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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ILLUSTRATIONS.....	2
INTRODUCTION.....	4
CHAPTER I	10
CHAPTER II	38
CONCLUSION	49
BIBLIOGRAPHY	51

ILLUSTRATIONS

No.	Page.
1.	Linda Rondstadt. by Annie Liebovitz.
2.	Laurie Anderson by Annie Liebovitz.
3.	Untitled Film Still no. 34 by Cindy Sherman.
4.	" " " no. 17 " " "
5.	" " " no. 14 " " "
6.	Untitled Film Still.
7.	Film Still from "One Dark Night"
8.	Film Still from "The Sleeping Tiger".
9.	Untitled Film Still.
10.	Untitled no. 74 Cindy Sherman.
11.	Untitled no. 71 by Cindy Sherman.
12.	Untitled no. 96 by Cindy Sherman.

13. Untitled no 98 by Cindy Sherman.

14. Untitled no 99 by Cindy Sherman.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years many artists have begun to adopt the tools which, at the time of their discovery, appeared to be a mortal threat to art and artists: mechanical mediums for representation such as photography, film and video which have created the ever-increasing excess of images which fill our world. The adoption by some artists of these tools is not however to rejoice that the original threat was unfounded, but to observe and examine how these mediums and the particular conditions for spectatorship that they present, invade our lives. Sometimes the artists celebrate the pleasure of images, more frequently they flounder to discover how these mediums affect them personally and their position as image makers. Of the latter category many of the artists are women, who feel they have a personal stake in exposing, exploring or displacing the distortions and myths which have been created by or through these mediums.

Women artists have begun to communicate about the particular social and political conditions, which have moulded them and restricted their activities coming to a realization that their personal and social positions have been defined for them by a patriarchal order which has excluded them from positions of political or cultural power and framed them as objects. The key phrase among women artists who feel they

have been excluded and exploited long enough by cultural institutions, is that "the personal is political", in as much as any in-depth analysis of one's personal experience as a woman, will expose, the structures by which one is limited and exploited as social subjects.

Photography has been the culprit of the glut of images which we now encounter daily, inescapably, in urban environments, in particular images of women, which nearly every statistical survey ever done has proved to be the most effective form of advertising. Inherent to the equation of woman and product created by advertising is the subliminal suggestion of fulfillment through consumption, which for women in terms of glamorous images becomes a masquerade of objectification through consumption.

Commercial photography has increasingly been adopted as a trade by women who have overcome the institutional attitudes which considered such technological pursuits as a male domain undermining women's attempts to "master" the medium. The new learning ground in terms of images is however open to any who wish to use their discernment and judgement in the "museum without walls" which has become our daily environment. Because we are onslaught with images our selective capacities or immunity must become developed, competitive image making in terms of publicity and advertising becomes caught in a quandary between creativity and exploitation, the latter being the more accessible and generally effective. For the woman who adopts the camera commercially there are ambiguities which can go unnoticed in



an acceptance of previous traditional standards and immersion in the perfection of technique, thus it is interesting in this context to consider the work of Annie Leibovitz who has photographed popular stars for Rolling Stone Magazine. What is most interesting is to observe how she presents images of women who are in the cultural limelight.

Liebovitz considers portraiture to be a communicative discourse based on the encounter she has with the person, thus her portraits contain, to some extent, her creative, interpretative reading of the individual influenced by previous images but also the subjects self-image and the extent to which they control how they are seen. If the images are exploitative, clichéd, semi-pornographic or subversive of how women are represented in general is it Liebovitz or the women's self images, as they have developed in terms of their frequent representation by camera, which control the way in which they are portrayed?

Liebovitz's portrait of Linda Ronstadt could be assumed to represent male desires. She lies, face down, across a quilt covered bed dressed in red, silk, cami-knickers and camisole top, her naked legs stretching into the foreground. Ronstadt's face which is turned to the opposite corner is obscured by her hair. The image is femme-fataleish and represents no identity, merely a passive physical spectacle.

But the Femme-fatale is precisely an image: it needs a viewer to function at all. It is disconcerting to consider two women having agreed to create this image.

On the other hand some of the female models are anything but sensual and attractive in the way they allow themselves to be portrayed. Laurie Anderson, a performance artist who uses a great amount of media technology in her work, looks pallid and goosebumpy, just out of a swimming pool which we can ascertain from the dingy, white-tiled, pool-wall which is behind her and the goggles through which she looks challengingly at the camera. Anderson's image, as an artist, is subversive. This representation of her is extreme in terms of conventional images of women but is in keeping with her integrity as an exposé and deconstructor of modern myths. Most of the other women portrayed depend on attractive presentation of their image because it is a part of their success.

Annie Leibovitz is interviewed in a catalogue résumé of her photographs by David Felton whose first question is pertinent in the context of the extremes of her photographic representations of women.

"If you were assigned to shoot a portrait of yourself, how would you go about doing it?"

"Well you should probably ask me that in about a year, because I'm just beginning to find out about myself. It's

funny, for someone who takes pictures the way I take pictures - I have absolutely no idea what I look like. So I'd have to figure myself out, which is what I do, you know, when I take someone else's picture. I try to come to some conclusion about them". 1.

One can imagine this figuring out of herself being an interesting agenda of exploration. Assessing how to turn the camera which has produced the clichéd sexist portrayal of Linda Ronstadt and the anti-aesthetic, anti-stereotypical image of Anderson, in her own direction.

This is what one photographer/artist has been doing for the last eight years and figuring out "who the real Cindy Sherman is" has become the dilemma of the spectator as well as the photographer. Her first commercially recognized series of photographs concerned itself with images of women from "B" type genre movies for which she used herself as model. The "B" movie being particularly ironical in America when one considers that the President is an ex-"B" movie star.

FOOTNOTES

Introduction:

1. Pantheon/Rolling Stone Press. Annie Liebovitz
(Photographs). "A conversation with Annie Liebovitz"
David Felton.

CHAPTER I

Film has, since the development of the still photographic image into this fluid form early in the 20th century, taken a monolithic position in the cultural arena whether in the original theatre-like environment of the cinema, or in the movie as transmitted by television and video. Its fictions and constructions have become accepted directives and mediators of a hyper-reality which conscientiously involves the viewer giving him a sense of control in terms of the mania and alienation of social and political conditions, or offers avenues of temporary escape through its visual and narrative offerings.

The cinematic experience may create the illusion of reality but its structures present particular conditions for the viewer who is there in the cinema in a double capacity as a witness and as assistant.

"I watch, and I help it. By watching the film I help it to be born, I help it to live, since only in me will it live, since it is made for that purpose: to be watched, in other words to be brought into being by nothing other than the look". 2.

