

Practice In Context. Dissertation Proposal.

Gaze, identity and power

Emma Millington

ADAD5004/C

Context

This research report explores the relationships between gaze, identity and power within photography, with a particular focus on feminists' interpretations of the female body. It is rooted in the concept of the male gaze, introduced by Laura Mulvey, which argues visual culture has been known to position women as objects of pleasure mainly visual rather than a person of self-ruling or worth. Within this, photography plays a key part in building and reinforcing ideas around women's body image and identity. This report investigates how fine art photography challenges these views by reshaping representations of the female body. By studying and analysing the work of photographers like Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin and Rineck Dijkstra my research shows how issues of representation, identity and power are debated within photographic practice. My research considers how the artists chosen disrupt the tradition of how women are visualised and show an alternative way of representing female identity beyond the idea of beauty and the male gaze offering a way for women to be represented as so much more.

Gaze

“to look at something or someone for a long time, especially in surprise or admiration, or because you are thinking about something else” (Dictionary Cambridge, 2026)

Gaze has been a part of art as a whole since the first painting, the idea to gaze upon an art work/photograph can be directly linked to the confrontation of coming face to face with the piece. One piece that shows this is Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Still #35, in this piece you can see sherman presenting as a house wife gazing behind her with a sad look on her face. The gaze backwards representing the the idea to only look back makes it impossible to move forward, the gaze of a woman who has been worn and torn down

