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Table of contents

The Epistemology of Cindy Sherman: A Research Method for Media and Cultural Studies

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Abstract (Abstract): In Post-Theory, [David Bordwell] attacks interpretation in general, arguing that it produces little knowledge because of its sloppiness: "since interpretation is generally unconstrained by rules of formal demonstration, its inductive processes rely upon 'quick and dirty' corner-cutting rules of thumb" (33). Bordwell argues for a more rigorous program which he calls "middle-level" research: "Closer to traditional academic scholarship, this tendency has concentrated on in-depth research." This "middle-level" research asks questions that have "both empirical and theoretical import" (27). Middlelevel research is concerned with questions presumed to have verifiable answers, such as, "How [...] did economic forces and principles of management affect the institutions of film production, distribution, and exhibition?" (28). Bordwell contrasts middle-level research with "Grand Theory": "Subject-position theory and culturalism constitute Grand Theory. Each rests upon several substantive premises about the nature of society, history, mind, and meaning. Each of these premises can be traced back to nineteenthcentury intellectual traditions. Concrete interpretations of films and filmic contexts are thought to flow from these Theories, instantiating the processes already provided for in the abstract doctrines" (27).
[Laura Mulvey], [Kaja Silverman], and [Williamson] assume the Untitled Film Stills reveal the "truth" about dominant media as part of a critique of dominant media, yet in doing so they suppress the powerful enigmas in [Cindy Sherman]'s work. [Gregory L. Ulmer] writes: "The Hermeneutic code [is] drive[n] to reduce enigmas to truth" (106). I find it symptomatic of these critics that they impose a "truth" model on Sherman's work. The critics' treatment of Sherman's work as critique reveals an apparatus bias: critique is part of the apparatus of alphabetic literacy-that is, the culture of the critics-and not necessarily part of the artist's apparatus. Critique functions outside its object of study, but Sherman's work, while it may pose challenges to mass media, is also a kind of "electronic/cinematic writing" itself. It is inside media and therefore cannot be understood solely as critique in its literate sense, though it may indeed have a "critique effect."
In Untitled Film Still #37 (Illus. 5), Sherman leans against a mantel holding a cigarette. Above the mantel is a landscape depicting water, boulders, trees, and mountains. Kaja Silverman calls this untitled image "Nature Girl." Silverman writes, "the painting depicts the landscape of the woman's desire-the frame into which she seeks to project herself through the studied 'naturalness' of her pose and costume" (218). Sherman's pose, Silverman claims, connotes reverie; we associate this reverie with the character's dream of being someplace else, the most immediate elsewhere being the "natural place" depicted in the painting. But the image does not signify nature; the scene Sherman depicts reminds us of a Douglas Sirk film, perhaps of Lauren Bacall in Written on the Wind. In other words, Sherman stylized the scene by making it conform to filmic codes. The femininity Sherman simulates is a kind of alienation made cool. Sherman demonstrates how to re-alienate a familiar alienation by playing it as a stylized pose.

Abstract: This essay is a manifesto for a cinematic/electronic media and cultural studies research method. I argue that Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills were produced using such a research method and I adapt this method for use within media and cultural studies. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

Full text: Headnote

This essay is a manifesto for a cinematic/electronic media and cultural studies research method. I argue that

Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills were produced using such a research method and I adapt this method for use within media and cultural studies.

The crone may cackle or tell a story or scold her for her self-absorption, but sooner or later she will open her eyes and find herself here in her moldy bed once more, waiting for she knows not what in the name of waiting for her prince to come. Of whom, no lack, though none true so far of course, unless in some strange wise they all are, her sequential disenchantments then the very essence of her being, the fairy's spell binding her not to a suspenseful waiting for what might yet be, but to the eternal reenactment of what, other than, she can never be.-Robert Coover, Briar Rose

Humanities research is widely considered to be the sole province of academic scholars, yet avant-garde artists practise their own versions of humanities research. As critics, we tend to applaud the avant-garde for its anti-linear, anti-rational, anti-Enlightenment qualities, but we do so even as we continue to reproduce the same form of criticism, employing linearity, rationality, and the rhetoric of scientific realism.

Avant-garde artists invent research methods by using media as research tools. Thus, avant-garde artists expose scholars' biases towards alphabetic literacy. Under the reigning logic, scholarship is recognized as such only when transposed into alphabetic text; with rare exception, no other forms count as scholarly knowledge. Scholars frame research questions such as, "How does selfhood change in the shift from literate to cinematic/electronic cultures?" Their answers, however, take the form of a treatise, never a film. Media and cultural studies scholars readily admit that film has its own ways of knowing. If not, why bother studying it?

