DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL OF SOCIAL CHANGE:
reading a shifting paradigm in the representation

of HIV/AIDS in Gideon Mendel’s photography

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Abstract

Gideon Mendel’s ongoing photographic work documenting HIV/AIDS, first started in 1993, has seen shifts not only in production but also in the author’s representation of his subjects. This paper looks at three texts of Mendel’s work, taken from three different stages of Mendel’s career and reads the shifting paradigm taking Mendel from photojournalist to activist armed with documentary photography as a tool of social change. This thesis explores how different positionings as an author and different representations of the subjects, living and dying, with HIV/AIDS influences meaning-making, and what that means for documentary photography as a tool of social change.
Acknowledgment & dedication

I acknowledge and value the enormous effort afforded to me in my quest of higher education – to my teachers and fellow students at Malmö Högskola for their engagement in debate and insight into the field, to Anders, for his inspiring supervision and encouragement, and to Gideon, for the insights his work in documenting HIV/AIDS has provided.

I dedicate this offering to the people living with HIV/AIDS who I’ve had the privilege of engaging with over my years as a photographer, to the editors who’ve supported me in that journey, to my families for their unwavering belief in me and to my partner, Paul, for his steadfast love and support, without whom I wouldn’t have embarked on this voyage of learning.

I would like to remember a friend and fellow South African photographer, Anton Hammerl, killed outside Brega in Libya on April 5, 2011. During the final days of writing this thesis, Anton was believed to be held by pro-Qaddafi forces for 45 days before fellow journalists, eyewitnesses to Anton’s death, were able to tell of Anton’s fate after their own release.
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The way in which the humanities and social sciences understand social life has notably changed over the last twenty or thirty years. ‘Culture’ has become an important way through which the humanities and social sciences understand social processes, social identities, social change and conflict. Within a constructivist view, social realities are continually constructed and re-constructed through social practices and communication. Many writers place the visual at the forefront of cultural construction of social life in present-day Western societies, suggesting that much meaning is conveyed by the visual.

Within this framework, this thesis sets out to examine the contexts in which documentary photography can be considered a tool of social change through the exploration of a case study of texts produced by South African photographer Gideon Mendel. Mendel’s ongoing photographic work documenting HIV/AIDS, first started in 1993, has seen shifts not only in production but also in the author’s representation of his subjects. This thesis looks at three texts of Mendel’s work, taken from three different stages of Mendel’s career. This thesis explores how different positionings as an author and different representations of the subjects, living and dying, with HIV/
AIDS influences meaning-making, and what that means for
documentary photography as a tool of social change.

Specifically, through this thesis, I’m looking for
insights into the contexts in which Mendel’s work are most
useful as tools of social change for practitioners. As a
documentary photographer myself, I feel this study will add
great value and insight to my own practice in development
communication. Hall points out in his discussion of
Foucauldian discourse analysis that meaning and meaningful
practice are constructed through discourse (1997 p. 44). In
the two decades I’ve practiced as a photojournalist and
documentary photographer, I’ve noted a shift in my own work.
My research interest in reflecting on the shifting paradigm in
representation of HIV/AIDS in Mendel’s work is guided by a
desire to inform and better shape my practice as a tool of
social change.

Gideon Mendel started his career photographing news in
South Africa at the end of apartheid and worked as a news
photographer at the news agency Agence France Press (AFP). He
moved to London in 1990 to pursue his career and started
engaging in work that was documentary in genre. Of the three
texts studied here, the earlier black and white photos were
mostly published in newspapers, books & exhibitions and are
photojournalistic in genre while his later work is more
participatory in genre. Much of Mendel’s later colour work uses a narratival structure concerned with ways of giving the subjects ‘voice’ and directly explores participatory concepts, through photography workshops with subjects, and cameras to document their own lives. The resultant work is disseminated alongside Mendel’s work documenting the subjects¹, increasingly shot on larger format cameras than those used in his earlier photojournalism.

While my methodological tool box is varied using semiotics and discourse analysis, it is all centred on how meaning is constructed and considers the politics of representation. I’ll return to the semiotic analysis later, but first, a brief overview of early documentary photography with reference to Lewis Hine serves to contextualise the paradigm shifts under discussion. While there are other examples of early documentary photographers, I feel that Hine is particularly well suited this discussion as reflections on Hine’s work are relevant to the case study in this paper and share the same broader discursive formation as the case study.

Early documentary photography

In 1905, sociologist Lewis Hine (1874-1940), started using photography to express his concerns, documenting the life of working people and the changing nature of work itself through

¹ www.throughpositiveeyes.org, www.kingsmeadeyes.org
industrialisation in the early part of the twentieth century in the United States.

Hine is described as a crusader (Trachtenberg, 1981, p. 238), much like Jacob Riis, who a few years earlier exposed the wretched conditions of those living in poverty in the tenements of Lower East Side of New York on the pages of the New York Tribune and Evening Sun. Much like Hine, Riis’ goal was to make ‘visible the invisible’. Riis felt that the ‘public’ or the audience making meaning from his photographs couldn’t avoid change if they knew the circumstances.

Compared to Riis, Hine was at an advantage in his mission though, as technology allowed the wide dissemination of his images. And unlike Riis, whose subjects “are usually downtrodden, passive and objects of pity or horror. Hine’s people are alive and tough. His children have savvy – savoir-faire, a worldly air. They have not succumbed” (Trachtenberg, 1981, p.251). Hine’s photographs of children labouring in the factories of the United States are regarded as instrumental in the passing of a law governing child labour in the United States (Trachtenberg, 1981, p.238).

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Hine’s role in bringing the unknown to light was not that of a singular image. His approach to his work and the nature of its publication lent itself to the narrative structure of what we know today as the photo essay: “While each picture, then, had its own backing of data, its own internal story, it took its meaning ultimately from the larger story (Trachtenberg, 1981, p.250).

Meaning can change and is never fixed. Meaning needs to actively be made through ‘reading’ or interpreting an image. Stuart Hall points out that, “The reader is as important as the writer in the production of meaning. Every signifier given or encoded with meaning has to be meaningfully interpreted or decoded by the receiver” (Hall 1980 in 1997, p.32-32). Hall goes on to note that signs which have not been intelligibly received and interpreted are not useful in any meaningful sense (1997, p.33).

In 1909, early on in his work with the NCLC3, Hine delivered an essay as a lecture with slides titled ‘Social Photography: How the Camera May Help in the Social Uplift’ which put forward his view that a picture is created by a specific understanding, and that it needs to be coherent about its message in order to communicate its story. Hine adds “this

3 *National Child Labour Committee*
unbounded faith in the integrity of photography is often rudely shaken (for while photographs may not lie, liars may photograph), it is doubly important to see to it that the camera we depend upon contracts no bad habits” (Trachtenberg, 1981, p. 252).

The thinking on photography has changed since Hine’s time. Constructivism has opened up the possibility of many ‘truths’. If the meaning of signs is not fixed and are always subject to changing the meaning produced within history and culture, then “there is no single, unchanging, universal ‘true meaning’” (Hall, 1997, p.32).

The Faucauldian concept of power/knowledge is useful here. “Foucault argued that not only is knowledge always a form of power, but power is implicated in the questions of whether and in what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not” (Hall 1997, p.48). Foucault argued that the application and effectiveness of power/knowledge is of more concern than interrogating its ‘truth’ (Hall 1997, p.49). “Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but has the power to make itself true ” (Hall 1997, p.49).

Alan Trachtenberg wrote of Hine “He wanted to make a difference in that world, to make living in it more bearable. He thought of his pictures as communications, and he guided
his technique thereby. “All along” he wrote, “I had to be doubly sure that my photo-data was 100% pure - no retouching or fakery of any kind.” For Hine, this also meant “a responsibility to the truth of his vision” (Trachtenberg, 1981, p.240).

Hine’s strong conviction that a photograph should represent the ‘truth’, without any fakery, didn’t take into consideration the meaning that his photographs could make when used in other contexts. Peter Seixas (1987) notes how earlier in Hine’s career, as the steel industry underwent changes in relations, Hine was hired as staff photographer for the Pittsburgh Survey. During this time, one of Hine’s colleagues at the Survey objected to the publication of photographs of families who were beneficiaries of charitable aid from another project on the basis that the publication signified a “breach of confidence” as the photographs revealed identities. Hine supported the publication of the photographs as he felt it important tell the public the importance of charitable work and since the photographs were useful for that, they should be published. To preserve anonymity, Hine suggested swapping the photographs between different cities, feeling that the meaning produced would remain the same and address the anonymity concern. Peter Seixas points out that the “prospect of a story on Milwaukee’s poor illustrated with unidentified
photographs of Boston apparently did not trouble Hine, as long as it aided the reform campaign” (1987, p.386). Seixas concludes that Hine’s rejection of “retouching or fakery” needs to be seen in this light. “For him, truth meant the portrayal of social conditions in such a way that the appeal for reform would be effective.” (ibid.)

_Hine’s shifting representation_

In 1918 Hine left for Europe working for the Red Cross, photographing the problems faced by civilian war refugees - health, hunger, sanitation - rather than the reality of war at the frontline. The war turned out to be a major milestone in Hine’s work, and he decided his time for “negative documentation” was over (Seixas, 1987, p.393). After resigning from the NCLC in 1917, Hine struggled to make ends meet and sought out other ways of making a living as a photographer, before settling on the path of more ‘positive photography’. Upon his return to New York, Hine represented himself as an ‘interpretive photographer’ discarding the ‘social photography’ signifier attached to his work (Rosenblum in Seixas, 1987, p.394). In this way, one can track Hine following a shifting paradigm. His shift in discourse from child labour and negative documentation to that of a more ‘positive photography’ was influenced by Hine’s need to be an employed photographer, financially remunerated in order to
responsibly care for his family. One can see the impact of the commodification of photography in the choice of Hine’s choice of representation.

After his return to the United States, Hine branched out and starting making portraits of workers, defining his work over the next twenty years. Hine wanted to “celebrate workers by showing their role in the creation of the goods which they produced” (Seixas, 1987, p.395). These texts were mostly published in the Western Electric News, an employee magazine, one of many that came to prominence in America after the First World War. The employee magazine tried to inspire worker’s pride in their own efforts and achievements as a way of securing loyalty to the company.

While Hine’s prewar work challenged the employers of child labor and the managers responsible for the accident rates in the mills, he now offered himself for hire to them, promoting productivity and loyalty by recognizing the workers in a context wholly controlled by the company (Seixas, 1987, p. 396). The choices Hine made in terms of supporting his livelihood put him into a different relationship with the subjects than that of his pre-war photographs, blunting “the sharp critical perspective which had informed his earlier projects” (Seixas 1987, p.394). Through Hine’s prewar photography, he aimed to remove children from wage labour
entirely. In his later years, Hine concentrated on portraits of the individual worker, omitting the social problem of labour and prioritising the individual over the social. Susan Sontag argued that, “When Hine aimed to change the conditions of work, he helped to transform American consciousness. When he aimed merely to transform consciousness, he changed nothing” (Sontag in Seixas 1987, p. 406).

A critical perspective

Martha Rosler’s In, Around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography) offers a critical perspective on this early documentary photography: “in contrast to the pure sensationalism of much of the journalistic attention to working class, immigrant and slum life, the meliorism of Riis, Lewis Hine and others involved in social-work propagandizing argued, through the presentation of images combined with other forms of discourse, for the rectification of wrongs.” (Rosler in Wells, 2003, p.262). Rosler holds that early documentary photographers like Riis and Hine reached out to a privileged class, reminding them that their worst fears of poverty “crime, immorality, prostitution, disease, radicalism” would change their own quality of life and existence (Rosler in Wells, 2003, p.262). These documentary photographs were intended to awaken the privileged class and stir them to action to create social change for the impoverished, even if
only to maintain their own status quo. The text therefore appeals to the morality of the audience. The photographs call for charity rather than a space where self-help is possible. Rosler argues that charity is an “argument for the preservation of wealth, and reformist documentary represented an argument within a class about the need to give a little in order to mollify the dangerous classes below, an argument embedded in a matrix of Christian Ethics” (Ibid.).

In the following section, I’ll bring this thesis into the present through a discussion of photojournalism in the context of compassion fatigue.

**Photojournalism and compassion fatigue**

The power of photography to bear witness has long motivated its practitioners to tell the stories of those affected by social and political conflict and oppression. The same reason that drew Hine to document the unfair, the unjust in society more than a 100 years ago still exists for photojournalists today: Bringing to light, to public awareness, assuming change follows knowledge. The dominant discourse in photojournalism today still, is that it will bring about social change by ‘bearing witness’. 
This is very poignantly evidenced by the final line in an obituary to photographer/filmmaker Tim Hetherington who worked across different, mixed visual media, using visual communication ranging from multi-screen installations, to fly-poster exhibitions, to handheld device downloads. James Brabazon, fellow conflict photographer writes: “The troubled corners of the world into which he shed the light of his lens are brighter because of him; the work he leaves is a candle by which those who choose to look, might see” (Brabazon, 2011).

