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David Serlin (Ed.), **Imagining Illness: Public Health and Visual Culture**, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, 285 pp., $27.50 (paperback).

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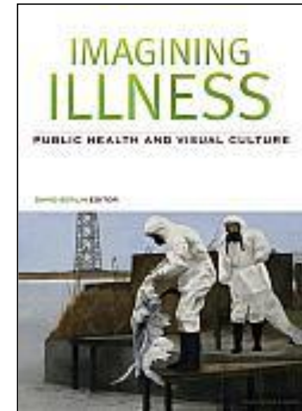

Imagining Illness: Public Health and Visual Culture makes the most of timing. Not only does editor David Serlin's introduction utilize a do-it-yourself YouTube video titled "HPV Boredom 2" as its starting point, but the anti-HPV vaccine Gardasil has become a more than tangential topic in the 2012 presidential process. Contenders for the Republican nomination have rendered various opinions about Texas Governor Rick Perry's 2007 executive order that required all young girls entering sixth grade to receive the vaccine unless their parents opted out. The Texas legislature quickly overturned the order and now the state does not require the vaccination. Indeed, Perry's current "hands-off" regulatory position seems to contradict such an executive order, even to the extent that during one of the 2011 Republican presidential debates, both Ron Paul and Michele Bachmann challenged Perry over his executive order. Bachmann went so far as to charge, without any medical evidence, that Gardasil caused "mental retardation." The debate over the vaccine's public health implications called attention to the ideological features of public health policies. Another key contemporary frame for the reception of this collection of 12 essays is the ongoing public health disaster in Japan. As the nuclear disaster continues to unfold, Fukushima is fast becoming a global event that challenges a "containment" approach to public health.

This collection is a product of the contemporary, as well as of the historical, ideologies of health that permeate not only the political and economic features of culture but also our everyday lives. *Imagining Illness* brings into focus the blurry edges of the interdisciplinary field of visual culture. As important (and warranting special mention) is the specific approach that this collection takes to its broad subject matter. Indeed, as Serlin emphasizes, the *where* of visual culture studies is just as important as the *what*. In other words, it matters where visual cultures of public health are enacted, represented, circulated, and regulated, as well as among which constituencies these messages are received (or not, as the case may be). In many cases, public health communication relies upon, as contributor Lenore Manderson points out, the "imagination of the unseen," (p. 14) of creating practices that can give shape to microbes, for example.

At the core of this collection is an imperative to question the presumption of health, to probe at the definitions through which bodies and entire populations are understood as threatening or threatened. Serlin's thoughtful introduction puts it quite succinctly: "*Imagining Illness* is intended as a critical intervention into the visual culture of public health in the most capacious sense of the phrase" (p. xiii). As editor and as author of both the introduction and an historically fascinating chapter on the history of broadcast and closed-circuit transmission of live surgery, Serlin casts wide the scholarly net and with good

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reason. The collected essays, based upon two different symposia, attempt to be both emblematic of the wide terrain of public health and to be precision case studies of the role of the visual—broadly construed—in an array of message forms. Serlin's introduction makes clear that the visual culture of public health is a vast topic and one that, like many areas in the interdisciplinary studies of what might broadly be called the "medical humanities," has been neglected to our collective historical and theoretical detriment.

Imagining Illness follows in the wake of such groundbreaking studies as Sander Gilman's *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (1988); Lisa Cartwright's *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* (1995); Paula Treichler, Lisa Cartwright, and Constance Penley's (Eds.) *The Visible Woman: Imaging Technology, Gender, and Science* (1998); and Joseph Dumit's *Picturing Personhood: Brain Scans and Biomedical Identity* (2003). However, one of the key factors that distinguishes *Imagining Illness* from previous work in visual representation, health, and medicine is its focus on public health. To be sure, most all of the essays focus on key figures in the dissemination of public health information and the implications of these individuals and their organizations in relation to specific populations—for example, the fascinating essay by Gregg Mitman about health-related philanthropy and race. Still, the collection never loses sight of the articulation between "the visual" and the different historical missions of public health. As Serlin notes,

> The virtue of examining public health media through a visual culture approach rather than exclusively through the tools of sociology or anthropology or political science of the history of medicine is that public health's visual culture consists by definition not only of images drawn from biomedicine but also from the vast web of media forms with which public health intersects. (p. xxiii)

Moreover, while it is the case that this volume's contributors (all scholars, if not all academics) represent various disciplines, each shares a common concern anchored in an understanding of the visual as the primary means through which health is made public. The other key factor in the "visual culture of public health," according to Serlin, is its "confluence of two mutually dependent innovations: the emergence of modern medicine's reliance on sophisticated media to represent diagnosis and treatment, and the emergence of modern communication's reliance on sophisticated media to fulfil particular institutional or ideological goals" (p. xxii). This mutual dependence is of utmost importance and animates each essay. The collection demonstrates this interdependence, moreover, in that it eschews a traditional historical trajectory; instead, its organization favors investigation of key events and particular campaigns that span the late 19th century through to our contemporary context.