The look, however, by which the film lives, has particularities unique to the photographic medium in that the object of the look, the actor/actress, is present and traced by the mechanical device which captures the image when the film is being made; but his/her presence in the cinema is in absence. Thus the spectator, who sits in the cinema in

dimly lit conditions, watches an illusion that appears to be real but his look will not be returned. It is one of the pre-givens of cinematic fictional narrative production that the actor/actress pretend that the camera does not exist and thus the spectator's presence as embodied in the camera on the set of the film is not acknowledged, setting the scene for the viewer's visual and emotional involvement at the screening.

"What we "are" for each other here is not what we are when we are watching a film, where the very movement of the camera drags us, it would be better to say invents us into an action. Our individuality is not a finite thing, autonomous and free, consciously deciding what it is doing and going to do; it is rather formed, deformed, transformed extinguished and born again-across the various forms of discourse it nevertheless experiences itself as controlling".3.

The unique experience of identification and heightened reality that the individual encounters in the cinema is one element which led Sherman to live out the fantasy of being one of these characters she had seen in innumerable old films, and an element of the cinematic experience which has come into question in previous avant-garde films such as Jean Luc Godard's Vivre sa Vie (My Life to Live). It is a film in which the filmmaker's wife Anna Karenina plays the part of Nana a married woman who becomes a prostitute,

turning herself into pornographic object, becoming a commodity, in order to discover economically and emotionally her own subjectivity (another element of the film pertinent to the work which Sherman produces which we will return to later). At this point, however, it is Godard's exploration or exposition, early in the film, of the qualities of catharsis and ease of emotional response which the individual experiences which is of concern in the cinema. The main character Nana is emotionally confused but does not display it until she goes to the movies to see Dreyer's Joan of Arc, and cries simultaneously with Dreyer's "Joan". On the screen Nana, and "Joan" on the screen within the screen, are both in close-up in tears. Godard's fictional character encounters her own deeper emotions only through identification with the cinematic image of another fictional character's sadness and there is something wrong with that.

"An Image is just an image. Yet with these images we are led to experience stronger emotions that we ordinarily experience in our day to day lives. Godard is seeking a way to short the emotional circuitry, the analogue circuitry that conveys the notion that films are like life, even better than life, and replace it with another structure which will assure us that films are only like films. They will discuss life and investigate it, but not reproduce it or allow us to think they are a substitute for it." 4.

Godard frequently quotes from previous texts, films and forms of representation in order to instigate analysis and fragment the established cinematic narrative structures thus earning the title of "cultural scavenger". This draws another comparison to Cindy Sherman who has recently been termed along with other recent artists as an "Image Scavenger". In appropriating the film stills mise-en-scene Sherman's work raises questions about narcissism and identificatory processes involved in mainstream Hollywood film : the images she recreates implicate not only a need for a substitute film practise but also a need to explore the way in which women have been represented by the cinematic apparatus in order to discover how the cinema functions and portrays sexual difference. What emerges in Sherman's work is the stereotypical and the lack cinematic female stereotypes embody in terms of positive role models for women.

"In so far as any stereotype represents the attempt by the dominant class to produce a universal popular language, equally valid for everyone, it is a political fact..."

"If we attempt to deny the reality of the stereotype, to bypass the forms of the language of the dominant class, we place ourselves outside the historical struggle in the realms of the ideal world of narcissistic identification." 5.

Godard's transition of the female character into pornographic object realizes, for the woman, elements of ambiguous ways in which women are frequently portrayed as secondary,

fetishized objects within certain cinematic traditions, What are the particular conditions of cinema which present woman in the monocular perspective of the dominant male order to which some women seem willing to subject themselves? And how are women (who feel confused by the narrow possibilities for identification within existing structures of female representation) to locate themselves for themselves in representation and why have they been portrayed exploitatively and two dimensionally?

In psychoanalytic terms the woman symbolizes the threat of castration, from the moment of sighting of the mother's lack of penis, from whence the male child is raised into the symbolic order forming the patriarchal unconscious. Often, in film, the woman symbolizes this threat to the male unconscious and two modes of inscribing women are generally used within mainstream Hollywood film in order to alleviate this symbolic threat. The first is the objectification of the woman who poses this threat as fetish by means of the voyeuristic possibilities of the cinematic gaze, exciting scopophilia. In Freudian terms scopophilia is one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives independently of the erotogenic zones; it subjects people to a controlling and curious gaze, transforming them into objects. The second means used to allay the threat is through narcissistic identification, which cinema makes possible, placing the viewer in a controlling position reminiscent of the child's first sighting of himself in the mirror when the complete body he sees is more perfect than his as yet underdeveloped

motory controls. The narrative form is used to explore and demystify the female character, thus enacting the original trauma of discovering the mother's lack, and the woman is subsequently punished or saved. The "film Noir" genre to which Sherman refers in her first series typifies this method of dealing with the threat the woman symbolizes. A male narrator and central character investigates the woman, seeking to gain control, and the narrative culminates in the guilty woman being meted her just reward or benevolently retrieved from the erroneous path. Thus, in terms of these two possibilities, which have generally been employed in mainstream Hollywood film, the woman is always secondary merely symbolizing male desire. 6.

The cinematic images, which Sherman chose to recreate in her first series, refer to the "film noir" genre, but in particular to the "B" type examples of this phenomenon (which have been referred to as "sexploitation" movies, essentially a commercial category). The type of film produced at minimum cost for maximum return which mimick or "exploit" the success of other films - replaying the themes, star stereotypes and genres of more lavish up-market productions.

These films have in the past been critically ignored to a great extent, but recent feminist film critiques have turned their attention towards such films because they are considered to be produced by men for a male audience and depend for

their financial success on an overtly coded fetishized image of woman as sexual object. This coding, or stereotyping, of women in cinematic forms (which has been mentioned previously) is considered by feminist critiques to be an essential phenomenon for analysis, in order to create a less oppressive film practice, because it is created and spoken by the dominant male ideology.

There is, however, within the tradition of the "exploitation" film a peculiar ambiguity. Because of the low budgets and speed with which they are made, many of the production values which give the mainstream Hollywood cinema its continuity and gloss are excluded. Thus, to some extent, revised critiques have considered the possibilities of a subversive potential in these films due to the second rate qualities of bad acting, crude stereotypes, and schematic narratives.

In her article "Exploitation Films and Feminism" Pam Cook ⁷ takes into consideration the films of Susan Rothman which, although made specifically for the exploitation market, (within which Rothman trained) would seem to contain some ironic input of her own which might be considered as subversive.

