

Interpreting images of motherhood: The contexts and dynamics of collective viewing

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Outline of presentation

- Background to the research
- Overview of approaches to the interpretation of images
- Outline of our emerging approach to the interpretation of images of birth and new motherhood
- Analysis of an encounter with a group of women looking at and talking about such images
- Concluding comments

Background to the research

- Janet's viewing of three images by the Dutch photographer Reneke Dijkstra of 3 women who had recently given birth: Julie; Tecla and Saskia. The photographs can be viewed at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/cruelandtender/interviews.htm>
- Our different reactions to these images and to what Dijkstra herself intended and the interpretation of others.

Interpreting the visual: theoretical perspectives

The analysis of visual texts can take three approaches: what is in the producer's mind; what is in the reader's mind; or what is in the image. (Jewitt, 1997)

The site of production: What's in the producers mind

It's not that I want to force people, showing things that they don't want to show but I find it much more interesting to photograph people at the moment when they don't have everything in control' (Dijkstra)

A very good friend of mine gave birth to her second child and I was there to help her .. *it was a very tough experience to see her in more and more pain* and at the end I couldn't even talk with her any more... *when the baby was finally there she showed it to me like very proud and at the same time very confused and exhausted but also very happy and so that was more or less how ..I thought it was such an emotional moment I would like to see if I could capture such a moment in a picture...* (Dijkstra)

Semiotics: What's in the image

The viewer is directly confronted with what is in the picture. If something is depicted from the side, the viewer literally and figuratively remains on the sidelines. (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 135)

A lot of women came to me and said that it is great that you made these photographs because *it is really the way it is* and I can recognise myself in it. (Dijkstra)

'pay little attention to possible disjunctures between the system of beliefs that viewers bring ..and what is coded.'
(Rose, 2001:93)

What's in the viewer's mind

'The images unmask the cultural cliché of the sweet beaming mother'. (Gijs van Tuyl, Director, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam)

'images can be read differently by different audiencesby different genders and at different historical moments' (Rose, 2001: 27)

The audience has tended to be conceptualised as 'autonomous individuals with little or no influence on (or from) others who are also viewing' (Warren, 2007)

A reflexive discursive approach to the visual and meaning-making

- Experience, emotion and memory
- Viewing context
- Collective viewing and the group dynamic

Theoretical & analytical approach

- Conversation analysis :
 - Turn by turn analysis of talk
 - Who gets to speak (Lomax and Casey, 1998; Hutchby, 1998; Woofit, 1998)
- Discursive psychology (Reynolds and Taylor, 2004; Wetherell, 2005)
 - How subjects are positioned in talk

Methods: The viewing process

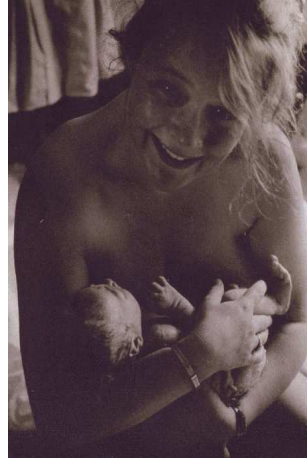
Discussion group

- Qualitative researchers
- Women
- University seminar room
- Lunchtime
- Taped discussion

Resources

- Paper on aims of research, circulated prior to discussion
- Photographs of Julie, Saskia and Tecla
- Photographs of Helen and Janet as new mothers

Helen



Helen



Janet



Janet



Findings

- Experience:
 - Who can speak
 - Universalising of motherhood
- Representation:
 - Speaking through genre

Memory and experience (1)

'I can see two photographs of me in my mind alongside these and *I thought of them immediately actually...*but there's something about the rawness of the face...I don't think I'd share it with the group. But the blissful one I'd be delighted to. It's one of my favourite photographs, but, you're right – it did bring back pictures of me actually' (Heidi)

Memory and experience (2)

Carla: because it triggered off lots of... because at first I thought 'ooh, I've had pants like that. Weren't they horrible!'

Others: Um yes yes! yes!

Susan: You know, that was my very first thought..... It triggered off, all sorts of things..... and all those memories come flooding forward'

Who can speak?

Louise: *It's funny as someone who hasn't had children ... when you gave me the pack ...I was like 'oh let's get through these' and I came to these ones (family photos), and I was like 'oh that so nice,' ... whereas the first few were really difficult to look at.*

Janice: *But even as somebody that's had children, I found them difficult to look at....*

Harriet: *But was it something for you thinking 'I might go through this at some point?'*

Questioning the images

'My first thought was for whose benefit is this? Because this seems to have moved on from their story and it's someone else who wants to tell a story. *It doesn't seem to be about these women as thinking, breathing, living people...* But I feel they're being used and I feel that I'm being used by whatever the...because I can't quite understand what the story is.' (Jenny)

Speaking through genre (1)

Heidi: There is something about, I don't know if there was, but kind of an awareness of *I'm posing with my baby in hospital*. Baby is in the crux of my arm

Rachel: *It's a classic Madonna pose*

Speaking through genre (2)

I like your use of the word 'art' because to me that gives you permission... – and art does allow you to expose the body in various shapes and forms and rawness so to speak, which we are not allowed in other circumstances to do.I think the statue of, is it Alison Lapper? (Carla)

Speaking through genre (3)

'You know we're used to photographs being family snaps, where people smile and, you know, look happy...I'm sure there's *something about the social conventions of what we expect in a photograph that's being challenged* here – in a way that I quite like' (Heidi)

‘Where’s the reality?’

‘Those are beautiful those photographs (of Janet and Helen) It’s like where’s the reality? I don’t know. Maybe these three are the reality of birth when we really get down to it and take off all this constructedness that we’ve put upon it.’(Janice)

Concluding comments

- Experience
- Representation
- Ethics
- Methodological implications
- Policy implications



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