

Student Name: Molly Summerfield

Student Number: 2001538

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Empowerment, Stereotypes, and Body

An Independent Research Dissertation Proposal

Within my dissertation proposal, I will be exploring three keywords: empowerment, stereotypes, and body. These three keywords reflect my interests and passion for supporting female empowerment and liberation in the visual arts. I have always been interested in how the media can affect women in many aspects from sexualizing female bodies to false or wrong advertising, and overall degrading. I find it intriguing how modern society continues to portray women provocatively and how social media is an open window for women to easily expose explicit content of their bodies. The use of identity, self-identification, and representations will help me accumulate and form a question for my dissertation.

Empowerment

Empowerment, I believe, is when a woman connects with herself both emotionally and physically. 'One is not born a woman; but rather becomes one,' Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (1949). Simone de Beauvoir is a well-known philosopher and this quote is one of the foundational texts of twentieth-century feminism. She plays on the role and construction of gender identity. There can be many interpretations of this quote. This is led back to Thomas Aquinas, (philosopher), who referred to women as being imperfect to men. This resulted in 'humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as a relation to him,' Simone De Beauvoir. However, Beauvoir concludes that it is the value of social norms that suggests that it is not nature that defines a woman, but merely that a woman defines herself by the connection with nature on her own emotional pathway of life.

Thanks to the actions of the first feminists of the *Women's Liberation Movement* (the 1970s), women have rights equal to men. However, fundamentally, women's servitude in a male society has still not changed in modern society. Are women not recognizing their oppression when they sell provocative images online for them to feel liberated, yet men continue to pay to see them? To what extent does it take for women to feel empowered?

Luce Irigaray cultivates another horizon of feminism, '*Feminism of Difference*' and its ethnopolitical impact. Meanwhile, Simone de Beauvoir, '*Feminism of Equality*', aims to women achieving the social status of men. This has essentially motivated women and empowered women to change the unequal social structures around the world. In contrast to this, Luce Irigaray's '*Feminism of Difference*' problematizes this and argues what is needed to enable these 'differences.' Is it possible that Irigaray has formed a new horizon that opens up a new ontological status for women and men? Representation and politics are very controversial terms. They both have a massive impact on how women should feel empowered. Judith Butler sheds light on the misunderstandings and trouble of gender identity in '*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*,' (1990). Judith Butler states that it is the persuasive cultural condition that tends to be where women's lives are misrepresented or not even represented at all.

The Guerilla Girls, (1985), are an anonymous feminist and activist group that illuminates the power of humor as political praxis and can empower, enlightens, and provides catharsis within their work. Their activism is well-fitting with the idea of gender identity, representations, and most of all; empowerment. In regards to the keyword; empowerment, it is associated well with the Guerilla Girls as they often use 'empowering' to describe the effect of the overall membership. The empowering

factor of their work is being able to laugh at the 'incongruity between the art world's self-representation and the inadequate reality.'