Imagining Illness is thus broadly concerned with the ways that visual culture—some of which borrow from commercial forms while others take their inspiration from political or militaristic public address posters—informs public health messages and with how implicit assumptions guide the production of those messages. Embedded within the visual culture of public health, then, are all kinds of ideas about power, race, privilege, control, and regulation of entire populations as well as of individuals. The book is divided into three broad, key parts with four essays (or chapters) in each. The four chapters in Part I, "Tracing the Visual Culture of Public Health Campaigns," have the most international focus in the book. They move from an examination of the specific biographical history of specific individuals within public

health campaigns to the analysis of the limitations of "corporate benevolence" and the possibilities of documentary film made for and by populations affected by specific diseases. The first chapter, "Image and the Imaginary in Early Health Education: Wilbur Augustus Sawyer and the Hookworm Campaign of Australia and Asia," by Lenore Manderson, examines the personal photographs and documents of Sawyer while it offers substantially more than a mere biographical sketch of the role that one individual played in key public health operations. Another chapter, "Cultural Communication in Picturing Health: W.W. Peter and Public Health Campaigns in China, 1912–1926," by Liping Bu, provides an account of the ways that public health was often aligned (not only in China) with missionary associations. Bu's chapter is particularly interesting for the ways that this case study represents a failure of public health—at least in terms of its "American-ness"—in a Chinese context and shows how historical campaigns were in no way universal. Both Manderson and Bu include important archival information collected from the personal documents of key personnel and emphasize the variety of visual methods for public health communication. The theme of "universality" and its critique unites each of these two chapters in the first section. They focus on different modes of visual representation, from lantern slide shows to the development of the pictogram and also the deployment of the sponsored corporate health film. In Gregg Mitman's and in the one by Kirsten Ostherr's chapters, the critique of universality or "universal comprehensibility" (p. 62) is made through the juxtaposition of the production and reception of different visual modes: pictograms and documentary films. In "The Color of Money: Campaigning for Health in Black and White America," Mitman offers a history of the ways that African Americans were not represented in the fields of science and medicine, nor were they recognized as potential donors to public health philanthropic campaigns such as that of the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation. Ostherr's "Empathy and Objectivication; Health Education through Corporate Publicity Films" deploys the term "representation inoculation" (p. 63) to describe a mode of representation frequently used in visual culture. Ostherr, whose research has provided a wealth of information about the history of the public health film, focuses her analysis on two very different forms of documentary "visual pedagogy" (p. 65) in which one mode serves the "dual functions of corporate publicity and medical education" (ibid.) while the other film, produced by a nongovernmental organization, shows "Africans practicing medicine . . . on each other" (p. 76) rather than being portrayed as passive subjects of a corporate and clinical othering gaze.

Part II, "Mapping a Visual Genealogy of Public Health," includes four essays incredibly rich and varied in subject matter as well as in approach. This section features Katherine Ott's fascinating chapter, "Contagion, Public Health, and the Visual Culture of Nineteenth-Century Skin," on the development of dermatology and the visual aspects of reading skin as a text, Mark Monmonier's "Maps a Graphic Propaganda for Public Health," an examination of the role of maps as "persuasive graphics" for mapping disease, William H. Helfand's ""'Some One Sole Unique Advertisement:' Public Health Posters in the Twentieth Century," historicizes the modern public health poster, and Shawn Michelle Smith's, "Nursing the Nation: The 1930s Public Health Nures as Image and Icon," analyzes the changing uniforms and the construction of the image of the public health nurse in the early decades of the 20th century. Each essay in this second section engages with a very different idea of "mapping" public health and the visual. Smith's "Nursing the Nation: The 1930s Public Health Nurse as Image and Icon" is surprising for its focus on how the image of the nurse was shaped through clothing—literally fabricated through attention to attire. Using archival materials from the National Organization of Public Health Nursing and from attendant professional publications such as *Public Health Nursing*, Smith shows the ways that professionalism was encoded

through dress so that the public health nurse could be distinguished from other women and, through this regulation of appearance, how she could gain entrance into private space for home healthcare. Indeed, as Smith points out, "It is the uniformed woman who nurses the nation," (p. 151) so the public health nurse had the burden of being the "outsider" coming into the private home. The uniform served as a means of distinguishing and also of normalizing the role that the public health nurse would play in home care. The most interesting part of her essay includes Smith's discussion of the visual representation of African-American nurses and white nurses in relation to segregation and to the performance of public health.

