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Course Title: BA Photography in the Arts

Module Code: ADAD5004/C

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The Male Gaze Reversed: How Feminist Photographers Challenge Traditional Gender Roles

According to John Berger, “It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world” (Berger. J, 1972, p. 7). This suggests that photography plays a vital role in shaping social views, as especially in today's image-saturated society, the images we see inevitably form and shape our opinions, perception and internal biases. By focussing on three key terms: male gaze, stereotypes and reclamation, this essay will examine the key strategies utilised by feminist photographers to challenge and disrupt patriarchal views, and strive towards gender equality.

Key Term 1: Male Gaze

The first key term I would like to discuss in relation to how feminist photographers have challenged traditional gender roles is 'male gaze'. The notion of the gaze refers to the act of looking and the power dynamics inherent therein. The term 'male gaze' was explained by art critic John Berger, suggesting that in art “men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (Berger, 1972, p.47). Here, Berger has highlighted the unequal power dynamic perpetuated in art through the notion of the male gaze. Men are often depicted as active agents within the artistic narrative, whereas women are reduced to the role of passive objects to be observed through the eyes and perception of men, meaning that men hold the power and ability to shape and define the female narrative and appearance. As “women watch themselves being looked at”, they are forced to view themselves through the eyes of men, therefore perpetuating a cycle of objectification and self-objectification where women are both the subjects and objects of the male gaze.

Feminist theorist Laura Mulvey expanded on this, explaining that the male gaze “projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is style accordingly”, as the women in film “holds the looks,

plays to and signifies male desire” (Mulvey. L, 2009). As women in film are portrayed through the lens of male desire, they are not only physically styled to suit this but their behaviour and role within the narrative also conforms to male expectation and desire; they are physical representations of male desire. Mulvey's male gaze theory suggests that women are only presented under patriarchal terms and shown in relation to men. Mulvey explains that “the presence of women is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film”, she suggests that women simply exist to fulfil the desires of male viewers and protagonists, once again perpetuating the objectification of women in media. Stating that this is an element in “normal narrative film” highlights how this is pervasive in mainstream cinema, and how traditional gender roles and power dynamics are reinforced. Mainstream cinema reflects and perpetuates traditional societal norms and gender expectations, as they present women in limited and stereotypical roles, written to serve the male gaze. Consequently, women are sexually objectified, and stripped of their power, independence and status within this context. This can be seen in Alfred Hitchcock's 'Vertigo' (1958), in the scene where the character Madeleine is introduced. From the music that is playing, to the slow and mysterious introduction of her character, Hitchcock employs various cinematic techniques to convey and symbolise her allure and sensuality. As the camera pans closer to Madeleine, the scene slows and a soft glow appears around her, objectifying her by emphasising her beauty and making this her defining characteristic.



Figure 1

The male gaze has been the subject of photographic work for many female photographers, seeking to push for societal change through their work. Martha Rosler uses her art to critically examine and deconstruct the way women are presented in visual culture; she challenges the narrative conveyed by the male gaze, by confronting the objectification of women's bodies. Her work is a critical interrogation of societal gender power dynamics, as she seeks to confront the reality of gender inequality. In her project *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (1966-1972), Rosler used cut outs from glossy print ads and men's magazines to create thirty-two photomontages which reuse the images in a way that subverts the original meanings (Rosler. M, n.d).



Figure 1

In her piece *Small Wonder*, Rosler uses a shapewear advertisement image, with an image of breasts overlaid, which highlights the reliance within advertising on sexual objectification, stemming from the male gaze. The original advertisement aimed to sell the shapewear, however the seductive pose of the model suggests that the advertisement is not only selling the shapewear, but also the possibility to fit the societal beauty standards reinforced by the male gaze. The juxtaposition of the lingerie ad with the breasts, the body part the lingerie was covering, undermines the tension created by the sexualised portraits of women. It serves to highlight and critique the objectification of women's bodies within consumer culture. This comes back to the

concept of the male gaze, as the original ad was taken in a way that conformed to the idea of the male gaze and the beauty standards within this, yet Rosler is undermining and appropriating this in her photomontage attempting to reclaim the presentation of women's bodies.