Photojournalism is humanistic, seeking compassion to effect social change (Bleiker & Kay, 2007, p.140-41). Meanings produced by these photographs are truly polysemic, many meanings can be made by many audiences. Within the photojournalism discourse, photographs of the suffering of others are intended to move the viewer so much by the message of the photographs that they are galvanised into action to ‘right the wrong’ depicted in the photographs, to effect social change for the Other.

Pictures such as these are often paradoxical in effect. While some of these images can be disturbing for a viewer, they may also reinforce an identity of a distant observer, and

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4 (http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/apr/21/tim-hetherington-obituary)

5 Tim Hetherington died 20 April 2011 in Misrata, Libya, on the frontline in Misrata photographing the civil war. His friend, American photographer Chris Hondros, and at least 8 other civilians were also killed that day. (http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/apr/21/tim-hetherington-obituary)
a positive view of one’s own life in comparison to the Others represented: “death in a distant and dangerous elsewhere can... become a way of affirming life in the safe here and now” (Bleiker & Kay 2007, p.151).

“Compassion fatigue is becoming so used to the spectacle of dreadful events, misery or suffering that we stop noticing them. We are bored when we see one more tortured corpse on the television screen and we are left unmoved... [...]. Compassion fatigue means being left exhausted and tired by those reports and ceasing to think that anything at all can be done to help” (Tester, 2001, p.13 in Höijer, 2004, p.529).

Many engaging in the critical media debate hold the view that suffering is “commodified by the media and the audience have become passive spectators of distant death and pain without any moral commitment” (Höijer 2004, p. 527). A commonly held point of view is that the audience's compassion fatigue results in a gradual lessening of compassion for others caused by exposure to the wide publication of images of suffering and horror over time. David Campbell notes that “it has become something like conventional wisdom to argue that media depictions of horror are commonplace, testimony to a commercially driven voyeurism by an immoral (if not amoral) industry” (Campbell 2004, p.59). Susan Sontag wrote in her 1977 essay On photography that “the aestheticizing tendency of
photography is such that the medium which conveys distress ends by neutralizing it. Cameras miniaturize experience, transform history into spectacle. As much as they create sympathy, photographs cut sympathy, distance the emotions” (Sontag, 1999, p. 109-110 in Campbell 2004, p.62). It should be noted that Sontag further developed her position on compassion fatigue. Campbell notes that Sontag’s 2002 writing Regarding the Pain of Others develops an argument that that does not associate compassion fatigue with political inaction: “People don’t become inured to what they are shown – if that is the right way to describe what happens – because of the quantity of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling” (Sontag 2002, p. 102 in Campbell, 2004, p.63).

Campbell argues that by giving prominence to the “widespread passivity” at the site of audiencing, “Sontag challenges both the compassion fatigue thesis, and the notion of “the CNN effect” (whereby the broadcast of atrocity images is said to change government policy)” (Campbell, 2004, p.63).

David Campbell in his article Horrific Blindness: Images of Death in Contemporary Media puts forward an argument in opposition to the mainstream thought on compassion fatigue that “see the media as replete with images of death and thereby contributing to a diminution in the power of

Campbell’s article maintains that “the intersection of three economies... means we have witnessed a disappearance of the dead in contemporary coverage which restricts the possibility for an ethical politics exercising responsibility in the face of crimes against humanity”. The three economies Campbell refers to are indifference to others; self-regulation of the media’s representation of death and atrocity on grounds of ‘taste and decency’; and how the image is displayed, how it is produced.

Schell (1997,p.101 in Campbell, 2008, p.37-38) argues, “perhaps the media images of devastation and starvation in Africa have helped constitute the continent to Americans as a habitat where humans are victims and disease and famine have the upper hand”. These representations of ‘Africa’ are constructed.

Jones’ study, cited by Campbell, of the changing representations of people living with HIV/AIDS in the United States over the last 10 years is an example of how these meanings are constructed (Jones, 1997 in Campbell, 2008, p.
Over seven months in 1995, Jones studied advertisements in three gay newspapers, noting how the subjects were depicted as “empowered, heroic and even athletic”. The texts produced a changing of understanding of HIV/AIDS in the US, with perceptions moving away from HIV/AIDS as illness automatically resulting in death to a long-term chronic condition managed by antiretroviral medicines. Campbell points out that “these ‘positive’ photographs of the healthy, active but infected person, while representing a significant shift in the media construction of HIV/AIDS that estranges the naturalization of the ‘negative’ pictures emanating from Africa, do not in the end escape the stigmatization of HIV/AIDS” (Campbell, 2008, p.37-38).

In David Campbell’s discussion The problem with regarding the suffering of photography as pornography he notes that more research is needed into what and where the main threats to empathy are: “In the wake of two world wars and a century of genocide, our inability to stop the suffering of others has been painfully demonstrated. Our collective failure produces cultural anxieties, and they have been exacerbated by our post-WWII condition. Simultaneously we have developed a greater awareness of distant atrocities because of media technologies, and a human rights culture that details responsibilities with regard to people beyond our immediate
borders. ‘Pornography’ and ‘compassion fatigue’ are alibis, slogans that substitute for answers to this gap between heightened awareness and limited response, which is limited at least in relation to the scale of the challenges” (Campbell 2111).

Mendel’s tightrope of horror and hope

For Mendel, there is a need for both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ images while understanding the consequences of publication of the images. “For me, it’s kind of walking a tightrope. I have made some photographs that show the horror. But it’s important not just to show people dying but to show that there are 30 million people living with AIDS in Africa” (Mendel, 2001a).

Convinced of the power of photography as a tool of advocacy, as a weapon of evidence6, Mendel feels photographs can produce meaning such as intimacy, tragedy, passion and hope. Mendel does not view himself as an objective photographer. “I see my work on AIDS in Africa as partisan and committed to social issues (Mendel, 2001a).

During a 2008 showing of Mendel’s work at the Frontline Club in London, he spoke of the politics of representation. In speaking of his work on his We are Living Here, he mentions a

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6 "photography is a political act – it works as a weapon of evidence” (Mendel and Denes 2001: 40 in Campbell, 2008, p.81-82)
specific subject in his documentation. The project is set in the Eastern Cape of South Africa in a rural area called Lusikisiki. Mendel started photographing a subject as she commenced antiretroviral treatment. The subject starts the documentation looking very sick, she is a skeletal form and needs care. She has a CD4 count of 2. Mendel says that she, “seemed to be almost dead, and I began photographing her at that point” (Mendel 2008, video). Mendel continues his documentation of her life over the next two years and his photos show her getting better, stronger and healthier. Speaking of an early photography where she is seen bathing in a metal bathing basin, her legs and arms sticking out uncomfortably, a signifier of her vulnerability, Mendel (2008) says, “This is the kind of photograph which some years ago people like me were being accused of being victimologists and vultures, for taking it, for portraying people living with AIDS as being victims, powerless, as people heading for death”. Mendel notes how the meaning the photograph produces is different in other contexts: “The changing circumstances, I think, it may have been appropriate then. The fact that I was able to follow her and her story to a situation of comparative health changes the whole landscape and environment” (Mendel 2008, video).
Later on in the same discussion, Mendel notes the different paradigms at play in the visual representation of HIV/AIDS. Mendel polarizes these viewpoints into two positions: “There are two extremes, on the one hand there is the hardline journalistic view: people are sick, people are dying, there are millions. The extreme view is that you should show suffering, you should scare people, you should frighten them, it’s a terrible horror, it’s a holocaust, it’s an atrocity. You show the second they’re dying and the ill babies, you show and shock people” (Mendel 2008).

Mendel elaborates on the other position, “Take that as the one extreme view, the other extreme view is, I suppose an organisational view, which is that it is counter productive to show that, there are many positive stories, there many HIV positive people who are living fulfilled lives, you’ve got to show the heroes, show the wonderful HIV positive culture that’s out there” (Mendel 2008, video). Mendel concludes by positioning his work as a middle point in these two representational paradigms, “If you take the two extremes, perhaps you could view my work as the balancing act on a tightrope between those two extremes.” (Mendel, 2008, video).

Development communication and social change

Development communication is formed at the melting point of several disciplines and methodologies. Those working in
development communication hail from varied backgrounds: "Communication studies, cognitive psychology, journalism, anthropology, sociology, behavioural sciences, public health, information systems, education" (Waisbord in Hemer & Tufte 2005, p. 85). "Social change’ is a term that can be used to cross the divides between the disciplines that practice development communication in some way or form, allowing practitioners to find a shared space to work towards their outcomes. “The debate focuses less on defining ‘best practices’ for ‘information-education-communication’ or channeling community participation, issues that had long occupied the field, and instead takes a broader position on how communication contributes to social change” (Waisbord in Hemer & Tufte 2005, p. 86). Thomas Tufte maintains that development communication practice is not informed by recent advances in communication theory and the making of meaning. As an example of this, Tufte notes that research into audience reception was practiced in the mid 1980s but hasn’t yet been incorporated into HIV/AIDS communication practices. Tufte points out that this is a weak link, a key gap in research (Tufte in Hemer & Tufte, 2005, p.118).

UNESCO’s definition (1980) of the “democratization of communication”, cited by Enghel (2007:3), can be said to have been the object of a process in which: an individual becomes
an active element, and not a mere object of communication, the
variety of messages exchanged constantly increases and the
degree and quality of social representation in communication
also increases.

While it is noted that the development communication arena
displays divergent approaches, most efforts involving mass
media use the dissemination of messages informing the public
about the development initiative, highlighting the positive
aspects of the initiative and encouraging the support of the
initiative. This model of communication, applying the
diffusion model, sends a message from a sender to a receiver.
Critics argue that this model is an elitist vertical model, a
top-down one sided communication (Servaes & Malikhao in Hemer
& Tufte, 2005, p.94).

In contrast, the participatory paradigm gives emphasis to
“cultural identity of local communities and of democratisation
and participation at all levels - international, national,
local, and individual.” (Servaes & Malikhao in Hemer & Tufte,
2005, p.95). The participatory model is based on ideas from
Paule Freire’s (1970) ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, focusing on
“community involvement and dialogue as a catalyst for
individual and community empowerment” (Morris in Hemer &
practitioners have increasingly supported the participatory
paradigm. Thomas Tufte notes: “His [Paulo Freire] concept of conscientização provides an ideal opportunity for civil society, organisations and lawmakers to join forces in many development strategies, but particularly the fight against HIV/Aids” (2005, p.171).

Giving ‘Voice’

“The documentary is assumed to give a "voice to the voiceless," that is, portray the political, social and economic realities of oppressed minorities and others previously denied access to the means of producing their own image. From this perspective, the documentary is not only an art form, it is a social service and a political act” (Ruby, 1991: 51 in Enghel, 2006:18).

Lewis Hine was intent in sharing his own experiences with photography as well his practical skills required to make images. In an 1909 essay Hine wrote “The greatest advance in social work is to be made by the popularizing of camera work, so these records can be made by those who are in the thick of the battle” (Trachtenberg, 1981, p.253). Hine wanted to make picturemaking accessible to all, to demystify the camera.

In 1910 Hine wrote to a friend of his “conviction that my demonstration of the photographic appeal can find its real fruition best if it helps the workers to realise that they
themselves can use it as a lever even though it may not be the mainspring of the works...” (Trachtenberg, 1981, p.253).

In the 1970s and 1980s the idea of documentary was much discussed and debated. This arose from the concern with the politics of representation and the “more abstract philosophical debates through which the Cartesian distinction between subject and object, viewer and viewed, was challenged.” (Wells, 2003, p. 253). These debates debunked the myth of documentary as a neutrally-seen truth. Previously, photographers were viewed as “the framer and taker of the image, with creativity in photography reliant on recognizing ‘telling moments’ “ in the vein of the famously coined phrase “the decisive moment' by French humanist photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (Wells 2003, p.253). In the 1970s photographs were first “interrogated in terms of the context of making, the intentions of and power of the photographer, and how meaning shifts”(Wells 2003, p.253). Who got to photograph whom? In which way? Why and what for?