Rothman went from college training into a position as assistant to the veteran Hollywood director and producer of "B" type low budget films, Roger Corman, (who became the head and president of two major production companies for

exploitation films). After her initial training Rothman proceeded to write and direct for his company "New World" productions which has something of a reputation as a "feminist" company. This reputation rests on "New World" production's frequent portrayal of women in the stereotype of the female aggressor, hell-bent on revenge. Corman has explained this revised feminine portrayal as a response to market demands; the films which did best for "New World" were those in which the female character was super-assertive, taking hold of her own destiny. (A warlike and destructive figure created in man's image, set apart from ordinary women and desirable only in death). This assertive image of women might be considered by many feminists to be productive not of a more real, positive image of femininity but rather of a transference of femininity into the language of the patriarchal order from which they already suffer as social subjects.

One of Rothman's films, however, although using all the mastering techniques she has learned from working for Corman within the exploitation format, integrates stylistic innovations by Rothman which deal with cinematic female representation somewhat unusually. The film Student Nurses was Corman's first "Nurse" film. In the film -

"The four female protagonists each have a distinct stereotype image, accompanied in each case by a certain style of film making usually associated with that image, and the playing off of the different styles against each other has

the effect of parodying those styles and the accompanying stereotypes". 8.

This film, by Rothman, could in no way be described as a feminist film but it would appear to contain some element of allegory, contradiction and shifts of meaning which undermine or subvert, to some extent, the inscription of women in exploitation films in general. This shift of meaning, displacement or struggle within the forms of film is considered by certain feminist film critics to be essential in order to discover a language for women which does not speak from patriarchal traditions, nor alienate women completely from pleasurable, or thoughtful, experience of film.

Rothman's parodying of the filmic styles used for various stereotypes raises analogy to Sherman's manipulations with various cinematic stereotypes: but although varied in interpretation, and vie-ing with one antoher when exhibited simultaneously, Sherman's "still" recreations of extracts from cinematic narratives have a common denominator both behind and in front of the camera - Sherman herself.

Sherman's playing out of filmic stereotypes originated, however, not from a theoretical perspective, but rather from a personal fascination with the possibilities of changing identity with clothes, wigs and make-up. A fascination

which preceded her adoption of photography as a medium. Sherman used to spend hours in front of the mirror transforming herself into some preconceived idea of a different feminine identity, thus personalizing the identificatory possibilities and projection which film invites. On one occasion, prior to the commencement of her photographic masquerade, Sherman dressed herself as Lucille Ball using clothes, make-up and a wig appropriate to the star's image, and came down to join some friends who were watching television. Their reaction was one of amusement and confusion, which Sherman found interesting, prompting her to explore further the masquerade fascination.

This first experiment occurred in Buffalo where Sherman went to college, and after the initial reaction which pleased her, she began to dress up and go to various functions in Buffalo in the guises of different stereotypes for the fun of it...once turning up at an opening dressed as a pregnant woman. However, when Sherman moved from Buffalo to New York she dressed a few times as a cliched secretary to join the urban parade, but found that - "it seemed almost too cliched. - There were so many strange looking people on the street. It wasn't satisfying and I stopped doing it." 9. She began to feel that her street identity, which is so essential to maintaining New York's Urban frenzy, was being threatened by the masquerade.

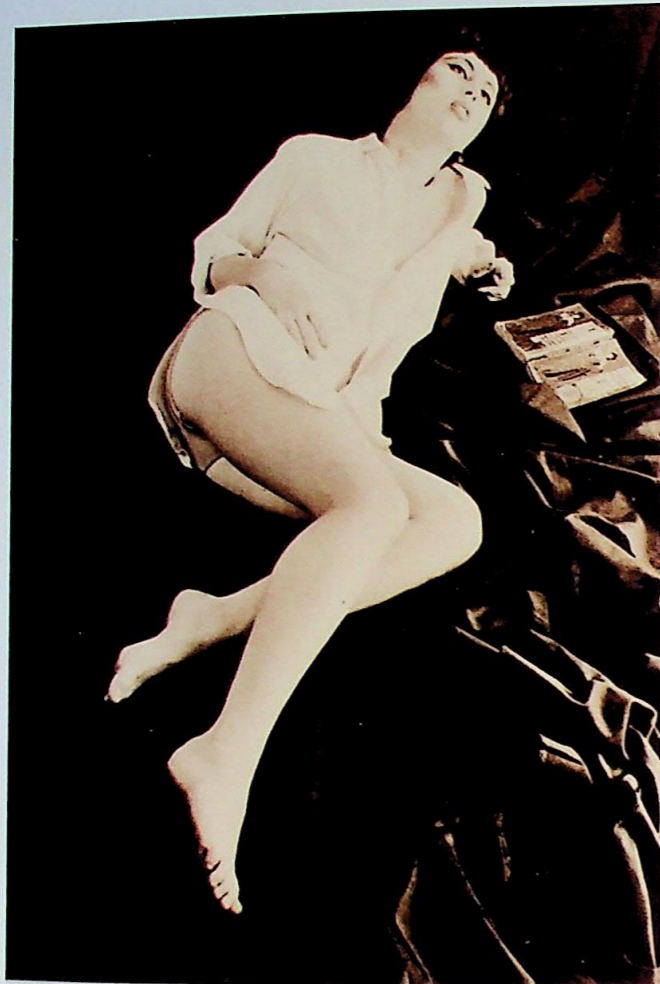
"People probably didn't notice anything at all. But even then I don't think I played the part I accepted it". 10. Sherman found her first few months in New York difficult in terms of adjusting to the city environment; she tended to stay in watching television or when she went out it was usually to go around the corner to a cinema which showed old movies. She did not dress up again to go out after her first experiences, confining her exposition of the masquerade to her photographic work after this point. It was around this time after having a mental block in terms of her work for the first few months in New York, that she became interested in the narrative allusions of still photographs. Another artist who has been termed an "image scavenger", David Salle, had a collection of pornographic images which caught Sherman's attention in that they seemed to be extracted from a continuum, suggesting an event preceding or about to happen. Were they one of a series, did other images exist which narrated a sequence of events, or were they created in isolation? It was with this in mind that Sherman took her first photograph of her "film stills series" outside the door of her New York loft. She was not at the time particularly concerned about "exploitation". The pornographic images did not bring any outrage in terms of how women are portrayed but rather the question of still images and narrative arose. In order to create these images Sherman takes on the dual role of director and actress "master" and female stereotype. She is subject to her own directorial dictates.

"The woman who takes up this "masculine" position however is thrown into conflict - she feels she is colluding, or

participating, in the same process of objectivization from which she herself as social subject suffers (I'm not denying the more common narcissistic, identificatory relation - but there is conflict here too, although its 'modality' may be different)". 11.

Sherman's intent in this series was to capture the narcissistic identificatory relation suggesting narratives:- leading the spectator to surmise the events which precede and follow the fragment she creates. Her real narrative source is the artist's experience, and absorption of multiple cinematic narratives, which leads to comparison with Godard's attempts, through inter-textual quotation, to question how we experience hyper-reality, and deeper sense of our own emotions in cinematic encounters. In a catalogue statement about her work Sherman verbalizes the intent of her photographs, or her desired response.

