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

The history of sexually transmitted diseases has attracted considerable attention from historians who have identified health campaigns as key mediators in the changing understandings of STDs. However, a serious engagement with the ‘visual’ component in these campaigns remains notably absent. Tracing how and why images were used (or not) in such campaigns facilitates an understanding of the hidden visual boundaries, norms and virtues vis-à-vis sexuality. This PhD project engages with the establishment of the media as a central component of health information dissemination and serves to remind us that the boundaries of the visual are constantly shifting. Historians no longer perceive images as unmediated displays of ‘reality’ but rather as complex socially constructed material objects that reflect and shape wider societal and cultural norms. Building upon these recent methodological considerations, this project aims at understanding STDs through an analysis of the visual in public health campaigns.

It will investigate the changing ‘meanings’ of sexuality through the use of visual imagery and how visual ‘practices’ were themselves shaped by new theories of media and advertisement. Moreover contemporary concerns relating to sexual health prompted by local and national authorities in conjunction with the medical profession, medical care organisations, voluntary and charitable networks, and the mass media whilst devising public responses to changing sexual norms and virtues will be examined. My project intends to contribute to new approaches in the field of visual culture and medicine that have emerged since the 1990s. It will uncover the strategies, which accounted for the success or failure of sexual health campaigns from the 1960s, the age of the ‘sexual revolution’ to the ‘safer sex’ era of the 1980s and highlight how ‘awareness’ of STDs changed over time to new attitudes towards human sexuality. By investigating changing anxieties regarding sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual behaviour from the ‘Permissive’ society to the era of the New Right, this project will track how health campaigns informed and reflected changing relationships between gender, sexuality, politics and the medical sciences.

My main argument, that the use of visual imagery shaped the perception and understanding of sexual health and sexual behaviour, benefits from research within visual culture. By examining the visuality of sexual health campaigns my research seeks to extend existing understandings of STDs via a thorough investigation of the practices and theory of the visual. The 1960s heralded a greater ‘flexibility’ in social attitudes pertaining to sexual morality and a gradual loosening of many traditional beliefs. The Lady Chatterley ruling 1960, the Profumo Affair 1963, the decriminalisation of homosexuality 1967 and the reform of divorce 1969, all contributed to the increasing visibility of sexuality and sexual conduct in society. Contrastingly, during the 1980s a new moral agenda emerged fostered by the politics of the British Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher. A strong commitment to moral regeneration by a return to what were purposefully entitled ‘Victorian values’ was expounded. Familialism was reinstated as the unifying ideology of the nation, overtly demonstrated by the introduction of the Local Government Act 1988, which made it unlawful for local authorities to ‘intentionally promote homosexuality’. Ultimately this project aims to assess the changing function of the visual as influenced by wider changes in the ways in which sexuality and the body were perceived within British political and social spheres.