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How Does Photography Play a Part in Changing the Way that People think of Gender and Beauty?

Throughout my thesis, I will compare photography from the last century to the current century to explore how photography has allowed us a society to form and represent our sense of self and beauty.

On average 92 million selfies are taken daily (Matic Broz, 2022), so roughly 1,066,944 selfies are taken in 16 minutes, which is the average time it will take you, the reader, to read through my thesis (Capitalize my title, undated).

Throughout this dissertation I will look at exploring how photography plays a part in changing a way that people think of gender and beauty. I wanted to look at how gender and beauty are perceived by society by looking at comments on social media, television programmes, and magazines whilst also looking at how they have developed over the years, because I find it interesting seeing the societal changes in views on this topic.

I will look at past and present sources to focus on throughout each of my three chapters whilst using theoretical books to support my findings within each conclusion of each separate chapter. The sources I will explore include Television, Magazines and Social Media whilst comparing the information I find to relevant artists and articles.

Chapter 1: Television

Throughout this chapter I will start by exploring how the artwork of Nan Goldin, looking at her self-portraiture and documentary photography. I will compare these artworks with the influence of the Television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* to see how they have impacted societies' thoughts on gender and beauty. I will achieve this by looking at a variety of different sources such as; video clips and news articles. Looking at how both Nan Goldin and *RuPaul's Drag Race* support Judith Butler's theory of gender being a performance, which she implies within her 1990 book *Gender Troubles*, in the *Subversive Bodily Acts* section stating "Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent" suggesting that gender is not what is on the outside it is who you are on the inside and how you perform it.

Nan Goldin became more well known from her controversial documentation of her life and the lives of her close friends who were drag queens during the 1980s, which is the artwork I will explore within this chapter. Goldin has been described by artnet as a 'visual autobiography'. Goldin explains how she became interested with drag queens stating "I wanted to pay

homage, to show them how beautiful they were. I never saw them as men dressing up as women, but as something entirely different - a third gender that made more sense than

Figure 1



either of the other two. I accepted them as they saw themselves; I had no desire to unmask them with my camera.” (Tate, undated). A popular piece of work by Nan Goldin is her 1991 piece *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a Taxi, NYC* (shown in Figure 1), the use of eye contact with the camera and the neutral facial expressions on the drag queens’ faces, making the viewer wonder if they are happy with how their lives are, with it being a difficult time for the LGBTQ+ community at the time.

Another piece of work of Goldin’s is 1989 self-portrait titled *Nan one month after being battered* (shown in Figure 2), which is an emotionally powerful image of Nan

with a bloodshot eye, two black

Figure 2



eyes with them both also swollen as a result of a domestic abuse attack, something I find interesting with this image of Goldin is how even though she is has noticeable injuries which are

quite horrible looking, she has taken the time to apply red lipstick on and brush her hair which I find an interesting comparison with how she has quite ugly injuries she still manages to keep on top of her physical appearance. The image first shown in her 1985 *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, within the book Goldin explains “I want to show exactly what my world looks like, without glamorization, without glorification. This is not a bleak world but one in which there is an awareness of

pain, a quality of introspection” which implies that she does not want to make something out like her life to be beautiful when it is not.

RuPaul’s Drag Race started in 2009 and is still ongoing, with many spin off series’ being aired on different streaming platforms. It is hosted by American drag queen RuPaul who first became popular in the 1990s (Anthony Green, 2022), the show looks at hosting a variety of weekly competitions between competing drag queens to then one of them eventually winning. Throughout the 13 years of it being on air there has been a number of controversial topics that have resulted from the show and been discussed on the show.

A particular episode from season 2 (episode 8)

of the UK spin off that I found eye opening

where drag queen Bimini Bon Boulash walked the runway wearing an oversized skin coloured shirt with skin coloured tights all covered in red jewels on their clothes and body acting as though they were spots (shown in Figure 3), challenging the idea of not being classed as ‘beautiful’ if you had acne. This look is quite inspiring with how growing up it was thought that you were

not beautiful if you had spots, and Bimini Bon Boulash was fighting this ideology by

Figure 3



looking very beautiful walking the runway on national television, and later won the competition from that week (Nicola Dall’asen, 2021).