Perhaps the most famous articulation of avant-garde arts as research method, André Breton's 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism" describes how novel methods of writing-such as automatic writing and cut-up newspaper headlines-yield knowledge of the mind and the world that cannot be obtained by strictly rational means. My essay, an homage to Breton, is a manifesto for an arts-oriented cinematic/electronic media and cultural studies research method. Although my work includes traditional critical rhetoric-providing another piece in the critical dialogue about Sherman's Untitled Film Stills-it also offers something else: a visual research strategy appropriate for media and cultural studies invented from Sherman's work. Gregory Ulmer calls such invention of new research methods heuretics. Though my claim that we can conduct important research using images may appear strange, I argue that such research is essential for addressing key questions:

* How can we learn about the "objects" of study in our discipline-media artifacts-while gaining self-knowledge?
* How do we invent forms of academic writing appropriate to cinematic and electronic media?
* What is the relationship between written criticism and other ways of knowing?

Heuretics is charged with finding "forms appropriate for conducting cultural studies research in relation to the electronic media" (Ulmer xi). Theorists from Plato to Barthes invented research methods appropriate to their disciplines and to the information technologies of their times. The Sherman project I propose is a hybrid of research methods from art and academia adapted for use within cinematic/electronic media.

I focus this research method on the following research "problem": the emergence of cinematic/electronic culture has changed the way people present the self, which Aristotle termed ethos, yet there is considerable disagreement and speculation about the nature of this shift. Sherman performed a response to this problem, exploring the changing modalities of selfhood in cinematic/electronic terms. I borrow Gregory Ulmer's term "mystory" (Scholes et al 241-312) to describe the kind of research Sherman does using images. Mystory is a genre that addresses questions about identity and ideology using their material embodiments within the culture and life of the researcher. Ulmer refers to artists' texts as relays, or rough analogies, for new methods of conducting media studies and cultural studies research.

The modalities of selfhood are best understood within the framework of grammatology, which studies the means by which people store, retrieve, and process information. In alphabetic culture, ethos, the presentation of self, is a "voice," the writer's simulation of a spoken "role" for a particular occasion. In cinematic/electronic culture, the self becomes a "look," an embodiment of one's values and mood in concrete form. Sherman's Untitled Film

Stills experiment with the possibilities of using the "look" to reflect upon herself and her culture.
Sherman's work performs a double movement in relation to her "object of research": the cinema. The Untitled Film Stills offer, simultaneously, identification with and detachment from cinematic images. Sherman achieves this double movement through strategies of simulation and defamiliarization. Another word for this double movement is unheimlich, Freud's term for that which is familiar to us but also strangely foreign or disturbing ("Uncanny" 219-252). The movie star types Sherman portrays in her Unfitted Film Stills look familiar, but none of them are precise imitations of particular stars. Rather, they are "star-like"; we could say of Untitled Film Still #7 (Illus. 1), for example, that it is "Sophia Loren-esque."
Star images attract us, in part, because of the star's charisma (Dyer 30), but attempts to mimic this charisma often meet with failure. Kaja Silverman sees Sherman as enacting failed attempts at star charisma; Silverman notes how Sherman's characters look uncomfortable in their roles, as though the characters were checking themselves to make sure they have the right look (195-227). Her characters' apparent uncertainties highlight the tensions between "self" and "role" that Richard Dyer theorized in his well-known discussion of movie stars' personae (20-1).
I read, or willfully misread, the Untitled Film Stills as re-enactments of ideological "lessons" Sherman received from cinema about the dominant culture's preferred values and behaviours. In Untitled Film Still #7, for example, I see Sherman re-enacting the scene of a lesson about femininity embodied in Loren's movies; the ideal femininity, Sherman learns, is a combination of luxury and glamour. Furthermore, it is unattainable.
Entire research programs and pedagogies might be based on such identifications. In Scholes, Comley, and Ulmer's discussion of mystory, they refer to subject positioning as a form of "education":
Identification is at the heart of this education in that one becomes who and what one is by internalizing an image of the nurturing authority figures encountered in one's world. According to the theory, this act of identification with parent figures in the family-extended to the authority figures encountered in other institutions that constitute the interpellation process as one matures-is a "mis-recognition," a necessary "mistake" that implants alienation at the core of selfhood as an experience. To be a "self," that is, is to carry internally an image acquired from "outside." Identity is "extimacy," as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan put it, coining a term that combines in one word "external" and "intimacy." An individual subject is not autonomous and self-identical, but is dependent upon an effect of language into which he or she has entered. (243)
Any scene in which one internalizes the authority figure's values and behaviours is a "scene of instruction." In the Untitled Film Stills, Sherman re-enacts her scenes of instruction from entertainment by citing the female stars who structured her "entry into language" (e.g. the visual language of gender identity). Sherman's images do not merely re-enact the performances of her authority figures; they include herself as the learner.
In my (mis)reading of the Untitled Film Stills, Sherman reconstructs the visual language of her scenes of instruction. This visual language is called the "image-repertoire" (Barthes, Lover's 106). The mystorical researcher becomes a "receiver" of this reconstructed image-repertoire. "One goal of mystory as an experiment is to learn how to replace argument with mood as a way to guide research. [...] One motive for this shift is to leave a place for the reader in the construction of the text (interactive texts are written from the position of receiver rather than author-a receiver of traditions of existing high and popular culture). If there are to be arguments made, the reader of the mystory, not the composer, supplies them" (Scholes et al 295).
Many of Sherman's critics focus on Sherman's presumed "artistic intent" but miss one possibility of Sherman's experiments. The critics assume Sherman knew what her images meant; they see the Untitled Film Stills as an effort to communicate with an audience of art viewers. These critics do not consider the possibility that the Untitled Film Stills are a form of research into the "unknowns" of culture and selfhood. Sherman, in other words, may be less a producer of the Untitled Film Stills than she is a receiver of them.
In the following section, I review major critical statements about the Untitled Film Stills. My goal, in part, is to defend the "unconstrained" methods practised by Sherman's critics-Laura Mulvey and Kaja Silverman-against

