

Research in Practice

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Module Name Research in Practice

Module Number ADAD5004

Course BA(Hons) Photography in the Arts

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Word Count: 2430

Three Key Words: Difference - Fetishism - Unconscious

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Non-Binary Portraits, Laurence Philomene, 2016-2019

Philomene, L., 2020. *Laurence Philomene - Photographer - Laurence Philomene*. [online] Laurence Philomene. Available at: <<https://www.laurencephilomene.com/#0>> [Accessed 11 May 2020].

Figure 2: Cover of Outside & Inbetween, Chloe Aftel, 2019

Aftel, C., 2019. *Outside & In Between*.

Figure 3: Non-Binary Portraits, Jackson Akitt, 2016-present

Akitt, J., 2020. *Jackson Akitt Photography*. [online] Cargocollective.com. Available at: <<https://cargocollective.com/jacksonakitt>> [Accessed 11 May 2020].

Being a non-binary person (enby for short) is a huge part of my identity not only because it's my gender but because of the stigma and oppression experienced because of who I am. One of the biggest impacts that this has on my day to day life is that when I meet new people, I often need to explain who I am, what it means and defend my right to exist. This is largely down to the lack of knowledge and understanding about what non-binary means and lack of representation in the media. No I'm not a girl, no I'm not a boy, yes I do exist and it's none of your business what I have "down there" so please stop asking. It would be heavily frowned upon if you met a cisgender person and jumped straight into asking about their genitals. Men, women, boys and girls are all so well recognised, although there may be stereotypes surrounding such people, and are all now widely represented in the media. I believe that if enby people were widely and accurately represented in the media then there would be a lot more awareness about our existence and overall, a lot more acceptance as well. So I would like to expose the current representation of people in between and outside of the binary to see how we are currently portrayed.

Difference

First, I am looking into why it is important that we are represented. For this, I am focusing on the book *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013). In particular, I am looking at Chapter 4, section 1.2 called Why Does 'Difference' Matter by Stuart Hall. Hall lists four reasons why difference is important; two linguistic, an anthropological and a psychoanalytic reason. The first is *"... 'difference' matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist."* (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013, pg 234). Simply put, the dark would not be defined without the presence of

light. It is based on Saussure's theory that meanings are derived from opposites. He does however point out that this can be very reductionist, in that it reduces people to a finite number of characteristics. In terms of enby people, this would mean I am not a man, but I am not a woman either. This is where we get to see another option: the other. The "other" that we are, according to this theory, is defined by what we are not (men and women).



Figure 1: *Non-Binary Portraits, Laurence Philomene, 2016-2019 (Philomene, 2020).*

Laurence Philomene's set called Non-Binary Portraits illustrates this point well. For example, the image above (Philomene, 2020) portrays a non binary individual by using elements of traditionally binary gender expression. For example, it shows that they can't be a man

because they're wearing a dress while showing they can't be a woman as they have facial hair. Therefore, they must be non binary because they are not binary. The second reason is *"...we need 'difference' because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the 'Other'."* (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013, pg 235). This is a theory from Bathkin and argues that meaning is formed in discussions between people with differences. Hall does say, however, that this would imply that the meaning behind something would constantly be negotiated. In a non-binary context, this would mean that who and what we are is defined by the discussions we have with people who are not like us, which links back to the first theory, that relies on the idea of opposites. The following reason is from Douglass *"...culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system."* (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013, pg 236). This means that everything must have a meaning. Douglass believed that if something were categorised wrong or did not belong in a category it would disrupt society. This would therefore mean that non-binary people would disrupt society because they do not fit into a specific category. We see this all the time in the world, especially with the arguments over gender neutral toilets. This is in part why I receive backlash from people who believe in a gender binary system. The final reason is one of Freud's *"...the 'Other' is fundamental to the constitution of the self, to us as subjects, and to sexual identity."* (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013, pg 237). Freud uses this to mean that one can only define who they are by noticing they are not their mother and that they are indeed something different. Hall adds that this means we are all therefore lacking what we are not and must be missing something. This is widely known as the mirror stage. This feeling of otherness is something present in everyone but more so in trans and non binary individuals because they don't stop feeling this otherness during the mirror stage. They are unable to see themselves in others due to a lack of representation.

Fetishism

Stuart Hall also wrote a section called Fetishism and Disavowal in Chapter 4: The Spectacle of The Other in the book “Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices” (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013). In this section, Hall takes an in depth look at how fetishism affects the portrayal of black people in the media. This theory not only applies to non-binary representation but, arguably, has the biggest effect on how the community is displayed. One of the most prominent and relevant examples of this is the first published book of photographs about non-binary genders: Chloe Aftel’s “Outside & Inbetween” (Aftel, 2019).



Figure 2: Cover of *Outside & Inbetween*, Chloe Aftel, 2019 (Aftel, 2019).

The cover of the book is a photograph of a non-binary person sitting in their underwear on a bed by a window. Immediately, the spectators first impression of this group of people is sexualised through the use of semi-nudity. The cover allows the audience to experience a feeling of disavowal which Hall described as when “...a powerful fascination of desire is both *indulged* and at the same time *denied*.” (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013). To understand why this is relevant, we must first recognise that non-binary people are very often looked at in an anthropological way. Speaking from both experience and information gathered from others, I can tell you that when introducing yourself as an enby, the most common question is “oh but what are you really?” or “but what do you have *down there*?”. With this context it becomes apparent that the disavowal the spectator receives from the cover image is the indulgence of seeing the flat chest but the denial of learning which genitals this person has. It sparks a curiosity in spectators that can be uncomfortable and, in some cases, dangerous for trans individuals. Fetishism also plays a part here. When talking about fetishism here, I am speaking in a psychoanalytic context. I am looking at Freud’s theory of fetishism from his “Three Essays on Sexuality” (Freud, 1949). In this, Freud describes fetish as a woman’s substitute for an absent phallus and a man’s castration anxiety because of this. Freud talks about scopophilia as sexual element of looking much like what has become to be known as the male gaze. He believes that looking is a subconscious way to search for unfulfilled desire. Hall applies this to an example of “The Hottentot Venus” which was an African woman brought to England in 1819 as a spectacle for people to look at. He describes her buttocks as the fetish as it becomes the source of interest that allows people to look at her in a sexual manner without having to look at her genitals and feel like they are looking in a sexual way. Similarly, with Aftel’s image, the viewer is able to look at the subject’s semi-naked body without feeling like they are sexualising them because there is nothing of a

sexually explicit nature in front of their eyes. Laura Mulvey also looks at fetishism in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1999). Mulvey states that cinema gives the viewers “an illusion of looking into private worlds” which I believe photography does too because of how the still frame allows you to stare at a person without being perceived as rude. Because of this, she argues people are able to enjoy a voyeuristic fantasy which is where one gets pleasure from looking at people without them seeing. This would allow the subject to be heavily fetishized which is what I believe is happening in Aftel’s photograph. While the representation can be viewed as beneficial, it is inherently dangerous because it is exposing a minority group to an unforgiving audience. Instead of showing the community in a powerful and validating way, it exposes their unusual bodies (which is what most people have an issue with) for the gratification of the viewer.

Unconscious

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1999), Mulvey also frequently references Jacques Lacan’s take on *the gaze* as mentioned in his book *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 2018). Lacan wrote this book off the back of Freud’s theories about psychoanalysis, *The Gaze* being one of these. The most relevant concept for this essay would be the *The Unconscious and Repetition* (Lacan, 2018, pg 17-66). During this chapter, Lacan speaks of Freud’s concept of the conscious, subconscious and unconscious where he describes the conscious as things we are aware of (such as thoughts), the subconscious as things we could be made aware of with a push (such as memories), and the unconscious as things which we will never be aware of, but are there (such as fears). This relates to non binary people because they are consciously aware that they are different, however, gender

is complex and there isn't much information or terminology accessible to society. This means that there isn't enough representation to enable the community to decipher their unconscious gender. Using this theory as a base, Lacan develops it further. He was particularly interested in the *Mirror Stage* which Stuart Hall also mentioned in Cultural Representation (Hall, Evans, and Nixon, 2013). The *Mirror Stage* is the stage in development where a baby first recognizes itself in the mirror and understands itself as an individual being. As mentioned earlier, the mirror stage is a key stage of development where people recognise they are a separate being from their mother and non binary people may begin to recognise themselves as the 'other'. Lacan developed this concept further by theorising that the baby must come to terms with the fact that the way it is represented as a being does not necessarily represent how the baby feels. What the baby is consciously aware of simply does not match to how it unconsciously feels because there are limits to our comprehensive expression of self. To understand this idea we must now look at Saussure's understanding of signifiers. This can be found in his book *Course in General Linguistics*, Part One – General Principles, Chapter I – Nature of Linguistic Sign, Part 1 – Sign, Signification, Signal (Saussure, 2011). Here we learn that the sign is the thing, the signifier is the name we give this thing and the signified is the reality of what the thing is. Lacan used this to support his theory that we can never get what we truly want because semiotics forms a barrier – we do not understand the reality of what we want, only the signifier used for it. Lacan originally linked this to love. He believed that language became a barrier because we had reduced everything down to its signifier so when we thought of love, we were limited to think about the word, not its actual meaning. This is the same with non binary people. We are limited to language's expression of gender and this traps us into consciously being aware of these signifiers, yet unable to develop into discovering the unconscious workings of our gender.

Lacan feels that we spend so much time and money trying to make our exteriors better represent our unconscious so that people will understand us more but after it all, we must accept that we will always be misunderstood because of the limits of semiotics. Jackson Akitt's photograph from their Non-Binary Portrait series can be used to explain this.



Figure 3: *Non-Binary Portraits*, Jackson Akitt, 2016-present (Akitt, 2020).

This shows an androgynous-looking non binary person sitting by a river. It shows that people try hard to make themselves look how they feel. This can be for gender euphoria (a phrase used in the trans community to mean comfortable in one's own body due to gender expression matching with gender identity), or for social transition (a phrase used in the trans community to mean outwardly expressing gender in a way that allows society to correctly assume your gender). Lacan's theory suggests that trying hard to express how you feel is fruitless as language will prevent people being able to understand you. I believe this translates rather well to non binary people as we do not feel understood or categorised well

by the signifiers man and woman. Looking at Akitt's photograph and knowing the context (they're taking these photo's to raise awareness as society tends to not recognise enby identities), we can understand that Lacan's theory can be applied here: No matter how androgynous enby people can look, societies language (he/she) will not correctly signify an enby and even if "they" became an acceptable pronoun, it would not begin to describe someone's unconscious feelings. As I have explained using the theories above, we need to make the terminology around gender become more widely understood, yet also broader to include the other. We must also remember not to allow this language to act as a barrier between feeling and expressing.

In conclusion, non binary genders are not represented well. It is important that we are represented well because having alternatives helps to define meaning, meaning is discovered through dialogues between those who think differently from one another, and otherness helps everyone identify and understand themselves. We learnt that people, like Douglass, who believe that otherness is damaging to society because it prevents efficient categorising, can be equally damaging as this ideology is trans-exclusionary. We learnt that fetishising enby people is bad because it exposes them to a society who, for the most part, thinks negatively about this group of people. Lastly, we learnt that we need to raise awareness of broader terminology but not become limited by this. Therefore, my proposed question is: compared to current standards, how can non binary representation be improved?

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