Figure 4



On the contrary of this moment of empowerment being shown on the show, there was a scene from the same season on episode 5, drag queen Joe Black walks the runway wearing a dress from H&M (shown in figure 4), which after RuPaul found this out states “I don’t want to see any fucking H&M... That’s what everyday people do” (Henry Giardina, 2021). This had a mixed response online, some people finding RuPaul’s reaction

funny but other people feeling frustrated by RuPaul with how they did not consider that Joe Black was struggling financially due to coronavirus and being limited to work so they had to buy cheap clothes. This can be quite damaging to the viewers of the programme, especially with the timing of the airing of this series with it being during the pandemic and people struggling financially anyway. With hearing RuPaul reacting the way that they did could put a lot of pressure on people to buy expensive clothes to look good, when they are struggling financially in the first place.

In regards to letting Transgender women and men compete on the show, in 2018 RuPaul stated, “Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not

men doing it” (Decca Aitkenhead, 2018), RuPaul received a lot of backlash from this statement, with people expressing their upset and frustration, including Gia Gunn a drag queen who appeared on the sixth season of Drag Race, and later came out as a transgender woman after her season tweeting “Although I do feel the separation from being a drag queen and now a trans woman, there should not be any reason to be ‘not accepted’ when it comes to the art of drag. If you are a fierce artist, you’re a fierce artist and should be judged based on your art. NOT your gender identity” (Gia Gunn, 2018). RuPaul has now apologised for the upset that they have caused and have now taken huge steps with having many trans women and men and now a cisgender woman competing on the show.

Looking at these two sources and the information that I have explored, I have found that it supports my initial thoughts on how the opinions on gender and gender identity have changed to a degree, with how Nan Goldin was assaulted by her partner and RuPaul claiming that transgender women and cis women can not take part in drag because it takes away the ‘irony’ of a man doing it. However, 30 years ago there could not have been a television programme surrounding drag queens, and I believe that Nan Goldin has played a massive part with her photography in encouraging this change.

Both of these sources support Judith Butlers theory of gender being a performance, which she implies within her 1990 book *Gender Troubles* shown in the statement “perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction

between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.” (page 11), adding to the implication that gender is not what is on the outside it is who you are on the inside and how you perform it.

Chapter 2: Magazines

Throughout this chapter I will explore the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and compare how his work differs or is similar to Vogue. I will look at how both Mapplethorpe and the ideologies and photographs of Vogue have impacted society’s opinions of beauty. This will be achieved by including a variety of sources like news articles, gallery websites which I will then compare Laura Mulvey’s *Visual and Other Pleasures* 1989 book to look at the theory of the social constructs that control how and why people are represented in magazines. This will then help me compare Robert Mapplethorpe and Vogue to help me come to a conclusion on how people’s opinions on beauty have been affected by photography.

Figure 5



Robert Mapplethorpe was best known for his “powerful black-and-white portraits and self-portraits. His photographs both challenge us and present us with images of classical beauty.” (Tate, undated). Mapplethorpe was seen as quite controversial for his inclusion of nudes and ‘homoerotic’ images, with people debating if his

photographs objectified the

subjects. (Philip Kennicott, 2019). Mapplethorpe stated “I’m looking for perfections in form. I do that with portraits. I do it with cocks. I do it with flowers. It’s not different from one subject to the next. I am trying to capture what could be sculpture.” (undated) This statement sums up Mapplethorpe’s work really well, particularly for two pieces of work shown in figure 5 and 6, though this statement

Figure 6



male black sexual partners (Liz Publika, 2020).

works really with describing

Mapplethorpe’s work, it can be seen as quite controversial with how Mapplethorpe only photographed people who fit the beauty standards of the 80s, when the images were taken. Contrary to this people argued that he took a major risk with the majority of models being his

With Mapplethorpe’s aim being to make people realize that they can be anything (Liz Publika, 2020), taking inspiration from Michelangelo’s sculptures and paintings, Mapplethorpe mainly explored beauty and often showed the bare body within his images. In figure 6 it is shown that Mapplethorpe also liked to create angelic looking photographs too, which is another similarity to Michelangelo’s work, particularly *The Creation of Adam* piece which is shown below in figure 7.



Figure 7

This piece is also a good comparison for a lot of Mapplethorpe's work with how he uses non traditional subjects posing in traditional ways within his images.

The different models used within Vogue throughout their existence have changed massively since they first started in 1892 (Glam observer, 2020) it has changed quite significantly.