This concern with the politics of representation resulted in a growing number of photographic projects and books “exploring the lives of the working people in order to expose and question taken-for-granted social histories” connecting with feminist, radical labour historians and post-colonial perspectives (Wells, 2003, p.253). People were coaxed into
exploring their own communities and the relations produced through photography projects connecting with local oral history projects. The purpose of this was to present not only alternative viewpoints and subject positions in the discourses of race, gender, class and ethnicity, but also to empower people to as makers of images (Wells 2003, p.253-254).

In 2001, Gideon Mendel spoke of his search for ways to give his subjects voice “I’ve also come to feel that images aren’t enough to express the story of AIDS. What I’ve found very effective is combining visuals with personal quotes from the people I’m photographing to give them a voice alongside their image” (Mendel 2001a). Mendel has employed this technique in exhibitions, in a printed book as well on websites.

Since 2001 Mendel has developed his ideas of giving voice further, working more with non-traditional forms of publication such as interactive multimedia web platforms, as evidenced by the third text studied in this thesis. Through multilinear multimedia representation, the audience can make meaning from different yet simultaneous strands of narratives and knowledge. Sarah Pink (2005, p.192) points out that while multimedia representations can be quite different to traditional print representations, she also warns that multimedia representations can repeat the discourse of printed
words and pictures. “They do not necessarily dramatically challenge existing styles of representation, but can embody continuities with established forms” (Pink, 2005, p.192).

Mendel has evolved his working relationship with photography, video and audio in a multimedia context since 1993. In his 2006 unpublished paper Roger Hallas notes that Brian Storm, a commissioning editor at Corbis encouraged Mendel to experiment with audio and provided seed money and equipment to commence a project, *The Harsh Divide*, documenting the need and viability of anti-retroviral treatment programmes in South Africa. During the course of the project, Mendel realised all the opportunities offered through a varied distribution, including multi-media use. *The Harsh Divide* project produced a series of short films, a video installation in several group shows, a photo-spread in South African and British newspapers, an interactive website and archival fine art prints (Hallas, 2006, p.6). Hallas puts forward the view that “the significance of Mendel’s new media work... is his consistently idiosyncratic remediation of old media. And it has become a central element in his own self-avowed transformation from a photojournalist to a visual activist” (Hallas, 2006, p.9).
Tools of advocacy

In 2004 Kofi Annan, then United Nations Secretary General, called for the “use of every tool at your disposal “ to fight HIV/AIDS naming it as “the worst epidemic humanity has ever faced.” Annan highlighted the reach of broadcast media, especially amongst the youth and said “we must seek to engage these powerful organisations as full partners in the fight to halt HIV/AIDS through awareness, prevention and education.” (Kruger in Palitza, Ridgard, Struthers & Harber, 2010, p.81). Annan’s words emphasise how important the media has come to be seen in the landscape of HIV/AIDS as a tool of public education. This sentiment was echoed by an unnamed newspaper editor to researchers at the South African Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation (CADRE):“I think that newspapers are one of the most important tools that we as a people, as a nation, as a human race have... For those of us who have an opportunity to do something and don’t I think that should be considered a crime against humanity, for having a tool, a vehicle, and not using it” (Stein, 2002, p. 8 in Kruger in Palitza, Ridgard, Struthers & Harber, 2010, p.88).

In the South African media landscape parallels are often drawn between advocacy journalism and the apartheid struggle. Apartheid provided a clear moral compass for many journalists and a justification for participating in the ‘fight against
apartheid’. However, this type of advocacy journalism has been discussed before South Africa’s struggle. “In the 1980s, there were widespread calls for journalists, particularly in the south, to replace ‘objective’ journalism with a commitment to development” (Kruger in Palitza, Ridgard, Struthers & Harber, 2010, p.88).

Many journalists question how advocacy journalism impacts on a basic need to report fairly. Kruger argues that some press codes such as South Africa’s press code of professional conduct says “a newspaper is justified in strongly advocating its own views on controversial topics, provided it treats its readers fairly by... making fact and opinion clearly distinguishable... not suppressing or misrepresenting relevant facts [and] ... not distorting the facts in text or headlines” (Kruger in Palitza, Ridgard, Struthers & Harber, 2010, p.88-89).

Advocacy journalism, and I would argue visual advocacy journalism too, can be broken down into two categories: strong and weak advocacy. Strong advocacy includes “a self-conscious recognition of the media’s power to influence, promote or fast-track collective action and/or policy agendas” while weak advocacy displays a “seemingly neutral educational and informative role, defined as “reporting what is happening” (ie. information giving) rather than as a direct
attempt to influence actions” (Stein, 2002, p.9 in Kruger in Palitza, Ridgard, Struthers & Harber, 2010, p.89). The relationship between the journalist and/or the news organisation and the degree of advocacy is not fixed. It can shift and is adapted to different situations (Kruger in Palitza, Ridgard, Struthers & Harber, 2010, p.88-89). Kruger notes that “much can be achieved, even within a weak advocacy role, if the journalism remains careful but focused on the issue” (Kruger in Palitza, Ridgard, Struthers & Harber, 2010, p.88-89).

Examining the visual

Visual methodology largely agrees on three sites of an image where meaning is made; the site of the image itself, the site of production and the site of its audiencing. These sites refer to three pivotal ways in which meaning is produced; what the image looks like, how the image is made and how it is seen. My research design draws primarily on Gillian Rose’s model of researching visual methods. The diagram below is her representation of this overarching methodological framework to analysing visual culture, visualities and visual objects. The modality most important to an image's own effects is often argued to be its compositionality. The compositional modality at the site of the image of Rose’s model refers to “the material qualities of an image or visual object”.

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The creation of an image draws on several conventional strategies such as content, colour and spatial organisation. Rose observes that some critics, often art historians, feel that many discussions of visual culture need to pay more attention to the details of particular images. Without these specificities, they argue "visual images are reduced to nothing more than reflections of their cultural context" (2007, p.21). The social modality at the site of the image refers to the span of social, economic and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and its meaning-making.
The approach to visual imagery termed compositional interpretation by Rose “offers a detailed vocabulary for expressing the appearance of an image” (2007, p.35). This sort of approach has traditionally been used by art historians in looking at high art. To Rose there is no point in researching the visual without acknowledging the power of the visual. Irit Rogoff calls this type of method ‘the good eye’; a non-explicit way of looking, in methodological and theoretical terms, at paintings and producing a particular way of describing what it sees as high Art, “functioning as a kind of visual connoisseurship” (1998, p. 17 in Rose, 2007, p.35). The ‘good eye’ of a connoisseur requires contextual information: knowledge about the painters, what inspired them and how they painted. The ‘good eye’ then uses this information to assess the quality of the images; looking at the images for “what they are” (Ibid.) rather than how the images were used or what they do. Compositional interpretation mostly looks at the site of the image itself to understand the meanings it makes and pays the most attention to its compositional modality.

Gillian Rose (Rose, 2001 p.15 & 16) points out that a critical approach to interpreting visual images takes images seriously. She argues that it’s necessary to look at visual images vigilantly as they are not necessarily capable of being
simplified to their context. A critical approach also considers the social conditions and effects of visual objects; the third aspect towards a critical visual methodology considers your own way of looking at images. However, reflexivity is not a simple task. It’s important to reflect on how you as a critic of visual images are looking. A dominant visuality denies the validity of other ways of visualizing social difference. There are different ways of seeing the world, and the critical task is to differentiate between the social effects of those different visions.

The site of production

In an interview with digitaljournalist.org (2001), Mendel speaks of starting his work on HIV and AIDS in 1993 with his involvement in a project called ‘Positive Lives’ in which photographers responded to AIDS in the U.K. He says, “My first exposure to the issue was photographing in an AIDS ward in London. I found the situation different than any I’d ever experienced as a photojournalist. It was only 10 percent photography and 90 percent communication and connection with people, dealing with issues of confidentiality, considering how people should be projected, being sensitive not to portray people as victims.”

Later that same year, Mendel started photographing HIV/AIDS in a mission hospital in Zimbabwe using a direct
photojournalistic approach, making strong images of skeletal people dying from AIDS. In 2001 when the mainstream HIV/AIDS discourse was about ‘fighting AIDS’, Mendel said that it’s often a visually “very extreme and dramatic situation” (Mendel, 2001a).

Technologies, as far as the practice of documentary photography goes, provide access to those practitioners of privileged status: “Generally, it was the photographers from the middle and upper classes who sought images of the poor for purposes which included curiosity, philanthropy and sociology, but also included policing and social control” (Harvey 1986, p. 28 in Wells, 2003, p.252). A better understanding of the technology of the photograph can affect the meaning a photograph makes to an audience. In the case of the three texts that are studied here7, the photographs were made between 1993 and 2010, meaning that the earlier work was photographed on film while later work could utilize digital camera technologies. This was of great significance at the time of the production of the third text, the website ‘Through Positive Eyes’ launched in 20108. The third text includes participatory methods in giving compact digital cameras to the subjects/participants of the text, to tell their own stories.

7 See appendices
8 http://throughpositiveeyes.org/
The call for participants to the Los Angeles chapter in 2011 of Mendel’s continuing work, shows that the participants will keep the cameras after the workshop. The call for participants is reproduced in the appendices. The advances in digital photographic technologies and the increasing affordability of technologies must have contributed to this being seen as a viable initiative by the producers. As noted by Rose, “All visual representations are made one way or the other, and the circumstances of their production may contribute towards the effect they have” (Rose 2007, p.14).

Photographs can be coded into different groups though genre. “Images that belong to the same genre share certain features. A particular genre will share a specific set of meaningful objects and locations” (Rose 2007, p.15). David Campbell concludes that “photographs, therefore, might be thought of as being produced in part by the genres of photography as much as they are made through their indexical relationship to the events or issues they portray” (2008, p. 96-98). I feel the three texts studied here are classified as belonging to the documentary genre, attaching certain meanings to the image itself.

In the time up to the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990, Mendel photographed change and conflict in South Africa, working with wire services Reuters, Agence-
France Press and as a nominee with Magnum photo agency. During the 1980s Mendel produced work in the genre of ‘struggle photography’ described by *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph* as “the black-and-white documentary and activist photography that emerged during the political mobilizations of the 1980s in South Africa, when the camera was seen as a cultural weapon of struggle against apartheid” (Lenman, 2011). I feel this notion of activism is carried through into Mendel’s work on HIV/AIDS.

The site of the image

Semiotics has been a leading approach to looking at how images make meaning; its importance in my study lies in that it, “Offers a full toolbox of analytical tools for taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning.” (Rose, 2007, p.76).

Semiotics is the study of signs and the way they work; studying the way communication generates meaning rather than the process of communication. As a concept, semiotics is complex and intricate. Rose points out that: “Each semiological term carries substantial baggage with it, and there is a tendency for each semiological study to re-invent its own analytical terms” (Rose, 2007, p.78). Often the terms are useful and lead to analytical precision, but sometimes new

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http://www.answers.com/topic/struggle-photography
terms are confusing and not very useful, trying to make something that is not interesting appear sophisticated and interesting. As Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1986, p. 165 in Rose, 2007, p.104) note about this sort of text, this does “little more than state the obvious in a complex and often pretentious manner.” Rose advises avoiding this sort of jargon and keeping it simple. At the same time, rigorous semiotic terminology is what provides an analysis its precision.

The fact that semiotics “acknowledges that semioticians are themselves working with signs, codes and referent systems and are thus imbricated in nothing more, though certainly nothing less, than another series of transfers of meaning in which a particular image participates” (Rose, 2007, p.103) allows for a certain reflexivity. It’s important to reflect on how you as a critic of visual images are looking. A dominant visuality denies the validity of other ways of visualizing social difference. There are different ways of seeing the world, and the critical task is to differentiate between the social effects of those different visions. “ However, there is a strong anti-reflexive strain in some sorts of semiology, particularly those that claim to delve beneath the surface appearance to reveal the true meaning of images” (Rose, 2007, p.104). As Rose comments, this sort of non-reflexivity has no place in a critical methodology.
Drawbacks to semiotics

There are disadvantages to the method of semiotic analysis: Semioticians choose to make detailed readings of individual images raising questions around how representative the analysis is and how that analysis can be reproduced. As indicated by case studies examined by more than one semiotician and resulting in different analyses.

Looking carefully at images includes looking at the visions it constructs of class, gender, race, sexuality etc. and how these visions articulate and construct social differences and relations of power. Slater argues that as semiotics is situated in the structuralist tradition which he says “takes as assumed, as given, precisely what needs to be explained: the relations and practices within which discourses are formed and operated” (Slater, 1983, p.258 in Rose, 2007, p.105).