Key Term 2: Stereotypes

The next key term I would like to discuss is 'stereotypes'. Ruth Amossy characterises stereotypes as cultural models that shape how we perceive, interpret and describe reality; they provide preconstructed frameworks, by which groups are depicted in various forms of media. Amossy explains that stereotypes are obstacles, and in this sense are “the opposite and the negation of representation”, as she suggests that stereotypes hinder our ability to grasp the true diversity and complexity of reality (Amossy, 1984. p.689-700). Berger briefly touched on stereotypes when discussing the female nude, explaining that “to be born a woman has to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space” (Berger, 1972, p.46). Berger addresses the societal expectations and constraints placed upon women throughout history, which have contributed to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes regarding women's roles and capabilities. As women are born “into the keeping of men”, they are born into a patriarchal society which expects them to conform to the expectations set by men, therefore reinforcing stereotypes by limiting their autonomy.

Artist Juno Calypso uses feminine stereotypes to her advantage, as they inform her practice. Calypso's work revolves around self-portraiture, where she depicts her fictional character Joyce, “a lonely woman whose dreams have failed to materialise” which she uses to present a carefully curated, and somewhat exaggerated, version of femininity (Spicer, 2017). By portraying femininity in this manner and employing stereotypes with a satirical edge, Calypso has expressed caution regarding the images of women she perpetuates as she acknowledges that “even though they're satirical, some people might see them as the real thing” (Spider. E, 2017). Calypso's images use

thoughtfully constructed settings and spaces, which often focus on domestic spaces, to help evoke a nostalgic, dreamlike and surreal atmosphere and quality in her images. She reclaims femininity in an attempt to “indulge in femininity and all its stereotypes, without fear of being condemned” (Keane, 2020). Through her art, Calypso deliberately plays on and manipulates stereotypes regarding appearance, and women's domestic roles to highlight the performative nature of femininity, showing that “the feminine ideal is fake, exhausting and painstaking” (Keane, 2020). One way Calypso is able to subvert female stereotypes is through her prevalent use of the colour pink in her practice. Historically associated with women and femininity, Calypso is able to subvert this stereotype and challenge the typical associations of the colour through using pink to create an unsettling and surreal atmosphere, by juxtaposing the bright colour with dark, mysterious elements. In an interview, Calypso explained that “everyone hates you for loving a colour”, and the men in her family would try to embarrass her for enjoying her own femininity, and that her “little feminine world would just get ruined. And then you would realise that this is a weapon”, and a “thing that makes people really annoyed”. Calypso's statement reflects the gendered expectations in society, regarding preferences. By expressing her love for the colour pink and using it in her imagery, she challenges the notion that feminine interests are deserving of ridicule. Despite facing criticism for embracing her femininity, she sees the colour pink as a tool of resistance, a “weapon”, highlighting it's subversive potential.



Figure 2

Figure 2, 'Subterranean Kitchen' is a strong example of how Calypso incorporates stereotypes in her work, through her use of setting. The image is carefully composed, paying close attention to symmetry as Calypso's character Joyce positioned in the centre of the frame. She is leant over a kitchen countertop, wearing a pink vintage dressing gown, with her red hair styled perfectly over her back. The setting is a pink and white vintage kitchen, with a kitsch style and vintage appliances. The combination of the kitchen setting and the colour pink connotes an attachment to gender stereotypes, as it is a gendered space. Historically, the kitchen has been portrayed as a predominantly female place, associated with cooking and cleaning which are stereotypical female roles. Calypso taps into this stereotype, using the space as a setting to explore the performative nature of femininity. She critiques the pressure on women to conform to standards of beauty and behaviour, even within their own homes. Moreover, the symmetry of the image can be interpreted as symbolic of the repetitiveness and confinement women face in society, especially within a domestic setting.