Looking at British Vogue's 1965 issue with Sophia Loren (shown in figure 8) where Loren is wearing very heavy eye makeup with strong eye contact with the camera, which makes the reader believe that she is there to be looked at rather than anything else significant. With the low cut on Loren's top/dress alongside her eye

Figure 8



contact it adds to the reader's desire that she was seducing them. Comparing



Figure 9
away” (Asia Milia Ware, 2020).

Loren’s cover to the 1950 cover of Vogue (shown in figure 9) there is quite a bit of similarity with the ideology of eye contact and heavy makeup used in these two covers. The red of the lipstick used within the cover is often linked to femininity and power which goes back to the suffragette movement to try and show people that they are strong, especially when men were trying to “strip that

During the time when these two covers came out for Vogue there was not much diversity with the models shown on the covers and throughout the publications with the models being predominantly white women who were upper class and were stereotypically beautiful, no plus size models, no people of colour, no disabled people, no members of the LGBTQ+ community. However, now there is quite a diverse range of models being included on the covers and in the publications. With people like Rihanna, Zendaya, Lizzo, Harry Styles, Greta Thunberg, Malala, Emma Corrin, Yasmin Finney, Dame Judi Dench, Timothee Chalamet and many more different celebrities. Though a lot has changed with there being a wider variety of models making appearances in Vogue, there are still little appearances made by people with disabilities which is quite degrading for those of their readers who have disabilities which might lead them to believe that

because they are not being represented on Vogue that they are not beautiful. Leading on from this, they do still mainly focus on beauty and looks with one of the headlines on the website (BritishVogue.com) being “Kate Moss’ Bare Faced Beauty Shows Sometimes Less Really is More” with this being placed near “The Princess of Wales’ Best Beauty Moments” which still puts pressure on their consumers to focus on their looks.

After comparing these two different sources and looking at the information that I have found during my research, it is clear that society’s opinions on beauty have changed to a degree in the past 30 years. Looking at Mapplethorpe’s photography and comparing the development of vogue, I believe that Mapplethorpe has had a major impact on how beauty is perceived by society. His work being controversial at the time of its creation and release to now it is quite rare to not see people representing beauty the way that he did. Seeing the contents of Vogue from before Mapplethorpe started creating and showing his work there has been a massive change. Going from Sophia Loren’s 1965 issue to Rihanna’s May 2020 (shown in figure 10) issue comparing how Sophia Loren was wearing heavy makeup and had a low cut top on whereas Rhianna wore subtle makeup, a shirt and tie and a head dress on.

Both Mapplethorpe and Vogue support Laura Mulvey’s 1989 book *Visual and Other Pleasures* and support her theory of how people are objectified and are photographed to be looked at rather than for any significance. Within the section *Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look* Mulvey states “women are

simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” This quote in particular can be applied to both Vogue and Mapplethorpe’s work. Looking at Vogue and how they mainly have women on their covers who are wearing heavy makeup, and lots of skin on show, with their tops having a low cut on the front so that their bust is more visible to the viewer. Though Mapplethorpe mainly had photographs of nude men, this quote can still be applied because some people argued that he was objectifying the subjects in his images and having their bodies on on show to be ‘looked at’.

Chapter 3: Social Media

Throughout this chapter I will explore contemporary self-portrait photography in comparison with the work of Hippolyte Bayard, one of the creators of photography, I plan to focus on his 1840 piece, *self-portrait as a Drowned Man* as well as Robert Cornelius’ self-portrait from 1839 and compare these to different aspects of social media, and how the process has developed.

I will look at different types of sources like social media posts, videos and websites, this will help me explore how the development of self-portrait photography and how it can now be instant and how this has affected people’s ideologies on beauty.

Hippolyte Bayard was one of the known three inventors of photography who came up with one of his own photographic processes (Met Museum, undated). Bayard's process consisted of a sensitized sheet of paper being placed in the back of the camera where the negative would normally be placed, creating a positive print (Marie-Angelique Languille and Chantal Garnier, 2020), according to Met Museum the exposure took roughly 30 minutes.

Bayard's most well known piece of work was his 1840 piece *A self-portrait of a Drowned Man* (shown in figure 11). This

Figure 11



image shows Bayard as a corpse of a suicide, Bayard created this image as a response to how the French authorities did not recognise his invention of his photographic process as an equal to Louis Daguerre, who also invented his own photographic process (Michal Sapir, 1994). This is a very important image, since it is one of the first

documented photographic self-portraits as well as also being a part of the first 'fake news', and there has been a dramatic development with self-portraits since this image was made and released.