Semiotic analysis can exclude the empirical exploration of polysemy and logonomic systems. “Semiology is very ready to admit to polysemy and to the contestation as well as the transfer and circulation of meaning in theory, but there are very few semiological studies that really get to grips with diverse ways of seeing” (Rose, 2007, p.104-5). Rose (2002 p. 15) notes “these [the image’s] effects always intersect with the social context of its viewing and the visualities its
spectators bring to their viewing.” Semiotics neglects to fully explore the processes of audiencing and the notion that different audiences might respond differently to the same images is not acknowledged conceptually. Semioticians explain the production of preferred meaning in two ways, the first being the visual and textual relation between an image and its viewer, and secondly, the emphasis on the social modalities of reception of an image. Williamson points out: “All signs depend for their signifying process on the existence of specific, concrete receivers, people for whom and in whose systems of belief, they have a meaning” (1978, p.40 in Rose, 2007, p.99). The viewer makes sense of the image, not the image itself.

The site of audiencing

Looking carefully at images includes looking at the visions it constructs of class, gender, race, sexuality etc. and how these visions articulate and construct social differences and relations of power. The effect of the image is always embedded in social practice, and is negotiated by the audience of the image. The meanings that signs make are very complex, often multiple meanings are created, this goes to say that signs are polysemic. Semiotics argues that most images most of the time produce what Stuart Hall calls the preferred meaning.
Some writers on visual culture “insist that the most important site at which the meaning of an image is made is not its author, or indeed its production or itself, but its audiences, who bring their own ways of seeing and other knowledges to bear on an image and in the process make their own meanings from it” (Rose, 2001 p.11).

Stuart Hall, a major contributor to thinking on the ‘cultural turn’, argues that culture “is not so much a set of things - novels and paintings or TV programmes or comics - as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings - the ‘giving and taking of meaning’ - between the members of a society or group”. Hall says that culture depends on the members of the participating group interpreting in a meaningful way that which is around them and ‘making sense’ of their world. The meanings may be implicit or explicit, intended or latent, felt as truth or fantasy and conveyed through restricted or elaborated codes. In whatever form, these meanings, these representations, structure people’s behaviour in every day life , (1997a, p.2 in Rose, 2007, p.2).

Hall stresses the point that there isn’t a single or ‘correct’ meaning conveyed by an image. Meanings can change over time. Interpretation of meaning is contested ground; one’s ‘reading’ of the image needs to be based on the
practices and signification used in the image, and what meaning they seem to be producing to you (1997a p.9 in Rose, 2001 p.2).

I chose Mendel’s three texts as the case study after a review of his work on HIV/AIDS added to my prior familiarity with Mendel’s earlier black and white work. As a South African photographer myself, I have a contextual knowledge of Mendel’s work. Mendel is a well known photographer, certainly in the South African photography discourse. I view Mendel as a seminal figure in photographic documentation of HIV/AIDS. As a young photographer, Mendel’s work performed a role modeling function for me, and other young photographers. I feel that these three texts are a good representation of the different stages in Mendel’s work and that as a case study, stands on its analytical integrity and interest, making clear my argument (Rose, 2007).

Reflecting on my choice of Mendel’s texts through a Foucauldian lens, I’d argue that the discourses of photojournalism and documentary photography have produced Mendel as a subject, as Hall describes, “...subjects – figures who personify the particular forms of knowledge which the discourse produces... these figures are specific to specific discursive regimes and historical periods” (Hall, 1997, p.56).
The same discourses have produced a place for myself - as the reader, as a practitioner - as the subject. Foucault’s *place for the subject* is where “the discourse’s particular knowledge and meaning make most sense” (Hall, 1997, p.56). In order for Mendel to be produced as a subject through discourse, I have located myself in the position from which the discourse makes the most sense. The discourses have constructed a subject-position for myself, ‘subjecting’ myself to its rules and becoming a subject of its power/knowledge (Hall 1997, p.56). Throughout my engagement with this thesis, I have tried at all times to reflect on the meanings that my subject-position in the discourses brings to my analysis.

**Reading Mendel’s photographs**

Visual methodology largely agrees on three sites of an image where meaning is made: the site of the image itself, the site of production and the site of audiencing. In practice, these three sites and their modalities are rarely as clear cut as Gillian Rose’s model suggests. Rose offers some suggestions I’ve considered in my analysis and included in the appendices of this study, as a starting point for exploring an image (2007, p. 258-259).

The first text I analyse is a photo essay published together with a story in a newspaper magazine in 2000 and features the lives of three families dealing with HIV/AIDS in
Malawi over a period of 24 hours. The second text is a photo essay published in an academic journal in 2006. The text is a part of a series originally made to be displayed at the South African National Gallery and the Museum Africa. Some of the photographs were published as part of a poster exhibition and widely distributed across South Africa by various organisations. The third text is an interactive collaborative multimedia website launched in 2010 that includes participatory approaches as well as Mendel’s own work.

A brief description of my understanding of the semiotic terms I use as a basis for analysing Mendel’s texts, would be useful here. Semiotics has three main areas of study: the sign itself, the codes into which signs are organized and the culture within which these codes and signs operate. In his development of linguistic theory Ferdinand de Saussure argued that the sign was the basic unit of language. The sign can be split into two parts: the signified which is an object or a concept and the second part, the signifier which is a sound or image attached to the signified. Saussure’s point is that “there is no necessary relationship between a particular signifier and its signified” (Rose, 2007, p.79).

Saussure argues that the meaning of a sign depends on the difference between that particular sign and others. The referent is the term for the actual object in the world that
the sign is related to. “The distinction between the signifier and the signified is crucial to semiology, because it means that the relations between meanings (signifieds) and the signifiers is not inherent but rather is conventional, and can therefore be problematized” (Rose, 2007, p.80). The first stage in semiotic analysis is identifying the signs that form the basis of the image.

Some writers argue that Saussure’s notion of semiotics has a static perception of how signs work and that he was uninterested in how meanings change and are changed through use. Other writers query how much a theory based on language can be of use in visual analysis. Some writers, while acknowledging the importance of Saussure’s discussion of the sign, prefer to turn to Charles Sanders Pierce’s work as “Pierce’s richer typology of signs enables us to consider how different modes of signification work, while Saussure’s model can only tell us how systems of arbitrary signs operate” (Iversen, 1986, p.85 in Rose, 2007, p.83).

Pierce differentiates between three different types of signs, based on the way the relation between the signifier and signified is understood: iconic, index and symbol. In iconic signs the signifier represents the signified by having an apparent likeness to it; it looks like the “thing” it represents. For example, an identity photograph is an iconic
sign because “it contains a direct resemblance to the person’s face and therefore forms a representational connection with that person” (du Plooy, 2001, p.10). The relationship between signifier and signified in symbolic signs is conventionalized but clearly arbitrary. “The meanings conveyed by symbolic signs, because they are more abstract and rooted in our social and cultural past, have to be taught and usually represent stronger emotional meanings than in the case of iconic or indexical signs” (du Plooy, 2001, p.10). Take, for example, the symbol of a flag: The colours and the symbols on a nation’s flag represent that nation’s tradition and history. The symbol of the flag is a powerful effect, the flag becomes the nation, the people, in the imagined social whole.

Most aspects of conventional social life are governed by rules of behaviour consented to by the members of the society considered in semiotics as ‘coded’. Visual texts present a non-linear narrative to be ‘read’, through combining and presenting signs in different ways as codes, communicating intricate and often abstract concepts (du Plooy, 2001, p.11). It is through codes that the semiotician has access to the wider ideologies at work in society: “At the connotive level, we must refer, through the codes, to the orders of social life, of economic and political power and of ideology’,
because codes ‘contract relations for the sign with the wider universe of ideologies in a society” (Hall, 1980, p.134).

_First text_\textsuperscript{10} - While the World Looks Away

The text was published on the 2nd of December 2000 in Britain, in the Guardian newspaper’s weekend magazine supplement, Guardian Weekend. David Campbell (2008, p.41) describes the Guardian as “a liberal paper committed to a global perspective with some sensitivity towards issues in Africa.” Mendel’s photographs are accompanied by a story by journalist Kevin Toolis. The text runs across thirty-one pages including 13 pages of full page advertising. The text comprises 23 black and white photographs: 3 photographs are each used across two pages (‘two page spread’), 7 photographs are used on half-pages, five pages each use 3 photographs. The text’s production is dependent on the technologies of photography, reproduction and newspaper distribution. The magazine story is financed by the magazine and the journalists relied on British charity ActionAid for “research and contact with local HIV/Aids groups in Malawi” (The Guardian Weekend, Dec 2, 2000 p.40).

The 13 pages of advertising run throughout the essay\textsuperscript{11}, colour advertisements in the midst of Mendel’s black-and-white photographs.

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\textsuperscript{10} See appendices for full texts

\textsuperscript{11} See appendices for full texts
photographs, encouraging the consumption of luxury goods. Many of the advertisements show healthy, young, white models selling goods such as perfumes\textsuperscript{12}, computers\textsuperscript{13}, organic vegetables\textsuperscript{14}, designer clothes\textsuperscript{15}, watches\textsuperscript{16}, cell phones\textsuperscript{17}, household appliances\textsuperscript{18}. David Campbell notes ‘this both drew on and reproduced conventional representations of Africa. As Bates (2007, p.67) argues, with a sense of deficiency and lack made manifest, pictures presented in this manner “reflect a visual legacy of degeneracy and disease inherited from the discourses of 19th and early 20th century colonialism and missionary medicine” (Campbell, 2008, p. 78-79).

The lead paragraph of the story, published on the first page of the text, together with an un-captioned photograph of a skeletal black man lying on a white bed staring at the viewer, says:

“WHILE THE WORLD LOOKS AWAY: Aids has taken a terrifying grip in Africa. The disease is making alarming inroads across the globe, but at least two thirds of those who are

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[12]{Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.16 & 41}
\footnotetext[13]{Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.18}
\footnotetext[14]{Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.25}
\footnotetext[15]{Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.26}
\footnotetext[16]{Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.27 & 33}
\footnotetext[17]{Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.30}
\footnotetext[18]{Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.35 & 37}
\end{footnotes}
HIV-positive live in Africa. It is the leading cause of
death, ruinous economically and tragic in its
consequences, orphaning millions of children. In the
great swathes of Africa, barley anyone can afford them.
Kevin Toolis and the photographer Gideon Mendel went to a
small district hospital in Malawi and, over 24 hours,
followed the lives and deaths in three particular
families” (Toolis & Mendel, 2000, pg. 13).

The first photograph in the series, published on the front
page of the article, shown below, shows the subject looking
directly into the camera, challenging the viewer to become
engaged in their stories. The line of text, the headline
While the World looks Away serves to anchor the meaning of the
gaze of the subject: the ‘away’ fixes the meaning of the gaze
of the subject: defying the world to look away no more, to
become in involved in their plight.
Signs can also be described depending on how symbolic they are. Signs can either be denotive, describing something or connotive, carrying a range of higher-level meaning. Roland Barthes (1997 in Rose, 2007, p. 87) suggests that signs that operate on the denotive level are fairly easy to decode: if we look at a picture of a baby it’s clear that its a baby and not a toddler. However, while a denotive sign may be easy to

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19 The first photograph of the first text ‘While the World Looks Away’.
understand, there may be so many potential meanings made that we struggle to choose the ‘correct’ meaning, the intended meaning. Barthes discusses the notion of anchorage, text that is used together with the visual image, allowing the reader to choose between the possible meanings created by the denotative sign (1977, p.38-41 in Rose, 2007, p.87).

Contrasted with the denotive sign, connotative signs carry a variety of higher-level meanings and are “deduced by the individual reader, which due to factors such as age, past experience, gender and cultural background - may result in many different meanings.” (du Plooy, 2001, p.10). The meanings constructed by society of connotative signs often support a particular approach or way of looking at life; an ideology or culture.

In the first photograph, the man lying on the bed with white sheets, his skeletal torso painfully visible, looking up at the viewer is a denotive sign. The meaning this sign denotes is passivity; the subject lies passively on the bed seemingly unable to help himself, and illness; denoted through the white bedsheets and the daylight hours apparent in the image, lying in bed during the day time means that something is wrong with the man in the photograph. The text in the first image anchors the meaning of the image: both of the subject’s rejection by the rest of the world and of the horror
of AIDS. The text also serves to reinforce the identity of the Other onto the subject, producing a meaning of ‘exclusion’. This man belongs to a space shunned by the world. The text further reinforces the exclusion of the subject from the audience’s world through the direct comparison of the situation of HIV/AIDS in the West and in Africa. “In the west, drugs are making AIDS manageable, - in great swathes of Africa, barely anyone can afford them” (Toolis & Mendel, 2000, p. 13). One reading of this photograph produces a meaning of a child-like, poor and disempowered victim rejected, downtrodden and forgotten by the rest of world, tugging on the conscious of the liberal audience to intervene, begging to halt this horror of AIDS.

