Abstract:

The language of images – in photography particularly – is a physical representation of the variability of signified meaning. Roland Barthes believed that photographic representation was a product of the “indexical” nature of photography – that photography pointed to one physical, visual element that represents the “real” or “true.” Individual elements of the mass media and postmodern art culture affect meaning behind representation, questioning how a photographer’s perspective alters representation of an image. Focusing on Cindy Sherman’s works within “Centerfolds” and “Sex Pictures,” Barthes’ studies on connotation and Butler’s criticism of the female body merge with Sherman’s expressions of femininity to operate as a language of the body.

The language of images – in photography particularly – is a physical representation of the variability of signified meaning. Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980) suggests that photographic representation is a product of the “indexical” nature of photography – photography points to one physical, visual element that represents the “real” or “true.” In Cindy Sherman’s two Untitled series “Centerfolds” and “Sex,” she explores the indexical and the language of gender performance through her reappropriation of both herself and of stereotypes of femininity. Within these collections, Untitled #96 (1981) and Untitled #264 (1992) provide a striking evaluation of the standards of beauty and the idealized, sexualized figure. Through her presentation of a “feminine standard,” Sherman’s photos operate as a language of the female body – and of her own – questioning feminine expectations and the definition of gender itself.

In both collections, Sherman’s reappropriation becomes the subject of her work. Not only is she reappropriating the notion of the artist by placing herself within the work, she reclaims societal myths put forth by images and their respective signs. Tackling the problem of sexuality
and objectification, Sherman’s reappropriation of both idea and image are made present through the combination of multiple signs that carry the myth of sexuality.

This incorporation of myth can be seen through the growth and transformation of Sherman’s collections *Centerfolds* and *Sex Pictures*, which reflect each other as a developing commentary on the media portrayals of femininity. *Centerfolds*, which is a replication and mockery of *Playboy*’s centerfold spreads, “grows up” in *Sex Pictures* as an outward, vulgar statement against the subject of the female body in popular images. Interestingly enough, in January 2013, Sherman included a photo from *Sex Pictures* (Untitled #264) in a *Playboy* feature entitled “Playmate as Fine Art.” This sparked me to explore how Sherman’s messages are altered based on the context of her photos. I will analyze one photo from both *Centerfolds* and *Sex Pictures* to map the growth of both collections, resting finally on the nature of connotation/image myth and their role in the language of the body.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 1: Untitled #96, from Centerfolds (1981)**

In her *Centerfold* *Untitled #96*, Sherman brings to light the (almost pedophilic) fetishism of youth and innocence. The girl Sherman has become within her photo is not only posed within
feminine seduction (legs tucked beneath her, spread as a centerfold within a fashion magazine), she has small feminine traits that attribute to her allure. Her nails are painted a cherry red; she appears to be laying on a tiled kitchen floor – a nod to domesticity. She is wearing a wool sweater that covers any cleavage or curves and a short gingham skirt, a nod to an innocence or naiveté. This, under the sexual gaze, suggests a fetishization of youth, while she flashes her thighs suggestively. She is clutching a cut-out of a newspaper’s personal ads. She is innocent, small, and even playful, in a way that suggests perversion and encroachment within the gaze.

In contrast, Untitled #264 is abrasive, grotesque, and disturbing. Shennan lies on a bed in an atypical “Playmate” pose – reclined, legs open, and suggestive – yet her actual physical composition is little short of horrifying. She has replaced her legs with those of a mannequin, has adorned a plastic vagina as well as breasts, and is wearing a restrictive, sadomasochistic mask that only shows her eyes and a small amount of her mouth. Behind her in the far corner, looking
downward, hangs a frighteningly realistic human mask; below that lies a silver burlesque mask. Her right hand is poised on the bed to show off her red nail polish; she is wearing a gold crown atop her perfectly curled hair. Sherman combines the sexual and the grotesque into a fetishized form, questioning the basis of sexuality and of the objectified female-in-media.

**Semiotics**

In photography, according to Barthes, the image is indexical, pointing to the real. Is staged documentary photography representative of the real? If we stage and privilege authority figures in the media, the repetitive insistence of the image is what makes this authority “real” and accepted. In Cindy Sherman’s collections she challenges the myth of gender authority and stereotype by appropriating the feminine stereotype as a language unto herself.

In “The Photographic Message,” Barthes explores the message within a photo as well as the notion that the photo itself is a message. Split into parts of a structure, the photo is a message whose source of emission is its publisher or author, the reader or audience composes its point of reception, and the medium through which it is presented is its channel of transmission. Each part of the message, he argues, demands different means of interpretation. The emission and reception, according to this text, require a sociological lens, and investigating transmission involves a more structural, physical, and semiotic route.

