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COMING OF AGE IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN KAPLAN'S 21

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Abstract: *The present paper situates its concerns at the crossroads of theories of culture, visual culture and Gender Studies in its attempt at investigating John Kaplan's photographic essay 21. Primarily grounded on Baudrillard's description of hyperreality, this study insists on the stereotypical quality of Kaplan's photographs which turns his Pulitzer winner series into a parodic celebration of American stereotypes of all kinds: gender-related, race-related, age-related, culture-related. This study also discusses the problematic relationship between reality and representation, which photography is wrongly assumed to conveniently solve. Thus, it debunks photography's claims to objectively represent reality. It also illustrates the various functions of stereotypical representation in visual art.*

Key words: *gender stereotypes, visual culture, American photography, parody.*

1. Introduction

As part of the generous but elusive field of visual culture, 'a place in the midst of conflict', situated everywhere and nowhere [6, p. 2-3], photography is wrongly assumed as its most straightforward apostle. Most people do not even consider it art, as a consequence of the contemporary availability of photographic technology and the resulting huge amount of photographs taken every day worldwide.

When does photography become art then? And under what circumstances? I believe the answer is to be sought in photography's relationship with representation and reality. Or, better said, with the representation *of* reality.

The general perception of photography is that it is meant to faithfully represent reality. And, in most cases it seems to successfully do so. It was for this reason, as Mirzoeff argues, that it immediately displaced painting and other forms of visual art as soon as it appeared [6, p. 32].

People tend to overlook the fact that photography is not an immediate depiction of reality. In fact, it is three-fold mediated: first, reality is mediated through the photographer's *perception,* which, as Mirzoeff argues, turns sight into vision; secondly, reality is mediated through the camera lens, which captures an ephemeral moment and makes it enduring. Finally, reality is mediated through the perception of the one looking at the photograph,

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whose role is to interpret it according to his own frame of mind and background.

Thus, it becomes obvious that we can by no means speak of a faithful mirroring of reality in photography. We can only speak of an illusion of it. When this relationship with reality is visibly questioned and subverted, I believe that photography makes the transition from commodity to art.

2. Considerations on representation

Representation does not necessarily mean resemblance. Especially not in the contemporary episteme. Contemporary theories of representation agree on its crippling effect. Representation forces its object/subject into the narrow confines of an image, be it visual or narrative. Thus, the object/subject is limited by personal vision. And, in many cases, it becomes a frozen image which turns into stereotype.

At this point, I believe it is important to acknowledge Jean Baudrillard's distinction between representation and simulation, which he includes in his coinage of hyperreality as a model of the contemporary world and especially of the contemporary United States of America. According to Baudrillard, simulation opposes representation as it stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence from the radical negation of the sign as value [1, p. 6]. Thus, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as *simulacrum.*

The above clarification is relevant to the present study as the photographic series under scrutiny claims to document the American coming of age: a contemporary dystopian visual account of the ubiquitous American dream. Or nightmare, to be more accurate. In this context, Baudrillard's *America* becomes relevant. Defined as a hyperreality, 'a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved', 'a perfect simulacrum, that of the immanence and material transcription of all values' [1, p.32], Baudrillard's America might shed light on John Kaplan's Pulitzer Prize awarded photographic essay 21.

Seen as representation, his photographs make powerful statements. Seen as *simulation,* they parodically reinforce the clichés of the American artificial paradise. Especially gender-related ones.

From the very first sight, John Kaplan's essay invites much gender -related criticism through its intriguing choices of subjects and perspectives. Featuring eight 21-year-olds, both male and female, the essay apparently attempts a realistic, even raw portrayal of the American youth at the beginning of the 1990s. Shot in black and white, the photographs have a documentary quality which turns them into powerful statements.