"I want that choked up feeling in your throat which maybe comes from despair or teary-eyed sentimentality: conveying intangible emotions. A photograph should transcend itself, the image its medium, in order to have its own presence, these are pictures of emotions personified entirely of themselves with their own presence - not of me. The issue of the identity of the model is no more interesting than the possible symbolism of any other detail." 12



In each of the images Sherman creates, appropriating the form of the film still, the female character is alone isolated within the environment she has chosen which suggests some film, or *meleé* of films, which she has seen. The woman never smiles or plays to the camera as the enigmatic star so frequently does, but rather she seems engrossed in some event, or person, or thought, which will never be clarified because the image suggests a fictional narrative - a film, which would resolve the mystery, - which does not exist. The title "Untitled Film Still" reinforces their fragmentary existence and ensures that we are aware that the narrative they suggest is unspecified.

In "still" after "still" the persona changes; - secretary, housewife, starlet, maid - totally reminiscent of all those unmemorable actresses in "B" type movies who fade into a blur in one's memory, who one feels empathy with in terms of their lack of whatever it is that makes a star unforgettable.

It is their lack, in terms of the cinematic ideas of women, which exposes how we are enticed to discern and judge images of women in terms of male desire. Therefore it is demanded of the actress/actor to pretend that the camera does not exist through narrative devices in order to make the spectator comfortable with the voyeuristic or identificatory possibilities of cinema.

In Untitled Film Still no. 34 the woman reclines on what would appear to be a bed which is draped in black cloth. There is a book beside her which she seems to have just put down on the cover of which is a picture



of a woman dressed in a low cut long dress, reminiscent of the type of dress worn by the female saloon owner and singer one frequently encountered in westerns. It could be Jane Russel. The pose and facial movements of the woman suggest that she is supposedly fantasizing about what she has just read, but there is a static uncomfortableness about how she retains the pose with her naked legs curled in the foreground which suggests an awareness of the camera and how she posed for it. The image, in that the woman looks away from the camera and is vulnerably positioned in a state of semi-undress, is typical of how women are fetishized as objects in exploitation films. There is also a doubled paradox in that Sherman assumes a conceived identity, making pretensions to being an actress playing a role in a film and suggesting that this person is fantasizing about another woman's experience. In the exception to the rule (that the central character's attention is directed away from the camera) Untitled Film Still no. 17 Sherman's adopted persona could be either a housewife or secretary. She wears a floral cardigan, white tie-necked blouse and a head square. One senses this might be the type of identity Sherman assumed when she first came to New York. The figure is in clear focus in the foreground with an urban street-scape filling the background. Although it is a streetscape the camera is angled to isolate the head and shoulders of the woman against the buildings behind cutting out the street activity one might expect. The characters



expression facing the camera is unfathomable, There is a doll-like dead quality about it that looks on the verge of shattering in a manifestation of suppressed, internalized emotion. The image is disturbing and hard to look at, portraying some kind of obsession or lack. We are faced with depression personified; an empty shell that threatens to crack before our very eyes, a possibility for the spectator to feel implicated in by looking. It speaks victimization.

"Her expression is an index of something or someone else about which everything in the frame points to. (In semiotic terms it literally is an index as a footprint to a foot - a relevant metaphor since so many Sherman women look as if they have been trodden on by men, fate, or a B-movie plot)". 13.

One image in particular (Untitled Film Still no. 14, 1978) is typical of the film-noir genre. The actress wears a black silk dress with a lace over-top, The wig she wears is dark and bobbed. Behind her there is a chest on which rests a photograph (which would appear to be the woman) a plant and two candles placed in front of a long, rectangular mirror. The image is perhaps the most narratively detailed in that through the mirror we see a table on which sits a half empty champagne glass, a chair over which a jacket hangs and smoke lingers in the upper left corner of the mirror. All these details suggest a male presence, which the woman's threatened expression and gesture also points toward. The

woman is holding some kind of black object which she seems prepared to defend herself with.

"What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance." 14.

One begins to wonder what way women look in real film stills of the genre suggested. Browsing through Sherman's images a couple of times they all seem to lack any positive possibilities of identification for women. One senses perhaps that film stills, which are basically produced as a publicity vehicle, are generally peopled with two or more characters participating in some scene from the narrative which suggests its merits; action, comedy, love or horror etc. Other than images of stars, who are publicity vehicles in their own right, how are women portrayed generally when alone within the frame? Shops selling nostalgic film stills, which may have had no aesthetic or commercial value in their time, have recently become very popular (mushrooming in alternative market-like areas alongside second-hand clothes and book shops). The images have gained a comparative value with the perspective of time, which has seen the cinematic apparatus disperse and change. Out of approximately 1,000 film stills available in these outlets (excluding images of stars) there were at most about ten images of women alone



within a frame to be found. These examples, which one might have expected to dispel the poverty and inadequacy of female representation in Sherman's appropriation of the film still's format, are actually more extreme and disconcerting indicative of narratively manipulated or obscured methods of dealing with women in film.

Most of these images are extracted from suspense or horror movies which are generally considered to contain elements of sado-masochism, exemplary of Laura Mulvey's interpretation of Lacanian analysis, which suggests that the woman must be punished, saved or fetishized in order to alleviate the symbolic threat of castration which she represents in terms of patriarchal order.

One of these images (illustration number 6) is comparable to Sherman's Untitled Film Still no. 34 in that the woman is posed in a very vulnerable position which displays her physical attributes sensually. She is dressed in a black, lacy mini-dress which is arranged so that her bare legs are displayed advantageously in the foreground, making prominent a butterfly tattoo on her upper right thigh. Her arms are drawn behind her, in keeping with her open mouthed wide-eyed expression which is directed out of the frame to the right, suggesting some threat to her personal vulnerability. The woman is attractively presented, her long blond hair coiffed and make-up carefully applied. Her expression of fear does not detract her appearance. Everything in the image and in particular the woman's reaction to whoever or



One Dark Night 15

Premier Releasing
PRESENT

whatever is outside the frame points to a narrative incidence, but the woman is also presented as object, playing to male desires. The woman's attention being directed out of the frame away from the spectator allows for the voyeuristic processes to function without the viewer being made conscious of the ease with which cinematic methods of representation create this possibility. The image caters to the male viewer leaving little room for identificatory or visual pleasure for the female viewer other than empathy in terms of female vulnerability, or the ambiguous sense that if a woman presents herself thus she deserves what is coming to her. In terms of the previously mentioned methods (of dealing with the symbolic threat of castration which the woman represents) the woman is here, both fetishized as object and presumably about to be punished in the narrative in order to allay the threat she poses. There is, however, a greater vulnerability about this image than Sherman's works, in that Sherman's are crowded with her own ideas and emotions, creating tensions in the pose and expression, whereas the woman in this image is subject to external directions. To portray fear, presumably, seems to separate her from self-consciousness about how she is posed. She is not in control of how she is portrayed.

