

# 'New ways of seeing'? Analysing digital visual media

University of  
**HUDDERSFIELD**  
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Professor Helen Lomax  
@LomaxHelen

**New ways of seeing: Social  
research in a digital, visual age,  
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Huddersfield Centre  
for Research in  
Education and Society

# Ways of Seeing: Overview

- Visual frames:
  - ‘Stock’ digital images in online news media
- Participatory visual research:
  - ‘The task of sociological writing is to bring to life people we work with and listen to’ (Les Back, 2009)
  - Visual Dialogues: Life in marginalised neighbourhoods
- Beyond the image: Reframing the visual & its potential for understanding (childhood)



# What's *in* a picture: The 'ambiguity' of images (Berger, 1967)



'photographs do not merely portray or communicate.. they are, paradoxically.... full of information and mysterious and depthless' (Les Back, 2009: 471)

'the relation between images & imputed meanings is fraught with uncertainties, for like opaque facts, images cannot be trapped readily within a simple interpretation. **They have a life of their own which often resists the efforts of photographers & viewers to hold them down as fixed meanings'**

Alan Trachtenberg (1989: xv)

# The politics of seeing: Images in dialogue with *text*

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‘Benefit cuts & welfare reform  
will undermine public support for  
the welfare state’ *The Guardian*

The 'welfare ghettos' where  
ambition means being 'boss  
of a gang' *The Telegraph*

# 'Overlooked & unremarkable': The digital *circulation* of images



'...representations of poverty [...] do not place the burden of expressing disadvantage on the figure of the child. Instead, they accuse a gloomy environment of boarded-up shops, decaying tenement blocks, rows of unkempt houses & badly swept streets, while groups of **young children preserve their childish sprightliness, against the odds.**' (Holland, 2006: 146)

The circulation of visual data in social media destabilizes research objects in ways that challenge visual analysis of textual meaning' (Hand, 2017)

# (Unseeing) the child in the picture?

Representations of blighted urban landscapes and broken families are part of 'a process of intensive ideological work... through which the social problems of deepening poverty, social immobility and profound economic inequalities are magically transformed into problems of 'welfare dependence', 'cultures of entitlement' and 'irresponsibility'

Tracey Jensen (2014) Cited in:  
Mannay, Fink and Lomax (2019)



Michael, 12, Cardiff. Photograph: Joel Redman for *The Guardian*

# Creative visual research: Seeing *with* children & families

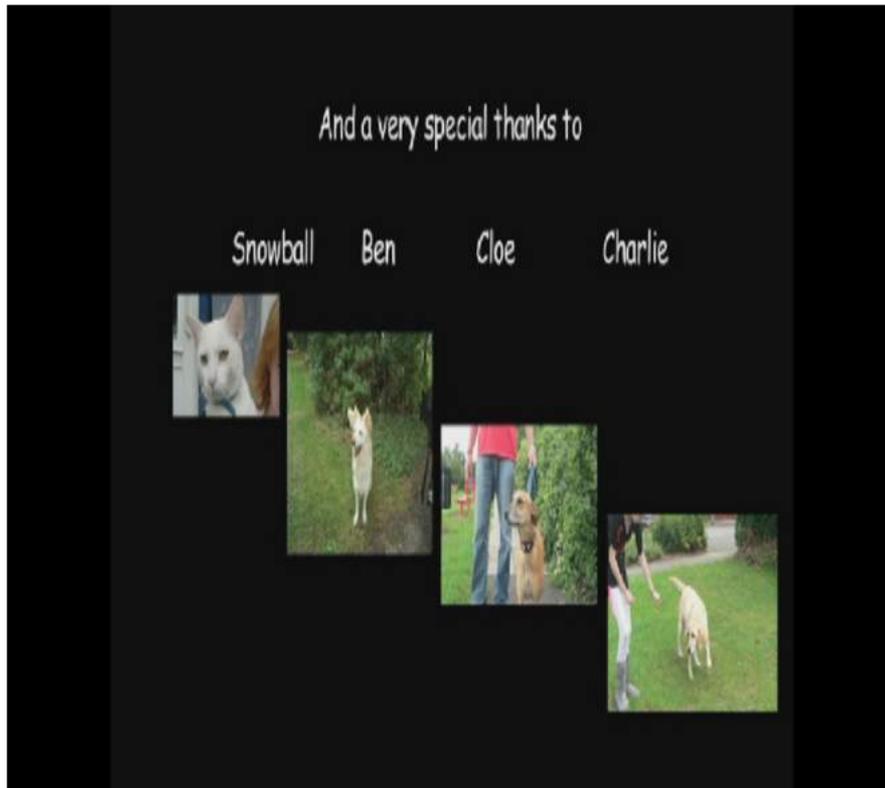


‘the suggestion that methods are child-led and child-oriented effectively circumvents the need for further discussion of the social dynamics that shape data-collection and analysis.’ (Jean Hunleth, 2011: 82)

# Visual Dialogues: Participatory visual methods in action



# New ways of seeing? Children's visual voices



# Images as performative

- 'everybody has been very nice'
- 'lovely ladies... make plans for what we want ... fund raise'
- 'it's coming together, Coffee Hall is coming together'
- 'you have your ups & downs ... your good ones & your bad ones'
- 'its a lot different now though'
- 'The council nothing to do with Coffee Hall itself'



# Speaking back to power



‘People are not just addressed or summoned by dominant discourses. They answer back’ (Clark et. al, 2007: 142)



# Conclusion: 'A lens to think with'



- The site of the '**image** itself' (the ways in which an image is shot, the scene is lit and its subjects composed) (it's 'grammar')
- The site of '**production**' (i.e. what was in the photographer's mind when s/he composed and shot the image);
- Viewing context: The site of its '**audiencing**': viewers expectations & culturally contingent understandings about children and childhood – including its (digital) **circulation** (Rose, 2016; Lomax and Fink, 2019)

'Issues of power remain central to what is seen, represented & understood .. In terms of what is made visible through the visual, who controls what is seen, whose interpretations are privileged (Elizabeth Wood, 2015)

'It may be useful to consider the visual as a lens to think with' (Melanie Hall, Kate Pahl & Steve Pool, 2015: 167)

# Thank you

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