The reproduction and representation of an object to an image reduces reality (here defined simply as the “actual”), but this may not necessarily transform reality. There is no need for translation between the object and the image – the image is the object’s “perfect analogon” and there is no need for further communication to better represent the object (Barthes, 1977, p. 17). Directly and consequently, there is no need for a code, making the photo a message without
a code. Photographs (and all signs) are comprised of two messages: the analogon, or denoted message, which is the actual, visual, physical object, and the connoted message, which is the less physical message – what the object within the photo represents and how society interprets that image.

Barthes remarks that the study of connotated images is lacking in discursive literature, asking whether art “can be reduced to a system of significations” (Barthes, 1977, p. 18). Still, it is obvious that despite its connoted meanings, a photograph can be “exclusively constituted and occupied by a denoted message” (Barthes, 1977, p. 18). A fully denotative system of information lends itself to a sense of being mythical. The sense of analogy can provide connotation “at the levels of the production and reception of the message” (ibid., p. 19). Particular psyches, social norms, and consumption lend to a connection between an image and the signs within it that lend to predetermined meaning read by an audience. This code of connotation is established through image myth.

Barthes (1977) takes this analysis one step further by discussing the myth’s inversion of culture into nature: social standards (culture) become natural (nature) through repetition and social insistence. This inversion allows social phenomena to become accepted as the norm. This movement prevents the signifier from being easily separated from the signified; connoted meaning becomes an instantaneous association with the denoted meaning.

The code of connotation and of inversion – a code that Cindy Sherman challenges through her work through her use of a self-dependent rhetoric – is prevalent in both Sherman’s subject matter and use of imagery. In my analysis, I will examine how Sherman uses image myths to reappropriate her body as well as the stereotype of female sexuality. While some have
argued that she is contributing to the myth itself by simple replication, her work in the context of Barthes’ arguments suggest that by recreating the sign itself, Sherman may in fact be destructing the signified meaning of the stereotype of femininity and sexuality.

Analysis

Pictures within the media are tools that elicit ideas and emotional response: they can provide pleasure, in forms such as a pleasant commercial or comedic sitcom, or elicit anger or anxiety. Each image varies in its level of emotional reaction. These multiple myths brought forth from a single image suggest a variability that allows images to provide media and culture with new myths, which Davis calls a “double-edged power” that motivates the media-based society to instill norms and accepted truths (Davis, 1992, p.1).

Since images contain dual layers of meaning, it is important to note that their interpretation rests within this same duality. Images can be interpreted on two levels: on the first, there is the immediate emotional response one gains from denoted meaning; on the second, images can be digested in context with others and with connoted meaning. This second level allows one to see how myths are created within a collection or language of images, and how these myths persist within a variability of signs.

Davis’s Myth #2: “Leave it to the experts (who are usually white men)” posits that the media privileges the ideas of white middle-class men and enforces that idea upon those who consume these images. The authority figures controlling media images are constantly white men, a power structure repeated into naturalization that suppresses “the views of women, persons of color, and representatives of alternate voices” (Davis, 1992, p.3). Through the appropriation of “real” femininity unto herself, Sherman establishes real control and power over how she is
represented within an image that she creates. She challenges the suppressed views of the minority by defacing the images associated with the authority: in *Untitled #264* particularly, Sherman takes the idealized sexual figure and contorts it into a fake, plasticized form that suggests fetishization of an object rather than sexual appreciation of a woman. Her inclusion of a plastic vulva and breasts directly challenge the standards set forth by authority in the media. Women are consistently encouraged to be perfect to the point of adopting artificial “parts” (such as breast implants). If our sex organs are not “real” per se, can we gain any pleasure from them? Clearly, this image challenges the standards of beauty and pleasure by questioning whether an artificial body can ever be inverted into the natural. The authority that claims these standards may in fact be imposing a rejection of the body that is actually natural – a statement which questions whether this authority itself is natural or a cultural assumption.

Myth #5: “Your body is not good enough” suggests that image myths can also be created just through the repetition of visual tropes – in this case, the “slim, muscular and good-looking” subjects of the modeling/entertainment industry (Davis, 1992, p.4). This again is another myth Cindy Sherman is directly challenging in both “Centerfolds” and “Sex” through her portrayal of herself as a physical stereotype of luxury and beauty. In #264, the posed, plastic model suggests a strict guideline in which the body is, in fact, “good enough.” By conforming to the regulated sexuality of the media – in this case, the typical “open-faced” centerfold pose – the model becomes the sign of sexuality so often portrayed in magazine images (pornographic or not).