Another of these actual "film stills" is extracted from a film One Dark Night. The woman is contorted with terror of whoever or whatever threatens her, which everything in the frame points to being in front of her in the position of the viewer; who has been placed by the camera in the position of aggressor.



The woman is pinned against a wall which allows no avenue of escape, with the object, her fears presumably, closing in on her. Her arms are raised behind her and she appears to be physically writhing with anguish. At first glance she appears to be onslaught by missiles, which look like rubber bullets diagonally positioned on either side of her angled towards her body. On closer scrutiny, however, these phallic shaped objects appear to be fixtures of some kind or other. One of the woman's raised hands touches one of these objects. The woman's writhing posture and these missile-like fixtures, make the image very violently sexually suggestive. Once again the image of the woman has a sado-masochistic sense which objectifies her. The possibilities of identification or voyeurism for the female spectator are limited. The image would appear to be contrived exclusively for a male audience.

A third image offers little more in terms of positive role models for women. In a still from a film called The Sleeping Tiger the female protagonist is once again subject, in her isolation within the frame, to a threat from outside. The details in the frame--broken dishes on the carpet ahead of the woman who is crouched on the ground-- suggest that the woman has already been violently pushed to the ground. She is lifting herself from the ground looking back over her shoulder, open-mouthed and fearful at "whoever or whatever" forced her into this vulnerable position, and it is in the direction of the spectator she looks. Once again the camera has been positioned between the victimized



woman and the aggressor. The woman looks into the camera with terror but the camera disguises its controlling objectification of the isolated woman through the narrative, which places the aggressor in this position. It would seem that without a male counterpart to take control within the frame the woman must be threatened, or punished, when in isolation, if not otherwise overtly fetishized.

Such an example of fetishization making the woman the object of the scopophilic drive, alleviating the threat she poses and presenting her, idealistically, as desiring what the male viewer desires her to be is illustration number 9, (an extract from a film whose title was not included with the image). The woman is in a shell shaped bath filled with foamed water. She is impeccably made up with her hair carefully arranged in a chignon on top with curling tendrils trailing down her neck, as of course any woman should prepare oneself in order to take a bath! The woman's leg is raised provocatively out of the water, in the foreground, and her hand with her manicured, varnished nails is laid against it. The woman looks invitingly and suggestively towards the camera. The image is not dissimilar to the way in which women are portrayed as sexual objects in soap and cosmetic commercials, and offers a characterless ideal for women.

What underlies all Sherman's images is the photographic medium itself, fluid as in the cinematic origins of her

first series, or static as she chooses to present her conceptions. The cinematic gaze (which has been referred to previously) even if it was not a conscious consideration when Sherman commenced her Film Stills series, is something that the insecurity of her images leads the viewer to recognize to some extent. As has already been ascertained female representation, in particular of the cinema, has become a specific area of feminist concern. One of the most theoretically respected essays on the subject of women in mainstream Hollywood cinema is an article called "Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by Laura Mulvey. She is concerned with formulating a film practise which does not provide the voyeuristic forms of pleasure described in her article in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis (which have been here outlined briefly - in terms of cinematic conditions). So what does Mulvey suggest as an alternative possibility?

"Going far beyond highlighting woman's to-be-looked-at-ness cinema builds the way she is looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion out to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged. Women whose role has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything more than sentimental regret" 15.

Mulvey's rationalization of the nature of cinema has been very influential but has, of course, provoked response. Although her analysis in terms of mainstream Hollywood Cinema is respected many people have difficulty in coming to terms with the spoiling of pleasure which she suggests. In discussing Mulvey's argument for a revised politicization of film practice, Theresa de Laurentis surmises on the possibilities and repercussions in the anti-theatrical extreme.

"Therefore within the context of the argument a radical film practise can only constitute itself against the specifications of that cinema, in counterpoint to it, and must set out to destroy the " satisfaction, pleasure and privilege it affords." The alternative is brutal, especially for women to whom pleasure and satisfaction, in the cinema and elsewhere, are not easily available. And indeed the programme has not been rigorously followed by feminist film-makers". 16.

Victor Burgin, a male artist who is concerned with issues raised in Mulvey's analysis, speaks at length in an interview entitled "Sex, Text and Politics" (17) on the issue of female representation. He considers that various forms of representation do not merely express a biologically pre-given "masculinity" or "feminity" but rather that sexual difference does not precede the social practises which "represent it". Sexual difference, he argues, doesn't function outside of such practises

but is constructed within them, and thus the problem of female representation cannot be altered by a pre-given essential femininity. The way in which photography constructs femininity must be examined in order to develop a practise which will have sexuality inscribed in it in such a way as to be no longer oppressive.

Thus in creating her first series Sherman was mimicking a tradition through which femininity was constructed in an oppressive way. She uses a form of representation whose idealized constructions of female images attempt to impose their limitations on women in general as standards to be mimicked through the consumption of products. This mimicry is the ultimate in consumerism.

I have quoted Burgin previously in his consideration that a woman who takes up the "masculine" position colludes in the processes of objectivization from which she suffers as social subject. Theresa de Laurentis, in her book Alice Does N'T which deals with feminist semiotics, uses the Humpty Dumpty chapter from Lewis Carroll's Through the looking Glass as a metaphor for the contextual determination of female representation in film.

"When I use a word "Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less".

"The question is" said Alice "Whether you can make words mean so many different things".

"The question is" said Humpty Dumpty "Which is to be master - that's all" 18.

The cinema has mastered female representation from its outset, continuing narrative and representative traditions which have treated the woman as secondary. Its first consideration is the male viewer, and it requires a female response "I desire what you desire me to be" (19). It echos Freud's "Feminity" in which the veils and furs of beauty cover up woman's lack: presuming only a male son can satisfy women's desire in which women must become while man is. When Sherman throws herself into the cinematic realms she attempts to become "master", making the "words", in particular, "herself" mean what she chooses. However, Sherman's isolated "words" created without the syntagmatic context they suggest are not controlled in a narrative, so giving them a particular meaning. They are the short vocabulary of stereotypes which have been used for women in the mastered cinematic institution of the exploitation movie.