Figure 3

In figure 3, titled 'The Honeymoon' Calypso manipulates the stereotype that women are obsessed with, and consumed by, their appearance. Through her character Joyce, Calypso invites viewers into an exploration of self-perception. Calypso, in an interview, explained that she had always been “one of those people who could sit in front of the mirror for hours, not out of vanity, but out of a

horrible curiosity” (Spicer. E, 2017). This feeling has been represented in 'The Honeymoon', as Joyce's unwavering gaze into the mirror, at a multitude of her own reflection, subverts the stereotype of female vanity to comment on the pressure placed on women to conform to societal beauty standards. Her deliberate choice to surround Joyce with ten reflections of herself further amplifies the sense of self-examination, and insecurity, therefore highlighting the pervasive nature of society on women's appearances.

Key Term 3: Reclamation

The portrayal of women in media frequently conforms to stereotypical tropes, often depicting them in a sexualised manner. Radical feminists argue that these media representations are “patriarchal structures that generate and sustain the power relations between sexes” (Klorman-Eraqui. N, 2019, p.15). In response, many female photographers, particularly since the feminist art movement of the 1960s and 1970s, have made “use of photography to counter media representations” (Klorman-Eraqui. N, 2019, p.17). Using photography as a tool to challenge media representation has been vital in pushing for societal change, as feminist groups of the 1970s and 1980s felt that “media images had a significant impact on the socialisation of women”, and have since been a target of feminist politics (Klorman-Eraqui. N, 2019, p.12). The artists associated with the feminist art movement of the 1960s and 1970s were driven by a shared commitment to challenge female representation, deconstruct traditional notions and expose femininity to be “a masquerade or set of poses adopted by women to conform to societal expectations” (Museum of Modern Art, 2023). This links to the third key term: reclamation. In challenging societal norms, views and perceptions, these artists were able to reclaim agency and power over their own image. Linking back to Juno Calypso, her incorporation of feminine stereotypes in her work enabled her to reclaim agency over how women are presented, asserting control over how these stereotypes are depicted: she presented these stereotypes on her own terms. She weaponised the colour pink, indulging in her femininity by choice.

Among many pioneering artists, Valie Export stands out for her provocative public performances and artwork regarding the female body. Although not strictly a photographer, her work and her “photography plays into her projects, as a means of documentation” of her performances have had a profound impact on reclaiming agency over female representation (The Photographers Gallery, n.d).