This paper is concerned with how gender emerges as an important component of Kaplan's photographic essay, even if it might not have been the author's intention, as well as with how it is (mis)represented. In this respect, this paper also takes into account, beside Baudrillard's account of hyperreality, two complementary theories of gender produced by Teresa de Lauretis and Judith Butler, respectively, which view the gender category in two distinct ways: as representation and as performance. Last, but not least, I believe that it is necessary to bring into discussion Freud's and Lacan's theory of the gaze, which inserts a political dimension to visual representation and which has been appropriated by Gender Studies as *the male gaze.*

Thus, the present study situates its concerns at an interdisciplinary crossroads, which is, I believe, indispensable in today's critical discourse, one which brings together theories of culture, gender studies, and visual culture. Its goal is to investigate how contemporary culture and discourse manages to affect visual representation and

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vice-versa and what is the nature of the relationship between visual representation and reality.

3. John Kaplan's *21*: an American kaleidoscope of stereotypes

In order to reach a pertinent conclusion, I believe it would be relevant and even helpful to start with a brief description of Kaplan's photographic series, which has an obvious narrative coherence dictated by the very word essay which the photographer himself used to catalogue it.

The series consists of nine different snapshots of five men and three women on the verge of turning 21. Hence the title of the essay. Only two of the photographs share the same subject, Phil Anselmo, the lead singer of an obscure rock band called the Pantera. The others feature Rodney, an African American murderer who stands in shame, as the police officers uncover the gun he used to commit a gang killing, Frank, a 21-year-old junkie, Beatriz, a Hispanic immigrant and former teenage mom, looking out of a window with her toddler, Tanya, an Eastern European beauty and former victim of child abuse presenting on the catwalk, Marc, an NFL top player singing the national anthem before the start of a game, Malli, a senior at Harvard, resting her forehead on the shoulder of her fiancée in the subway, and Brian, a drug-addict shooting speed in a California hotel. Eight stories which gratify and subvert the American dream, eight narratives which compose a hectic and troubling image of coming of age in the United States of America.

Kaplan was careful to endorse the kaleidoscopic character of his work by carefully selecting the subjects for his snapshots: male and female, black, Hispanic, Eastern European. However, this is where I believe he apparently fell in the trap of stereotypical representation, were it not for a subversive undeclared intention. Race and gender are used to endorse the cultural stereotypes that have for so long misrepresented and harmed individuals. The black are portrayed as gangster murderers (the male) or foolish wide-eyed dreamers (the female), the Hispanic is the illegal immigrant, the teenage mom who hopes for a better future for her toddler, the Eastern European girl is the former victim of sexual abuse and currently a top model. What this paper is interested in, though, are not these racial stereotypes, but rather the gender stereotypes which somehow incorporate them, and the way they affect the reception of Kaplan's much awarded photographic essay.

It is interesting to note that once we separate the male representation from the female ones, it becomes crystal clear that Kaplan is consciously playing with American type-images. His male subjects are the rock star, the drug addict, the criminal and the football player. His female subjects are the top model, the teenage mother and the romantic dreamer. All of them achieve a generic quality due to the photographer's ability to make them signify for a certain category. In fact, I believe that category is the word which best describes Kaplan's photographic achievement.

Starting with the title, 21, which is used to name, define and reduce to a common denominator a series of very different individuals (an operation very similar to representation, according to contemporary theories), and continuing with these clichéd representations of maleness and femaleness. Obviously, Kaplan's series is a parody. The parodic subversion erases the effects of cliché and dissolves the narrow confines of categorization. Were it not a parody, then Kaplan's achievement is nothing else but a retrospective of American clichés, a Disneyland of American youth models conveniently falling under well-established categories.

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Opening with two snapshots of Phil Anselmo, a teen idol but a mother's worst fear, as Kaplan's own caption reads, the series seems to grasp moments in the personal history of real-life characters. Were it not for the obvious cinematic quality of the photos, it could even get away with this claim. But, at a closer look, the mere spectator acknowledges a powerful Hollywoodian atmosphere coming through. Taken in black and white, all photos benefit from a carefully arranged setting, an effective distribution of light and a clever choice of position, both of the camera and of the subjects. In this respect, Kaplan proves to be an inspired director, luring the viewer to indulge in the fresh perspective of a snapshot. However, the claim is illusory. The photos are in fact well staged illustrations of powerful gendered clichés about teenage.