attacks by positivist critics such as David Bordwell who accuse these critics of overreaching. I intend to show how Sherman's critics have something valuable to offer the mystorical method, but I also contrast these critical approaches with the mystorical approach. I aim to salvage the "unconstrained" methods practised by Sherman's critics, but to re-deploy these methods as elements in an avant-garde research method.

Several of Sherman's critics, including Mulvey and Silverman, are also, not coincidentally, film critics. Although Sherman's Untitled Film Stills consists entirely of still photographs, Sherman's critics follow the interpretive methodology apparent in their work on film; this methodology David Bordwell calls "symptomatic criticism."

In Post-Theory, David Bordwell attacks interpretation in general, arguing that it produces little knowledge because of its sloppiness: "since interpretation is generally unconstrained by rules of formal demonstration, its inductive processes rely upon 'quick and dirty' corner-cutting rules of thumb" (33). Bordwell argues for a more rigorous program which he calls "middle-level" research: "Closer to traditional academic scholarship, this tendency has concentrated on in-depth research." This "middle-level" research asks questions that have "both empirical and theoretical import" (27). Middlelevel research is concerned with questions presumed to have verifiable answers, such as, "How [...] did economic forces and principles of management affect the institutions of film production, distribution, and exhibition?" (28). Bordwell contrasts middle-level research with "Grand Theory": "Subject-position theory and culturalism constitute Grand Theory. Each rests upon several substantive premises about the nature of society, history, mind, and meaning. Each of these premises can be traced back to nineteenthcentury intellectual traditions. Concrete interpretations of films and filmic contexts are thought to flow from these Theories, instantiating the processes already provided for in the abstract doctrines" (27).

Bordwell complains that Grand Theory overreaches; it asks questions for which no empirically verifiable answers exist and it relies upon untested premises when applying theories to particular cases. Bordwell argues for greater rigour, by which he means limiting the scope and methods of investigations but increasing the likelihood of producing verifiable results. His argument is squarely in the tradition of positivism articulated by August Comte in his Introduction to Positive Philosophy.

Bordwell raises the key question for media and cultural studies: what counts as knowledge? (For a lengthier discussion of this issue and Bordwell's role in it, see Robert Ray's essay "The Bordwell Regime and the Stakes of Knowledge") Bordwell rejects the possibility that knowledge is an effect of language; rather, he believes that there is an objectively knowable "truth." He assumes it is possible to acquire knowledge without premises; his disparaging use of the word "premises" in the passage cited above, however, disavows the ways in which his own enculturation in literate society established his premises.

Those practising "Grand Theory" and postmodern art, in contrast to Bordwell, believe that knowledge is an effect of language. seen from the perspective of heuretics, Grand Theory, such as the feminist-Lacanian theories of Mulvey and Silverman, can be understood as metaphorical ways of knowing-"literary" ways of knowingbecause they pose a correspondence between one kind of story and another, in particular between the details of a particular narrative and those of a meta-narrative. This correspondence is known as interpretation. There are several schools of interpretation, each with particular interpretive meta-narratives and particular methods of mapping correspondences between textual objects and meta-narratives. For example, psychoanalytic theory translates particular narratives (e.g., works of literature) into a meta-narrative of personal development: the story of the Oedipal subject. Marxist theory uses the meta-narrative of class struggle. Feminist theory uses the meta-narrative of gender struggle. In an earlier essay entitled "Methodologies of the Film Still," I explore various research methods for understanding the narrative and meta-narrative codes of film frames, using Sherman's work as a relay. Almost all literary or filmic texts can be "mapped" onto these broad schemas.

In Making Meaning, Bordwell writes that interpretation involves several steps:

* Noticing significant details in the text.
* Finding a pattern in those details.
* Mapping the pattern of the text to an interpretive schema.

* Claiming that X in the story is really Y from the meta-story.

Interpretation moves from specific case to general methodology (feminist, Marxist, etc.); in other words, the critic translates the details of a text into abstract terms from a meta-narrative. Critics, however, use some, but not all, of the details in the text for their interpretations. To pose a counter-criticism, it is sufficient to claim that a critic missed significant details, formed a misleading pattern, and mapped the story to the wrong meta-story. The counter-criticism then retraces the steps outlined above. Those who point to a correspondence between a particular narrative and a meta-narrative are not making verifiable claims about an external "truth," the kind of claim that Bordwell champions. Rather, correspondences form a pattern from which the writer creates intelligibility. In other words, the critical interpretations Bordwell disparages closely resemble the way artists do research.