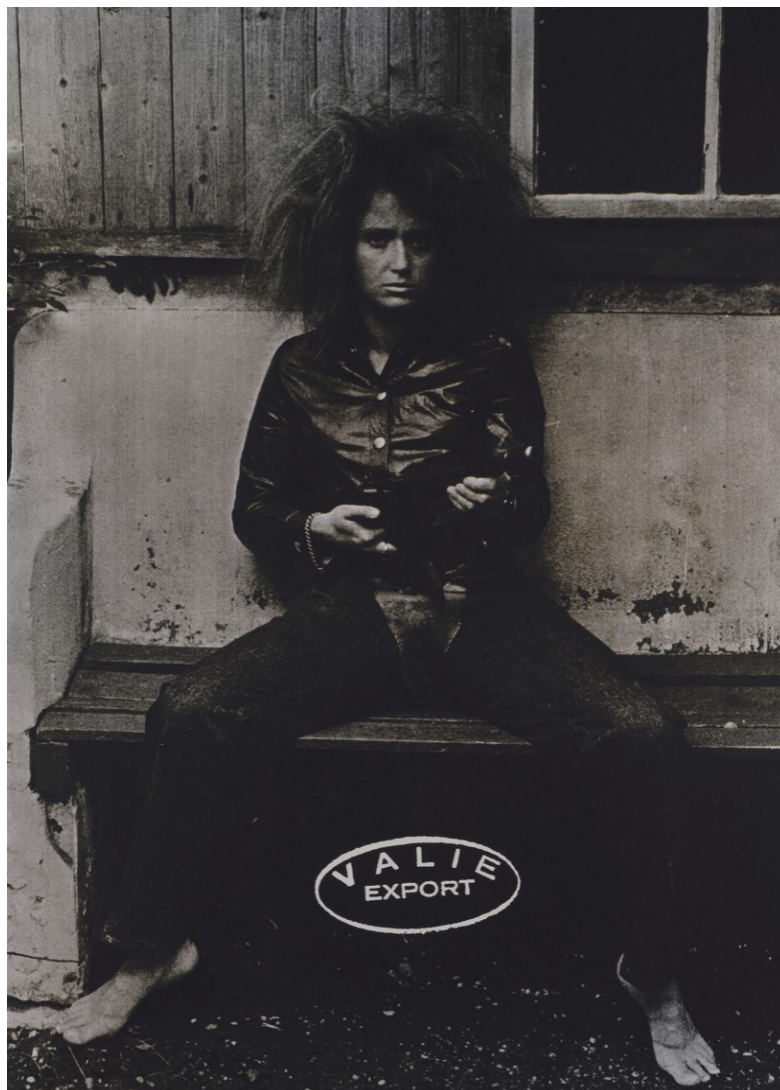


Figure 4



Figure 5

One of Export's arguably most famous pieces is 'Action Pants: Genital Panic'. This was a performance, which Export photographed, where she entered a cinema and walked between rows of seated viewers, wearing trousers that had the fabric cut out at the crotch. In the photograph, Export posed holding a machine-gun, "in readiness to turn it on the viewer towards whom her gaze is directed" (Tate, 2024). Export then produced a set of identical posters to commemorate her performance in Munich in 1968. This adds another layer to this work, as she was able to mass communicate and preserve her message. By exposing herself in a public setting, she disrupts the notions of propriety, challenges societal expectations and reclaims agency over her own body. Although she exposes herself in a sexual manner, as Export has done this by choice she asserted autonomy over her own body. Exports deliberate choice of the cinema as the site of her performance carries considerable significance, serving as a direct commentary on the sexualised portrayal of women within cinematic media. By performing in a cinema, she is directly confronting and critiquing the male dominated space. Her decision to reclaim agency over her own body here is particularly notable, given the profound societal impact of cinema, which often perpetuates stereotypes and removes the control over representation away from women in society.



Figure 6

Carrie Mae Weems' 'Kitchen Table Series' reclaims agency over female representation in a very different way to Valie Export's work. Whilst Export's work is centred around the sexualisation of women, Weems addresses representation in a very different way. As a black woman, Weems is able to explore the interplay between gender and ethnicity. 'Kitchen Table Series' is a series of twenty black and white images, and fourteen text panels that Weems created in a response to her own "sense of what needed to happen, what needed to be and what would not simply be a voice for African American women but what would be a voice more generally for women" (Valentine. VL, 2020). Weems' images are set in a kitchen, a traditionally feminine space. She acts as the mother of the household, taking on typical feminine roles. By focussing on everyday experiences and emotions, Weems is challenging the marginalisation and erasure of women's stories in cultural narratives. Her intimate portrayal of women's experience highlights complex female experiences, defying stereotypes and reclaiming agency and authority over the representation of women. Weems' work, which was created at a time when racism was still an integral component of

American society, also seeks to disrupt stereotypes around black women (Bell, 2018, p.8).

Through depicting the struggles and complex emotions of women, Weems is able to humanise them.

Exploring these key terms surrounding feminist photography has led me to understand the methods employed by a range of female photographers to challenge traditional gender roles. Female artists have been able to use the medium of photography as a tool to explore and appropriate the male gaze, therefore raising conscious awareness of and alleviating its impact. By deconstructing the concept of the male gaze and reshaping it through a feminist perspective, artists have catalysed increased awareness and understanding. Similarly, by subverting stereotypes female artists have challenges societal perceptions and assumptions about gender, therefore disrupting the status quo and pushing an audience to question these pre-existing ideas ingrained in society. Through using photography to reclaim agency and authority over the presentation of women in photographic media, women artists have been able to challenge traditional perceptions about gender, and gender roles. Therefore, as femininity is a topic I would like to explore within my practice during my final year, this research has led to the question I have devised for the dissertation: 'How has the representation of women in photographic media developed and progressed over time?'. This question serves as a starting point to delve further into the subject of feminist photography. This question will allow me to explore various aspects of feminist photography, such as an in depth analysis of different forms the representation of women has taken, how female photographers have used their own work to challenge this representation, and how challenging this representation has led to change.

Word Count: 2735 words

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