4. Gender stereotyping

While watching the series, one cannot avoid operating with binaries: male/female, young/old, good/evil, success/failure. This certainly raises new questions as to the relationship between representation and reality. Reality does not operate with binaries, narratives about it do: culture, religion, art, etc. Kaplan's photographic representations very well represent these narratives.

The American youth emerges as a quilt of (mis)conceptions. So does gender. Circumscribing his subjects to definite, frozen, stereotypical categories, Kaplan reinforces Teresa de Lauretis's theory of gender-as-representation. Developed in her study *Technologies of Gender,* this postulates that 'gender assigns to one entity, say an individual, a position within a class, and therefore also a position vis-à-vis other preconstituted classes' [5, p. 4]. This is exactly what happens in Kaplan's photographs. Individuals only become meaningful as parts of certain well-devised categories and never by themselves. They only signify when related to a certain class. The rock star, the junkie, the football player and the criminal only gain consistency when superposed with the male category, which confers them poise and status. The teenage mom, the top-model and the romantic dreamer mean something only in the context of female stereotyping.Thus, gender comes to be defined by the representations of it, rather than being acted out through performative acts [2].

Kaplan's men stand out as solitary, stern, strong, even though vicious. Strength seems to be their defining quality, as the shaved skull of rock star Phil Anselmo, Kaplan's first protagonist, so evidently reads. Then, there are other subtler subtexts which reinforce stereotypes of maleness, such as the obvious phallic symbols present in the photos: the snake that Anselmo negligently carries on his shoulder, the cigarette that hangs out from Frank's vicious mouth, the gun that Rodney used to commit murder, the syringe that Brian uses to inject heroine. Kaplan's male protagonists defy what Freud and later Lacan defined as the gaze, that devouring stare of the viewer which consumes the subject of the visual representation, a term later consecrated by feminist theories as the male gaze. All of them have their eyes closed and their bodies turned away from the camera, as if not even being part of the picture. Thus, they seem to refuse entering any relation, not only inside the frame, but also outside it.

By way of contrast, the female protagonists are pictured as being part of relationships. The top model, the teenage mom and the Harvard student are thus devoured by the gaze. All three are (re)presented as recipients of the male gaze, a hypostasis which is best depicted by Tanya, the Eastern European model who throws a seductive look at the camera(s)

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inside and outside the frame. Femaleness thus falls under the domination of the patriarchal representations of it, because, as Mirzoeff argues, 'the gaze subjugates subject and object alike', it is 'a grammar of domination' [6, p. 45]. This domination cuts short any attempt at liberating the female. In her much acclaimed 1970 study entitled *The Female Eunuch,* Germaine Greer argued that one is born a whole woman, but, though a series of practices, representation being one of them, she gradually becomes a woman who only exists to embody male sexual fantasies or rely upon a man to endow her with identity and social status [3, p. 6].Thus, Kaplan depicts women under erasure.

There is this interesting play of black and white, light and darkness which adds to the dichotomic subtexts of Kaplan's work. The male/female binary is doubled and supported by the extensive use black and white. Not only are the photos taken in black and white, but the protagonists themselves are ostentatiously black *or* white.