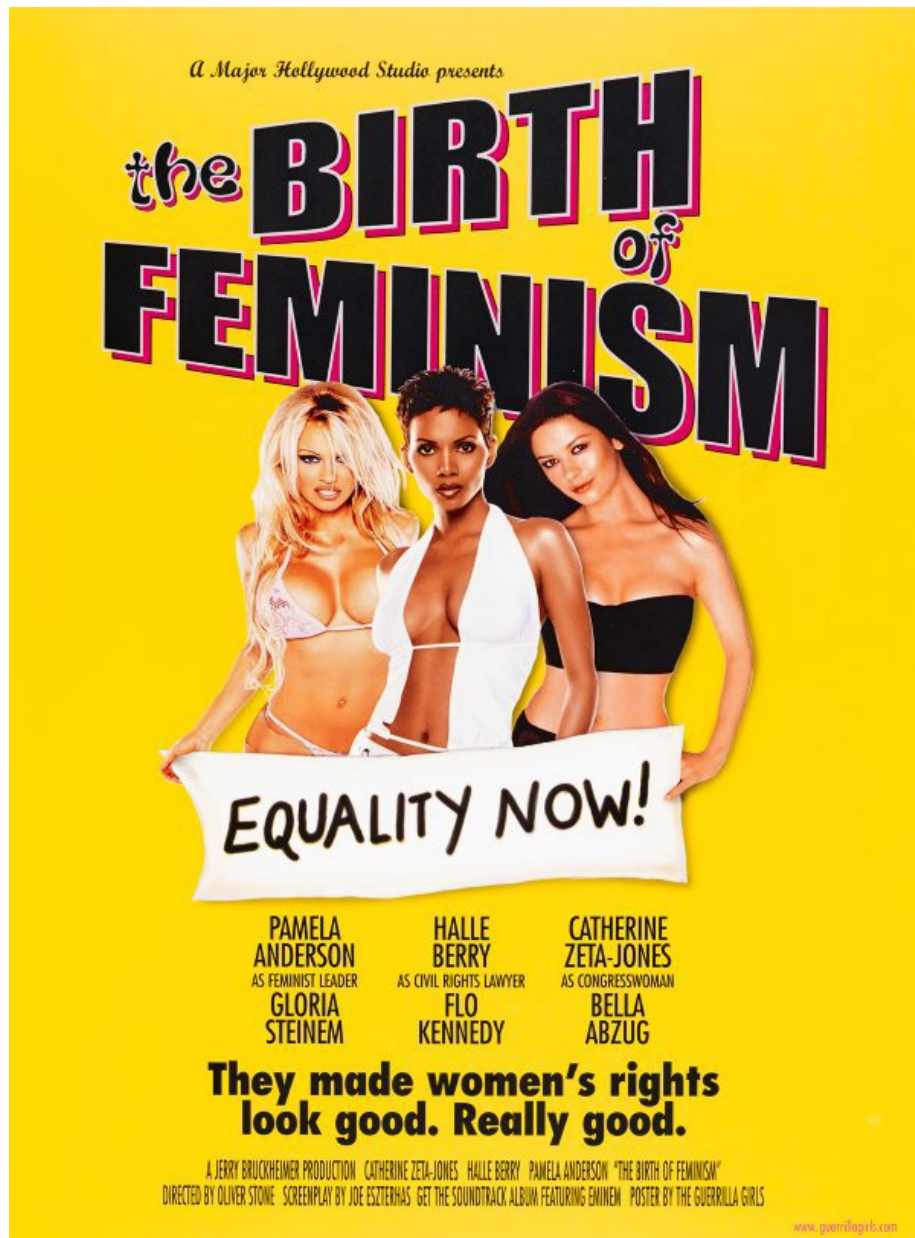


Fig. 1

Guerrilla Girls, (2001), *The Birth of Feminism*.

The Guerilla Girls often use billboards and posters as a way to expose corruption and discrimination. These can often be deconstructed by the use of semiotic analogy, Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, (1977). *The Birth of Feminism* is a photographic paradox in itself and instantly perpetuates gender stereotypes. The Guerilla Girls cleverly advertise a production on American Feminism 'A Major Hollywood Studio' written in small italic at the top of the poster. They also use an obvious, almost humorous way of reinforcing the male gaze by using women as sex symbols wearing only bikinis. John Berger's, *Ways of Seeing*, (1972), can also be applied here revealing the concept of idealisation from the use of models. The idealization is shown through three glamour models featuring: Pamela Anderson, Halle Berry, and Catherine Zeta-Jones, all starring the roles of feminist leaders; Gloria Steinem, Flo Kennedy, and congresswoman, Bella Abzug. The Guerilla Girls reinforce the norms of the superficial standards that women are hired on what they look like as opposed to their talents. There is a huge irony in this advertisement as it reveals many misrepresentations if it were made into a movie. Empowerment can be shown through three strong women, demanding 'Equality Now!', however, the use of the stereotypical representation of women shows how their bodies are being used for consumer purposes. This emphasises the objectification of women. Are women the face and embodiment of the main product?