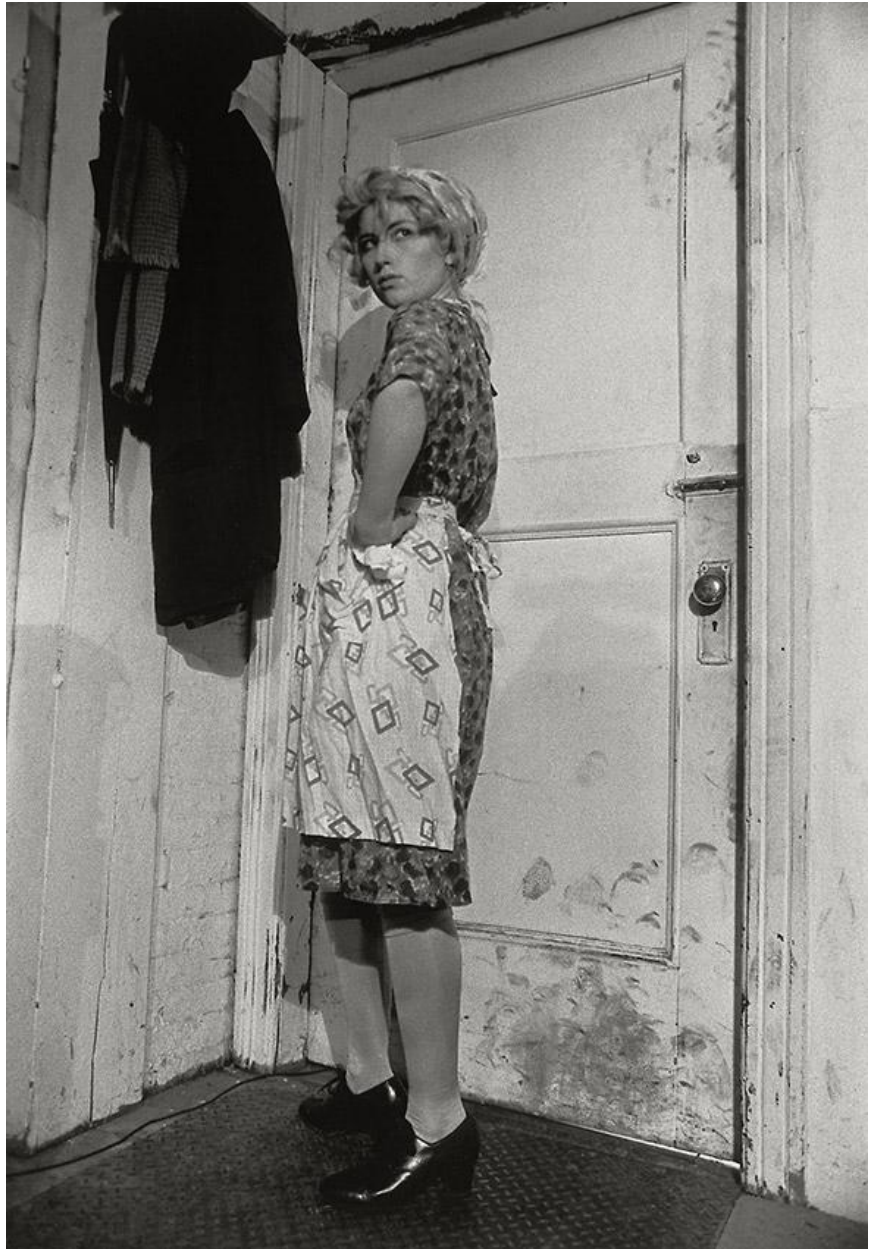


Figure 1 Sherman, C. (1979). Untitled Film Still #35. Accessed 10/04/2026

showing how the media objectifies a woman as a house wife exposing how feminism is not naturally given but visually produced each image reflects a performance “ visual creators to objectify women” (Caffre,2024) Shermans work also could be seen as interrogating the male gaze, male gaze is the ideology of how men portray women on screen as well as in stories or even down to how they view women

as a whole "it's the way male storytellers write and frame women to service the desires and worldview of men" (Lutes, 2024) Sherman's work repeatedly reflects a performance shaped by men, the whole of the work Untitled is a performance each image shaped by the cultural norms of women she's depicted at the "housewife" the surroundings in the image showing how this life is depicted for women the idea of a woman being gazed on and the viewer then looking upon this image feeds into the male gaze once again a man gazing upon a woman who is fitting their agenda "scenario most often involves the man looking and the female being looked at" in the image you can see Sherman looking back gazing as if her hypothetical partner is calling her over. Sherman's work reveals how identity is formed through repetition and representations while including the gaze, her pieces consist of a woman in these pieces the woman is either looking out of camera frame in a way of looking for something a longing for something and some pieces she's gazing into the camera forcing you to take notice of her and what she's saying, this leads into the point of the viewer looking at a layered construction of ideologies created through the male agenda "create idealized images of women for their enjoyment" (McInerney, 2021). Sherman's work demonstrates the idea of feminism as a relation to power the images where she is staring straight into the camera can also force the audience to look at her as a woman not an object like a housewife but more than that it forces you to see her as a woman changing the gaze from a wishful woman to a person creating a scene that a woman would want to see while also incorporating the male gaze in the sense of what a man would want to see. "show scenes and situations that would capture the attention of the audience" (McInerney, 2021) Leading on from this point you could also look at the piece as the idea of the male gaze showing a male a different narrative to a woman. A woman's gaze leads her to feel sorry for the subject in the image whereas to a man it could be seen as a "joke" forcing the idea of the jokes made by men who view themselves in a higher standard than women for example people like Andrew Tate who have previously stated "Tate has said that women are a man's property,

belonging in the home and cannot drive” (Dalton,2023). This just shows how views expressed in Sherman’s images still sit the same today as Tate is a figure still relevant to society today influencing the up and coming generation of men.

Identity

“the fact of being, or feeling that you are, a particular type of person, organization, etc.; the qualities that make a person, organization, etc. different from others” ” (Dictionary Cambridge,2026)



Figure 2 Dijkstra, R. (1992). Beach Portraits. Accessed 15/04/2026

Rineke Dijkstra’s portraits look at identity from an adolescent point of view “creating a subtle yet powerful exploration of identity” (Dijkstra, 2018). Dijkstra’s portraits are taken with a neutral background photographing many different ethnicity’s while asking her subject to keep a straight face keeping the viewers gaze on the idea of their identity. I investigated adolescence identity through feminism in response to Dijkstra’s work the idea of identity existing alongside feminism plays a role throughout, to

