

Module: Research In Practice Proposal

Code: ADAD5004

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photographic art through three keywords, that will summarise key points within art in how women are portrayed. I will explore additional media to expand narratives that have affected the portrayal of women.

My first word is representation here we will look at how Stuart Hall broken down representation in representation theory where he eludes to the artificial nature in which it was formed. We will also look at how the historic nature of male gaze has perverted the image of women in art as a performance for men made by men. Another topic I will include in this is queer narrative as today we move towards newer topics of conversation in regards to representation.

Then I will talk about stereotype historically in art and how second wave feminist art and queer photography redefined the female archetype in art and how theorists and writers discuss the implications of stereotyping and how that ties into modern media. I will then look at transgender theorists and artists who have documented transgender people and how that generates alternative queerness to the narrative surrounding representation and how trans females adapt to female stereotypes and so called socially female accepted behaviours to form their own identity in their new role.

The Aim of outlying these keywords in the history and political sense of art will expand my understanding of why confronting male gaze through second wave female representation promoted challenge societal norms moving forward and why fifty years later we are still fighting for control of our own narratives in art as politics once again strives to cut down on social change that second wave feminism thought hard for in terms of equality and why artists still practice to keep open doors to authentic identity.

Representation in isolation is defined as “the way someone or something is shown” (Cambridge dictionary definition, 2025) We think of representation in art in accordance to gender and the word representation, we often today think of way women are depicted in film and television and now social media . Sexualisation of the woman through the lens as well as film has always been a topic of debate especially through the male gaze.

It often communicated that women have been the victim of “a primordial wish for pleasure looking” (Mulvey, 1975) as it was Mulvey that coined the term ‘male gaze’. We also look at how second wave feminism fought for better pay, health care and fought for their own image as a female that has been constructed through historic male patriarchy.

I find second wave feminism art interesting because often feminist art (and now queer and marginalised movements) depicts a open dialogue with women and a protest against male perceived views on women that can lead to “objectifying and sexualizing representations, as portrayals that paint a restrictive picture” (santonicrolo 2023) We can see this as far back in western society in renaissance paintings where politics historically largely led by male figureheads and religious movements dictated visuals of females in “paintings of women embodied the idealized notion of beauty through the enhancement of physical attributes and behaviours seen in portraiture and mythological art. Artists of the time thought creating visual forms of female beauty through eroticism and nudity” (Nelson 2023) it is through this bias of eroticism and nudity that the representation is formed through male gaze promoting a gender barrier in art. Feminist artists actively sought to stop Western art from simply reproducing gender barriers ingrained in society today with political significance. A female may view a feminist art piece with political defiance because of current narratives or a single narrative surrounding women rights such as in America where we can see in western culture there is a “high risk of abortion rights being rolled back even further After the Supreme Court ruling in 2022 that overturned Roe.V. Wade, ending the constitutional abortion protection, many states quickly restricted or banned abortion” (Saez 2024) this is a worrying response to culture shifts as well as trump is known to have a biased view towards women as “Trump represents “hegemonic masculinity”, the exalted position of men at the top” (Cardiff University 2025). This is a example of world leaders still trying to

dictate the way a women's body should be represented in society rather than promoting reality.

Stuart Hall coined the term representation theory which talks about how representation is formed. Through the power of the image and media outlets Hall states "through the fact in the notion of representation is the idea of giving meaning so the idea of representation is the way in which meaning is given somehow through images" the comment taken by Challenging media in 2006, this is a gateway to understanding complex ideas in an analytical sense and a form of communication.

Hall states that what we see through media can lead to multiple different outcomes in context of an image or a image that does not have any context to a media story can be used to create new discourse that cannot be traced from isolation in its authentic form. We can see how in second wave feminism art in a positive light can be transformed to fit into political narratives such as Cindy Sherman's film stills. The images in the interpretation of the artist looking back states "I didn't think of what I'm doing as political to me it was a way of to make out the best of what I liked to do privately which was dressing up" (Sherman 2013) however in the work has been adopted by the feminist movement to forge a new meaning in a performative political context.