Yet there are significant differences between the research methods of artists and those of critics. Whereas critics translate particular narratives into abstract or general terms, artists such as Cindy Sherman create correspondences between one particular narrative and another particular narrative; artists reason from thing-to-thing rather than from thing-to-abstraction. Sherman's Untitled Film Stills create correspondences between the narratives of entertainment-especially movies of the 1950s-and Sherman's autobiographical narratives. By creating such correspondences, Sherman the composer becomes Sherman the receiver.

Bordwell notes that critics who practise symptomatic interpretation on mass media texts tend to find only explicatory meanings in "oppositional" texts. When interpreting mass media texts, such as Hollywood films, these critics use the symptomatic approach. Mass media texts, these critics believe, contain symptoms of social disease; critics identify these symptoms in order to expose abusive social relations. When the same critics approach an oppositional text, however, they resort to explicatory criticism and become advocates for the text. These explicatory readings grant the author the benefit of the doubt; they highlight the author's "noble intentions." Such explicatory readings assume that there are no unintended messages to be found within oppositional texts. The critical texts about Sherman I discuss here, those by Mulvey, Silverman, and Williamson, conform to Bordwell's depiction of symptomatic critics doing explicatory readings of oppositional texts; these critics argue that oppositional texts such as Sherman's are therapeutic remedies for a diseased society. Of this critical tendency, Bordwell writes:

The tendency of the symptomatic critic to switch into the explicatory mode is especially evident in the interpretation of avant-garde cinema since the mid-1970s. As the contradictory-text model gained supporters, critics could look to oppositional films as exemplifying that "other scene" repressed in classical cinema. [...] This development suggested that the oppositional film, in laying bare the contradictions of dominant cinema, would not itself be conceived as harboring repressed meaning. [...] If there is a general disinclination to interpret the works of the avant-garde (or at least the avant-garde that the critic prefers) in symptomatic terms, that may be because the critic can treat these films as aspiring to the status of written theory or criticism. Like the critic's hermeneutics of suspicion, political modernist cinema is held to lay bare the repressed material hidden by dominant ideology. (Making 101-103)

Thus Laura Mulvey praises Sherman's work for enacting and then collapsing the fetish because the fetish hides trauma and thus history (65-76). Silverman praises Sherman's work for exposing the impossibility of ever becoming the "ideal imago"; she claims Sherman's work offers alternative identities to those available within dominant ideology, identities that allow a productive "distance from the mirror," which critique and reconstruct identity away from patriarchal norms (224). Williamson praises Sherman's work for liberating women from an essentialist and imprisoning femininity (102-16). All of these readings are explicatory. Bordwell presents the following passage about explicatory criticism:

On a summer day, a suburban father looks out at the family lawn and says to his teen-aged son: "The grass is so tall I can hardly see the cat walking through it." The son construes this to mean: "Mow the lawn." This is an implicit meaning. In a similar way, the interpreter of a film may take referential or explicit meaning as only the

point of departure for inferences about implicit meanings. That is, she or he explicates the film, just as the son might turn to his pal and explain, "That means Dad wants me to mow the lawn." Explicatory criticism rests upon the belief that the principal goal of critical activity is to ascribe implicit meanings to films. (Making 43)

The flip side of this paradigm is that critics tend to perform symptomatic criticisms on films they consider ideologically suspect. Bordwell explains symptomatic criticism in this passage:

On a summer day, a father looks out at the family lawn and says to his teen-aged son: "The grass is so tall I can hardly see the cat walking through it." The son slopes off to mow the lawn, but the interchange has been witnessed by a team of live-in social scientists, and they interpret the father's remarks in various ways. One sees it as typical of an American household's rituals of power and negotiation. Another observer construes the remark as revealing a characteristic bourgeois concern for appearances and a pride in private property. Yet another, perhaps having had some training in the humanities, insists that the father envies the son's sexual proficiency and that the feline image constitutes a fantasy that unwittingly symbolizes (a) the father's identification with a predator; (b) his desire for liberation from his stifling life; (c) his fears of castration (the cat in question has-been neutered): or (d) all of the above. [...] Now if these observers were to propose their interpretations to the father, he might deny them with great vehemence, but this would not persuade the social scientists to repudiate their conclusions. They would reply that the meanings they ascribed to the remark were involuntary, concealed by a referential meaning (a report on the height of the grass) and an implicit meaning (the order to mow the lawn). The social scientists have constructed a set of symptomatic meanings, and these cannot be demolished by the father's protest. Whether the sources of meaning are intrapsychic or broadly cultural, they lie outside the conscious control of the individual who produces the utterance. We are now practising a "hermeneutics of suspicion," a scholarly debunking, a strategy that sees apparently innocent interactions as masking unflattering impulses. (Making 71-72)

Critics employing the symptomatic approach look for "incompatibility between the film's explicit moral and what emerges as a cultural symptom" (75). In other words, the symptomatic approach looks for instances that "prove" a film's explicit message is not what it appears to be. Such symptomatic readings warn people not to be fooled by appearances; the true, yet disguised, intentions of a text, its "repressed meanings," are apparent, according to these critics, if you know how to look for them. Symptomatic criticism identifies messages produced by the unconscious (of the filmmaker or of the culture in which the filmmaker worked). Explicatory criticism, by contrast, urges the audience not to miss the messages they were intended to "get."

