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When a Woman is Nude : A Critical Visual Analysis of “Harlem” Photograph

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When a Woman is Nude : A Critical Visual Analysis of “Harlem” Photograph

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I. INTRODUCTION

The *Harlem Photographs* (1932-1978) is arguably the *magnum opus* of the Jewish American photographer Aaron Siskind who is believed to be the leading founder of abstract expressionism (Entin, 1999). This compilation of fifty-two photographs of Harlem, New Jersey, and its residents was a major project of the New York Photo League that documented the level of poverty and socio-economic conditions in Harlem (Entin, 1999). In this brief, I single out one of his oeuvres the “Harlem”.



The magnetic force of this photograph resides in the almost irresistible nude body of a Black woman on display “preyed” upon by both men and women for their erogenous gratifications.

To this end, I situate my analysis within mainstream critical visual analysis, focusing on key notions of scopophilia, the body as fetishized commodity as well as myth. The critique also pays attention to how elements of composition, design and color afforded in the photograph accentuate the nudity of her body. Let’s begin with scopophilia.

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II. LAYERS OF SCOPOPHILIA IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

Present in the “Harlem” photograph is a dominant reading of sensuality. There is something mysterious about this body, something apocryphal, something pleasing to the human eye. It’s the female black body. It’s the Hottentot-like presence of her *derrière*, her sunlit rare back, her *staetopygia*. Years ago Mulvey (1975) wrote that the woman is placed at the center for voyeuristic pleasure by the machinery of the male oligarchy. Writing in the context of Hollywood cinema, Mulvey argues that that society is so patriarchal that its everyday, mundane and unconscious practices are structured by andro-centric discourses. She notes that even in an unconscious patriarchal order a woman is seen symbolically as a castrated person who lacks a phallus, and so lacks power. She writes, “Woman’s desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it” (Mulvey 1975: 62). So grabbing a white piece of cloth as background for the shot, this Black woman in the photograph poses majestically like a real professional ready for the ‘kill’. She is completely nude, and her nudity is very much made lucid by the white fabric she holds. Right leg down, left foot gently raised a little above the floor, she wears what appears to be a black bead around her waist. She’s turned her head towards the left hand side of the huge parlor where she is on display like a commodity ready for the purchase. She is aware that her body is the center of attraction, and seems to have gladly posed, or for the benefit of doubt masqueraded to be contented in her role as a model. The foray of her hair is remarkable as it is unusually plenty, and it is home to what I think are three ribbons.

But more to the point, perhaps what draws one’s attention the most to this Black woman is her bright, voluptuous Hottentot-like aura. It’s an almost undeniable reconnaissance. The huge well roundedness of her bums perhaps trapped in not-so-huge a body is almost shocking. It’s a kind of feeling one gets by saying to oneself, “So do you have that kind of buttocks? And how’s that possible since you’re not that big?” No wonder she is at the epicenter of the parlor. Sadly though, it is exactly this dominant reading of gaze that reduces women to objects of voyeuristic pleasure in a

patriarchal system. In the context of Siskind's "Harlem" photograph, we are presented with even far more intricate complexes. Both men and women, black and white, are the lookers, the subject, while the woman is the looked-at, the object; she is the castrated woman and is deprived of power, vitality, and vigor in her lack of the phallus, to borrow from psychoanalysis literature (Sontag, 1973; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). But to what extent can we say that this naked woman is powerless? Or rather is it not the case that she poses for the camera willingly by virtue of her own agency? In the photograph we see an active role of erotic feasting on her body as she seems to awe both men and women. Here the idea of a phallogocentric order can, however, not be fully evoked as close to four women in the photograph take pleasure in gazing her nude body. Perhaps did Siskind wish to argue that scopophilia is after all not the preserve of men?

III. ON THE RHETORIC OF LIGHT, COLOR, AND CAMERA

Also worth considering are the ways such elements as light, color, and camera add meaning to this photograph. A closer look reveals a continuum of progression of tints and shades employed in the making of the work. One of the main reasons scopophilia is pleasurable is because the spectator is sitting in a darkened auditorium watching an image that cannot see them as well as the inability of the other spectators to see them. The darkness allows the spectator to watch without inhibition. In our case this is made manifest from the way the lights diminish in their brilliance right from the left hand side to the right hand side. One realizes that the lights are 'thicker' on her body than in the regions of the parlor where the viewers are seated or standing. This photographic rendition is purposeful. First, it aids and emphasizes the significance of the gaze on the Black woman's body. In Barthes' (2003) terms, we will consider this gesture as the punctum of the lights. The bright lights make it easy to perspectivize her body from different angles almost as if they interpellate. Techniques involved here include a ready perception of vision, and a quirky tension of black and white. In this way Siskind suggests that when black and white are brought into sharp focus and seen close-up, every raw material and random physical detail can be aesthetically resonant. Thus he creates a certain liminal zone, that is, the area where the symbolic and the spatial converge. It is the ordinary plus the extraordinary. Or was he also suggesting that in matters of eroticism, color/race makes no difference? We fantasize about the same things? But from a more critical standpoint, the lights are symbolic of a nirvanic experience. It's as though the apocrypha, the mystery surrounding the sacredness of her body has finally been

discovered. There's merry making to that effect. Right in front of the Black woman on display is a symphony of orchestra played by mainly Black men themselves. The use of this soft music heightens the pathos of the occasion as if to create a revelatory mood of reverence surrounding the sexy contours of her body, most especially her undeniably attractive sensuous *derrière*. The occasion thus presents itself more as a studium. The lookers are fascinated by it, as they engage in detailed voyeuristic phantasmagoria on the object of the woman. The sexual body of the nude woman then becomes an exhibition and more seriously a projection of the repressed desire on to the performer (Mulvey 1975 cited in Jones, 2010). Their libidinal thirst may as well be assuaged by the prolonged gaze. So to what extent was her body commodified and fetishized? I offer a negotiated/resistant reading.