For example the work has been interpreted as defiance of the male gaze "build up an image of femininity which simultaneously falls apart as all the female identities played by the artist (which are not self-portraits) destabilize a rigid notion of femininity, as we see in the front cover image (Untitled Film Still #2), where a young woman is seen in the act of composing in the mirror a self-idealized image of herself for an implied gaze." (Sorrentino 2016) Sherman didn't fight this idea and allowed her work to be adopted by the feminist movement based on Sherman's quote "It's important to note that Sherman is not anti-feminist by any means; in fact, quite the opposite. However, she emphasizes that her work is not made with a feminist agenda on her end" (SEGREST 2024) and for good reason Sherman allows her work to be adopted, we can argue that the work being given political meaning transcended the images from a playful university project to a series of images with timeless political purpose.

“To refer correctly' to someone as a 'dumb blonde', and to understand what is meant by that implies a great deal more than hair colour and intelligence. It refers immediately to her sex, which refers to her status in society, her relationship to men, her inability to behave or think rationally, and so on. In short, it implies knowledge of a complex social structure” (Dyer, 2009, Pg. 208) this quote implies that stereotyping can be used as grouping people together on pattern and assumption.

Stereotyping is often today seen as a by product of media outlets promoting outrage at a group that may be considered a minority. In Western culture, the essential everydayness of Whiteness allows White people to "create the dominant images of the world," and yet be unable to see that "they construct the world in their image" (Dyer ,1997 pg. 9). Dyer theorises that the negative reporting of minorities is that of the psychology of the white male.

We can back up this theoretical thinking with social psychology where it is described as “Social psychology as being the scientific attempt to explain how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings. (Gordon Allport 1954) this process of social psychology seeks to understand how stereotypes are formed through the masses, this process can be traced back as far as the first writings of commentary on a minority in 1962 “A number of them will sleep together in the veldt, making no difference between men and women...They all smell fiercely, as can be noted at a distance of more than

twelve feet against the wind, and they also give the appearance of never having washed” (Hook, 2005,pg 1) here we can see how a culture can be perceived negatively based on difference in culture and religion as we can see in quote homosexuality is referenced in negativity and judging appearance which are strong evidence of social psychology effecting the way we consume information of alien topics or experiences as they are formed for us.

Judith butler eludes to stereotype in what is expected of gender roles and how we are taught from birth to fit into society based on ones sex. Butler explores how this idea of fitting into roles is not based on scientific fact and not conforming to the narrative “fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (Butler 1988, pg 522) a recent example of this would be how demi Lovato changing her pronouns from she/her to they/them and the reasoning behind it being “No matter what choices men thought I should make for myself, I just started listening to me, which I ended up finding out was equal parts masculine and feminine” (Lovato 2021) This is evidence that women are changing there identities because they do not meet the stereotypical aspects of femininity and are finding other ways to label themselves. Lovato two years later dropped the non binary term due to it being “absolutely exhausting. And that is one of the reasons that have led me to also feel comfortable with the feminine pronoun”(Lovato 2023)

This implies a stereotypical issue in regards to what is meant to be a woman. However should your gender be assumed at all from birth because of sex? Butler views “Gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (Butler 1988 pg, 8)

Yumna Al- Arashi a Muslim photographer combats western culture with its stereotypical depiction women in bathhouses. Arashi states that “the gender-segregated baths that are culturally distinctive to North Africa and were often conflated with harem scenes as an excuse to show naked women in Orientalist art” (Galer 2019) We can suggest that historic western artists are appropriating Arabic culture through the male gaze sexually stereotyping women. Jean- Leon Gerome created a oil painig depicting a north African female only bathhouse setting. However its been contested in its authenticity because “as a man and an outsider, Gérôme could never have entered a space like the one depicted here. The harem was a private area reserved for women.” (Beeny 2025)

Therefore we can see how the male gaze and the possible political views based on colonialism of the time has formed this image and therefore the reality is altered to fit western culture.

