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Question 5: From the Lens-Based Image Making research strand Lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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Gender Representation and Stereotypes Within Photography and Media

Introduction

This essay will discuss gender representation within photography and media and explore sexism and stereotypes within these mediums. It will discuss femininity, feminism and female representation that is seen within photography and media, specifically magazine covers. Artists and their portrayal of gender in their work will be investigated. There will also be discussion on how *Vogue* portrays women on their covers over a 50-year time period, and how *Vanity Fair* portrays cis-gender woman compared to transgender women and cis-gender men. As well as discussing femininity on the covers of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, there will be a discussion on femininity and gender representation within the work of Cindy Sherman. This essay will also include a discussion about Annie Leibovitz and gender representation in her work.

What is Feminism? Feminism is defined as “Organized efforts to improve women's legal rights, personal and social opportunities” (Mitchell, 2015, p. 1). Feminism is often seen in many types of media, especially pop culture and popular tv shows and movies (Trier-Bieniek, 2019, p. xiii). It is possible to believe that feminism has shaped modern society and created the powerful people that we see in media today. We see the effects of feminism in everyday life, and we will continue to see things changing because of feminism.

Many artists have used feminism as the main theme of their work. It could be argued that feminism has become a trend within art and media, and that many lesser-known artists use it as a way to become popular. The question is how is feminism used in art and media? Is it used as an advertising tool, or is feminism used in art and media

to help the audience obtain a better understanding of what feminism actually is? Perhaps some artists use art to express their own personal experiences with gender stereotypes. On the other hand, there are some negative gender stereotypes within art and media, and some artists might use gender stereotypes in a negative way. Perhaps people in art and media use harmful or negative gender stereotypes in their work without realising the impact that their work has. These topics are explored through analysis of the artists and publications below.

Cindy Sherman



Figure 1. *Untitled C*, Cindy Sherman, 1975

Cindy Sherman, born in 1954, is a photographer who specialised in self-portraits (Tate, 2021a). Cindy Sherman uses gender in her work, focusing on gender, including femininity (The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), 2021a). In *Untitled C* (figure 1), the woman is making direct eye contact with the camera, and it could be said that she is challenging the beauty standard of her time. The hair style could be considered a non-traditional feminine hair style. It could be argued that Sherman has done this to challenge gender stereotypes. The way Sherman is standing and posing is arguably not the most flattering pose, pulling her head down towards her chest creating a shadow under her chin that looks similar to a beard and creating a small

smile that is slightly crooked on one side. The way she is posing might not be what you would expect for a woman in 1975, especially because this is a self-portrait. The way Sherman positions herself stands out compared to other portrait photographs of women.



Figure 2, *Untitled B*, Cindy Sherman, 1975

Sherman's *Untitled B* (figure 2) has Sherman dressed as a man. Sherman has made her hair look short with a man's hat on and a drawn on unibrow. She also has dirt all over her face. She has also pulled her head back to make it appear that she has multiple chins. She has done this in a way where it is obvious that she is a woman dressed as a man and not trying to trick people into that she is a man. This is an interesting portrayal of gender specifically for the time that it was made. It looks almost as if she is mocking the female stereotype and the male stereotype at the same time. Perhaps Sherman has created this photograph to mock how a woman is supposed to like in a photograph. Sherman is also not wearing a top, perhaps this is because it is more socially acceptable for a man to be topless in a public setting than it is for a woman. Her face also looks dirty perhaps to protest against the ideal beauty for women. *Figure 2* was created in 1975 therefore perhaps this photograph was controversial in its time or at least less accepted as it is today.

Femininity and Feminism on Magazine covers

Magazines are known for setting unrealistic beauty standards for woman by using models that look unrealistic (Trier-Bieniek, 2019, p.21). There is also gender bias in different genres of magazines, for example, in sport: “Despite females’ increased participation in sport since the enactment of Title IX and calls for greater media coverage of female athletes, women appeared on just 4.9 percent of covers” (Weber and Carini, 2013, p. 1). This figure is from 2000 to 2011 and since then there has likely been some change, but this proves that there has been and probably still is a gender bias on magazine covers especially sport magazines. This statistic also displays that there still gender bias in sport media in the 21st century.