In 1839 Robert Cornelius created the first documented photographic self-portrait (shown below in figure 12) by taking the lens cap of his camera off and running into

frame and sat until he felt the image was correctly exposed (Angie Kordic, 2016). The image was created using the Daguerreotype process with Cornelius using a prepared

Figure 12



metal plate in his “makeshift camera” with the lens being made from an opera glass, and Cornelius having to sit in front of the camera for 10-15 minutes (Wendi Maloney, 2022). The act of self-portrait photography is currently most commonly referred to as a selfie, which people joke that Robert Cornelius took the first of by creating this image.

Another person who was seen as quite ground breaking with their self-portraiture and the way they expressed their gender and

beauty is Claude Cahun. Claude Cahun changed their name from Lucy Schwob as a way of protesting traditional gender norms (Joseph. B. Treaster, 2019). Throughout Cahun’s work they experimented with self-portraits and often presented themselves as a woman in some images and a man in others. A popular series of images of Cahun’s from 1927-29 (shown in figure 13) shows

Figure 13



Cahun as a feminine man with black stickers over their nipples and writing on their

chest stating “I am in training don’t kiss me”. This image is very powerful in many ways, Cahun was presenting themselves as a feminine presenting man with heavy makeup on (Naomi Blumberg, 2022), which broke quite a few gender boundaries of this time with men not stereotypically wearing makeup and being feminine presenting, and men not posing as they do in this image, with their legs crossed and pouting their lips.

Photography and self-portraiture (selfies) have developed massively since 1839 when Robert Cornelius first produced his self-portrait, with digital cameras and smart-phones allowing people to instantly create a self-portrait and edit it, this was not possible when Robert Cornelius and Hippolyte Bayard first made their self-portraits. With people now being able to instantly post selfies on to social media from their phones wherever they are, this has reduced the time between creation and viewing by the audience, changing the relationship and responsibility.

An Instagram account with the username @beauty.false became popular for calling out different celebrities who manipulated their photos to make themselves more ‘instaworthy’ and ‘beautiful’, it looks at showing their photos that they posted on their social media accounts alongside paparazzi photographs of them showing the insta vs reality, showing people that what you see on social media is not always true. There are a lot of posts which show celebrities like Kim Kardashian, Stella Maxwell and Gigi Hadid showing their posts on social media and the real post or their paparazzi images showing them editing out uneven skin, acne, and lightening or

darkening their skin which has made a lot of people conscious of how they look and what they post or do not post on their social media. This ideology shows how we, as a society, have become perfectionists with the way that we look and how we are conveyed in images, showing our obsession with being able to look at our photos before we post it to make sure it is 'perfect'. This showing the massive change since Bayard's A Self Portrait of a Drowned Man, with Bayard not having the ability to review the image before publishing it.

Celebrities are often called out for editing their photos for social media with the Kardashians being a popular culprit.

In the beginning of 2022 Kim Kardashian posted a photo on her instagram feed (shown in figure 14) with people speculating that she tried airbrushing her stomach to make it look smoother, resulting in removing her belly button. Kim Kardashian later responded to these claims on her Instagram stories, stating that her lack of



Figure 14

bellybutton was a result of her wearing her Skims underwear (Joe Price, 2022).

Another example of this from Kim Kardashian that was pointed out by some viewers, was in a promotional video for her Skims brand, which was later deleted after they were called out. The video showed Kardashian laying down in her pants and bra

running her finger up and down her waist in an attempt to show that the underwear stays in shape, whilst doing so viewers spotted that as her finger goes over her waist he finger distorts (Chelsea Ritschel, 2021), leading viewers to believe that she, or the editors for the video, edited her waist to make her waist more curvy, forgetting that it would distort her finger as well as her waist.

Another post on Instagram was posted by model Denise Bidot, who in July 2022

Figure 15



posted a series of images on her page (shown above in figure 15) of herself wearing a bikini with the caption “It’s 2022, we out here... stretch marks, cellulite, rolls, who cares?” this post has been seen as very inspirational for her 738k followers and the other people who this post reached, for her natural post showing people that even though she is a model she still has stretch marks, rolls and

cellulite and they are only natural and even models have them, creating confidence for her followers.