Her traditional feminine traits in *Untitled # 96* are a direct argument of what is considered necessarily “feminine” within society, an echo of Judith Butler’s notions of performative gender – the subject of this photo is, then, “the sign, understood as a gender imperative – ‘girl!’” argued through small gender-linked image myths (Butler, 1993, p. 581). This suggests that the
imperative in Sherman’s work is, in fact, the sexual. She is performing as a woman through her photography. This is not Cindy herself; there is no indexical to a “real” Cindy. Her referent is to a concept of the feminine through the sign of the feminine. Through this, Sherman negates the inversion of popular image myths – no man has control over her representation or how she is represented, she questions why her body is not good enough, and she shows that the gender imperative is a cultural construct. Not only does Sherman appropriate the aforementioned feminine stereotypes unto herself, she acknowledges small masculine traits a woman can possess – her short-cropped wig in this photo nods to a sense of “butch” or masculine style, in opposition to feminine standards of long, flowy hair. While she is very visually female, small traits about her prevent her from crossing the line into the female sexual. Her lack of makeup contrasts with the cosmopolitan, centerfold-style of the image and questions the position of the feminine within fashion standards.

However, these attributes are all deliberate and intentional, causing the viewer to question the gaze of the image and the nature of power here. By controlling which feminine attributes she displays in her work, Sherman brings forth the feminine “voice” that Davis argues is suppressed by male dominance in imagery. This can be seen within the reflection of Centerfolds by Sex Pictures – the latter collection is a direct foil of the former. One can see the clear development of one collection to the other; for example, *Untitled #94* in Centerfolds appears to be recreated in Sex Pictures’ *Untitled #250*. Both portray a blonde, sexual figure in a suggestive recline; where 94 is soft-faced, covered, clothed, and gazing away from the camera, 250 matures into a grotesque, old, naked, withered, penetrated, and plastic woman. This collection, as seen with these two photos, is a response to the early Centerfolds and suggests that the views on women (and women themselves) have been further degraded. The degradation present within Sex
Pictures shows how male directives have shaped our views on women; where Centerfolds in the 1980s positioned women as dreamy, ethereal, innocent beings, Sex Pictures decade later strips (literally) these characters raw, makes them fake and plastic, and destroys their innocence with an aggressive sexuality that, in some cases, becomes disturbing.

Laura Mulvey’s “Phantasmagoria of the Female Body” (1991) supports this challenge of image myth by associating photos like those within *Centerfolds* with the nature of femininity as a masquerade. She argues that Sherman “uses cosmetics literally as a mask” – or, in the case of this image, feminine attributes – that present femininity as a caricature, parodying the societal standard of what is acceptably feminine (Mulvey, 1991, p. 142). In what Mulvey calls a “soft-core pastiche,” Sherman creates a photograph centered on “feminine emotion, longing, and reverie” that sparks the idea of an innocent, dreaming girl caught in a seductive moment (ibid., p. 142). This juxtaposition allows Sherman to grasp the gaze of the image and direct it toward the feminine qualities she is both appropriating and questioning.

Sherman’s subject in *Untitled 96*, for example, “[exudes] vulnerability and sexual availability” that is both striking in its blunt nature and causes a reconsideration of the true nature of the photo (Mulvey, 1991, p. 142). Is Sherman attempting to seduce her audience or is she attempting to empower herself through a self-imposed sexuality? This performance of sexuality may be linked to a drag performance, as Butler argues that the hyperbolic performance of gender signs “are dissimulated as the heterosexual mundane” within hyperbole in an attempt to destabilize gender norms and the image myths associated with them (Butler, 1993, p. 581).

It is clear that the denoted message of Sherman’s *Untitled # 96* is that of a pretty girl lying down seductively. A less obvious denoted message (one level further from the analogon)
would be that of the girl’s reverie, a daydreaming pose presented by her facial expression. To explore the connoted meaning of this image, one must approach smaller denoted messages, or even signs. For example, what is the connoted meaning of the personal ads Sherman’s subject is clutching? There is an implied seductive desire attached to the personal ads – the subject desires a date, a sex partner, or attention. This connoted meaning, applied to the image as a whole, establishes a desiring/desired partnership to Sherman’s subject, questioning her innocence, her sexuality, her sexual desires, and her feminine role in society as a sex object or an object to be desired. Her clutching the personal ads shows her desire to be in control of her own sexual desire, a nod to the possibility that the patriarchal society is in fact controlling her desires and she may not in fact have control of herself.

Important to note is Barthes’s acknowledgement that the “sign” of the photo is its “gestures, attitudes, expressions, colours or effects, endowed with certain meanings by virtue of the practice of a certain society” (Barthes, 1977, p. 27). The association of signs with “gestures” suggests that signification can create an image language and provide a sense of connotation derived from denotation. Barthes argues that the analysis of a connotation is always “historical” in the sense that the reader applies previous “knowledge” to his or her interpretation of the image (ibid., p. 28). The “historical” in this sense, is the feminist aesthetic applied within Sherman’s work.