Arashi uses a feminine gaze and her Muslim heritage to create the authentic reclaiming female only spaces in “hope is that we can start thinking for ourselves more often going forward.” (Gaddis 2025)

John F Olivan used transgenderism in the medical text *Sexual Hygiene and Pathology*, published in 1965. Olivan used the term transgenderism in a medical sense to indicate an “urge for gender (‘sex’) change. (TNM 2015) In the modern day setting the term transgender is often shortened to trans to describe someone in the process of changing gender. “The prefix “trans” is Latin for “from the other” usually indicating a change of state. “ (Wex Definitions team 2025) we can suggest that from the other states that transitioning is a process that we can call a journey.

Transgender people for arguably the first 80 years of the 20th century really struggled to break into society. Gary Comenas quotes Pat Hackett, “As late as '67 drag queens still weren't accepted in the mainstream freak circles. They were still hanging around where they'd always hung around - on the fringes... sticking to their own circles - outcasts with bad teeth and body Odor and cheap make-up and creepy clothes” (Comenas 2025) this is statement made two years after the term transgender entered the public eye. During the 60s Candy Darling was one of the early public eye pioneering women who faced being in a “homophobic and transphobic world” (Shewey 2024) Darling struggled with just about every issue a trans woman could face as she was transitioning before society could catch up to her including one of today biggest political western topics should transgender women be allowed in female toilets?

An aspect of the transgender movement that needs to be explored in imagery is that of resilience and solace. Fitting into a hostile environment is very difficult because of said

demonisation of the trans woman. Darling faced “becoming an outlaw the moment she put on a dress,” (Anderson 2024) Today the term outlaw has manifested into threat. “many of whom are supposed to be feminists – keep coming up with lurid “what ifs”. my response to them is: trans women do not pose a threat to cisgender women” (Solnit 2020).

The champion of demonisation trans women today is arguably Harry potters creator, J.K Rowling. Who is fallen under the umbrella, ‘TERF’ is an acronym coined by trans activists, which stands for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist. In practice, a huge and diverse cross-section of women are currently being called TERFs and the vast majority have never been radical feminists. (Rowling 2020) TERF refers to women who feel threatened or uncomfortable with trans women. Rowling argues that its concerning that many men are wanting to transition in modern culture and references autism as plausible factor and uses a statistic that 60 to 90 percent of teens grow out of gender dysphoria so more policing should be considered. As Rowling states that trans women cannot grasp what it means to be a woman “woman is not a costume. ‘Woman’ is not an idea in a man’s head. ‘Woman’ is not a pink brain, a liking for Jimmy Choos or any of the other sexist ideas now somehow touted as progressive” (Rowling 2020) we can look at this comment in several ways, this came from J.K. Rowling who likens women to a dress up experience, this is what trans women do as a act and there is a argument for some sexism in that field of work. However it is satire and pantomime. A trans woman is medically diagnosed with gender dysphoria and screened vigorously through the NHS psychiatrists and in my own experience the objective is to integrate into society as safely as possible in ones new role. The idea of dress up and big breasts is a luxury, a fantasy in its self. So these factors do not correspond to the reality of a trans woman in society. Rowling plays a dangerous game linking women to that kind of person because she is using feminine stereotypes to link and separate women from trans women. Her argument starts to fall apart when this link is made because that notion of thinking states that women are being invaded by men, again which is “One of the really weird fears about trans women is that they’re men pretending to be women to do nefarious things to other women, but that’s either a fear of straight cis-gender men who do horrific

things to women incessantly all over the world, in which case the problem is still straight men, or a deep misunderstanding of what trans women are.” (Solnit 2020) It also stereotypes men because although it has happened a close friend of mine told me that her friend was raped in a nightclub by a man, this is also not common but the chances are a lot higher than a trans woman being the culprit at large.

Within these three words we can find that western documentation compounded by media has manipulated women into being objects to be desired and how the female gaze is starting to take ownership of how the authentic woman should be represented in art, the female gaze and transgender women place in society is still forming and changing as well as the political landscape that forms contentious views on trans women, and although there is evidence to suggest trans women are women and the trauma that one faces when changing gender, how does a transgender person navigate society with the stigma attached to them through representation and stereotype and what excursions do trans women go on to reach their goal of what transition means to them?

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