Visual empathy

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This paper will address the relation between visuals and empathy from a multidisciplinary perspective. A particular focus will be placed on mass-mediated visuals (Kaplan 2011), such as press photographs (Müller, Kappas & Olk 2012), online- and TV-mediated visuals as well as drawings and artwork in a therapeutic context. Analyzing the production, dissemination, perception, reception and interpretation of visuals and how they relate to the presence or absence of human empathy is still poorly understood, due to complex interactions and synergies. In the proposed talk diverse strands on empathy research as a human capacity to connect to others (e.g., Batson 2009; Coplan & Goldie 2011; Decety & Ickes 2009; Koss 2006; de Waal 2009, 2012), to identify, but also to distinguish oneself from others, will be woven together in the pursuit of the answers to the following different, but interconnected, research questions: A) What is the relation between empathy and visuals? B) How can certain violent phenomena be linked to empathy, and what is the role of visuals? C) How can visuals be of use in therapy?

Can mass-mediated visuals (e.g., 9/11, media coverage on natural or man-made disasters) traumatize audiences (e.g., Ahern et al 2004; Kaplan 2011; Schemer 2012; Trempler 2013; Zelizer 2010)? What is the connection and what are the mutual effects of human empathy and traumatization? Is empathy a precondition for traumatization? Is there a difference in the type and level of empathy in real situations as opposed to mediated situations? What exactly is the nexus between “real”, fictional and mediated situations and the experienced empathetic responses? If there is a link between empathetic responses to (mass-mediated) visuals, then there must also be a “feedback” in terms of visuals being at the center of the cure of mental disorders that are related to visual empathy.
Selected References:


