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Abstract

The Politics of Desire in Contemporary Art: A Comparative Study Between Hito Steyerl and Sherrie LeVine

This paper examines the political implications of the desire in today's artistic practices through the comparison between the two artists Hito Steyerl and Sherrie LeVine. It also looks at how image-centric culture, algorithmic control, and the commodification of identity have been affected, constructed and contested within contemporary art under the conditions of late capitalism and the emergence of new forms of post-capitalism. Using a combination of feminist theory and postmodern criticism, this analysis explores Steyerl's work in relation to her use of new media technologies for political purposes, especially as articulated through two of her works, "How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File" and "Factory of the Sun".

Parallel to this, the study will address Levine's critique of well-known images by examining the way she recontextualizes those images in "After Edward Weston", and her attack on conventional concepts of authorship and originality. In this article, we demonstrate how Steyerl and Levine utilize the work of Judith Butler, Laura Mulvey, Jean Baudrillard, and Stuart Hall in a wider theoretical framework to explore and deconstruct the mechanisms of desire and commodification and then present them in a comparative way. Additionally, the comparative method demonstrates that both artists challenge accepted narratives around identity, representation, and consumption, as well as create unique means for resisting and recreating these narratives. Ultimately, the work of Steyerl and Levine adds insight into contemporary art's potential to expose and counteract the mechanics of desire in a commodified and digitally dominated society.

Introduction

Contextual Background

Desire occupies an essential ideological role in the Late Capitalist era as the basis for constructing subjective identity, culturally and psychologically. It has shaped both the understanding of oneself and the environment through a variety of technological advances and Mediated Visual Communication. The growth of Media and technology has allowed for increased representation of the Self and the Different - as well as new forms of expressing desire both as a construct and as something to be commodified, represented, consumed, and controlled. The enormous quantity of Digital Image Archiving or Archives (media representations of the self) and the ways in which digital algorithms determine the meaning, value, and identity of that archival material are examples of how media forms and digital technology continue to influence expressions of desire (Baudrillard, 1994; Hall, 1997). Not only are individual desires of a psychoanalytic (or personal) nature; however, but they are also viewed as part of a structure created by economic systems, technical systems, and Ideological systems.

And in this period of "Late Capitalism", Desire is now manufactured via the internet and through "data mining", "Algorithmic prediction", and platform type economies, existing as what is happening, as opposed to as symbols. As such, the role that visual culture plays in constructing one's identity has increased, Since Images not only work as Symbols of one's Desire to be socially accepted but through images, one can receive attention from an audience and build their emotional connection with the content they engage with. In addition, Contemporary Art has become an important space to examine the way that our desires have become Employed and Resisted, in a time when commodification of art is becoming the norm, and one can lose their desire if they don't participate or engage with a commodified art market.

Significance of Theme

Contemporary artists uniquely respond to shifting socio-political and economic environments through their creative practices. In doing so, artists actively participate in the development of processes that define, create, commodify, and challenge how individuals experience desire. Moreover, art allows for and encourages individuals to imagine themselves in ways that challenge traditional views/ways of being. Thus, Consideration of "Desire" as an aspect of political thought is critical for understanding the way people develop their identity (i.e., their subjectivity) and how they may create opportunities to rebel against existing cultural traditions through individual or collective action (Butler, 1990; Mulvey, 2005).

Example Artists

Hito Steyerl and Sherrie Levine have both produced new artistic work that has provided an analytical approach to exploring desire's implications in the global political landscape.

Levine has used her work to challenge traditional notions of authorship and originality through her use of appropriation, while Steyerl's work explores the relationship between technology, surveillance, and the production of images through a wide range of media. Both have created art that highlights how identity is commodified and how desire flows throughout today's culture.

Statement of the Thesis

Hito Steyerl and Sherrie Levine's opposition to the monetization of identity and authorship demonstrates their differing political descriptions, as they challenge the politics of desire using their artistic practices. Through the analysis of their work, it becomes apparent that Steyerl and Levine offer significant critiques of the socio-political aspects of desire within the scope of late capitalism using feminist and postmodern theory.

Section 1: Conceptual Structure

Theory of Feminism

Feminist theory critically studies the constructions and the circulation of desire, particularly when considering the interplay between gender identity, consumerism, and other facets of human experience. Judith Butler's concept of performativity shows how the notions of long-term stable or fixed identities and or authentic selves are called into question by society's continual re-enactment of the moments of desire through social performances (Butler, 1990). Butler's work has a direct application to current artistic methods that illustrate the limitations and fragility of how we construct ourselves subjectively. The male gaze (Mulvey, 2005), as an often-direct continuation of patriarchal logics that view women as objects of desire within the realm of visual culture, reinforces gendered power relations. Through the application of the male gaze in visual art and film, women's bodies are constructed as sites of consumption for desire; at the same time, by normalising the commodification of desire, it empowers men to maintain their dominant position over women. Feminist artists, in response to this, have sought to challenge and deconstruct these dynamics and create a new lexicon of how we can express desire and how we experience desire (Mulvey, 2005).

Consequently, feminist theories not only critique how women are represented but also critique the larger systems through which desire is created (constructed), delivered (distributed), and managed (regulated). To comprehend how Steyerl and Levine practice appropriation, recontextualization, and technological mediation to disrupt standardised versions of authorship, identity, and consumption, one must also understand this framework of theoretical discourse. Feminist theory has traditionally not acknowledged the gendered structures of power; however, more recently feminist thought emphasises intersectionality as an important lens or framework for studying desire. For example,

Kimberlé Crenshaw has illustrated that desire is constructed differently according to the multiple axes of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation through which we view the world. The two artists, Steyerl and Levine, create works of art that demonstrate how through utilising different historical and aesthetic contexts, both address intersectional concerns by revealing how structures of visibility and value privilege some bodies and narratives while marginalising others. The wider feminist perspective therefore posits that desire is neither universal nor neutral; rather, it is socially and politically ascribed.

Criticism of Postmodernism

Postmodern theory has provided illuminating perspectives on how images and representations are manifested within the cultural constructs of late capitalism. More specifically, Jean Baudrillard (1994) has presented us with the concept of "simulacra" — meaning a condition where signs and images take form and circulate as a commodity unto themselves and without any connection (or reference) to their own referential "realities". In this regard, in the digital realm, images are no longer derived directly from their primary source of authenticity. Rather, an endless multiplication of images has resulted in yet more distances from that source, as well as infinite new forms of nostalgia and distance from that object. Additionally, Simulacra impact an artist's identity, but this impact is not limited solely to an artist's identity. Simulacra complicate concepts of originality, authorship, and authenticity, as the boundaries between reality and representation become increasingly blurred (Baudrillard, 1994) whereby the artwork produced by the artist(s) is reflective of the commodification process and the signs to/from which those images are obtained.

Postmodern critique provides insight into the way that both Steyerl uses technological mediation through installation art and how Levine uses appropriation of famous images as forms of artistic creation. Both Steyerl and Levine are working in a context where there are numerous representations and commercialised images within society, therefore both artists are navigating issues regarding simulacra and the resulting devaluation of image meaning.

Culture Studies Representations and identity construction within the landscape of culture politics are examined and theorised through cultural studies, such as Stuart Hall's work on representations and its relationship to power (Hall, 1997). According to representation theory developed by Hall (1997), "the systems of signification that create meaning in our society," are connected to power and the construction of representations of identity. Therefore, the politics of representation and identity exist at the same time.

The media is both a reflection of and an influence on how people view themselves and others. As the number of digital platforms and technologies increases, the media's role as a source of cultural production continues to expand. This allows for new types of identity formation, surveillance, and commodification, all occurring through digital media. Since art exists at the intersection of the media and culture, it is important to study and reorganize many of the above-mentioned processes within an artistic framework (Hall, 1997). It

emphasizes how the over-use of the same images eventually leads to a sense of boredom rather than abundance. Fredric Jameson argues that repetitive image recycling during the late period of capitalism creates a "flattening" of human emotion, resulting in disconnectedness between emotion and desire. Levine's use of appropriation and Steyerl's damaged digital images illustrate this repetitive practice and show how desire continues long after authenticity has disappeared. Their artwork does not provide the experience of transcendence but challenges people with a repetitive stream of imagery, forcing them to engage in critical reflection on how desire survives and grows during a constant reproduction/recirculation of visual imagery.

Section 2: Hito Steyerl.

Biography and Overview.

The work of Hito Steyerl, a German artist, filmmaker, and scholar, examines the interplay between technology, politics, and visual culture. Trained as a documentary filmmaker, Steyerl has expanded her creative output through video essays, installation art, and written theory regarding how images are created and circulated in a digital environment. Her art explores the materiality of images, digital surveillance systems, and the fragility of individual subjectivity created by global capitalism (Steyerl 2012). Through Steyerl's educational background, as well as being an active voice in current discussions regarding digital culture and global politics, she has formed many of her artistic ideas and methodologies. Steyerl's installations often utilise irony, absurdity, and didacticism to present the paradoxes and problems of contemporary society. A continual theme throughout Steyerl's artistic practice is the examination of how visibility is constituted by technological systems, how knowledge is commodified, and how desire interacts with technology (Enwezor 2015).

Key Works

"How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational." "MOV File"

Created by Steyerl as a commentary on contemporary Visibility Politics, "How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational." MOV File (2013) uses Humour, Nonsense and Absurdity to Analyse the Conditions that make Individuals and Images Visible and Invisible within Surveillance and Data regimes. The absence of visibility from the point of view of Steyerl generates a series of filmed lessons and Computer-generated Animations which explore the Ambiguities of Current Visibility. In addition to highlighting the Emotional need to be visible as a 'need for recognition', Steyerl shows how the Need to Be Seen is equated with Vulnerability to Commodified identity and control, with the use of Technological Infrastructure to manage Bodies/Self/Image(s) as well as the Becoming of the Unseen through the Tactics of Disappearing into Digital Capture by becoming Smaller than the Resolution of the Camera and/or by Blending into Green Screen Landscapes (Steyerl, 2012).

In addition to providing a method of voyeuristic access to the unseen operations of surveillance, this piece utilises the power and danger associated with the visibility of ourselves and others to present an opportunity to examine our vulnerability to institutions and the nature of our image-making practices that could be seen as shaping or contributing to our own socialisation. According to Enwezor (2015), through its didactic approach, Steyerl encourages viewers to accept and potentially reject their own roles and capabilities in relation to technological systems. By doing so, this video demonstrates how visibility can be monetised and how economies of control and digital attention operate alongside the desire for visibility. Steyerl posits a critical reflection on the growth of digital forms of mediation through the conception of *Factory of the Sun* (2015).

Using a digital format that allows for total immersion, *Factory of the Sun* invites its audience into a fiction where, through the act of moving about the physical world, we create virtual sunlight through the conversion of our movements into digital data. The transformation of labour and affect into commodities within a digital economy is what Joselit (2016) notes as the thematic focus.

The text discusses the desire for real and authentic experiences and the right to make independent choices within the modern world which is dominated by automated computations and Virtual Realities. *The Factory of the Sun* represents the ways in which one might navigate tensions with modern desires. In Steyerl's view, desires for both freedom and authenticity are consumed within systems of control, commodification, and monitoring (Steyerl, 2012). According to Joselit (2016), Steyerl's use of immersive environments does more than simply critique the commodification of labour and desire; they also serve as a way for the viewer to confront the emotional and intellectual conflict of living in the digital age. The work combines elements of amusement and fear to encourage critical reflection on issues such as agency, subjectivity, and resistance to global capitalism.

Scholarly Engagement

Theoretical works by H. Steyerl include "The Wretched of The Screen" (2012) highlighting the materiality of images and mediation and its associated politics. She sees Digital Images as more than just representations, they are part of a larger network controlled by those holding the power to move and manipulate them. Through her emphasis of the "Poor Image", which is a low-quality image, widely disseminated, often copying and pirating, she challenges the hierarchical tradition of evaluating images based on value or originality and links her work into a wider Postmodern critique of the concepts of Authorship and Authenticity. Marking the transition point of contemporary art within Steyerl's (H.) artistic practices is the works of O. Enwezor (2015) in describing how through exploring the complexities and contradictions of mass surveillance, techniques of commodification, and the implications of technological determinism; Steyerl has demonstrated her skill and capability in making visible these power structures. Similarly, the affective and cognitive nature of H. Steyerl's installation work allows viewers to interact with her work to explore

and/or contest the complex systems of desire in the commodified digital environment outlined by David Joselit (2016).

Steyerl's engagement with invisibility is a deliberate approach towards anti-desire, an aspect of Steyerl's writing that is often overlooked. While most mainstream visual regimes promote an association between visibility and empowerment, Steyerl presents a counter-narrative by showing how visibility is routinely exploited and monitored. In this context, the desire to withdraw, disappear, or become unreadable is seen as a political act of resistance. As such, Steyerl's writing provides a re-framing for desire from one of wanting to be acknowledged (i.e., to be transparent and involved) to being in tension with both the dual forces of exposure and preserving oneself from exploitation.

Section 3: Sherrie Levine.

Biography and Overview.