In discussing the importance of color in visual representation, Nicholas Mirzoeff speaks of the imperialism of whiteness which has governed visual arts ever since the ancient Greeks. 'Whiteness came to convey an intense physical beauty in itself' (Mirzoeff) as well as expressed the ideal racial type, therefore it would not be farfetched to speak of a normative quality of white and whiteness. This intense beauty which Mirzoeff mentions is bound to create stereotypical visual representations of the type of Dorian Gray's portrait [6, p.105]. Likewise, Kaplan uses this imperialism of whiteness and intense beauty in two separate instances of his series: the male rock star and the female top model. What stands out in these two instances is the perfection of their bodies which is doubled by the light behind. By way of contrast, the photos whose characters are black are also very dark, to the point at which the protagonist's face is almost swallowed/erased by darkness. Therefore, we can, without a doubt, speak of a politics of color in Kaplan's photos. It is the politics of slavery, of oppression and domination, of colonialism and imperialism, a politics of black and white, a politics which births stereotypes. However, it is through difference that subjects are constituted. And identities form. Kaplan's work flaunts difference. It speaks of how identities are constituted through a permanent play of differences. *21* is a moving kaleidoscope of representations which elude their subjects. Ina way, it is a failed attempt at containing the essentials of coming of age. In another, it is a successful reminder of how different people are.

5. Parodic revision

Apparently, Kaplan's work encourages hierarchies. It underlines the injustices of stereotypical representation. One finds it hard though to believe there is nothing more to it. Therefore, I feel strongly inclined to class it as a parody of cliché and norm. And, according to Linda Hutcheon's definition of it, it really is.

Parody thrives on difference in order to point to a certain reality's inefficiency. As a 'repetition with a difference' [7], parody apparently endorses certain realities or discourses in order to underline their arbitrariness. Irony is an integrative and compulsory part of parody. The ironic stance is used in order to mark the difference and expose norms as inefficient. Through irony, subversion insinuates and the reader/viewer is invited to multiple readings and interpretations. This is what happens in the case of Kaplan's photographic series. The ironic stance allowed by the parodic representation of stereotypes invites viewers to subversively deconstruct these stereotypes. Kaplan very subtly underlines the subversion by introducing in his essay two instances

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where gender norms are switched. This is the case of Brian, the male prostitute and of Malli, the female black Harvard student. Both of them destabilize the common stereotypes used to describe the male and the female. A male prostitute is oxymoronic by itself, while an academically successful black woman defies all representations of black women in the classical American discourse. Both parody the well-established representations of the prostitute and the successful academic, in an attempt at directing the viewers' attention towards the arbitrariness of norms and representations.

As a form of dialogic relation between texts [4, p.XIII], parody points to the inaccuracies of parodied texts by mirroring them with a difference. Of course, as Hutcheon herself argues, parody is in the eye of the beholder [4, p.XVI], but I believe this is the only clever way to read Kaplan's photographic essay. Things are too straightforward. Statements are too obvious. Representation is too obvious. Parodic revision subverts the assumptions of the source-text (in this case the meanings attached to stereotypical representation by centuries of normative discourse) in order to interrogate their legitimacy and to dislocate their centrality.

In our particular case, John Kaplan's parodic display of stereotypes, be they all-American or not, raises questions as to photography's claims to objectivity, as well as to its ability to document life. But, Kaplan's parody is subtly dangerous due to its markedly elitist target. Not everyone is able to grasp the parodic streak, yet everyone is able to see the clichés. This makes his work controversial.

6. Conclusion

This analysis makes it quite clear that Kaplan's much celebrated photographic essay should not be taken for what it appears to be. Its strength relies in the message it sends. Namely, that things are not to be taken at face value. Not even in photography. Or, especially not in contemporary photography. It is a warning: a warning against the excessive use of stereotyping in the visual area, a warning against the damages that these stereotypical representations cause to individuals, a warning against the facile consumerism of visual art. Metaphorically, his representation of coming of age is a *be*coming, a state of transience, a place of questions and of uncertainties. A state which longs for completion. And this is exactly what Kaplan refuses to do: to achieve completeness in the sense of offering answers, solutions, ready-made representations.

Taken at face value, in Kaplan's *21*, the United States of America emerge as a collage of clichés, an artificial paradise of youth, a hologram. However, Kaplan's clever use of parody questions the very authority of normative discourses about youth, gender, race, being American. Through ironic revision, Kaplan manages to subtly destabilize the pedestal of classic discourses about them, introducing the more productive stance of the question mark, of uncertainty, of possibility.

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