Mulvey argues Sherman’s representation of the feminine “could not have been formulated without a prehistory of feminism and its theorization of the body and representation” (Mulvey, 1991, p. 138). This can be associated not only with the feminist movement rapidly growing during the publication of “Both of Sherman’s controversial collections” but its surrounding literature: works by Butler and Kristeva stress the importance of the female body
and the disestablishment of patriarchal power and control that subject the feminine into set
didactic ideals. As a feminist gesture, then, within the context of a feminist movement, it is
important to question whether #96’s status is as “reclaiming sexuality.” Is Sherman making a
powerful statement about being in control of her sexuality, or is she subjecting herself by
displaying herself as a sexual object?

What is most important to note in the context of this analysis is Sherman’s recent
inclusion of #264 in the January/February 2013 issue of Playboy. Arguably, Sherman publishing
any work in Playboy is in acquiescence to the publication’s subjecting nature, and one may even
suggest that the feature of Sherman’s work rids it of any powerful message. Certainly there is
something to be said about a grotesque, disembodied, and plastic centerfold being presented
within a pornographic magazine: Sherman is making a statement about fetishism, and
questioning the lengths one can and will go to “get off.” But within the context of such a
restrictive and objectifying text, the image’s connoted meaning faces an inversion in which it
becomes a “thing” to be objectified, sexualized, and used for masturbation.

Marshall McLuhan’s focus on the visual posture and gesture of photography, or what he
calls the image gestalt suggests that pose and gesture, in the realm of feminism, establish a
subject position of feminine inferiority and submission. The monocular vision of the photograph
commodifies items within an image as a machine that “tends to turn people into things”
(McLuhan, 1994, p. 2). Like Davis, who suggests myths are created in images through a sort of
thing-ification, McLuhan suggests that because an image literally frames items, people – even
ideas – it can turn them into merchandise. This commodification renders a new signified
meaning of the object: a person in an image is no longer a person but a price-valued object
placed in the public domain. People in images are “bought and hugged and thumbed more easily
than public prostitutes” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 2). The photo can be compared to a brothel in this sense because people want to be timeless, desired, and bought.

This, within a feminine image, is what Mulvey calls “the ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of femininity,” a need for the audience to be the spectator to a cosmopolitan feminine mystique (Mulvey, 1991, p. 143). Sherman presents this posed gaze through Untitled by making this centerfold a non-traditional fashion image: this is not the type of photo one would find in a fashion magazine, but its composition suggests just this and makes the viewer question what is really being observed.

In the case of #264’s inclusion in Playboy, certainly an already usually objectified woman becomes a commodified item. This alters the supposed meaning of #264 in context. Its inclusion in Playboy inverts it into a commodity; any powerful message on the fetishism of reclaimed sexuality that the image could have is trumped by its nature as on literal commodity and of the subject as a fetishized form within a fetishistic text. Since Sex Pictures as a collection speaks out against the stereotypical imagery Sherman is replicating in Centerfolds – an imagery that has been inverted into a “natural sight” through media – this overssexualized, disturbing image strikes a chord to question whether this inversion is natural.

McLuhan presents Joyce’s idea that the photo is the “abnihilization of the etym” – an “automatic writing” of a language created from nothing (McLuhan, 1994, p. 5). This, according to Joyce, pins the image as the rival to the word, making photography a wordless (or word-independent) language. Image language is dependent upon gesture (stated by Gombrich as ‘gestalt’). It provides a physical, human sense of presentation. Language within the photograph is a human gesture; the physicality of photography is a language in itself that speaks to possibilities that words have yet to discover or explain. Flight, to use McLuhan’s example, was itself seen as
a possibility through the photographs of birds that revealed the motion of wing movement for the purposes of propulsion. However, less physical gestures can be revealed and explored through the image, which Cindy Sherman’s photographs show.

The gesture and posture of gender within Sherman’s collections reveal her view on the commodification of gender stereotypes as well as the perspectives that originated these stereotypes. This type of representation is important to the language of images, according to McLuhan, as “language takes on a graphic or iconic character, whose ‘meaning’ belongs very little to the semantic universe, and not at all to the republic of letters’ within the photograph” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 9). Sherman uses the indexical as a tool to discuss the female body; her gestures and character point to an inverted misrepresentation of the female body that is somehow seen as natural. While Cindy Sherman does not explicitly apply a theory to her work, her reappropriation serves as a swift argument against the politics of both imagery and stereotype within a patriarchal society. By using her body to create multiple bodies, she establishes a language in an attempt to decenter the structure of a male-dominant society and to reconstruct the idea of the “feminine” body and of the gender itself.
Works Cited


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