come to terms with feminism identity comes with it " feminist beliefs and identity are correlated" (Martino et al,2024). Dijkstra's work takes the young and impressionable forcing the subjects to come one to one with the idea of their own identity, the idea of stripping the subject from any form of emotion while still allowing them to use their body to express themselves still shows how people identity's show through so many ways for example their body language " accentuates the individuality of her subjects"(Dijkstra,2018). Individuality also plays a role in identity which as previously stated Dijkstra's work takes identity to the extreme young people are so impressionable especially with the subject of identity, identity is a personal experience throughout the images each pose shows how confident within themselves each subject is. One thing that is easily shown is how comfortable and confident the young males are within themselves showing their true identity the women seem much more reserved and uncomfortable "whether this identity may be linked with men's attitudes" (Martino et al,2024). Identity is a strong subject throughout this piece as previously discussed, one thing that is prominent in these pieces is how the gaze is controlled yet open-ended. Creating a narrative for the viewer, rather than fixed or confident identity's Dijkstra captures individuals in the process of becoming", highlighting their self-presentation, vulnerability, and evolving sense of identity within personal and cultural landscapes." (Dijkstra,2018). Identity is important as an adolescent, it shapes who you are now and who you're about to become, identity gives you a sense of belonging "Having an identity can give you a sense of belonging" (The Children's Society, 2023) Dijkstra's work allows you to make connections within your own identity, it forces you to look these young adolescence in the eye as they try to find themselves.

Power

“Ability to control people and events” (Dictionary Cambridge,2026)



Figure 3 Goldin, N. (1986). *Nan and Brian In Bed* Accessed 17/04/2026

Nan Goldin's photography explores power through intimacy while documenting personal relationships "One's attitude and attire, relationships and lifestyle are as carefully constructed and dramatically expressed as any work of art." (Metmuseum.org,2020) Power is shown throughout Goldin's work, it is shown

consistently like in her image *Nan and Brian In Bed*. In this image you see a man smoking a cigarette looking out in a dazed sort of look while Goldin is laying on the bed clutching her pillow with a sad look on her face. The angle of the camera is allowing the audience to look at this man in a sense of loss the idea of him looking out longing for something while the woman is in the background longing for him is something we see in many movies, books and television shows the angle gives no sense of power but a sense of longing allowing us into an intimate moment between a couple creating a literal scene "It's the most neutral camera angle — and the most psychologically honest. There's no power dynamic at play. The viewer meets the subject as an equal." (Boilard,2018).

Goldin's work often reflects on power in a relationship; the idea men and women aren't of equal during a period of which the man and woman would be in a relationship. Her work explores this idea without

trying to resolve it, Goldin's work gives us a literal sense of the man in the relationship the idea that men and women would never give the same into a relationship consequently creating a power dynamic between the two while also displaying said subjects as just strangers the idea men and women could never coincide in a relationship "unpicked the mythologies of romance and demonstrated her belief that 'men and women are irrevocably strangers to each other'" (O'Hehir,2023). Goldin's work creates power dynamic between subject and photographer, creating an image that feels emotionally raw instead of staged or fake. The work as *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* as a whole creates a link between gender, intimacy and power. Throughout the pieces gender is shown as a form of power, the idea of Goldin laying there in this image looking at the man with a sense of hatred behind her eyes leads you to believe that power has come into play at some point before this image then inflicting the gender problems Goldin was discussing, are men and women really meant to exist as a couple. Goldin explores the reality she feels that are relationships between men and women believing that a man and a women aren't meant to be as one showing its sexual dependency not the idea of love "'men and women are irrevocably strangers to each other'" (O'Hehir,2023) One of the main power houses in Goldin's work is through visibility, Goldin documents experiences often left out or ignored at the time by mainstream media while giving power to the minority's she represented throughout this slideshow of images giving them power while she documented the life around her. Goldin's work also looks into the idea of men and women being dependent on each other's anatomy not necessarily the emotional connections, showing the power of a relationship between men and women as solely sexual which leads into the idea of feminism allowing women to make a disconnect from the person swapping the agenda of the man with the woman however also showing the danger women are faced with while chasing the autonomy of a man that a man is unlikely to face with a woman "a photo series about the struggle between

autonomy and dependency and the power relationships between men and women that put her in danger.” (VARELA,2023).

