

Book Chapter: "Psychosomatic Imagery"

Deadline: Mar 10, 2021

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Call for Book Chapter

"Psychosomatic Imagery": Photographic Reflections on Mental Disorders

If the current pandemic has shown us one thing over the past year, it is our vulnerability to pain, not only to physical but also to psychological pain. It has exposed the fact that all humans, regardless of their social, political, and economic status, are susceptible to conditions like anxiety, insomnia, and depression. But mental health conditions are nothing new; they were even described and treated by the populace of ancient Mesopotamia as early as 3,000 BC¹, who would consider them as "hands" of specific deities taking control over a person.² In our time, according to the WHO, in most countries one in three people report sufficient criteria for at least one mental health condition at some point of their life,³ a number which signals the urgent demand for further research into this expanding field. The study of mental disorders, however, is not only limited to psychology, but has also been open to a variety of other disciplines, such as the arts and philosophy. For example, over the past decade numerous artists and other professionals have used photography as a way of reflecting on the characteristics of mental disorders, or as a means of recovering from such conditions.

Among the many examples one can mention Matthieu Zellweger's *Mondes Parallèles* (ca. 2019) in which abilities of manipulated photography are applied to visualize the experience of the world when the brain loses control over reality, or Devin Mitchell's *Veteran Vision Project* (ca. 2014) in which photography's complicated relationship with the metaphor of the mirror is used to visualize living double lives. While many artists have used photography as a representational tool, others have utilized the practice of photo-making itself as a recuperative means. For instance, the US Army veteran Shawn Augustson, who, since serving his country in Iraq, has been taking photographs in order to combat PTSD. For him, the bodily act of taking an image is as recuperative as the final photograph, underscoring how photography can intervene between a bodily activity and a mental process.⁴ The term "psychosomatic" refers to the interaction of mind (psyche) with the body (soma); it refers to their co-dependence and co-existence. Therefore, by "psychosomatic imagery" our book refers to a specific trope of photographic images that deal with the body-mind interaction in mental disorders.

As W.J.T. Mitchell once argued, the family of images can be divided into five tropes: graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, and verbal.⁵ Irrespective of their existing iconological descriptions, each category of images has its own "life", which can either animate us, possess us, or lead us astray.⁶ Surveying art history, David Freedberg later claimed that not only images have always had the power to influence our minds, but also our bodies, as different iconoclastic cases and theories of

embodied spectatorship have testified.⁷ The locus of images, Hans Belting further argued, is the "living body" wherein our perceptual, affective, and cognitive responses give birth to images.⁸ Images, however, do not only originate from the living body, but can also help us visualise its internal breakdowns as in the case of madness and insanity, which Mitchell has recently investigated concerning cinematic images.⁹ Even though mental disorders have been explored in the arts at large,¹⁰ or in specific discourses such as literature,¹¹ painting,¹² and pop culture,¹³ they have not yet been fully investigated in relation to photography. The only theoretical exception is the recent upsurge of scholarly interest in the conjunction of photography and trauma studies, such as: *Spectral Evidence*,¹⁴ which ties the temporality of trauma to the photographic image; *Photography, Trace, and Trauma*,¹⁵ which looks into the role of indexicality in trauma and photography; *Trauma and Media*,¹⁶ which examines the role of photography in historical transformations of the Freudian theory of trauma; and *Photography and Place*,¹⁷ which studies the belatedness of traumatic experience vis-à-vis aftermath genre. With the exception of PTSD in trauma studies, the photographic discourse has been devoid of any comprehensive study of mental disorders.

Although the kinds of mental disorders are continually expanding, their most common ones include, but are not limited to: paranoia, schizophrenia, dementia, Alzheimer, depression, anxiety, PTDS, bipolar disorder, insomnia, autism, psychosis, eating disorders, OCD, and phobias. Thus far photographic studies have overlooked examination of the majority of these categories. Instead, they have either discussed the images of pains¹⁸, atrocities ¹⁹, and sicknesses ²⁰, or as in the case of *The Burns Archive*, they merely used photography to document supposed mental disorders in the past.²¹

Instead of using photography as a mere documentational means, our book project aims to provide new insights into the understanding of, and ways of communicating about, mental disorders by examining contemporary photographic practices, technics, and metaphors. Amongst many possible photographic approaches and metaphors, contributions may include reflections on, but are not limited to:

- Diffraction, inflection, deflection
- Window/mirror
- Shadows/lights
- Occlusion/eclipse
- Latency/dormancy
- Temporality/spatiality
- Disruption, dislocation, disjunction
- Projection, introjection
- Invisible/visible
- Framing/unframing
- The blind field
- Camera Lucida/Obscura
- Trace/index

Abstracts:

We welcome English abstracts of approximately 250 words that engage with and reflect on mental disorders through contemporary photographic practices, technics, and metaphors. Please send your abstract & a short biography (100 words) to the following Email addresses no later than

March 10st, 2021. s.a.shobeiri@hum.leidenuniv.nl h.f.westgeest@hum.leidenuniv.nl A selected number of abstracts will be invited to submit a full chapter of 5,000 to 6,000 words in August 2021.

The edited book will be published at a prestigious academic publisher in 2022.

Schedules & Deadlines:

Submitting abstract: March 10st, 2021

Communication of acceptance/rejection: March 30th, 2021

Submitting the full chapters: August 30th, 2021

Provisional date for publishing the book: The first half of 2022

Co-editors:

- Dr. Helen Westgeest, Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History and Theories of Photography, Leiden University
- Dr. Ali Shobeiri, Assistant Professor of Visual Arts Theory and Photographic Studies, Leiden University

References:

- 1 Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (London: Greenwood Press, 1998), 80-81.
- 2 Jeremy A. Black and Anthony Gree, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London: The Bath Press, 1992), 102.
- 3 Demyttenaere, "Cross-national Comparison of the prevalences and correlates of mental disorders", *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*. 78 (2000): 413–26.
- 4 YouTube, "Combating PTSD with Photography" (1 September 2018), accessed 4 October 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN2-J4VOP00&ab_channel=ThatOhioVibe
- 5 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 10.
- 6 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- 7 David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989)
- 8 Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014)
- 9 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Seeing Madness, Insanity, Media, and Visual Culture: 100 Notes, 100 Thoughts: Documenta Series 083* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2012)
- 10 Philip Sandblom, *Creativity and Disease* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2009); Gemma Blackshaw et al (ed.), *Madness and Modernity* (London: University of London, 2009); Anna Harpin, *Madness, Art, and Society: Beyond Illness* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Sander L. Gilman, *Seeing the Insane* (New York: The University of Nebraska Press, 1982).
- 11 Kia Jane Richmond, *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature: Exploring Real Struggles through Fictional Characters* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2019)
- 12 Hans Prinzhorn, *Art History of Mentally Ill*, translated by Eric von Brockdorff (New York: Springer, 1972)
- 13 Sharon Packer, *Mental Illness in Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2017)

- 14 Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005)
- 15 Margaret Iversen, *Photography, Trace, and Trauma* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017)
- 16 Allen Meek, *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories, and Images* (London: Routledge, 2010)
- 17 Donna West Brett, *Photography and Place: Seeing and Not Seeing Germany After 1945* (London: Routledge, 2016)
- 18 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2004)
- 19 Geoffrey Batchen et al (eds), *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012)
- 20 Maija Tammi, *Sick Photography: Representations of Sickness in Art Photography* (Helsinki: Aalto University, 2011)
- 21 Stanley B. Burns, *Patients & Promise: A Photographic History of Mental and Mood Disorders*, 4 volumes (New York: Burns Archive Press, 2006)

Reference:

CFP: Book Chapter: "Psychosomatic Imagery". In: Arthist.net, Jan 26, 2021 (accessed Sep 13, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/33279>>.