A photographer that is well known for posting her self-portraits on instagram and manipulating them so much that you do not recognise her is Cindy Sherman. Sherman looks at exploring identity and the different stereotypes that have come about, she has produced images where she plays characters in the series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), which highlights her fascination with identity and the

different ways it has been displayed, this ideology still being explored in her current work.

A popular series of photographs that Sherman has created, that she first starting posting in 2017 and still continues to make are uploaded onto her instagram page.

The images include self-portraits of Sherman where she is again playing different



characters and then digitally manipulating the images to make them look very bizarre, by pinching the nose to make it smaller or bigger, moving

Figure 16

the eyes up or down the

face, which according the caption on the first of her many manipulated images which she posted on May 12th 2017 post which states “Selfie! No filter, hahaha” suggests that this series is a dig at the people who constantly add filters and digitally manipulate their photos before posting on their social media account. Since this first image was posted Sherman has progressively manipulated her selfies more and more (shown in figure 16). What makes these images more powerful, is that she started posting these images during the time where it was made more public of Donald Trump making criticizing comments about women’s appearances (Noah Becker, 2017), suggesting that these images are her reactions to his comments.

Looking back at when self-portraiture photography first came around and comparing it to the current age of social media there has been a significant change to how it has affected the ideologies on beauty. Seeing how Robert Cornelius and Hippolyte Bayard took their self-portraits in 10-15 minutes or more, without being able to manipulate how they looked in the images, to now people being called out online for adjusting the way they look in their selfies that they were able to take in seconds. When Instagram first started in 2010 (Dan Blystone, 2022) people were not able to post photos that were on their camera roll, and were only able to instantly post photos from their camera through the app so no digitally manipulating the images was possible, however this feature was later removed which allowed people to edit their images before posting, which is a major development in self-portrait photography.

Conclusion

Looking back at the original statistic I made of an average of 1,066,944 selfies are taken in 16 minutes, this statistic alongside my research throughout my thesis, has allowed me to come to a conclusion of how we, as society, have developed our compulsion to be taking selfies a lot of the time and posting it to social media for everyone to see, so our faces will be the first thing that everyone will see when they open up the app.

Researching how television has an impact on people's views on beauty and gender has really been an eye opener. Looking back at Nan Goldin's work

Exploring how magazines and newspapers have contributed society's thoughts on beauty and sexuality, with the photographs they use alongside the headlines that are included, it causes a massive insecurity for their readers. There is little representation of members of the LGBTQ+, with only recently their being transgender models and celebrities included on covers of Vogue and the increase of popularity of the Attitude magazine which has the target audience of members of the LGBTQ+ community. Alongside this, the lack of plus size models being included in these type of publications, adding to the growing body issues throughout society. Also adding to the increase of body and beauty issues is the way that the models are photographed, with the use of heavy makeup, low cut tops/dresses, poses and eye contact. Creating another issue is there lack of racial diversity too, lack of representation of different races and religions causing younger generations to feel self conscious and think that they are not beautiful because they are not being represented in beauty magazine and newspapers.

Looking at how the photographic process as developed from its beginning with people like Robert Cornelius to now with people like Cindy Sherman, the way that photographers and people in general nowadays have the ability to edit and manipulate their photographs however they like, whether it is to look 'beautiful' or to make a political statement in regards to unrealistic beauty standards. Another massive development with the photographic process is how long it takes to actually take a photo, from originally taking roughly half an hour to expose and not having access to technology to edit the photograph, to now having a camera constantly on

our phones which allows us to take a photo in seconds and being able to edit the photo wherever we are whilst on our phones. The development of the process itself has added pressure on the standards of beauty with how originally being unable to see how the photo turned out until the images were processed and developed so they did not have the ability to take multiple photos until they felt it looked good, whereas now we are able to instantly see the photo after we take it so we can take multiple photos until we are happy with it.

In my opinion, the pressure of feeling represented or not represented in regards to your gender, gender identity, or looks makes different members of society feel like they are not good enough to take photographs of themselves or be in photographs, this ideology I believe is changing with different representations being included in television programmes, magazines and on social media allowing people to slowly become more confident with themselves. Giving people access to social media allowing them access to voice their self expression through photographs, providing room for them to have fun with their image, sometimes causing them to fall fowl of society's beauty standards.

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