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20 The second photograph of the first text ‘While the World Looks Away’.
Similarly, the second photograph in the series, shown above, appellees the audience, challenging the audience to acknowledge the subjects’ presence, challenging the audience to share the subject’s secret. It shows a line of painfully thin men standing in a queue, with hospital beds in the background. The first subject on the left is unrevealed by the camera, the second subjects looks down, with a stern look on his face, the third subject stares back at the audience, raising an eyebrow in acknowledgement, the fourth subject looks hesitant, the fifth self-consciously looks at the floor. The men in the photograph are all extremely thin, their rib bones jutting out of their chests. Once again, the sign of their skeletal frames, and the hospital beds, denote illness fixed in meaning by the text used in the publication to contextualise the photograph, the text that anchors the meaning produced by the photograph. The caption to this photograph reads: “Small relief: Patients queue for their 4am medication in a ward at Nhkomota Hospital in Malawi” (Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.14). At the time of the taking of Mendel’s photographs, anti-retroviral treatment was not available at Nhkomota Hospital, the connoted meaning is that the medicine is for treating the symptoms of AIDS illnesses, rather than suppressing the viral load as anti-retroviral therapy does.
In 1981 Martha Rosler wrote, “Documentary, as we know it, carries (old)information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful.” This is a description particularly appropriate to Mendel’s work in this text, published in “a stylish and well presented publication read by an intelligent discerning readership” aimed at “well educated, middle aged professionals with high disposable incomes”\(^2\). The social identity of the Mendel’s subjects are mostly economically powerless. Only one of the subjects is portrayed as working, that is the coffin maker, himself HIV positive. The coffin maker has a lot of work due to HIV/AIDS (add quote from text), he’s at the height of his business, but ill, and making money from his community.

*While the World Looks Away* features the lives and (mostly) deaths of people with AIDS in three particular families in a small district hospital in Malawi. Some of this work was later published in *A Broken Landscape: HIV & AIDS in Africa* in 2001, a collection of work made by Mendel on the subject of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa from 1993 to the time of the book’s publication.

It is interesting to compare the representation of two of the same essays in both publications. The stories of Eliza

\(^2\) http://www.webwindows.co.uk/newspaper-advertising/guardian (downloaded 26 April 2011)
Myeni and Miriam Mbwana are both represented in the Guardian Weekend’s article and in Mendel’s book on HIV/AIDS in Africa. There are differences in publication. The texts are reproduced in full in the appendix.

I coded the photographs as a thematic chart as a starting point for the analysis. The coding chart is reproduced in full in the appendices. Over a third of the images published in relation to Eliza’s story in *While the World Looks Away* (Mendel & Toolis, 2000) represent Eliza’s suffering. Forty percent of the visual signifies suffering through denoted meaning of caring for the ill. These four photographs are shown below.

While the arms of Eliza’s caregivers signify the strength Eliza needs to hold herself upright and the arms of the caregiver feeding her signifies her powerlessness to look after herself, the arms of the caregiver cradling Eliza’s head against her torso connotes a space of both compassion and love, for Eliza.

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22 See appendix
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23 Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.17

24 Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.19
Within the broader African cultural code of death, Eliza is not left alone to die, the arms of her caregivers and her skeletal body signify her nearness to death. The discursive practices of HIV/AIDS as a terminal disease contributed to producing this meaning. The text was produced at a time when ante-retroviral treatment was not generally available. The sign of a skeletal body signified certain death with no hope of recovery.

A Broken Landscape: HIV & AIDS in Africa (Mendel 2001) publishes 4 photographs telling Eliza’s story in comparison to the 10 published in While the World Looks Away (Mendel & Toolis, 2000). Of these four photographs, only one signifies the suffering of Eliza. The text is shown below.
On the page opposite the photograph a written quote from Eliza’s aunt, Jane Chirwa, is reproduced:

“Eliza was the daughter of my younger sister Efrieda who died in 1994. Her father James who had been a store clerk died last year. She had been in Form 2 at school in Mzuzu, but when she fell ill she came to stay here at the home of her grandfather in Selemani Village as she did not have parents to care for her anymore. She got very sick and was in hospital for a month. With my other sisters I stayed there taking of her as well as we could. She was vomiting a lot and became very thin but we tried to get her to eat just a bit of maize porridge. She had a big cough and then she died in the middle of the night. I was there with her and she just held me my hand tight. God protected her and then he wanted her” (Chirwa in Mendel 2001, p. 54).

The image of Eliza’s suffering produces different meanings when published in the context of Chirwa’s quote. The hospital bed frames and sheets still signify illness for the one covered by the sheet. Eliza’s skeletal body still signifies her wasting physical health. Now we see her breasts, sagging on her chest signifying the demise of her adult body and its retreat to a childlike body, powerless and without agency. The arms of Chirwa wrapped around Eliza’s body, holding her arm
signifies support. The arm holding Eliza’s hand still while a spoon, signifying nutrition, is seen on the left connotes both agency and the lack of it.

Saussure defined two ways in which signs can be organized into codes – syntagmatic and paradigmatic signs. “Syntagmatic signs gain their meaning from the signs that surround them in a still image...” (Rose, 2007, p.84). Paradigmatic signs “gain their meaning from a contrast with all other possible signs...” (Rose, 2007, p.84). Chirwa is seen as having agency, as the one who is containing the other while Eliza looses her agency as the one contained, unable to exercise her will. Chirwa’s quote, a syntagmatic sign, anchors the meaning of the loss of agency made in the text, that it’s for her own good. The connoted meaning is not of a powerless victim, rather of a responsibility, a well-doing, of compassion and love, for the person dispossessed of agency.

Out of the 13 photographs making up Miriam’s representation in While the World Looks Away, 3 of those show individuals grieving: one of a woman, two of a man. The first photograph of a man grieving, is of Mirriam’s son-in-law, Martin, is shown below, the smallest photograph on the page. The photograph shows a distraught Martin, being helped through the doorway to outside by an unidentified man. Martin holds his hands behind his head signifying his powerlessness. In
other contexts, in other readings, the signifier of holding your hands behind your head produces meanings of criminality: detention, arrest.

This sign produces another meaning in Mendel's photograph. It is anchored, not only by the caption text accompanying the photograph but also by Martin's expression.

26 Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.34

27 “Mary's grief stricken husband Martin is himself not well” (Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.34)
signifying grief. Martin’s facial features are transformed by his emotions signifying the overwhelming pain of being a prisoner to his grief. The hands that support Martin are almost wrapped around his body, an arm supporting him from behind and a guiding arm on the front of his body signifying Martin’s loss of control, his loss of awareness of his surroundings. The arms that encircle Martin denote compassion extended to someone helpless as a child with grief.

The next grieving image, of Miriam, is flanked on either side by a full page advertisement and follows the first photograph of Martin. The photograph of Miriam is seen below.

Miriam faces the camera directly, her face contorted by emotion, her hands held up, clasped together in supplication. The sign produces a meaning of overwhelming grief, and helplessness. A woman to the right of Miriam has a comforting arm laid on Miriam’s shoulder.

The meaning is anchored by a caption that reads: “Too much to bear: Miriam, Mary Mbwana’s mother, must now care alone for her 28 orphaned grandchildren. Mary is the sixth of Miriam’s 11 children to die.” (Mendel & Toolis, 2001, p.36).
The third picture, seen below, shows Martin physically supported by other people attending his wife Mary’s funeral, while in the foreground a woman is seen, her face in anguish.
Martin’s face is downcast, his consciousness centred within his thoughts, his emotions collapsing inwards. Martin is signified as weak and in need of support. The caption of this photograph draws attention to Martin: “Her distraught husband is supported by fellow mourners at the funeral” (Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.38). In contrast, the woman raises her face to the sunlight, exposing her grief publicly.

29 Mendel & Toolis, 2000, p.38.
Her eyes are closed, her face is a grimace signifying her pain. Her pain represents the pain of ‘Africa’, the synecdoche also stands in for the pain that Martin is inwardly experiencing.

It is interesting to note that of these three photographs representing grieving in While the World Looks Away, that while both Martin and Miriam are depicted as experiencing emotional trauma, Martin’s signification as weak and helpless is much easier to read than that of Miriam.

It is also interesting to note that Mendel choose to include fewer pictures depicting grief in the edit of Miriam’s photo story in his book publication in 2001.30

A Broken Landscape: HIV & AIDS in Africa publishes one image representing grieving. The photograph of Miriam crying during the vigil, with her arms clasped in supplication (discussed further above) is repeated in the book, as the third photograph in a series of eight.

The introduction to the photo essay also contains a quote from Miriam, on the left, with photographs on the right. Miriam’s quote reads:

“In my life I have had 11 children, eight girls and three boys. Seven have passed away. The first, Lawrence, died in 1993 and one of my children has died every year since.

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30 See coding charts in appendices
Another 6 of my grandchildren have died. AIDS has carried my family away like a flood.

I look after 16 of my children's children. My granddaughter Madrin is in hospital with her son John, and they are both very weak. She has lost three children already. My daughter Mary is now very ill. We are very close. She is my best friend.

What have we done to deserve this? My father used to say 'When death is there, pass by on the other side'. But it’s not possible now. Death is everywhere.” (Mbwana in Mendel 2001, p.60).

The text is shown below.
The reading of the caption represents Miriam as the matriarch of the family facing (and loosing against) the challenge of HIV/AIDS at a time when medicines for anti-retroviral treatment and medicines to prevent HIV infections from mother to child were not available. The photograph of Miriam sitting at her daughter Mary’s bedside enforces the meaning that the text makes of Miriam as a caregiver. The photograph of the children signifies the grandchildren and other family members Miriam is responsible for after the death of her children.

From reading the metonymic code in Mendel’s photographs, it can be seen that the people shown in his photographs are living in poverty; sidelined by economic restraints and little formal education. A metonymic code is associated with something else that then represents that something else; the code is a collection of signs producing “meanings on the basis of their associations or assumptions” (du Plooy, 2001, p.11).

The text While the World looks Away is produced under the discursive practices of newspaper production, photojournalism and securitization discourse as described by Prins and Garret:

“The securitization of HIV/AIDS problematizes a virus, disease and its consequences in a way that makes them available for particular forms of action. Securitization gives the issue a greater sense of threat and urgency, puts it on
the political agenda of the state, brings into play national and international bureaucracies involved in diplomacy, intelligence and military affairs, and demands a policy response from the highest echelons of government (Prins, 2004: 940; Garrett, 2005:11).

Whether a large-scale war or global emergency, the securitization of HIV/AIDS cast the virus as an aggressor and called on states or international agencies to fight against it” (Campbell 2008, p. 9-10).

Mendel (2001) recounts a situation when he started photographing in a small hospital in Zimbabwe: “While I was there I was photographing a (HIV positive) patient whose wife was lifting him up in his bed. As I was documenting that scene, he had a sudden seizure and died from kidney failure. On my contact sheet I can follow the sequence as he moves from life to death. These are images I have mixed feelings about: as a news photographer I have photographed many dead people, yet there is something about my role in that situation I do not feel comfortable with. Are there some moments which should be sacrosanct, exempt from the intrusion of a camera?”

Mendel noted how the discourse of photojournalism produced his work: “I put my camera down and stopped photographing. The doctor who had been called looked at me calmly and said, ‘Come on man, do your job.’ In that context
of medical crisis it was the only constructive thing I knew how to do."

Mendel’s discourse of documentary photography as a tool of advocacy and the discursive practices of photojournalism and HIV/AIDS produced *A Broken Landscape: HIV & AIDS in Africa*. There is a shift in representation indicated by these two different publications; *While the World Looks Away* and *A Broken Landscape: HIV & AIDS in Africa*.

**Second text – Looking AIDS in the Face**

The text was published in the Northern winter of 2006 in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, a literature journal edited by Ted Genoways and published by the University of Virginia in Charlottesville in Virginia in the United States. The journal’s *A Special Report: AIDS in Africa* features varied contributors including Mendel. The second text authored by Mendel and studied in this paper consists of 8 colour photographs used across 10 pages, accompanied by extensive written text telling the stories of the subjects. These images are part of a series Mendel titled *Looking AIDS in the Face*.

Speaking during a showing of his work at the Frontline Club in London in 2008, Mendel\(^{32}\) recounts the origins of his way of representing the people in *Looking AIDS in the Face*.