Mulvey, Silverman, and Williamson assume the Untitled Film Stills reveal the "truth" about dominant media as part of a critique of dominant media, yet in doing so they suppress the powerful enigmas in Sherman's work. Gregory Ulmer writes: "The Hermeneutic code [is] drive[n] to reduce enigmas to truth" (106). I find it symptomatic of these critics that they impose a "truth" model on Sherman's work. The critics' treatment of Sherman's work as critique reveals an apparatus bias: critique is part of the apparatus of alphabetic literacy-that is, the culture of the critics-and not necessarily part of the artist's apparatus. Critique functions outside its object of study, but Sherman's work, while it may pose challenges to mass media, is also a kind of "electronic/cinematic writing" itself. It is inside media and therefore cannot be understood solely as critique in its literate sense, though it may indeed have a "critique effect."

My purpose in tracing this discussion about criticism is to learn how to use criticism, not as an end in itself, as somehow revealing some ultimate signified-the "truth"-about Sherman's work, but as a poetics for writing like Sherman. This poetics I call "Writing with the Fetish." In Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety, Marjorie Garber argues that Hollywood stars, particularly female stars, perform gender as a masquerade by employing the fetish to create a cosmetic body. Garber refers to a person who uses the fetish for masquerade as a cross-dresser. The cross-dresser performs gender, race, or any identity category as an appearance. Crossdressing includes not only obvious cases of men passing as women, but also includes those who employ the fetish to represent any identity category, including their "own." According to Garber, female film performers

employ the fetish, enacting femininity as a display through the use of costume, props, make-up, and gestures. Freud understood fetishism as a defensive response to the threat of castration ("Fetishism" 149-57). In my approach to Sherman's work, I am far less concerned with Sherman's motives for using the fetish as I am with her methods of using the fetish. I am interested in the fetish as a writing strategy; in other words, I am interested in its iterability.

The cross-dresser routinely appears in both entertainment and in avant-garde texts. Sherman's predecessor, Marcel Duchamp, "cross-dressed" by appropriating fetishes from mass culture; he explored the fetish as an iterable sign. Duchamp employed "readymade" fetishes-the articles of everyday life he used in his pieces. Defending one of his readymades, the upside-down urinal he titled Fountain (Illus. 2), Duchamp argued that it was of no importance whether the artist actually made a particular object; what matters was that "He chose it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view-created a new thought for that object" (qtd. in Hall 193). Duchamp's "dressing up" as the fashionable Rrose Sélavy is an obvious precursor to Sherman's work. "It was a sort of readymadeish action," Duchamp said of his performance as Rrose (qtd. in Hall 194).

Sherman simulates the processes of creating personae following the "readymade" methods of art (Duchamp and Warhol) and entertainment. Simulation of everyday life is a common strategy within the avant-garde. This strategy, however, does not entail the simple reproduction of observed phenomenon. Rather, avant-garde artists attend to the uncertainty of objects, complicating attempts to "fix" meaning or identity. Sherman simulates the look and feel of 1950s films and their ancillary texts, including pinups and paparazzi shots, yet these simulations defamiliarize the "original" texts.

A standard defamiliarization strategy is to remove objects from everyday life and place them in a new context; artists transfer objects from their vernacular setting to the museum setting, thus upsetting expectations about their meaning. With the Untitled Film Stills, Sherman appropriated signifiers of stardom to a museum context where we can re-examine them under a new light. Sherman's Untitled Film Stills portray a variety of star images, including their on-screen and off-screen identities; some images suggest film frames, while others suggest pin-up poses (Untitled Film Stills #6 and #34) and paparazzi shots from glamour magazines (Untitled Film Stills #7, #8, #9, #47, #54, and #55).