Sherrie Levine has created much of her body of artwork through a feminist and postmodern critique through the 1970s and 1980s. Most of her artistic output encompasses appropriation and re-development of works by well-known male artists from the 1800s and 1900s. Much of Levine's work addresses issues of authorship, originality, and representation, while simultaneously raising questions concerning how identities are formed and commodified within the fine art and visual culture industries. Through her application of feminist theory and her critiques of traditional art history, Levine has become one of the most influential artists of our time. By imitating and reframing famous artwork, Sherrie Levine allows society to engage in a deeper questioning of the limitations of art, aesthetics, and social hierarchies.

Key Works

"After Edward Weston"

In "After Edward Weston" (1980), Levine has created a series of photographs that document and display some of Weston's most famous works from the point of view of a modernist photographer. When she manipulates and re-copies these famous images into her own photographs, she is demonstrating that the idea of a unique creator has been stolen from modernity, and that the physical act of creating images has been taken over by a commercial industry who creates desire through their own representations of artists and the physical objects they create (Gokey, 1989). Levine gives us a way to see the social framework in which Weston's work was created, to expose the patriarchal structure of art and the fetishist relationship of photographs and those who desire these photographs. The way in which Levine re-interprets and re-signifies the photographs that she creates out of Weston's images, tells the viewer that desire and value are created and circulated through sets of representations that promote certain identities and activities and these very same

representations shape the way we think about the art of man and the larger culture in which we participate (Gokey, 1992).

In addition to being critical, the appropriative practice detailed here allows artists to reposition themselves in terms of how they create beyond traditional expectations. Levine uses "After Edward Weston" not only as an analysis of the object of love/desire but also as commentary on the system's role in creating desire through commodification.

"After Walker Evans"

Levine expands her study of representation and identity construction using Evans' photos, and in doing so, she addresses the art of representation, the construction of identity, and she explores how documentary "truth" is created and contested as well as the complex nuances that form the basis of authorship through the appropriation of Evans' work. Levine also explores how images can be sites for "desire" and "identification" both for viewers and institutions (Nochlin, 1989).

The work of Levine expresses the limitations and exclusions that form the basis of the canon of art history where the narratives of creative merit have been traditionally primarily controlled and defined by male artists and the narrative exclusion of women and other "others" from those same histories. By placing herself in the tradition of Evans, Levine questions the authority of that same male canon by exposing the "gendered" and "ideological" aspects of the "desire" that surface in the practices of seeing, collecting, and valuing (Dyer, 1992).

According to Dyer (1992), Levine's approach creates ambiguity surrounding the boundaries of what is original, what is imitated/reproduced and who/what we identify with that has come before us, as all these distinctions represent desire based upon relationship and conflict. In addition, Levine continues to offer an alternative viewpoint to studying the relationship of women, men and all other genders to artistry, power, money, consumer culture, and contemporary visual culture.

Scholarly Engagement

Academic Analysis

The feminist art historian Ella Nochlin (1989) placed Levine's artwork within a larger structure of feminist art history. She suggests that Levine's appropriation critiques both the myth of artistic originality and the male-dominated desire processes. The appropriation not only reveals the exclusion of women from the canon of art but also creates new forms of authorship and agency. Richard Dyer (1992) develops further the implications of Levine's work on visual culture politics by discussing how her work demonstrates the constrictions of desire and identity within systems of representation. Dyer describes how Levine's actions encourage the viewer to enter the process of meaning-making and question their own passive consumption and identification within that system.

The approach that Levine employs can be viewed as feminist refusal as it denies the creation of new images in a crowded visual economy, while at the same time not adhering to a masculine-driven notion of "uniqueness" or "mastery". By using other artists' canonical works without altering them, she redirects the audience's desire for creative output away from that of creating new images and towards that of obtaining social recognition from established institutions. The shift in the focus illustrates a developmental change within the arts in relation to the way we view art: Desire in art is often not to simply enjoy an aesthetically appealing work of art, but rather to experience the sense of "ownership," "authorship," and historical significance that an artist represents.

Section 4: Comparative Analysis.

Similarities and Differences

Steyerl and Levine both offer critical analyses of the politics of desire; however, their methods and emphases are markedly different. In general, Steyerl's focus is on multidimensional and immersive artistic installations, using technology to mediate visibility, monitor, and measure labor through the lens of surveillance and labour. Her work often encourages engagement and education, allowing viewers to navigate the complexities of desire in our digital economy (Steyerl, 2012; Enwezor, 2015).

Conversely, Levine approaches this topic using appropriation and recontextualization; her focus is how images are circulated throughout the history of both art and popular culture. The conceptual rigor of Levine's work challenges the question of who is original, as well as what happens to an individual's identity once it has been commodified (Nochlin, 1989; Dyer, 1992). Although Steyerl and Levine differ in technique and emphasis, both artists push back against conventional notions of authorship and truth, shedding light on the ideological implications of representations and consumption, as well as demonstrating how desire is produced, disseminated, and controlled, and how to combat these forces and articulate new realities.

Despite being produced in two different eras of history, both Steyerl's and Levine's critiques of desire are consistent with those of the late 20th/early 21st centuries and modern capitalism. Levine's work uses a postmodern and institutional-critical view of desire, whereas Steyerl uses a digital acceleration and algorithmic control perspective. Both Steyerl and Levine provide a timeline that shows the development of desire from the fetishism of items to the commodification of attention, data, and affect.

Thematic Connections

Both artists have shown a strong dedication to challenging both the commodification of one's identity and the role technology and media play in our desires. Through their works, Steyerl and Levine have created a dialogue around how we think about our relationships with ourselves and with others, original and copy, the system and the individual. In her

exploration of visibility and surveillance, Steyerl has many parallels with Levine's critique of the "gaze" and how visual representation operates politically in terms of desire/identification (Steyerl 2012; Nochlin 1989).

They (Steyerl and Levine) both question the stability and fixed understanding of one's identity and/or desire and have created spaces for alternate methods of viewing and existing amidst the multiple exclusions and hierarchies that form the basis of contemporary (or "post-modern") culture. While Hall (1997) writes extensively about the intertwining of identity politics with representation politics, both Steyerl and Levine are employing Hall's insights to create critical discourse regarding the socio-historic arrangement of identities in a commodified society.

Implications for Contemporary Audiences:

What do Steyerl and Levine's work mean to viewers today?

The work done by both artists encourages viewers to evaluate their own relationships with, and perceptions of, how we express desire, how we identify, how commodification occurs. Their work illustrates the production of desire, and how it is managed. Thus, viewers become more engaged in constructing and shaping their own value and meaning systems. Through this process, art creates an opportunity to challenge the dominant narratives present in late capitalism (Joselit, 2016; Dyer, 1992).

The relevance of Steyerl and Levine's approach is more pronounced at this time, given the advancements made within technologies and the growth of the internet, along with the increase in surveillance and monetising of an individual's digital footprint. Both artists' work draws attention to the benefits and dangers associated with being visible, to the complexities of ownership and authorship, and the continuous challenges to maintain autonomy and receive acknowledgment within a mediated society (Enwezor, 2015; Nochlin, 1989).

Artists on both sides of this spectrum appear to advocate an alternate definition of "Spectatorship" -- one in which spectators are positioned as actors, rather than passive consumers, and positioned morally in terms of their participation in desire systems. By placing viewers in environments that both encompass Steyerl's immersive qualities and address the more abstract philosophical implications of Levine's work, both artists require self-reflection on the viewer's part to realize their own participation within the continuum of gazing, valuing and desiring systems.

Section 5: Conclusion.

Summary of Key Findings

Hito Steyerl and Sherrie Levine's artistic practices interrogate how the politics of desire operate in contemporary society through the application of feminist and postmodern

theories. Interestingly, both artists critique the commodification of identity and authorship to draw attention to the systems at play when constructing desires and subsequently how those desires are created, reproduced, and regulated in society today. Through her multimedia installations, Steyerl illustrates how technology and surveillance shape how we see labour, while through her use of appropriation, Levine challenges

traditional notions of originality and the patriarchal systems within the art history framework that support the formation of desires.

Broader Implications

Steyerl and Levine's works address broader issues beyond the art world; they offer insights into sociopolitical dynamics inherent to late-and post-capitalism. While highlighting how desire is tied to representations of interests, commercialised products and mediators of control, they also present ways to resist and reposition desires. Their works are relevant today given the increase in digital technology and continued surveillance, allowing viewers to reconsider how they see themselves and their desires (Steyerl; 2012; Nochlin, 1989; Hall, 1997).

Future Research Directions

Additional research should examine how new technologies—such as AI, VR, and social media—are shaping the creation and management of desires and identities. New dynamics unique to digital culture will present additional concerns about authorship and authenticity, as well as the issues surrounding the development and establishment of agency. Future research will have an opportunity to address these new issues. With other contemporary artists who address similar themes, will enable us to understand better the issues regarding the politics of desire in a globalized, interconnected world.

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