Female Representation on *Vogue* Covers over a 50-year time period



Figure 4, *Vogue* Cover November 1971



Figure 3, *Vogue* Cover November 2010



Figure 5, *Vogue* Cover November 2021

Feminism and gender representation are topics that are often discussed in the media, especially in the 21st century.

Vogue is a fashion magazine known for its beautiful cover pages. *Figures 3 to 5* show *Vogue* covers from November 1971, 2010, and 2021, there are many differences of female representation seen on these covers. The woman in *figure 5* is

wearing more clothing, covering her arms and legs but in an elegant way rather than a conservative way. The dress does have a lower neckline but still has a fuller coverage than the woman in *figure 3*. The woman in *figure 5* is wearing a green dress which could be considered as a traditionally masculine colour. This could be a personal choice or an aesthetic choice, but there is the chance that she has chosen this particular colour because it could be considered a traditionally masculine colour. The *figure 3* cover has the woman showing more skin and making direct eye contact with the camera, and the woman in *figure 5* cover is not making eye contact with the camera. In fact, only one side of her face is visible in the photograph. The woman in *figure 4* is also making direct eye contact with the camera, but she is also tilting her head to the side and sitting on a chair. This pose could be seen as a more innocent pose which could also be perceived as a more feminine pose. *Figure 4* has the women in a strapless bright red. As it appears to be a strapless dress it has a low neckline, but she is using her arm to cover her chest. She could be covering her chest with her arm to make her appear more modest, or it could be for her own personal comfort in the photograph. Red could be considered as a traditionally a feminine colour, therefore she could be wearing that colour dress to appear more feminine, but similar to the woman in *figure 5*, she could be wearing that colour as a personal choice or aesthetic choice.

There is a difference in the typography on the *Vogue* covers, over time we see less typography being used. *Figure 4* has a similar amount of typography as in *figure 3*, and *figure 5* has significantly less typography. There could be less typography on the most recent *Vogue* cover because the magazine wants the audience to focus their attention to the woman and her body more than the typography surrounding the woman. Perhaps this also demonstrates that the woman is more important. *Figure*

4 may have a similar amount of typography to *figure 3*, there is a difference with how it is placed. The typography in *figure 4* surrounds her whole upper body, whilst the typography in *figure 3* is on the left side of the women still focusing on the face and upper body of the women but in a different way. Pop culture media which includes magazines set unattainable standards in social situations and beauty suggested by Trier-Bieniek (Trier-Bieniek, 2019, p. 21). The way that the women are represented on the *Vogue* covers may have changed over time, and perhaps the women on the covers of *Vogue* are setting standards that are impossible for the audience.

Gender Representation on *Vanity Fair* Covers



Figure 6, caitlyn-jenner-bruce-jenner-july-2015, Photographed by Annie Leibovitz, 2015



Figure 7, *Vanity Fair* Cover November 2015, 2015



Figure 8, *Vanity Fair* Cover January 2015, 2015

Vanity Fair is a well-known magazine and seems to be very popular. *Figures 6, 7 and 8* are *Vanity Fair* covers from 2015 and they all features a photograph of a celebrity. *Figure 6* has Caitlyn Jenner featured on the cover, and Caitlyn Jenner is a well-known transgender woman. Annie Leibovitz photographed Caitlyn Jenner for the *Vanity Fair* cover for July 2015 (Bissinger, 2015). The question is how did *Vanity Fair* portray Caitlyn Jenner, a known transgender woman compared to cis-gender women and men? *Figure 7* features Rihanna, a famous singer who is also a cis-gendered woman. In both *figures 6 and 7* Jenner and Rihanna are doing a similar pose and are wearing similar clothing, the difference being that Rihanna looks more

relaxed and comfortable. From observing *figures 6, 7 and 8* it is obvious that *Vanity Fair* have a trend of using celebrities on their covers, but does the fact that it is celebrities on the covers affect how we discuss gender representation on magazine covers? It could be argued that people discuss the gender representation or gender stereotypes in a more open sense, perhaps because it is less personal and easier for them to give an opinion on the subject.