In Untitled Film Still #6, the character, in a failed attempt to match pin-up ideals, looks doll-like; heavy make-up and a frozen expression make her appear lifeless. Her look is in striking contrast to Thomas B. Hess's description of pin-up conventions:

By the 1940s, the pin-up image was defined with canonical strictness. [...] She had to be the healthy, American, cheerleader type-button-nosed, wide-eyed, long-legged, ample hips and breasts, and above all with the open, friendly smile that discloses perfect, even, white teeth. Then there is her costume and pose. These must be inviting but not seducing; affectionate but not passionate, revealing by suggestion while concealing by fact. The legs are carefully posed so that not too much of the inner thigh is shown; the navel is covered and so are most of the breasts except for the famous millimeters of'cleavage.' [...] The pinup girl [...] (is an) instantly legible visible image of the comforting and commonplace which is also ideal, and thus unattainable, (qtd. in Dyer 51)

Sherman's character, with small breasts and hips, does not have the ideal pin-up girl body type. Her undergarments, a solid black bra with large white stretch lace panties, do not match. Her pose is awkward. She holds a mirror in her right hand, face down against the bedspread, indicating that she has checked her pose and rehearsed it. The shirt she wears and her floral sheets detract from the desired image because of their connotations of unglamorous domesticity. These visual elements emphasize the unattainability of the character's desired "look."

In order to use Sherman's method for research within media and cultural studies, we must first extract a poetics from her work. In the section below, I use Roland Barthes's theories of photographic connotation from his essays in Image, Music, Text to extract this poetics.

Barthes describes the photographic message as a paradox:

The photographic paradox can [...] be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the 'art,' or the treatment, or the 'writing' or the rhetoric, of the photograph); structurally, the paradox is clearly not the collusion of a denoted message and a connoted message [...] it is that here the connoted (or coded) message develops on the basis of a message without a code. This structural paradox coincides with an ethical paradox: when one wants to be 'neutral,' Objective,' one strives to copy reality meticulously, as though the analogical were a factor of resistance against the investment of values (such at least is the definition of aesthetic 'realism'); how then can the photograph be at once Objective' and 'invested,' natural and cultural? (Image 19-20)

Barthes's essays addressed different kinds of photographs: press photographs, advertisements, and film frames. In his early essays about photography (pre-1970), Barthes's stated goal was to divest photographs of their supposed objectivity and to reveal their reliance upon cultural codes. Barthes identified six kinds of connotative procedures:

* Trick effects
* Poses
* Objects
* Photogenia
* Aestheticism
* Syntax

Trick effects involve the manipulation of the image: subtracting figures from an image or moving figures closer together. Sherman does not use trick effects. Barthes argues that most press photographs, advertisements, and film frames from conventional films attempt to "naturalize" their connotations, directing the viewer to seek the origins of these connotations in nature, not in culture. Sherman, however, systematically subverts each of the connotative procedures; her work directs us to look for the communicative force of these images in culture rather than in nature. By playing connotative procedures against one another, her work makes these cultural conventions appear arbitrary. In the section that follows, I explain how Sherman uses connotative procedures, noting their deviation from the procedures Barthes identifies. I use Sherman's critics to explain the procedures and effects of her work.

In his discussion of pose, Barthes analyzes a photograph of President Kennedy: "a half-length profile shot, eyes looking upward, hands joined together." Barthes reads the image's message as "youthfulness, spirituality, purity." "The photograph clearly only signifies because of the existence of a store of stereotyped attitudes which form ready-made elements of signification (eyes raised heavenwards, hands clasped). A 'historical grammar' of iconographie connotation ought thus to look for its material in painting, theater, associations of ideas, stock metaphors, etc., that is to say, precisely in 'culture'" (Image 22).

The photograph naturalizes its message because of its denotative properties; the analogic impression of Kennedy's body "guarantees the authenticity" of the scene (Barthes, Image 22). Sherman's work, by contrast to the Kennedy image, illustrates the artificiality of posing. Her poses draw on the familiar store of connotations, but in such a way that we become aware of them as codes.

In Untitled Film Still #37 (Illus. 5), Sherman leans against a mantel holding a cigarette. Above the mantel is a landscape depicting water, boulders, trees, and mountains. Kaja Silverman calls this untitled image "Nature Girl." Silverman writes, "the painting depicts the landscape of the woman's desire-the frame into which she seeks to project herself through the studied 'naturalness' of her pose and costume" (218). Sherman's pose, Silverman claims, connotes reverie; we associate this reverie with the character's dream of being someplace else, the most immediate elsewhere being the "natural place" depicted in the painting. But the image does not signify nature; the scene Sherman depicts reminds us of a Douglas Sirk film, perhaps of Lauren Bacall in Written on the Wind. In other words, Sherman stylized the scene by making it conform to filmic codes. The

femininity Sherman simulates is a kind of alienation made cool. Sherman demonstrates how to re-alienate a familiar alienation by playing it as a stylized pose.
In his discussion of objects, Barthes analyzes a press photograph showing objects in an intellectual's house: [Objects as symbols are] the elements of a veritable lexicon, stable to a degree which allows them to be readily constituted into syntax. Here, for example, is a 'composition' of objects: a window opening onto vineyards and tiled roofs; in front of the window a photographic album, a magnifying glass, a vase of flowers. Consequently, we are in the country, south of the Loire (vines and tiles), in a bourgeois house (flowers on the table) whose owner, advanced in years (the magnifying glass), is reliving his memories (the photograph album). [...] The connotation somehow 'emerges' from all these signifying units which are nevertheless 'captured' as though the scene were immediate and spontaneous, that is to say, without signification. (Image 23)
In Unfitted Film Still #3 (Illus. 6), Sherman employs a "lexicon" of objects to produce striking connotative effects.

