

“From the Sexual Revolution to the ‘New Plague’: A Visual Investigation into Changing Notions of Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Britain, 1961-1989”

This PhD thesis will investigate the changing understandings of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) through the prism of public health campaigns in the UK between 1961 and 1989. It argues that such campaigns facilitated firstly by the availability of penicillin to treat STDs, and secondly by the introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1961, altered the relationship between sex and disease and thus creating a complex socio-cultural construction of STDs. Importantly both the 1960s and the 1980s signified profound change within advertising media, with television, motion pictures and glossy magazines becoming increasingly recognised as profitable sites for health education. An emergence of a distinct consumer culture from the 1960s was reflected in the changing role of advertising employed by the State. These changes altered and effected how public campaigns were organised, with health posters, leaflets and documentary film increasingly utilised as a central element of promotion. I will analyse inherent visual imagery to argue that health notices served to create a very specific view of sexual behaviour, which significantly corresponded with contemporary cultural and societal norms. These varied greatly from the sexual freedom of the 1960s, to the ‘safe sex’ guidelines aimed to combat AIDS. I intend to assess how far such images contribute to this notion of a social construction of disease from a visual perspective and how this changed over time. Furthermore I will evaluate the development of new notions of psychology in Britain and assess their impact and influence on the production of public health advertising material.

Until recently academic research paid only modest attention to the visual facet of public health campaigns. Posters, leaflets and other visual objects central to such campaigns, are often treated not as meaningful in themselves but as ‘mere’ illustrations to textual historical analysis. Medical historians were usually more interested in the policy element of the campaign rather than the impact of visual material. Lara Marks, *Sexual Chemistry: A History of the Contraceptive Pill*, Virginia Berridge, *AIDS in the UK: The Making of Policy 1981-1994* and Lesley Hall *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain* all focus on policy development rather than engaging with the use of the visual. It was only after the ‘visual turn’ in the 1990s that the visual became part of the historical dialogue. Sander Gilman and Paula Treichler highlighted the key importance of public health posters in establishing an understanding of disease during the early AIDS campaigns and how this affected the social construction of disease. Roger Cooter and Claudia Stein, in ‘Coming into focus: Posters, power, and visual culture in the history of medicine’, investigated the ‘re-discovery’ of the public health poster in AIDS campaigns. Increasingly, the visual aspect of public health campaigns became central to the social creation of disease and its wider cultural perception. My PhD project will contribute to these new approaches.

My research will centre on analyses of archival, audio-visual and printed sources to provide a broader picture of the dynamics and evolution of visual health promotion. Relevant material will be located in the holdings of the Wellcome Library, Wellcome Image Library, National Library of Medicine of the United States, UCLA Digital Library, Simon Watney collection in the Hall-Carpenter Archive of the London School of Economics, Centre for Sexual and Reproductive Health material held by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the Women’s Library, Bayer archive, Collingdale. Various sex education films at the British Film Institute and pamphlets published by the Central Council for Health Education and the Health Education Council held by the National Archives will be examined.