Stereotypes

Stereotypes generally cover a particular category of people. The group's that are often stereotyped are normally on the basis of race, sexuality, gender identity, and more. However, the stereotypes I will be referring to will be gender identity, based on women in particular, and how women are stereotyped in the media. Stereotypes was

briefly introduced at the end of the last keyword, however, by exploring the works of Barbara Kruger, an American conceptual artist and collagist, stereotypes will be more in-depth. Kruger's work focuses on political hypocrisy, consumerism, and stereotypes.

Through Image and Text, Kruger uses one of the most important strategies of stereotypical representations by using the pronouns 'you', and 'I/we.' The direct address reinforces the idea of unstable identity. Kruger's practice (1980s), was based mainly on photo collage and photomontage revealing aggressive, argumentative, and assertive works. Barbara Kruger often uncovers the 'rhetoric of the image', by using sharp black and white contrasted images that are disrupted by superimposed texts. Roland Barthe's theory of signs and symbols can also be applied here to reinforce ideological control by economic and political power and to decode semiotic protocols.



Fig.2. Barbara Kruger, (1989), *Your body is a battleground*.

Your body is a battleground, (1989), reveals habits of consumption and judgements that interrupt conventional responses. The dominant decoding of gender can be seen in the contrast through the asymmetrical line that separates both sides of the face. On one hand, it could relate to authority, patriarchal privilege, and expertise. On the other hand, is infantilization, sexual integration, and feminine passivity. The perfectly lined symmetry also suggests that Kruger addresses the critical political issues criticising objectified stereotypical standards and that women are perpetuated by the media. The image depicts that the woman is no longer an individual but a product of society. This is a stereotypical representation of how women should look; an object of beauty. 'Advertisements shower us with beauty,' Simone de Beauvoir: *Feminist Writings*, (2015). Upon reflecting on my research so far there are a few questions that come to mind that I would like to take note of, linking with stereotypes, in order to help me conclude and contextualise to form a question at the end of my essay. Why do we compare women's beauty like we compare the aesthetic sensibility with the most famous paintings to the greatest works of literature? Why are women always being depicted in the degrading images displayed in advertisements to sell a product, but never a man? Is it possible that a world without women being used, is a world without pictures?

Lynda Benglis, a visual artist, also known for her latex sculptures and wax paintings. However, during the height of the feminist movement, Lynda Benglis was heavily

influenced by gendered stereotypes calling them 'sexual mockeries.' Benglis created a very controversial statement within her *Artforum Advertisement*, (1974), where she posed nude holding a dildo and only wearing sunglasses.



Fig 3. Lynda Benglis, (1974), *Artforum Advertisement*

Benglis subverts women stereotypes and almost makes a mockery of male stereotypes or could be 'manipulating men through the exploitation of female sexuality,' Cindy Nemser, a feminist critic. The photo mimics a centrefold of a magazine; from glistening skin to a toned and tanned body, In contrast, it also reveals pornographic context by her stance, with her hair cropped back, and the artificiality of the dildo. It is in fact a radical form of art and feminism. Benglis demanded more playfulness within the sexual roles and gender identity during the women's movement, claiming the 'bad girl' icon. Whilst this advert is controversial, it

can also be seen to acknowledge Laura Mulvey's, *The Male Gaze*, (1975), where she discusses the major shifts of self-representation in digital culture, reinforcing what it means to look at the so called 'fashioned female body.' It can be seen that Kruger uses text violently, while Benglis' stance is very male dominant as they both almost mimic male predatory behaviour, however they both subvert the idea of gender identity and stereotypes.

Body

The previous keyword picks up on gender stereotypes in the media and how they are portrayed, however Jenny Saville, a British painter subverts the typical ideology of female stereotypes and normalises female bodies. Courageously emphasising that women should not condone the media, but allow them to be expressed freely undermining beauty standards. Within the visual arts, Jenny Saville contributes towards the representation of female bodies revealing new constructions of new identities of the body. Saville's paintings often exceed the frame emphasising the topographies of a typically fat female demonstrated through detailed observations of bodily surfaces.