According to Silverman, the various props in the image counteract the character's "wished-for photographic exchange" (209). "In this image," Silverman writes,
a woman stands to the right, facing a sink with a dishrack, a bottle of ivory dishwashing liquid, an almost empty juice bottle, and an opened Morion's salt container. She wears a frilly apron and a sexy T-shirt. She looks seductively, with moistened lips, over her left shoulder at an unseen figure, presumably male. Because she leans with her left hand on the counter, her shoulder is provocatively elevated, and her breasts sharply defined. Here, the woman offers herself to be "photographed" as "vamp," as sexual tease, but the mundane objects in her immediate vicinity contradict this self-definition, and proclaim her instead to be a "Hausfrau." (209-210)
Silverman argues that this photograph indicates how "the camera/gaze does not always apprehend us from the vantage point to which we direct our selfimaging" (Silverman 210). The props -indicating Hausfrau-undercut the connotation suggested by the woman's pose-vamp. (Another interpretation might posit that domestic labor is seductive and "vampy"-hence the maid's uniform in so many seduction fantasies. Sherman's image allows us to "switch" interpretations because the tropes of femininity overlap.)
In his discussion of photogenia, Barthes writes, "In photogenia the connoted message is the image itself, 'embellished' (which is to say in general sublimated) by techniques of lighting, exposure and printing" (Image 24). Sherman employs techniques of lighting and exposure to signify different film styles, subjugating the image to the style of particular directors.
In Untitled Film Still #2 (Illus. 7), for instance, Sherman adopts the direct lighting and grainy black-and-white style of Hitchcock's Psycho. We see a woman in a bathroom, wearing a towel and gazing at herself in the mirror. Perhaps an evil force, arising from sadistic voyeurism, threatens the woman. This connotation arises not just from the pose, the point of view, and the framing, but also from the harsh lighting and the graininess of the film stock. The photogenia puts the image in the realm of the horror genre.
Aestheticism occurs when photography employs "painting, composition or visual substance [...] so as to signify itself as 'art' [...] or to impose a generally more subtle and complex signified than would be possible with other connotation procedures" (24). In nearly all of Sherman's Untitled Film Stills, aestheticism overlaps with photogenia. Sherman uses these strategies to connote a particular director's style.
In Barthes's discussion of syntax, another photographic connotation procedure, he writes: "several photographs come together to form a sequence (this is commonly the case in illustrated magazines); the signifier of connotation is then no longer to be found at the level of any one of the fragments of the sequence but at that-what the linguists would call the suprasegmental level-of the concatenation" (24). Barthes's example of syntax is a sequence of several images in which a hunter points his rifle in different directions "to the great peril of the keepers who run away or fling themselves to the ground" (25). The series produces comedic effects, which are to be found not in any one image but in all of them together.
Rosalind Krauss identifies a group of three images, Untitled Film Stills #21, #22 and #23, that reveal Sherman

wearing the
same costume, a dark, tailored suit with a white collar and a small, straw cloche pulled over a mop of short blond curls. But everything else changes from one still to the next. In the first, #21, the register is close-up taken at a low angle; in the second, #22, a long-shot posits the character amidst a complication of architectural detail and the cross-fire of sun and shadow; in the last, #23, the figure is framed in a medium-shot at the far right side of the image against the darkened emptiness of an undefined city street and flattened by the use of a wide angle lens. And with each reframing and each new depth-of-field and each new condition of luminosity, "the character" transmogrifies, moving from type to type and from movie to movie. From #21 and the Hitchcock heroine to #23 and the hardened, film noir dame, there is no "acting" involved. Almost every single bit of the character, which is to say of the three different characters, is a function only of work on the signifier; the various things that make up a photographic style. (Krauss 28)

Sherman's sequence parodies the famous experiment in cinematic language conducted by Lev Kuleshov. "Having found a long take in close-up of Mozhukhin's expressionlessly neutral face, Kuleshov intercut it with various shots, the exact content of which he himself forgot in later years-shots, according to Pudovkin, of a bowl of steaming soup, a woman in a coffin, and a child playing with a toy bear-and projected these to an audience which marveled at the sensitivities of the actor's range" (Levaco 8).

Kuleshov's audience believed Mozhukhin shifted mood from one sequence to the next, expressing hunger, sadness, and joy respectively. The audience ignored the actor's identical expression in each shot. Kuleshov's experiment demonstrated the power of context, the sequence of images, to determine connotations. Sherman's experiment with sequence is more radical than Kuleshov's because she shifts the character's identity from one image to the next. Judith Willamson, an early champion of Sherman's Untitled Film Stills, writes: "We are constantly forced to recognize a visual style (often you could name the director) simultaneously with the type of femininity. The two cannot be pulled apart. The image suggests there is a particular kind of femininity in the woman we see, whereas in fact the femininity is in the image itself, it is the image" (102). Williamson argues that Sherman's sequence shows how our reading of identity depends upon visual style. Sherman's sequence undermines character; it robs each photograph of its power to authenticate femininity. Femininity, the series suggests, is a kaleidoscope of contradictory images.