\(^{32}\) *Frontline club video reference*
Mendel was commissioned by ActionAId and Oxfam to produce photographs to be used in an educational exhibition relating to HIV/AIDS in Mozambique. When Mendel met with Mozambican NGO, Kindlimuka, to discuss the project, he discovered that people were hesitant to show their identities in the photograph as they feared stigma. The exhibition was planned to be shown in Mozambique rather than abroad. Mendel conceived of a new approach to the exhibition, and pulled a roll of gaffer tape from his bag and drew a frame on the wall. Mendel recounts addressing the NGO and said: “Look, here’s a frame. I think we all agree that this is an important project and that there are a lot of important stories to be told. What I’d like you to do is to put whatever you want to in the frame, no-one has to show their identity. Put whatever you’d like to in the frame as long as you tell me your story to go with it... People seemed really inspired by the idea, I think I had empowered them in a way in which they’d never been engaged with before” (Mendel, 2008 video).

The resulting portraits were the basis of a large display in Mozambique and Mendel continue to evolve the concept through his work with HIV/AIDS activist NGO Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa. The later South African work was
developed into a 13 poster advocacy set\textsuperscript{33}, and 500 copies distributed to organisations across Southern African - a tool that Mendel calls a ‘tool of visual advocacy’ (Mendel, 2008, video).

Shown below is an image from Mendel’s series showing Thendeka Mantshi with her daughter at the antiretroviral clinic in Khayelitsha near Cape Town in South Africa.

The text under the photograph reads:

\textsuperscript{33} Produced by Treatment Action Campaign, with the support of SIDA, MSF South Africa, Perinatal HIV Research Unit, ActionAid, The Wellicome Trust, The South Africa National Gallery, Positive Lives and Network Photographers.
“Thendeka Mantshi and her daughter are both HIV-positive. Mantshi has become an activist fighting for the right of poor people with HIV or AIDS to have access to life-saving medicines. Now they are part of a new treatment program - sponsored by Treat Access Campaign, headquartered at the Khayelitsha squatter community, near Cape Town - aimed at demonstrating that people living in poor African communities can benefit from the same medications available to Westerners or well-off individuals in Africa” (Mendel in Genoways, 2006, p.44).

On the right of the photograph a court document is reproduced detailing the case in which Mantshi was a witness when the Treatment Access Campaign challenged pharmaceutical companies in 2001 (Mendel in Genoways, 2006, p.45).

The photograph shows Mantshi and her daughter looking straight at the viewer, framed by a roughly drawn black gaffer tape stuck onto a rusted corrugated iron wall. The metonymic code read in the photo, in the rusted background and the natural styling of the subject’s hair, lets the viewer know that Mantshi is not wealthy. The reading of a healthy, determined against-all-odds working class woman is the preferred reading. The viewer is not challenged any other signs of material poverty except for the rusty wall in the background. Mantshi addresses the viewer directly in her gaze,
her brow slightly furrowed, reading as determination. This meaning is anchored by the explanation in the caption text that Mantshi is an activist. There is no reading of her as a powerless, helpless individual. Mantshi stands with her back to the wall, determinedly facing the viewer.

Not all of Mendel’s subjects were prepared to disclose their status as openly as Mantshi. For many living with HIV in communities where stigma is high, disclosure can lead to a variety of problems for the subject in their life. Disclosure does lead to the reduction of stigma, but this needs to happen in a space and at a pace the subject is comfortable with. Informed consent means making sure the subject is aware of how the photographs will be used. In today’s globalized world, it is no longer sure to assume that photographs will remain unseen in the communities where they were taken, if intended for an ‘outside’ audience. Shown below is the representation by Mendel of two of the subjects in Mozambique who chose not to disclose their identities.
The photograph on the left, of ‘Anonymous’ shows the naked torso of a man holding his hands over his face, obscuring his identity. The photograph on the right, of ‘Anonymous (member of Kindlimuka)’ shows only the black gaffer tape frame on the wall. Reading the photographs on their own, it is difficult to make a preferred meaning from these images. The site of meaning-making, at the image itself, is influenced by the social modality surrounding the production of that image. The written text clearly anchors the meaning of these photographs as representing the broader issue of stigma in HIV/AIDS. ‘Anonymous is quoted in the text saying, “I can’t be identified because it may have a bad impact on my position as a university student...If my faculty discovered my status,
there is a real possibility that they will discriminate against me. Even if they don’t expel me right away, they will try all sorts of devious means to get rid of me” (Anonymous in Mendel in Genoways, 2006, p.50). The absence of the face signifies the subject’s absence of disclosure about HIV status in the face of the perceived threat to his personal ambitions.

The text accompanying the photograph representing ‘Anonymous (member of Kindlimuka)’ reads:

“I do not want to be alone within this frame. I would like to leave my space empty because there are so many who should be joining me. So I wish to use this opportunity to dedicate this empty frame to all the people on this continent who are living with HIV or AIDS - although many don’t know it.

I would also like to fill this frame with the millions of orphans who will have to grow up without their parents.

I want to leave this frame open for all those who are tormented by the fear of stigma, those who have been abandoned or isolated, those suffering discrimination from their family, friends, colleagues, and those suffering from lack of money to buy drugs or food.
This frame is for those who lost loved ones in silence.
This frame is also for all the ones who care” (Anonymous (member of Kindlimuka) in Mendel in Genoways, 2006, p.51).

Once the photographs are seen in the context of the Looking AIDS in the Face series and the accompanying written text, the meaning these two photographs of the faceless body and subject-less frame produces becomes clearer. The sign of the black gaffer frame stands in for the broader social impact of HIV/AIDS. The frame indicates the effect of HIV/AIDS on individual pictured within the frame, and simultaneously denotes the larger ‘invisibility’ of the epidemic.

In the introduction to the text, Mendel writes that unlike his earlier black and white work on HIV/AIDS, “There are no images of sick and dying here. The haunting power of this work lies in the fact that while most images are gentle, the traumatic and painful material is contained within the text” (Mendel in Genoways, 2006, p.43).

Mendel is seen responding to the social space, the shifting paradigm where the discourse of HIV/AIDS representation was operationalised: “At various point in my career, and you’ll see in the black and white work earlier, I was quite severely criticized in different types of contexts, and I did really try and take it onboard. I tried to find ways to tell positive stories, I tried to find ways to engage in
different ways, and different ways of representing people“ (Mendel, 2008, video). Looking AIDS in the Face was a divergence from Mendel’s earlier black and white work in a genre of traditional photojournalism to his current work which are constructed portraits and are both documentary and participatory in genre. Mendel reflects on this shift: “I think it was a movement where people were engaging with confronting the camera in a much more direct, very different kind of way but I think it also coincided with me getting more involved in text and words” (Mendel 2008, video). Mendel expanded the contextual elements associated with the publication of his photography to better represent the subject’s story and voice. This reflects Mendel responding to the shifting paradigm of the representation of HIV/AIDS. It shows how Mendel responded to participatory discourse calling for a more ‘subject’ centred, dignified representation.

Third text - Through Positive Eyes

The third text this study looks at is the website of a project co-directed by Mendel and named Through Positive Eyes, launched in late 2010. The project is produced by the Art|Global Health Center at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and in South Africa it is produced with Positive Convention. Through Positive Eyes is a project of MAKE ART/STOP AIDS, co-directed by Gideon Mendel in three
countries to date, and co-directors David Gere and Janna Shadduck-Hernandez. The project’s output from South Africa, Brazil and Mexico is published with more coverage to be added to the website as the documentation in other countries is completed. Through Positive Eyes was produced in Mexico City in August 2008, Rio de Janeiro in June 2009, and Johannesburg in March 2010. Currently ongoing is the production in April/May 2011) in Los Angeles.

*Through Positive Eyes* is described on their website as,

“An attempt to address key themes of the AIDS epidemic: widespread stigma, extreme social inequality, and limited access to lifesaving medication. The project is based on the belief that challenging stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS is the most effective method for combating the epidemic – and that art is a powerful way to do this” (*Through Positive Eyes, 2010*).

The project’s methodology draws on participatory methods in collaboration with Mendel’s work. Mendel refers to this model of production as ‘collaborative photography’ (*Mendel, 2011, video*). The project will include HIV-positive people in six countries and on five continents who participate in photography workshops led by photographer Crispin Hughes and mentored by Mendel to create photo stories of their own. Mendel visits the participants at work or home, to take
photographic portraits and to film them in their own surroundings. Audio interviews are recorded with the participants telling their own stories. International and local advocacy materials are to be produced from this collaboration. The website is one such tool. Other tools of advocacy include exhibitions, short films, and a book (Through Positive Eyes, 2010).

The call for participants for the workshop held in Los Angeles from April 28th to May 8th, 2011 appeals for “inspirational HIV-positive people” to participate in an “activist photography workshop” (Through Positive Eyes, 2011). The pamphlet notes that the twelve day workshop will be restricted to a total number of twelve HIV-positive people, resident in Los Angeles. As noted on the website, the workshop is, “Designed to teach people with no prior visual training to explore their world and express themselves through photography. Armed with new skills and techniques—as well as small, high-resolution digital cameras—participants are then set loose to document their lives in any way they choose” (Through Positive Eyes, 2010, website). In return, the participants receive a digital camera each, a stipend to cover travel costs to the workshop, a print of the portrait taken by Mendel of each participant, and a CD of their own photographs.

34 See appendices
The participants are not compensated for the use of their photographs in the project’s dissemination.

It is worth noting that *Through Positive Eyes* is produced under different discursive practices to the first two texts considered in this study. By the time of production of the *Through Positive Eyes* project, AIDS had been present in our social space for almost 30 years. In the decade from the publication of Mendel’s book *A Broken Landscape: HIV & AIDS in Africa* to the launch of the *Through Positive Eyes* website, the discursive practice of HIV/AIDS shifted from the securitisation of HIV/AIDS to equity in access to antiretroviral treatment. The meaning produced by the broader HIV/AIDS discourse is that HIV/AIDS is understood as a serious long-term illness, but, once managed properly through antiretroviral therapy and a healthy lifestyle, it is not a guarantee of an early death. This shifting practice of discourse lessens the coverage of HIV/AIDS in the media, as the urgency of the securitisation discourse, ‘the fight against HIV/AIDS’, lessens. (Swain, 2005: 259-60 in Campbell, 2008, p. 28).

The *Through Positive Eyes* website profiles the stories of participants from South Africa, Brazil and Mexico, and will include other countries as the work is produced. At the time of writing this, the homepage of the website features the
stories of eighteen of the participants, with a link to the rest of the stories. The home page also features a gallery of some of the most powerful photographs taken by the activists at the workshop. A portion of the home page is shown in a screenshot below. Mendel’s portraits are shown on the home page in a block layout, showcasing each individual. It’s interesting to note that at first glance the portraits all look like stills photographs. A closer reading reveals that six of the portraits are video portraits, so to speak. The subject faces the camera straight on, moving slightly while the camera maintains its gaze, never altering its perspective nor moving. The short video clip runs in a loop.
I’ll examine one of the participant’s representation more closely. I chose a South African participant by reading the metonymic code in the montage. Broader South African cultural codes are easily recognizable to a South African like myself. I chose Mgladzo as I was drawn to the joy in her story.

Mgladzo’s story is told through words, photographs and video. On Mgladzo’s page, a viewer can read a long text detailing her story, told in her voice. A viewer can choose to look at a gallery of her best photographs or to watch a video. Mendel’s portrait of the participant is reproduced very small
in comparison to the stage offered to the work of the participants.

The beginning of the video shows a title that reads “Mgladzo is one of seventeen HIV-positive people in Johannesburg who photographed their lives in order to fight stigma and prejudice. In March 2010 she “participated in a photography workshop, learning to use a camera to tell her story. The still images that follow are a collection of her photographs. Video by Gideon Mendel” (Mendel, 2010).

What follow next is mix of media; of Mendel’s video, and Mgladzo’s photographs laid to a soundtrack of an audio recording of Mgladzo speaking, telling her story and an audio bed of music. Mendel uses the video movement to introduce the viewer to the subject and as the story-telling begins, Mgladzo’s photographs start telling their story too. The video camera returns to a static portrait of Mgladzo, looking straight at the viewer, the sound of Mgladzo’s voice narrating her story returns but in the video portrait Mgladzo’s mouth doesn’t move. She continues, solidly and directly, to address the camera, sitting so still the audience can watch her breathe. The visual story returns to Mgladzo’s photographs after approximately 12 seconds. This technique, this filmic device, is used again at the time in Mgladzo’s story where she speaks of being proud to be a lesbian.
The use of this device produces a negotiated reading by
the audience, indicating that there is something different in
this video production that doesn’t conform to the cultural
code of video interviews. Mendel’s use of the video portrait
instead of the traditional ‘talking head’ that is seen during
interviews in video signifies the different social spaces of
production of Through Positive Eyes.