There is less typography to be seen in *figure 6* than in *figure 7*, perhaps this is because the magazine wanted the audience to focus on Jenner herself and her body rather than the other stories that are in the magazine. *Figure 8* features Bradley Cooper who is a famous actor and is a cis-gender man, and it is very obvious that they have presented him differently than Jenner and Rihanna. Cooper is wearing more clothing covering his body, but the top of his shirt is slightly opened whilst Jenner and Rihanna (*Figures 6 and 7*) have clothing with a lower top showing a lot more cleavage which is very unlikely to be seen on a man. The main focus of Cooper is his face, and we can see this because the typography surrounds his face leaving his face clear but with typography over his body.

In *figure 7* the typography surrounds Rihanna's body and face and like discussed earlier there is little amount of typography on *figure 6*. It appears that *Vanity Fair* portray women differently to men as Bradley Cooper in *figure 8* is doing an activity whilst the women in *figures 6 and 7* are simply posing for the camera. It appears that *Vanity Fair* have portrayed Caitlyn Jenner, a transgender woman in a very similar way that they portray a cis-gender woman. There are some small differences between how they have presented Jenner and Rihanna, but this could be because of aesthetic reasons or because of the stories in the magazine. Perhaps having Caitlyn Jenner on the cover of *Vanity Fair* is the social change and opportunities of feminism

mentioned by Mitchell (2015, p. 1). As discussed with *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* could be seen as setting impossible beauty for women standards that are seen in pop culture. By having a transgender woman and a cis-gender man on *Vanity Fair* covers could suggest that *Vanity Fair* is more inclusive and realistic than other big-name magazines.

Annie Leibovitz

Annie Leibovitz is an American Photographer born in 1949 (MoMA, 2021b). Leibovitz has been a photographer for *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair*, two very different magazines (Biography.com, 2021). Leibovitz was only twenty-three years old when she became the chief photographer for *Rolling Stone* magazine (Biography.com, 2021). But how is Annie Leibovitz's photography important for the discussion of gender representation in photography and media? Leibovitz photographed Caitlyn Jenner for *Vanity Fair* after she came out as transgender (*figure 6*) (Biography.com, 2021). Whether or not people consider the photograph by Annie Leibovitz to be controversial, it is still a huge step forward for gender representation in media because Caitlyn Jenner is a very famous transgender woman who is also associated with the Kardashian family. Leibovitz is also known for taking photographs of extremely famous celebrities for *Vanity Fair* that are more controversial than other photographs that are seen on the *Vanity Fair* covers (Biography.com, 2021). It could be said that Annie Leibovitz does not have a specific way of portraying gender in her photographs, but she photographs gender as she sees it.

Cindy Sherman and her photography work represents her own femininity in a very interesting and creative way. Through unflattering self-portraits that comment on gender stereotypes and aesthetics, Sherman has used her own femininity to express herself as a female artist. It could be said that the way *Vogue* portrays woman has changed and developed over the years by using less typography and framing the whole body of the woman on the cover, and not just framing her face in earlier covers. It is possible to believe that *Vanity Fair* have portrayed Caitlyn Jenner, a transgender woman the same way or at least a similar way to how they portrayed Rihanna, a cis-gendered woman. There are also some visible differences between the representation of men and woman on *Vanity Fair*. *Vanity Fair* have cover men with more clothing and doing an activity, and the women on the covers have less clothing than the men and are posing instead of doing an activity. Annie Leibovitz photographs men and women for magazine covers and, perhaps Annie Leibovitz has no certain style when it comes to photographing different genders.

From the research seen in this essay it is obvious there has been some improvement in gender representation in photographic media by including and representing a transgender woman very similar to how cis-gender women are included and represented. There has been a gender bias within media which is changing with time. Artists have used photography to express their femininity and artists will continue to use art and photography to express their own femininity.

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