In conclusion, this research has explored the relationship between gaze, identity and power within fine art photography through a feminist prospective. This piece of research focuses heavily on the influence of the male gaze on representation of women through the media. Drawing upon the influence and ideas of Laura Mulvey and wider feminist discussion biased heavily on representation. This report has examined how visual culture has historically positioned women as objects only worthy of observation and consumption. Through my analysis of photographers such as Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin and Rineke Dijkstra it becomes obvious that fine art photography has the ability to challenge and also demolish these traditional societal structures placed upon women by presenting alternative representations of feminism, femininity and the body. Sherman's constructed personas expose how female identity is shaped through stereotypes and media representation, encouraging the viewer to create the question of how authentic these roles are. Goldin's intimate and emotional images reject normalized beauty standards by presenting the viewer with bodies and relationships in an honest and vulnerable way. Dijkstra's work portrays the act of removing glamour and style to emphasize the subjects as individuals while maintaining a human presence. Together, these artists shift the power dynamics normally associated with gaze by allowing subjects to exist not just as passive and sexual representation but as so much more. Instead of presenting women as an object made only for visual and sexual pleasure, their work encourages the viewer to engage with identity and the body in so much more depth and authentic ways, showing a woman as more than what meets the eye. In result, this research shows that photography is not just a tool for documentation but can also be used as a powerful way of shaping our cultural understanding of a woman through the lenses of gender, beauty and identity. Feminist

photographers/photographic practice continue to question the dominant visual of women as objects while also creating a space for a more diverse and realistic representation of women within visual culture. Overall, the relationship between gaze, identity and power remains highly relevant in modern society, particularly within the digital world of this day and age making the continued investigation of feminist photography while also showing the increasing importance of challenging restrictive ideas surrounding women and the female body. However, through all my research I am still left with the question of How did feminism change the world of art? How did feminism as a movement change the course of art?

Reference List

Boilard, M. (2018). Camera Angles | Understand the Psychology of 7 Powerful

Angels. [online] PhotoWorkout. Available at:

<https://www.photoworkout.com/camera-angles/>.

Cait, Caffre. (2024). Male Gaze | Research Starters | EBSCO Research. [online]

Available at: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/women-s-studies-and->

[feminism/male-gaze](https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/women-s-studies-and-feminism/male-gaze).

Dalton, N. (2023). Everything Andrew Tate has said about women and how he became a 'trillionaire'. [online] The Mirror. Available at:

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/everything-andrew-tate-said-women-30930249>.

dictionary.cambridge.org. (2026). GAZE | meaning in the Cambridge English

Dictionary. [online] Available at:

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/gaze>

Lutes, A. (2024). The Male Gaze: A Full Guide to Its Effect on Art and Society. [online] Backstage.com. Available at: <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/male-gaze-definition-examples-77633/>.

Martino, R.M., Roberts, S.R., Maheux, A.J., Stout, C.D. and Choukas-Bradley, S. (2024). The Role of Feminism and Gender in Endorsement of Hookup Culture among Emerging Adults. *Archives of sexual behavior*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-024-02841-5>.

Metmuseum.org. (2020). Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/284773>.

McInerney, R. (2021). The Male Gaze. [online] Art History Perspectives. Available at: <https://www.arthistoryperspectives.com/posts/themalegaze>.

O'Hehir, A. (2023). Nan Goldin's The ballad of sexual dependency (1986). [online] National Gallery of Australia. Available at: <https://nga.gov.au/stories-ideas/nan-goldins-lens-on-relationships/>.

Rineke Dijkstra (2018). 'Beach Portraits', Rineke Dijkstra (1959). [online]

Photoanthology.org. Available at: <https://photoanthology.org/projects/beach-portraits>.

The Children's Society (2023). *Identity / The Children's Society*. [online]

www.childrenssociety.org.uk. Available at:

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/young-people/well-being/resources/identity>.

VARELA, I. (2023). *Nan Goldin: 'What makes it radical are all these men trying to stop it from coming to light'*. [online] EL PAÍS English. Available at:

<https://english.elpais.com/people/2023-10-16/nan-goldin-what-makes-it-radical-are-all-these-men-trying-to-stop-it-from-coming-to-light.html>.