Part III, "Building New Public Spheres for Public Health," extends the work of the collection to modes of visual representation that have seldom, if at all, been discussed in visual culture studies or in the medical humanities. Returning to the idea that the place from which the public health message originates is as important as its content, the authors in this final section engage with this topic in different ways. Roger Cooter and Claudia Stein's "Visual Imagery and Epidemics in the Twentieth Century," returns the reader to the memorable Benetton advertising campaign of the 1990s that featured a photograph of David Kirby, a 32-year-old man dying from AIDS, surrounded by his family. The authors use this image to make a larger argument about the ways that the visual culture of public health, through the ephemerality of the poster (and also in this case, of the advertisement as a certain kind of health text) always seem to produce gaps in what we assume to be our knowledge about a particular health issue. This chapter corresponds to the previous chapter by Helfand in that Cooter and Stein focus their analysis on public health posters. One of the unexpected threads that bind these two chapters is the role of specific archives and research facilities shared by scholars who are interested and invested in the visual culture of public health. The archives that have made this book possible deserve mention and some of them include: the William H. Helfand Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Wellcome Library and the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine; the National Library of Medicine; the Smithsonian; and the Otis Historical Archives at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

The third part of this book also includes Lisa Cartwright's "The Image of the Child in Postwar Psychoanalysis," David Serlin's "Performing Live Surgery on Television and the Internet since 1945," and Emily Martin's "Imagining Mood Disorders as a Public Health Crisis." Cartwright's work analyzes films made by two teams of psychoanalysts—infant psychiatrist Rene Spitz and his partner, Katherine Wolf, and the psychiatric social worker James Robinson and Joyce Robertson. Cartwright draws upon work by Anna Freud and others with war orphans in the years following World War II. She explores the visual documentation of childhood trauma through institutional filmmaking practices in which psychiatric experts attempt to visually document the effects of responses to grief and deprivation. Of particular importance to Cartwright is not only that psychoanalysts and social workers were making films to document their subjects and to aid "data collection," but also how the experts intervened in the scene to prompt the spectator to see the patient in a particular way. On the one hand, the observing experts became participants by giving to their child subjects "compassionate consternation" (p. 195) while, on the other hand, they emphasized looking as a means of studying the child as an empirical subject. The context for these studies was institutional and based upon the loss of a caregiver due to the effects of war.

Serlin's essay relates a story of television's early years that has little in common with live productions of the Texaco Star Theater. His documentation of early broadcasts of live surgery, as well as

of the use of closed-circuit television transmissions to medical students and doctors, provides a parallel history to the story of television's "golden age." As a counterpoint to medical dramas such as *Medic* and other "stethoscope operas" of the 1960s such as *Ben Casey, M.D.*, Serlin explains that live television broadcasts of surgery and other medical displays to lay audiences (as well as to professionals) were a precursor to the Internet in terms of circulating certain kinds of medical information.

The final chapter, Emily Martin's "Imagining Mood Disorders as a Public Health Crisis" takes up the visualization provided by charts that ask us to identify our moods in relation to a range of pregiven possibilities. While reading this provocative chapter, I was reminded of the "mood ring," popular in the 1970s, whereby the wearer could peer into a finger ring to determine whether s/he was "happy" or "sad." Indeed, the 1970s offered many images and ways of gauging mood, from the ubiquitous yellow "smiley face" to mood charts published in popular magazines and not dissimilar from Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush's "Moral Thermometer" (1833). Martin draws upon varied sources to suggest links between the "moral thermometer" and contemporary models of mood regulation and measurement provided by public health promotional materials focusing on mental health, as well as pharmaceutical advertising directed toward consumers.

Overall, *Imagining Illness* fills a significant gap in terms of the visual culture of public health. As Serlin and the other authors make clear, the interdisciplinary connections between visual representation and public health have an obvious affinity, and this anthology shows the rewards of such sustained scholarly encounters through and across our perceived areas of expertise. On a final note, I must comment about the role of the visual in this book, as the images are abundant and beautifully reproduced by the press. Given that this book is devoted to the image, it is heartening to see them reproduced here with such detail and expertise. This anthology is itself a product of scholarship that has preceded it, but I also see that it will be an inspiration for others who are interested in tracing the visual across public cultures of health.