Mgladzo’s photographs of her relationship with her
partner, and her children produce meanings of happiness and
love.
The photographs taken by Mgladzo of her intimate moments with her lover signify their passion. Screenshots of the webpage showing those photos are seen above. Mgladzo proposed marriage\(^{35}\) to her love during the workshop timeframe and she documented her emotions and her actions photographically.

The photograph of her partner helping the children with their school work by the lamp of a lantern signifies good parenting. A screenshot of the webpage showing that photo is seen below.

\(^{35}\) While same-sex marriages are legal in South Africa, a lot of gay women are victimized.
In reading the metonymic code of Mgladzo’s photographs within the broader South African cultural code, one can situate Mgladzo within the broader cultural code of working class South Africans. Reading the photographs within a participatory code, they produce meanings of emotional intimacy without feeling of intrusion. The viewer is aware that the meaning the photo series makes is autobiographical. It is interesting to note that this text doesn’t produce representations performing a stereotyping function.

Drawing conclusions

In his earlier black and white work, it can be seen that Mendel does indeed reproduce the phobic images of HIV/AIDS.
widely seen in the media during the 1980s. My reading of the first text in this study, *While the World Looks Away*, shows that the representation changes slightly when represented in another context, in his book *A Broken Landscape: HIV & AIDS in Africa*. The contextualising of the images in the book through the quotes telling the subjects’ stories leads to a more dignified representation of the individuals who are the subjects of his documentation rather than an objectification of the Other. In his book, Mendel’s coverage is read in the context of his wider social work on HIV/AIDS, including that which documents community and activist responses, reflecting the representation of HIV/AIDS as much more than just a story of death. The context provided in the book provides a parallel space representing people as ‘fighting back’ against AIDS, rather than that of powerless victims. A significant discursive space producing Mendel’s early work is the practice of ‘struggle photography’ and its associated code.

The second text, *Looking AIDS in the Face*, shows Mendel responding to flows in the spaces of discursive practice. His reflexivity brings a participatory concept to his work as a tool of advocacy, that of giving voice to his subjects. This leads to the subjects themselves becoming more actively involved in their own representation. Mendel’s work now represents people living with HIV rather than dying of AIDS.
Mendel has been seen responding to the early AIDS activist discourse regarding the representations of AIDS as read in the phobic images widely used in the 1980s. Mendel becomes an activist using documentary photography as a tool of advocacy.

The discourse of the changing media landscape informed the production of Mendel’s third text, the website Through Positive Eyes. The project is housed at an academic institution rather than at a newspaper or an activist organisation, as in the past. Mendel’s mixed use of media and voices is a very effective tool to contextualise the story’s telling, to ensure the meaning produced is more closely aligned to the meaning the message maker intends. The use of contextualising multimedia anchors the meaning the text produces.

Mendel’s work can now be seen at the end of its shift to the participatory paradigm, almost wholly produced in participatory methods. His work informed through participatory methods, and discourses of documentary photography and HIV/AIDS activism and operationalised within a broader neoliberal paradigm.

Through his work, Mendel is seen responding to historical instances - Prins and Garrett’s securitisation discourse, the discourse I call people living with AIDS rather than dying, and using participatory methods. Charting the shifting
paradigm of HIV/AIDS represented in Mendel’s work shows that documentary photography and its practitioners are subject to discursive practices.

As can be seen in both the discussion of Hine’s work and Mendel’s work, both are subjects of similar discursive formations sustaining regimes of truth. In my analysis of Mendel’s work, it can be seen that through reflexivity at the site of production and the use of contextual storytelling tools, it can lead to different representations and different workings of representation, as a way to ending the perpetuation of the more stereotypical representation of AIDS. My analysis shows that through reflexive, careful, considered use of documentary photography it is possible to produce meanings creating social change at a discursive level. It shows that the social world can be changed through struggles at the discursive level, and that the probability of producing meaning-making tools of social change is higher when photographic documentary projects methodologies include aspects of participation, and self-representation.
References


Campbell D. (2011) *The problem with regarding the suffering of photography as pornography.* Downloaded from http://www.david-campbell.org/2011/01/21/problem-with-


Preparatory questions for analysis

The questions listed below are to be considered as a starting point for the study; prompting new ideas or areas not previously considered. My primary analysis will be at the site of the image itself; in order to begin my analysis I will reflect upon the following questions:

Production of an image

• Where was it made?

• Who made it?

• Was it made for someone else?

• What technologies does it production depend on?

• What were the social identities of the make the owner and the subject of the image?

• What were the relations between the maker, the owner and the subject of the image?

• Does the genre of the image address these identities and relations of its production?

Image itself

• What is being shown? What are the components of the image?

  How are they arranged?

• What is its material form?

• Is it one of a series?
Where is the viewer’s eye drawn to in the image, and why?

What is the vantage point of the image?

What relationships are established between the components of the image visually?

What use is made of colour?

How has its technology affected the text?

What is, or are, the genre(s) of the image? Is it documentary, soap opera, or melodrama, for example?

To what extent does this image draw on the characteristics of its genre?

Does this image comment critically on the characteristics of its genre?

What do the different components of an image signify?

What knowledges are being deployed?

Whose knowledges are excluded from this representation?

Does this image’s particular look at its subject disempower its subject?

Are the relations between the components of this image unstable?

Is this a contradictory image?

Audiencing

Who were the original audience(s) for this image?

Where and how would the text have been displayed originally?
· How is it circulated?

· How is it stored?

· How is it re-displayed?

· Who are the more recent audiences for this text?

· Where is the spectator positioned in relation to the components of the image?

· What relation does this produce between the image and its viewers?

· Is the image one of a series, and how do the preceding and subsequent images affect its meaning?

· Would the image have had a written text to guide its interpretation in its initial moment of display, for example a caption or catalogue entry?

· Is the image represented elsewhere in a way that invites a particular relation to it, in publicity materials, or in reviews?

· Have the technologies of circulation and display affected the various audiences’ interpretation of this image?

· What are the conventions for viewing this technology?

· Is more than one interpretation of the image possible?

· How actively does a particular audience engage with the image?
· Is there any evidence that a particular audience produced a meaning for an image that differed from the meanings made at the site of its production or by the image itself?

· How do different audiences interpret this image?

· How are those audiences different from each other, in terms of class, gender, race, sexuality and so on?

· How do these axes of social identity structure different interpretations?
Coding charts

Number of photos in each text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representations in each text</th>
<th>‘While the World Looks Away’</th>
<th>‘A Broken Landscape’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total no. photos</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crying family</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>Orphans</td>
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| Mirriam                     | 8                           | 13                  |
| Suffering                   | 1                           | 1                   |
| Crying family               | 1                           | 2                   |
| Grieving                    | 3                           | 1                   |
| Treatment                   | 2                           | 0                   |
| Orphans                     | 0                           | 0                   |
| Work                        | 0                           | 8                   |

Figure 2 (Nesbitt Hills, 2011)
Percentage representation

Eliza - ‘While the World Looks Away’

- Suffering: 40%
- Crying family: 10%
- Treatment: 20%
- Orphans: 20%
- Work: 20%

Eliza - ‘A Broken Landscape: HIV & AIDS in Africa’

- Suffering: 20%
- Crying family: 20%
- Treatment: 20%
- Orphans: 20%
- Work: 20%

Figure 3 (Nesbitt Hills, 2011)
Figure 4 (Nesbitt Hills, 2011)

Miriam - ‘While the World Looks Away’

- Suffering: 15%
- Grieving close-up: 23%
- Vigil/dead: 31%
- Graveside: 15%
- Cortege: 8%
- Orphans: 15%
- Work: 8%

Miriam - ‘A Broken Landscape: HIV & AIDS in Africa’

- Suffering: 13%
- Grieving close-up: 13%
- Vigil/dead: 13%
- Graveside: 13%
- Orphans: 13%
- Work: 25%
- Treatment: 13%
- Orphans: 13%
While the world looks away

Aids has taken a terrifying grip in Africa. The disease is making alarming inroads across the globe, but at least two thirds of those who are HIV-positive live in Africa. It is the leading cause of death, ruinous economically and tragic in its consequences, orphaning millions of children. In the west, drugs are making Aids manageable — in great swathes of Africa, barely anyone can afford them. Kevin Toolis and the photographer Gideon Mendel went to a small district hospital in Malawi and, over 24 hours, followed the lives and deaths in three particular families.
PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL OF CHANGE

Mention: (Text continues with details about the use of photography as a tool for change, possibly discussing various projects and their impact.)

[Image]: A photograph shows a person holding a lantern, possibly symbolizing light and hope in a dark setting.

[Caption]: "[Caption text]"
PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL OF CHANGE 107

advertisement

advertisement
A broken landscape: HIV & AIDS in Africa

Eliza Myeni.

Eliza was the daughter of my younger sister Effieda who died in 1994. Her father James who was a store clerk died last year. She had been in Form 2 at school in Mazabuka but when she fell ill she came to stay here at the home of her grandfather in Seimanzi Village as she did not have parents to care for her any more. She got very sick and was in the hospital for a month. With my other sister I stayed there taking care of her as well as we could. She was vomiting a lot and became very thin but we tried to get her to eat just a bit of maize porridge. She had a big cough and then she died in the middle of the night. I was there with her and she just held my hand tight. God protected her and then he wanted her.

JANE CHOSSA
Miriam Mbwana.

In my life I have had 11 children, eight girls and three boys. Seven have passed away. The first, Lawrence, died in 1993 and one of my children has died every year since. Another six of my grandchildren have died. AIDS has carried my family away like a flood.

I look after 10 of my children’s children. My granddaughter Madrin is in hospital with her son John, and they are both very weak. She has lost three children already. My daughter Mary now is very ill. We are very close. She is my best friend.

What have we done to deserve this? My father used to say ‘When death is there, pass by on the other side.’ But it’s not possible now. Death is everywhere.
Looking AIDS in the face.

GIDEON MENDEL

Looking AIDS in the Face
An Activist Photographic Project
from South Africa and Mozambique

Photographer Gideon Mendel, born in Johannesburg in 1979, began photographing the spread of AIDS in Africa in 1993. His book photojournalism: HIV & AIDS in Africa received international acclaim, but also a critique of photography’s sick and dying, Mendel openly acknowledges that with this project he crossed the line from journalistic objectivity to activism.

All of the people pictured in the series are living with HIV or AIDS. They are all from South Africa or Mozambique, where AIDS has become one of the most important social, political, and medical issues facing civil society. In the last two years, the organization Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) has challenged both drug companies and the South African government to make life-saving drug treatments available to the millions who need them and provide the simple drug treatments that can help millions avoid transmitting the HIV virus to their children at birth.

This unique body of work came out of a groundbreaking project in which itself, working in collaboration with TAC, produced a visual statement to some of the people living on the frontline of one of the most important struggles of our era. Each image works in conjunction with a powerful text component, either direct testimony of the subject or significant documents that relate to them. Unlike much of Mendel’s previous work and after work done on the issue of HIV/AIDS in Africa, these are no images of sick and dying people here. The haunting power of this work lies in the fact that while most of the images are graphic, the transcendent and painful material is contained within the text. As such they collectively bear witness to the overwhelming challenges that face those living with HIV and AIDS in Africa, but they also show the remarkable hope of antiretroviral treatments — that they are only made available to those who need them.

Originally created for display at the South African National Gallery and the Museum Africa, a selection of fifteen of these works was published in South Africa as a poster exhibition, which then was widely distributed to organizations across South Africa. Some of this work also was adopted for publication in the UNAIDS/IAWAC publication and went on to receive the Amnesty International Media Award for Photoreporting.

Of the recurring visual motif of the series, Mendel says: “The use of an impromptu black snap frame began as a way of making space for people who normally would refuse to participate due to the immense stigma attached to the disease and their fear of being identified. However, it was such a genuine moment and it became an open space hanged over the participants, who were very enthusiastic about the concept. They were free to occupy the frame in any way that they chose. I flipped the photo and framed the frame but they felt empowered to make choices about the nature of their representation. They all consider themselves AIDS activists and welcomed the opportunity to make their statements public. Some had already made the difficult choice to come out in public about their HIV status in order to combat the stigma, as strongly did they wish to show their faces within the frame. Others, for a variety of personal reasons, could not be identified, but chose to use the frame to make a significant statement. These portraits are a recognition of their courage, their integrity and their strength.”

Theodora Mantshi

Theodora Mantshi and her daughter are both HIV positive. Mantshi has become an activist fighting for the rights of poor people with HIV or AIDS to have access to life-saving medicines. Now they are part of a new treatment program—supported by Treatment Action Campaign, headquartered in the Khotsohobia squatter community, near Cape Town—aimed at demonstrating that people living in poor African communities can benefit from the same medicines available to Westerners or well-off individuals in Africa.