Luce Irigaray develops an explicit feminist account on touch of the body through her identification of the 'morpho-logic' (2004). Jenny Saville is seen to be 'breaking the tautology where only men's sex is spoken', Robinson (2006). Saville's work often draws light on feminist politics that concerns the re-presentation of the female body. Her works reflect on her growing up in a society that was body-conscious in the nineteen-eighties. Therefore, Saville found a gap in the art world to produce her frustrations through visual art as no other female artists were talking about

body-consciousness. There are concerns and assertion of sexual difference and ontology of representations that Elisabeth Grosz (2005) proposed that this

May provide a new direction for a more abstract approach to feminism, the kind of abstraction that is needed to bring about new frames of reference and new kinds of questions.

There is resonance with Irigaray's 'sexual difference' that challenges conceptual systems that refuse to acknowledge their own specific interests and limitations .

However, Grosz criticises Irigaray who fails to explore the real women beyond the patriarchal containment.

Jenny Saville manages to shift away from the stereotypical traditional representation and sheds light on the real representations, the true, and the uncomfortable parts that women are often self-conscious about their bodies. Jenny Saville's feminism lies 'in a clear-eyed unromantic view of the female form- undistorted by sexual desire or notions of idealised femininity,' Alison Roberts, *The Guardian*, (2003). How can we call it feminism when we are disgusted by real representations? Are we not supposed to make each other feel comfortable and confident in our own bodies?



Fig 4. Jenny Saville, *Propped*, 84"x 72" (1992)

Propped(1992), is rather captivating; yet unsettling from the disproportions. The thighs dominate the painting meanwhile the writing scratched over the top reads: 'if we continue to speak in this sameness- speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other,' Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe Qui N'en est Pas Un*, (1977).

The physical manipulation and the distortions of the body could mimic the manipulations and motions of how women are manipulated into thinking their bodies have to look a certain way. Or on the other hand, the possible psyche of disgust of our bodies. The brushstrokes Saville uses are a way to break those boundaries and conventions. Saville paints the flesh with subtle pinks, blues, and yellows to highlight the imperfections. They are also used to challenge the preconceptions of beauty. Jenny Saville gives a new perspective on women's bodies, like Naomi Wolf, a philosopher does in her book, *The Beauty Myth*,

If we are to free ourselves from the dead weight that has once again been made out of femaleness, it is not ballots or lobbyists or placards that women will need first; it is a new way to see.

The Beauty Myth focuses on female stereotypes and ideals. Naomi Wolf emphasises how stereotypical images of women are perpetuated by the media. Jenny Saville manages to break these social norms and values possibly. Is it time for society to wake up and look in the mirror?

To conclude this essay, I originally started with three keywords: empowerment, stereotypes, and body. By contextualising theorists and thorough research, the information above has led me to numerous questions. I have explained and deconstructed how advertisements and the media manipulate female identities and stereotypes. It is evident that the feminist artists such as the Guerrilla Girls, and Barbara Kruger tended to explore the conceptual route as a way of deconstructing and decoding female beauty. They reveal the truth that the media constructs an ideal

beauty. Whereas Jenny Saville breaks the social norms and conventions to reveal the truth of one's self, that real self. After reading over my key words, the essay broke down into sub-genres of identity, representations, and misrepresentations. Overall, what it really comes down to, is the hiding of imperfections. Through the poster of the Guerilla Girls we are confronted with conventional glamour models, to Barbara Kruger's, *Your body is a battleground*, with the perfect symmetrical face. Jenny Saville encourages women to be real and true to themselves, revealing all the imperfections. In today's society we are confronted with the media and many forms of social media with easy access to filters and editing. This has led me to the working research question: After all the efforts of the feminist movements throughout the years, why are women still hiding? This coincides with the sub-genre questions: Why do women continue to be manipulated by the media? How do filters and editing make women feel empowered? Do women follow these structures to feel confident? What was beauty before the media?

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