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2014-02-12
http://hdl.handle.net10539/13729

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A Re-reading of *AIDS and Its Metaphors*

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Abstract

The portrayal of HIV/AIDS in photographic imagery provides a powerful foundation from which to examine how one can interpret and understand text through the use of images, and how images have the ability to influence the meaning of text in an uninhibited fashion. The representation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is considered, not through metaphors of language but rather metaphors of visual representations, along with substantiating themes such as stigma, stereotyping and visual markers of the disease. These themes are used to explore the way in which Sontagian metaphoric representations are substantiated by selection of Gideon Mendel's photographic collection. This disease marks the infected visually, often with lesions or emaciation, and leads one to consider a visual explanation in order to understand text around the disease. Rather than using text to decipher images, this study reflects on the use of images, namely photographic images, to decipher text. The complex relationship between image and text is explored through an analysis of Gideon Mendel's photographic collection, *A Broken Landscape*, as well as Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. The World Press Photo catalogue is used as a visual framework from which to analyse and criticise this visual representation of the disease, and the way it has been covered and presented since the 1980s. A selection of photographic images from Mendel's *A Broken Landscape* is used to understand Sontag's textual metaphoric approach toward disease, and specifically HIV/AIDS. Visual representations of HIV/AIDS give transparency and understanding to textual representations of disease as an alternative of using text to read images. Using images to decipher text illustrates a contemporary method of understanding, unlocking a broader meaning rather than relying on prescribed (textual) meaning.

Key words: HIV/AIDS, Text, Image, Stigma, Stereotype, Photography, Sontag, Mendel, Visual Analysis