IV. COMMODITY FETISHISM AND NUDITY

Commodity fetishism involves the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. A little over a decade ago, an observer saw that "Whoever controls the 'eye'—the camera, the gaze, or the image—also controls the 'victim'—the subject, the photographer's fetish object, most notably women" (Cole, 1999: n.p.). In the context of the "Harlem" photograph, the nude body is turned into an object worth possessing. Commodity fetishism works best in consumer societies, and is "the inevitable outcome of mass production, the practices of advertising and marketing, and the distribution of goods to many different consumers" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009: 281). In the photograph, the body of the nude Black woman is advertised to viewers who have been presented with lack or a need to satisfy urgently.

In "The Finest Consumer Object" Baudrillard (1998) intimates that the human corporeal body is constructed as an object of salvation that ought to be given its quotidian treat. He sees this devotion to be in stark contrast to the years gone by in which the body was seen as sinful, less useful than the spirit. For Baudrillard (1998), this shift in value ought to be traced to the doorstep of advertising because it presents itself as a therapeutic cult (cf. Sturken & Cartwright, 2009 "therapeutic ethos"). He writes, "For centuries, there was a relentless effort to convince people they had no bodies....today, there is a relentless effort to convince them of their bodies" (italics in original, p. 277). He notes that the body has cultural capital, and is a fetish. Had Baudrillard seen the 'Harlem' photograph, he may perhaps have described it as a false sexual pathos. By this, he would mean that a hedonistic emphasis has been placed on the value of the Black woman's body such that her body begets its own encoded signifiers of social status. Its use value has been traded for an

exchange value of satisfying the erogenous gratification of viewers, he might add. Her body is desacralized for fougance (visual pleasure).

Interestingly the "Harlem" photograph is a myth. In Barthes' (1999) view, the dominant codes in a photograph do not necessarily correspond to its signified representations. Myth, he adduces, is "a mode of communication," (p. 51). Photographs, in Barthesian philosophy, communicate a myth because they make the viewer think and feel that they are beholding the real, whereas all photographs are, to large extent, a social practice (Sontag, 1973; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). John Tagg (1999) calls it an "artistic fiction", in as much as realism is "a social practice of representation, an overall form of discursive production, a normality which allows a strictly delimited range of variation (p. 271). In our case, I consider the "Harlem" photograph a myth because it is a metadiscourse. It is a discourse of other discourses of representations of reality. Maybe it thrives on the negative portrayal of the Black woman as one imbued with insatiable sexual appetite "so far as to lead black women to copulate with apes" (Gilman cited in Jones, 2010: 169). Thus in "Black Bodies, White Bodies", Sander Gilman unmasked the negative stereotypes associated with the Black female body in the late nineteenth century. Focusing on the Hottentot Venus, Sarah Bartman, he shows that the Black woman's body was written away as one whose physiognomy, skin color, and the form of her genitalia underscore her difference. But what is most remarkable in this work is that it exposes the way Black women were thought to be abnormal, diseased and prostitutes whose love for sex knew no bounds.

V. THE MYTH OF NUDITY AND THE WORK OF RESISTANCE

Finally, the "Harlem" photograph is therefore a myth because it represents Black women as senseless and incapable of moral judgment. It is a myth because even the photograph itself was produced under mechanical, artisanal, and ideological standpoints. It is not what it is. According to Barthes (2003), the various distributions imposed on photographs by their producers are also rhetorical in nature, and external to the object. Again, the "Harlem" photograph is a myth because it is an ambiguity, for while it presents us with the form of the Black woman, the same is always there to outdistance the meaning. Barthes terms such signification depoliticized speech, and notes that the essence of the myth is its capacity to abolish the complexity of human acts, and give simplicity to them. In everyday parlance one would say that myths such as these are simply propaganda. Siskind's "Harlem" photograph is a myth because it offers a worldview antithetical to the culture of the Black race. For as bell

hooks (1990) laments in the context of television, "Black images were commodified as never before in history" (p. 4). Two years later she writes on the same subject in her famous essay "The Oppositional Gaze" that Black people do not lack agency, and that they have the capacity to resist the ways they are encoded and negatively represented, or rather misrepresented in visual media be it the arts, television or cinema. She notes that critical black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual Black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing, and looking (hooks, 1992). For hooks, it is not just the question of putting up resistance against the preferred, dominant ways of encoding Black women. Instead it is the need to overcome apparatuses, strategies, and mechanisms of control and the desire to assert one's own true identity. I guess the question to ask is, "Have these ways of encoding the Black woman in popular culture changed?"

VI. CONCLUSION

Towards a Rhetoric of Oppositional Viewing Elsewhere I have argued that the representation of women's bodies, or rather their misrepresentation, reinforces the myth that their bodies are an indispensable signifier of economic and socio/cultural status. The effect this myth has on the psyche of young adults is that female nudity is celebratory, and is the marker of allure and capital. Nonetheless, if we believe in the mosaic model that repeated messages in the media create a lasting impression on viewers, then it is possible to say that the more adolescents and adults alike are shown images of hyper-commodified and sexualized women, the more they may consider this myth a norm and an element of Black ethos.

In proposing a rhetoric of oppositional viewing, we need to be mindful of the agency of women who still desire to be represented in this light. In a study of the representation of female butt in West African cinema, for example, I have argued that this rhetoric needs to produce the knowledge to understand the laws, apparatuses, strategies, and mechanisms of control privileged in a phallogocentric society (Coker, 2003). Here are some suggestions. Switch off the television set at the site of such depictions: Openly dialogue about it: Tell the young ones about the ravaging effects of this representation.

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