At a Cindy Sherman retrospective in Bristol's "Watershed Gallery" in May 1983, one man became incredibly worked up about how sexist Sherman's images were, considering there to be enough images of women as sexual objects, passive, doll-like, all-tarted up. Judith Williamson -

"..Was certain his anger must come from a sense of his own involvement, the way the images spoke not only to him but from him - and he kept blaming Sherman herself for it, deflecting his sexism on her, as if she were really a bit of a whore". (20)

Williamson considers that Sherman's work, by using the processes rather than trying to undo them, involves us directly in the functioning of the ideology by forcing us to supply the femininity behind the photographs through recognition. Thus to interpret Sherman's work satisfactorily it is nearly necessary to have a previous theoretical concern, or distance, in terms of female identity.

It is perhaps most expository of how narrowly stereotyped women were in this film genre, that in spite of a wealth of stored up images from her childhood, she felt she had exhausted all the possibilities with the clichéd stereotypes after three years during which she produced about 90 black/white "Film Stills", many of them being the same adopted stereotype in different environments.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER I:

2. Christian Metz, The Psychoanalysis of Film.
Macmillan 1982/'83. p. 93.
3. Victor Burgin, Sex, Text and Politics (an interview)
4. Robert Philip Kolber, The Altering Eye, Oxford Uni.
Press 1983.
5. Pam Cook. Exploitation Films and Feminism. Screen
Vol. 17. No. 2.
6. Laura Mulvey Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. Screen
7. Pam Cook. Exploitation Films and Feminism.
8. " " " " " "
9. Els. Barents, 'Introduction', Cindy Sherman, Schirmer/Mosel,
Munich, 1982 p. 13.
10. " " " " " "
11. Victor Burgin. Sex, Text and Politics.
12. Catalogue Documenta 7. Kassel, p. 411.

13. Judith Williamson, "Images of Woman" Screen Vol. 24
No. 6. Nov/Dec. 1983 p. 103.
14. Laura Mulvey. Visual pleasure and narrative cinema.
15. Laura Mulvey. Visual pleasure and Narrative cinema.
Screen.
16. Theresa de Laurentis. Alice Does N'T. (Feminism, Semiotics
Cinema).
17. Victor Burgin, Sex, Text and Politics.
18. Theresa de Laurentis Alice Does N'T Feminism,
Semiotics, Cinema.
19. Jacques Lacan "The Signification of the Phallus" Ecrits.
New York. W.W. Norton and Co. Inc. (1977) p. 290.
20. Williamson, Judith "Images of Woman" Screen. Vol. 24.
No. 6. (Nov/Dec 1983).

CHAPTER II



Sherman changed her medium from Black/White to colour for her next series, using rear-screen projections which give the sense of more up-to-date made for television films or series. She increases the scale from that of the previous series, which mimicked the film-still format, to near poster size. The new colour medium is used quite definitely, closing in on the upper body of the female character which is once again herself. The figure is now always to the forefront because there is no actual environment, the character now being more defined and real than the narrative context. Make-up is somewhat more natural and wigs, expression and gestures are the means by which she changes the character.

Her use of colour varies from bold contrast to subdued monotony and most of the near-screen projections suggest urban environments. On two occasions the women portrayed bounce into the foreground in brightly coloured jackets, these being Untitled no. 74-1980 and Untitled no. 67, 1980. In contrast, the woman in Untitled no. 71, 1980, nearly blends into the background, like a chameleon. The latter creates the sense of the suburban trap - the car, the kids, the mortgage, the supermarket. The woman's dress, mousy hair and lack of make-up, reflect the grey brown colouring of the environment which suggests a suburban estate, with sky scrapers looming in the distance. Her expression is the only item in the image which draws away

from a "swamped" sensation. There is an intense sense of vulnerability or isolation and the woman's look is one of semi-fear, semi-plea, directed at a point to the viewers left out of the frame. The character seems in particular to exemplify Sherman's own description of her intent to capture

"that choked up feeling in your throat which maybe comes from despair or teary eyed sentimentality: conveying intangible emotions".

However, as compared to the psychologically intense Untitled Film Still no. 17 of the previous series, the woman's emotions, although traumatized, do suggest some positive possibilities. One can empathize with this character, whereas the previous image was extremely negative. It did not invite identification because it faced the spectator.

In contrast to this dull vulnerable image (which suggests a young housewife) in Untitled no. 74 Sherman changes completely, with the help of a greying wig and overstated make-up, into an ageing image - conscious woman. The woman wears a bright yellow jacket which suggests exhibitionism but also brings to mind nature's use of colour in the bumble bee which is attractive yet dangerous. There is a towering streetscape to the rear which seems more distant in contrast to the bold attire. There is a touch of the ageing Doris Day lookalike about the woman. She is quite repulsive, nearly hilarious and terribly sad. The image embodies a feminine fear of ageing and need for attention, symptomatic of the consumerist promise of self-fulfillment through image

rather than intellect or personality - the endless street parade.

This particular series was Sherman's first colour series. She encountered many problems with the new medium and rear-screen projections. Her next series closes in more on the subject, practically eliminating set and environment. The horizontal format is broadened and the size enlarged once more, giving a sense of the panoramic. Sherman now presents herself in little-girl-dresses, kilts, gingham skirts and on some occasions very ordinary, up-to-date, street clothes. The fantasy being lived out would appear to be more personal than the previous identification with, and projection onto, cinematic stereotypes. This particular series has raised most cynicism because of the dubiousness and obvious sensuality of the child-woman she creates.

In an article, entitled "Naming the neo-nit-wits at the C.A.A.", Jeff Perone refers cynically to this particular series by Cindy Sherman.

"Dress yourself up as a schoolgirl and take photographs of yourself and The New York Times will devote a page to you and Artforum will compare you to Carravaggio" 2.

The images in this series are generally pretty disturbing, writhingly pubescent distantly dreamy or lost in a world of their own. The composition and colour is aesthetic and



subtly appealing, as in Untitled no. 96 where there is a generally rusty, orange hue and the pose of the figure creates well defined, positive and negative shapes. The form is pleasing in itself and the colour suggestive of a more glamorous shot.

The schoolgirl images seem to play out a site of lost innocence, a growing awareness of sexuality, dreams of future independence and a vulnerability or defencelessness.

Untitled no. 98 is similar in its crouching pose and obvious fear to the actual film still from The Sleeping Tiger, which was previously mentioned. An image in which the object of the characters fear is in the vicinity of the spectator, thus involving the spectator directly in the terror and vulnerability of the moment. For this image Sherman is dressed in a kilt and white shirt, Her hair is wet and her face is very scrubbed and natural looking as though she has just had a swim or a shower. The background is oblique and the harsh light, which picks her out, comes from the foreground. She is on her knees with her hands spread flat on the floor, nearly crawling. Her expression is wide-eyed and open-mouthed, suggesting a desire for flight but she appears frozen in terror, victimised, awaiting some dreadful act of violence which she seems powerless to avert. If the image is considered to be sexist it is a signification with narrative. Can Sherman really be master if the cinematic and photographic means contextualize women, through the condition of presence/absence, into objects of the voyeuristic possibilities of cinema

* of the objectivization of women and lack of identification

which is disguised by narrative devices? Or by being master by adopting mastered traditions is she complicit in her own objectivization?