I do not claim to have special knowledge of Sherman's motivations for producing the Untitled Film Stills. My claim is that Sherman's work is useful as a relay for conducting experimental research in media and cultural studies.

Sherman's Untitled Film Stills employ the "middle look," a neologism I am coining to convey a photographic analogue of the "middle voice"-a contrast to active and passive voice-theorized by Roland Barthes. "Barthes noticed that a third category of voice had emerged within experimental literature-a middle voice-based on the reflexive, self-conscious nature of modernist writing that claimed to be knowledge only of language, not of life" (Scholes et al 240-241). I read Sherman's images as being reflective; they are about the ways in which the body functions as text, the effects that visual codes have upon Sherman, and her inescapable existence within these codes. The Untitled Film Stills are an experiment in mood, an attempt by Sherman to understand her state of mind towards her formative scenes of instruction.

The cinema provides means for Sherman to explore these scenes of instruction; by re-creating the image-repertoire she inherited from cinema, Sherman puts her relationships to cinema into question. I believe it is a mistake to see the Untitled Film Stills simply as an oppositional text requiring explicatory criticism; an explicatory approach to the Untitkd Film Stills assumes Sherman was fully conscious of her intentions and of her texts' meanings. I see the Untitkd Film Stills, rather, as one element of Sherman's research. I imagine Sherman's images are intelligible to her as part of a pattern that includes scenes from her life. Only a self-reflective symptomatic criticism, conducted by Sherman, reveals the effect of these images upon her. Perhaps Sherman reads these images by seeking correspondence between her psychic life and the psychic life of the culture as

embodied in the movies she encountered growing up. In this mystorical view of Sherman's creative process, the meaning of the work comes after the production.

The Untitled Film Stills maintain a mysterious power because Sherman's audience lacks direct knowledge of her psychic life, the context needed for making the stills fully intelligible. We perceive mood and style in the pictures but the referents are missing. We cannot receive the scenes of instruction as Sherman encountered them. We can, however, re-receive our own scenes of instruction. Sherman's Untitled Film Stills function as a relay for us to experiment upon our own formative encounters with the images that shaped our identities.

The results of our explorations may be surprising. One result, desirable perhaps, is that we no longer feel doomed to the "sequential disenchantments" and "the eternal reenactment of what, other than, [we] can never be" (Coover 175). By making concrete the scenes that guide our values and behaviour, we "penetrate the veil while retaining the hallucinatory qualities" of our scenes (Taussig 10).

This appendix offers instructions for conducting a mystorical cultural studies research project using Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills as a relay.

* Find and describe a cinematic scene of instruction for one of your identity categories (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, age, etc.). A scene of instruction is any moment in which you learn the "proper" way to perceive yourself and the "proper" behaviors expected of you in particular situations. A cinematic scene of instruction might be one in which a character with whom you identify learns about gender values and behaviors. For example, an injunction to a crying boy to "be a man" could mean that crying is not manly and must be avoided. It could also mean that males must endure pain privately. Explain in writing what lesson(s) you learned from your scene of instruction.
* Photograph yourself playing one of the roles in your scene of instruction, using the fetish practices described by Garber and the connotation procedures identified by Roland Barthes to compose the image.
* Write a series of anecdotes in which you narrate events from your life that activate the identity category you represented in your image (whether or not you actually responded to the situation the way your chosen "star" would endorse).
* Using David Bordwell's Making Meaning as a set of instructions, perform a symptomatic reading of the scene you photographed for step two, accounting for multiple interpretations of the scene. Additionally, reflect critically upon the "wisdom" and values offered by the scene and its appropriateness as a model of behaviour for the events you narrated in step three. If you determine that the scene offers an inappropriate model of behaviour, imagine and articulate another scene: one in which your chosen "star" behaves appropriately.

After you have completed these four steps, you should perceive a pattern. This pattern addresses our research question: "How does selfhood change in the shift from literate to cinematic/electronic cultures?" We now have a hybrid text, part image (Sherman) and part literate criticism that reveals self-knowledge and knowledge of the culture: the "objects" of Cultural Studies.

Sidebar

Sherman's Resources

1. Medium (material practices Sherman adopted):

a. Photography and performance art

b. The clichés of femininity and their embodiments in cinematic images-these include poses, costumes, and settings from movies, pin-ups, and paparazzi shots.

2. Models (other cases where Sherman found useful ideas):

a. Positive models (from within the domain of art): Duchamp's readymades, Warhol's pop art, conceptual art.

b. Exotic positive models (outside the domain of art): Popular cinema and ancillary textsfanzines, pin-ups.

c. Negative model (what Sherman decided NOT to do): Formalist art.

3. Aesthetic (articulations of purpose Sherman adapted for her own use): Amateur, pop, advertising, Brecht.

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