse by injecting him in the jugular and allowing him the full intravenous benefit of the heroin/cocaine speedball high. At the end of the vignette, however, racial antagonism reasserts itself. US inner city apartheid is embodied in differential injection practices among whites and African Americans who frequent the very same shooting encampments.

Viewers might react solely with disgust and only see self-destructive social pathology in this photograph. This moral judgmentalism has been a central concern in our work. Will our photographs fuel a pornography of violence and exacerbate negative stereotyping? Will we confirm puritanical polarisations between the worthy and the unworthy poor? Can we convey the non-absolutist gray zone of extreme social suffering posited by the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi where victims surviving in Levi’s case are also perpetrators (Levi, 1988)? Moral judgments are not applicable in a linear fashion to gray zones. Can we evoke sympathy and empathy for the injectors and explain the pragmatic logic of their everyday violence in its most difficult, hideous local context without condescending or beatifying—let alone spectacularising?

We also have an immediate, short-term concern that derives very directly from police repression and social

stigma. Is it too dangerous to show faces even when the homeless want their faces shown and their real names published? The first time we discussed this with one of the injectors in our scene she quickly responded, ‘If you can’t see the face, you can’t see the misery.’

It might be safer and more comfortable to sanitise the photographs and our text. Such an act, though, feels too much like collusion with the conspiracy of apathetic silence around extreme social suffering in the United States. It ultimately also obfuscates even more an already confusing inaccessible social setting that deserves to be addressed on its own terms—not repressed or hidden. John Ranard with his beautiful images and short text has been successful in the case of Russian injectors. He links every day violence, celebration and suffering on the street, in the home, and in the institution to the state power and dysfunctional policy. He persuades viewers to look closely into the hidden world of Russia’s AIDS crisis, uncovering one of that country’s more egregious public secrets.

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