"Then sometimes I wonder how it is I am fooling so many people. I'm doing one of the most stupid things in the world which I can't even explain, dressing up like a child and posing in front of a camera trying to make beautiful pictures. And people seem to fall for it (My instincts tell me it must not be very challenging then). Believing in one's own art becomes harder when the public response grows fonder". 9.

Should it, however, be acceptable that the photographic apparatus of representation be such that the intent of the photographer be undermined by readings which place woman first as commodity? Must this be the primary consideration of a female photographer? Must the pleasure be spoiled, as Mulvey suggests, or should we go to extremes, like Laurie Anderson, to deny such pleasures?

Sherman's attitude towards the camera itself and how it portrays femininity seems to have developed in her next series, in which she changed the format to a vertical, centre-fold type, presentation.

"These photographs - surely her most controlled and masterly in their manipulations - indicate that Sherman has zeroed in on the implications of her metamorphoses, moving her persona closer to home" 4.

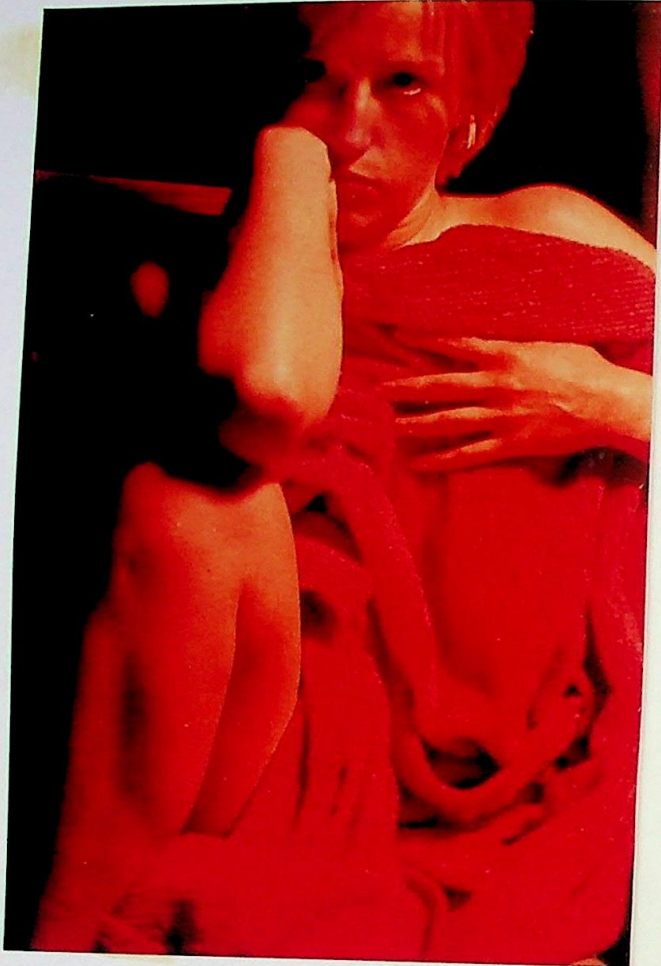
The character is now more natural and occasionally somewhat androgynous. A red candlewick dressing gown is the main prop in at least four of these images. Sherman holds it to her in Untitled no. 97 for a pose that alludes to star images or fashion shots. The colour and composition is immediately aesthetic having an overall warm, reddish-pink hue. Sherman does not, however, give to the camera as one would expect from such an image, she looks totally bored and disinterested. There is that not-at-home look about her expression similar to the resigned attitude of someone watching a T.V. programme, which is banal and stereotyped.

Sherman's use of lighting in this series of images is aesthetic but occasionally harsh - "The relationship of males and females to make-up, lighting and costume is substantially different as are their various relations to special effects. Cinema's technologies portray a clear sexual division of labour. For example, John Alton, a film lighting designer states in "Lighting".

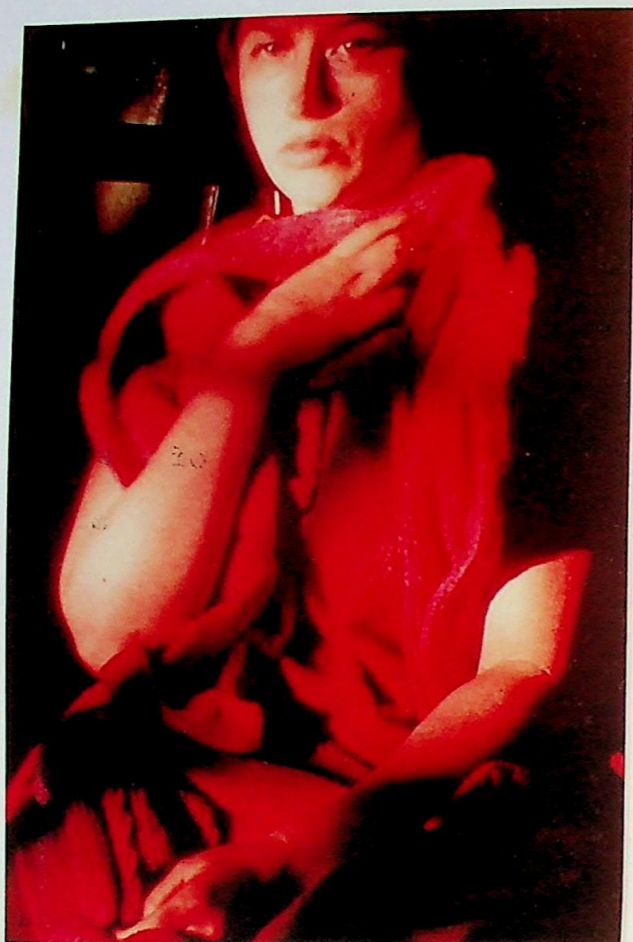
"In the illumination of the close-up, there are two main groups, feminine and masculine . While in the feminine close-up we strive for beauty, in masculine pictures it is the character of the individual we accentuate". 5.

"For a good close-up, good make-up is absolutely essential very little make-up is used today by man.

"Women are beautiful, Men are men". 6.



Untitled no. 97



Sherman attracts us to these images with most of the ploys of photographic female representation, she then omits the mask of make-up and denies the passively giving expression we might expect. The pose is stereotypical of pin-up images but Sherman's characters slump it.

"As if to acknowledge the ordinariness of such a focus to their lives". 7.

In Untitled no. 99 the light is harsher and Sherman's pouting expression farcical. She once again draws the dressing gown to her, suggestive of a sensual glamour shot but the overall impression is one of failed mimicry. Sherman appears to be challenging or making fun of herself and simultaneously of the viewer.