IN THE HIGH COURT OF SOUTH AFRICA
(TRANSVAAL PROVINCIAL DIVISION)

Case No. 393/98

In the matter between

PHARMACUTICAL MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA AND OTHERS

AND

THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA AND OTHERS

APPELLANT

1. The respondents

THEODORA MANTSHI

Do hereby make oath as follows:

1. I am a 43-year-old woman living at 414 Mahia, Kyaletsina. I am not married and have two children: one son and one daughter, both born in 1985.

2. The facts upon which I rely are within my knowledge unless it appears to the contrary from the documents.

3. I am a diabetics patient and have been treated for 11 years for diabetes mellitus.

4. I accepted the diagnosis.

5. In 1983 I became pregnant for the first time. I was then seven months pregnant when I was diagnosed with a congenital defect in my child from birth. My baby was born HIV positive.

6. I accepted the diagnosis.

7. At that time I was told that my baby would die. I was not told that my HIV status was not a danger to my child who was HIV positive.

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DATED THE 17TH DAY OF MAY 1998

THEODORA MANTSHI

64 THE VOLTAIC WEEKLY REVIEW
PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL OF CHANGE

Pumla Dladla
KNYSNERS, SOUTH AFRICA

I have been in Khayelitsha since 1996. I came here because my child was sick from the first month she was born in December 1995. I took her to the health clinic and they referred me to the Red Cross Children's Hospital. From there, she was sent to Groote Schuur hospital for a week. I am a tasker that she had HIV - I saw for myself, I did not believe, I have not knew what HIV was. In May 2000 I was very sick - coughing, losing weight, no appetite. At Red Cross they took my blood and referred me to MTP (Medical Task Force - Doctors Without Borders). Then last year they came with this program of antiretrovirals. I will thank all people with HIV who could have this treatment if they used it.

I am open but I do not want my child to be photographed because other children might stigmatise her and not play with her. When I had my child I did not know I had HIV positive. It was the Eastern Cape I had and not my in-educational. If I had known I would have wanted to take the drug nevirapine, which can stop the virus passing to the child. I would have done anything to have saved my child. My mother is dead and now I want to die, who would take care of my child?

Vuyani Jacobs
SNOWFLAKE, SOUTH AFRICA

When I tested positive I was not ill. I was taking a test for an insurance policy so there was no counselling at all. At that time I was a bank clerk. After taking some time off I told my boss. That was my biggest mistake. Everything became strange and many people started knowing about it. At work I had to come outside by taking an overdose of pills. When I began to get dizzy I informed that I did not want to do as usual at a clinic and they saved me.

I later became involved with one of the early support groups for HIV positive people. It was strange for me because I am Zulu today but there were gay people counselling me. These men helped me understand HIV/AIDS and how to cope emotionally.

In the year 2005 I started getting very sick and slim of weight. I had full-drown AIDS by the year 2006. After three months of having ACTs, I was back. My viral load became undetectable. My weight went up. I can now walk long distances and remember things like telephone numbers.

When my last girlfriend died, I decided to be open because I did not want to infect any other woman. I felt guilty because in the past I used to take things with a clear conscience. I hope that by being open now I can encourage others not to make the same mistake. Doctors make people infect others, history would want to carry that burden.

Nomaielo Zwedala
ESSAYIST, SOUTH AFRICA

I was diagnosed with HIV in 1996. The doctor said people must take me to the hospital to get a death certificate because I was almost dead from AIDS. When I came back from the hospital the family. I was brought with closed nose and I went home to the Eastern Cape. Then my boyfriend called me back to Cape Town and I lived in his house in Observatory for two years. Then he died seven years because of AIDS.

After that the doctors told me I was very weak. So they suggested that I go into trials for antiretroviral drugs. Before I went on the drugs I went and I could not take care of my son. I was very ill, my skin was bad, I lost my hair, I lost my hair. I had lost my nails and my teeth. I was afraid I was going to die. When I began the antiretrovirals I was afraid there would be bad side effects.

So I was afraid but didn’t fear to die and afraid to take the drugs.

Today my weight has come up and I feel healthy and strong. When I began the drugs I have some side effects but after two months they disappeared. I have begun to feel better. Every day I have to take three pills in the morning and three at night, at eight o’clock. At first it was not easy to stick to that, but now I never ever forget to take my drugs. If I had taken antiretrovirals I would not be here and there would be no one to take care of my son.

Matius Raimundo Azevogolela
REDUCTION ARREST REPORTER ORGANIZATION, NATIVO, MOZAMBIQUE

I suspect I was infected when I was in the army. I was training in undercover security in Zimbabue and at weekends we used to stay over and then go to the villages and sleep with women. We didn’t use condoms. When I began to get ill I went to the witchdoctor; she said my mother was bewitching me and my wife was part of the spell. So I chased my wife away and we separated.

One day a doctor at the hospital told me to look up someone at Kindumaka. I suggested I do an HIV test, and after 15 days I got my result which was positive. The first thing I did was to go home and apologize to my mother, for accusing her of bewitching me. She understood and forgave me.

I got a job at Kindumaka as a woman delivering documents, so I had no other choice. After some time I joined the home visiting project and was trained in the prevention of HIV and sexually transmitted disease. Because of my dedication I was promoted to coordinator of the home care project. Now I know my status. I feel very fine. I am no longer depressed and fearful. I like my job very much and always try to give moral support to people sick with HIV/HIV/AIDS, so they can have the same feeling as me.

Ginuwe Pendo

"The Virginia Quarterly Review"
Anonymous
MAPUTO, MOZAMBIQUE

I can't be identified because it may have a bad impact on my position as a university student. I can't even allow people to say what my full name is. Here in Mozambique there is discrimination practiced by the government. In one of his speeches, the Prime Minister said Mozambicans should not be involved in educating people with AIDS because it is too risky for them.

If my family discovered my status, there is a real possibility that they will discriminate against me. Even if they don't want me straight away, they will try all sorts of excuses means to get rid of me. They might unfa]ily lead me in my examinations. My family would understand, but friends and colleagues could isolate me. Among my fellow students, we form weak groups and they might not want me in their groups.

I think I was infected with HIV by a blood transfusion after a car accident. Before that, I was a blood donor, but afterwards they told me that the blood wasn't wanted anymore. Up to that point, I had never had sex with a girl.

Anonymous (member of Kindizimba)
MAPUTO, MOZAMBIQUE

I do not want to be alone within this home.

I would like to leave my space empty because there are so many who should be joining me. I wish to use this opportunity to dedicate this empty home to all the people on this continent who are living with HIV or AIDS—although many don't know it.

I would also like to fill this frame with the millions of orphans who will have to grow up without their parents.

I want to leave this home open for all those who are tormented by the fear of stigma, those who have been abandoned or isolated, those suffering discrimination from their family, friends, colleagues, and those suffering from lack of money to buy drugs or food.

This home is for those who lost their loved ones in silence. This frame is also for all the ones who care.
ACTIVIST PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP: SEEKING INSPIRATIONAL HIV-POSITIVE PEOPLE

Deadline to Apply for Through Positive Eyes: Friday, April 15th

No Photographic Experience Necessary

To apply to take part in the workshop, send an email to lgould@arts.ucla.edu answering these two questions in approximately 150 words each.

1. We’d love to get to know you. Tell us a little bit about yourself.
2. What interests you about Through Positive Eyes and why do you want to take part?

What you’ll contribute:
1. Your story, to fight HIV stigma here in Los Angeles and around the world
2. Compelling photographic images from your life
3. A commitment to participate in HIV advocacy

What you’ll receive:
1. Panasonic Lumix digital camera
2. $200 honorarium to cover travel costs
3. A portrait of yourself, taken by photographer and project co-director Gideon Mendel
4. A CD with all your own photos

Project Dates: April 28th – May 8th, 2011 - Various Times
4/28 - Thursday- Welcome Dinner
4/29 - Friday - Full day Workshop at UCLA
4/30 - Saturday - Shooting photography on your own in the morning; afternoon workshop
5/1- 5/3 - Shooting photography on your own: 1/2 day portrait shoot with Gideon Mendel
5/4 - 5/5 - half-day one-on-one photo edit and interview sessions
5/7- Saturday- Full Day Workshop at UCLA
5/8 - Sunday (Mother’s Day) 4pm - Exhibition Unveiling Event for family and friends

About Through Positive Eyes
From April 28-May 9, 2011 a group of 12 HIV-positive Los Angeles residents will pick up cameras and join a global project that gives photographic voice to people living with HIV in major cities around the world (Mexico, Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg). Through Positive Eyes is an arts-based public health project that addresses key themes of the AIDS epidemic: widespread stigma, extreme social inequity, and limited access to lifesaving medication. The project is based on the belief that challenging stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS is the most effective method for combating the epidemic—and that art is a powerful way to do this.

The project lives within communities as a traveling exhibition, and on the web at www.throughpositiveeyes.org

Learn more at www.throughpositiveeyes.org
Through positive eyes

These are my photographs.  
This is my story.

A global photographic collaboration with Gideon Mendel and MAKE ART/STOP AIDS.

A selection of some of the most powerful photographs from the project

See all the participants and find out what connects their stories

About this site

Through Positive Eyes gives photographic voice to people living with HIV in major cities around the world. It is based on the belief that HIV-positive people should pick up their own cameras and make their own artistic statements. In doing so, they create powerful tools for combating stigma, which is one of the most formidable barriers in reducing the spread of AIDS today.

More about our aims
Mgladzo’s photographs.
Through Positive Eyes

Mgladzo, Johannesburg

Last year, I found myself this beautiful lady and we started dating. She's HIV-negative. She is there for me, and she loves me with her heart and her soul. I love her. We do everything together, and she loves my kids very much.

When the doctor told me I have AIDS, I said "Fuck you." I didn't take it seriously. But as years went by my mom found out she was infected and so my sisters too—my younger sisters and my older sister. So we were all HIV-positive in the home. Last year my mom got sick and passed on, even though she was on ARVs. And
Through Positive Eyes

Mgadzo, Johannesburg

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When the doctor told me I have AIDS, I said “Fuck you.” I didn’t take it seriously. But as years went by my mom found out she was infected and my sisters too—my younger sister and my older sister. So we were all HIV-positive in the house. Last year my mom got sick and passed on, even though she was on ARVs. And then my sister also passed away because of HIV and HPV, human papillomavirus. My younger sister is alive now but she’s the only one left. And she’s sick. I am angry because I thought I knew how to deal with HIV.

Some people say that I have demons because I’m a lesbian. There was a time when I decided, “This is not good for me. I am trying to make myself into a boy, and I’m not a boy.” So I decided to grow my hair and get a boyfriend. That’s when all these things started. I got the boyfriend and we slept together, and that’s when I got HIV. And I was pregnant at the same time. I was 15 years old.

But I didn’t know that I had HIV. When the child was born, she got sick and then they decided to take my blood. That’s when they told me I had AIDS. The child died at four months. I myself was still a kid.

When I grew up I decided to try having kids again. In 2004, I went back to the very same man, we slept together, and I fell pregnant. My son’s name is Mpendulo, which means
“answer,” because God gave me a child—my prayers were answered. In 2007, we had another baby. I named him Asibonga, “thanks.” As the father of my kids came closer, I disclosed my sexuality to him and he was supportive. Unfortunately he died two weeks ago. He loved his kids very much.

My kids’ daddy was HIV-positive and so was I, but I wanted to have HIV-negative kids. So I went to the clinic and they informed me about PMTCT—prevention of mother-to-child transmission. I went through that process. I attended every appointment that I had and they gave me Nevirapine. I followed every precaution that they said I must take. I did everything. Now my two kids are healthy, they know my HIV status, and they know my sexuality.

In 2007, my colleague, an open lesbian, was murdered. They stabbed her, they shot her, and they took her underwear and put it in on her head. I was so confused and scared. I’m proud of myself, but going out and saying it loudly, “You know what, I’m a lesbian and I’m proud!”—it’s very difficult.

Last year, I found myself this beautiful lady and we started dating. She’s HIV-negative. She is there for me, and she loves me with her heart and her soul. I love her. We do everything together, and she loves my kids very much. Even my son says that he’s now got a mommy and daddy. I’m the daddy, she’s the mommy.
I proposed on Saturday, it was my birthday. She was crying and screaming. She couldn’t believe this is happening. Lucky me, she said yes. Now she’s not just a girlfriend, she’s my fiancée. When I decided to propose, I just felt that this is the right time for us to do what we want to do—become a family. Because we are a family already.