Sherman's work was discussed in a photographic series by the trendy pop culture magazine The Face. The author considered her previous series, which contained the childlike images, to manifest a "lingering sexuality", emphasized by the closeness to which the viewer was drawn by the sheer size of the images - "just to look at the photographs is to become a voyeur". However the author felt - "something empty and cold about these photographs. They are paradoxical statements at once seductive but unmoving". Of the vertical images he felt "the larger-than-life scale to be disconcerting and unattractive, the blatantly blown-up

faces being sickly in the cruel garish light. After her earlier works these photographs are disappointing, the new anti-fashion techniques don't seem to come off. And ironically, Sherman has just been commissioned to do advertising work for Dorothea Bis" 8.

This critical response is formed in terms of aesthetic values which are a part of the rejection in Sherman's work. Rather than strive to mimic exactly, or as closely as possible, her image of the media stereotype as she did in her first series, there is in this series a contempt for the viewer's expectations of a glamorous mask. The female viewer may identify in these images with the media nurtured fear of being compared with fashionable standards of beauty, or, the terror of becoming a bag-lady. Sherman presents us with images which are quite androgynous and tomboyish that we recognize all the same, but not from any frequent sighting in media images. The range of clothes used in the series is anything but fashionable (shirts, shorts, vests) which suggest various types of women whose primary concern is not self-image. The attitude of each character suggests a disdain for the process of imaging, of being 'framed', which goes beyond each single image, becoming a gesture in terms of the mass oppression created by female exploitation through photographic representation. Sherman uses the mythificatory process of photography to present us with images which are the antithesis, to some extent, of the glamour industry.

The ensuing collection of photographs, which was mentioned in The Face article with a note of disbelief considering the anti-aesthetic developments in Sherman's work, was commissioned by the fashion designer Dorothee Bis. It is ironic that Sherman's subversive methods should be sought by a commercial establishment whose commodity promises glamour, style and the 'transformation of image'. Fashion advertising is totally dependent on female images to create the illusion that one will become desirable and fulfilled through the consumption of the product. It is symptomatic of capitalistic culture that even subversive image makers should become commodified into the system they attempt to expose.

Sherman was given free reign to experiment with a collection of outfits from the designer shop, using the opportunity in order to create a new show. In the end result we see the artist turning the tables by parodying the stance and expression of cliché fashion modelling. Lipstick is smeared, the clothes are contorted by overemphasis of stereotypical fashion poses, and there is a total absence of glamour which satirizes the high fashion clothes. Is this anti-aesthetic attitude to fashion something new? Does it not ring slightly of the punk, anti-aesthetic, subversive attitude to society and culture. It is, however, in Sherman's case the various origins of the clothes she has chosen to which she refers. She returns the appropriations by designers of street fashions, Hollywood styles, etc., to their origins by looking unkempt and seedy in ragged hems, torn t-shirts (high-fashion items) or by assuming the identity

of a Hollywood victim, Frances Farmer, looking pretty, dishevelled and deranged, in a chique suit which draws on the classic Hollywood style.

Ultimately, Sherman's work would seem to have evolved from a confused fascination about identity in terms of media's mirror images and stereotypes, through a process of exorcism, to a contemptuous, humorous, mockery, which nevertheless does not escape re-assimilation into the structures it tries to subvert. It is possible to imagine that the new pop-culture status of the "image-scavengers" will present us with anti-fashion fashions of an appropriative nature rather than, as one would hope in Sherman's case, directly influence a reconsideration of women's relationships to media stereotypes and the negativity inherent to them. Sherman's last series is more direct and specific in dealing with fashion type set-ups but leaves us with an extended hall of mirror-images which can be humourously observed without specifically pointing at the camera as the culprit. Sherman's work would appear to be a photographic expressionism which does not set out to be particularly feminist in a theoretical sense but rather tries to express her own confusion in the face of the image world, hopefully to liberate herself from its mastering fascination.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER II

1. Catalogue. Documenta 7. Kassel. p. 411.
2. Perrone Jeff. "Naming the Neo-Nit wits at the C.A.A." Women Artists' News, 1983.
3. Catalogue, Documenta 7. Kassel. p. 411. Cindy Sherman
4. Review. Art in America. 1983.
5. Patricia Mellencamp, "Cinema, technology and Sexuality." The Structurist.
6. Ibid.
7. Review. Artforum. Jan. 1983.
8. Photography article. The Face. 1984

CONCLUSION

Perhaps what one dreads most when one sees a development in creative work which seems to embody some psychological catharsis or coming to terms with the underlying necessity for expression is that, should the artist achieve success at a stage in development, he/she might end up repeating ad infinitum (with various subtle changes of style) the recipes he/she originally achieved success with. Isn't there a great possibility that Sherman's bored expression is merely a symptom of having looked at herself everytime she has worked for the last eight years? She has suggested in interviews that she is getting "sick" of looking at herself. Will she continue on the same path or might she surprise us with something quite different, like a portrait of the real Cindy Sherman? How many more layers of imaginary identities must be peeled off, or is one photograph ever capable of telling very much about the layers of experience and absorption which make up the individual?

It would be very interesting to see how Annie Liebovitz works herself out, having made so many decisions with other women to make one specific image to represent them, it could become quite a revelation if she were to present herself in all the possibilities which came to her mind. One wonders if the set of images might bear any resemblance to Sherman's. Or, will she remain at the figuring out stage avoiding the encounter with her own self-image, or Jack of fixed identity, as the case may be?

The point is that Sherman may not have been conscious of every step she took but her photographs have enticed theoretical criticism and analysis which have raised the issues of feminine representation in film and advertising, in comparison and contrast to Sherman's images. Thus these questions which exist for every woman may be eased to the surface by work such as Sherman's, which is not overly intellectualized or stereotypically feminist aggressive. It may also inspire other women to attempt to deal with their personal relation to the dominance of "mastered" images or to explore other work by women artists who deal in a more political way with woman's unique experience. Artists such as Barbara Kruger and Martha Rosler who intervene in mechanical imaging practises, in particular photography and film, juxtaposing images and text in order to expose how these practises function. Kruger in particular, although the work she presents is static and exposed in the gallery environment, is not so much concerned with art as with how the camera portrays sexual difference and thus writes feminist film criticism rather than art criticism.

Sherman was chosen here as subject because her work dealt specifically with images of women, using herself (the personal is political) as starting point. There is much to be unearthed underlying this ambiguous practise but solutions in terms of how women are to find themselves for themselves in representation are not yet at hand. It is to be hoped that Sherman's development will not flounder totally to the commodity machine and that her pursuit of identity will reach some resolution or raise more questions.

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