

Somaesthetics in the Lens: Rethinking the Queer Male Body As A Medium

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ABSTRACT

In the protracted struggle for bodily liberation and affirmative action, photography has become an important battleground for Queer's affirmative action, as it serves as a means of documenting and making Queer's bodies more visible to the world. By analysing the medium of the male Queer body in photography through the lens of somaesthetics, we will understand how it serves as a site of aesthetic experience, connecting the real material world with the imaginary sensual world, and the private and public areas in order to know how Queer uses it to achieve the emotional expression of identity projection, self-satisfaction pseudo-real characters, and the experience of empathetic feelings.

KEYWORDS

somaesthetics; queer; photography; visual culture

1 Introduction

The Queer, once hidden in the darkness, is challenging the mainstream in the edge through the gay political affirmative action movement that began with the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and has been consolidated by the Queer political affirmative action movement since the 1990s. Queer's fluid and flexible individuals of biological, psychological, and social gender have used their bodies as the main battlefield to challenge the mainstream sexual ideology in an unprecedented way and complete the subversion and dismantling of the mainstream culture, including heterosexual hegemony, and the ultimate goal is to dismantle any limits on ego and pleasure and to liberate the sensual life of man entirely. The revolutionary and liberating function of Queer's body, especially the male body, is an extreme example of this. In Western patriarchal societies, the male body has long been regarded as an absent presence, whose ephemeral display only serves to prove the transcendence of the male body's existence in relation to corporeality. To return it to the body is in itself a dismantling of patriarchal hegemony, and Queer's subversion of the male body is a direct shot at the heterosexual hegemonic center. In this protracted struggle for liberation and affirmative action, photography, as a means of documentation, has rendered the Queer Male body more visible to the world and has therefore become an important battleground^[1] in the aforementioned affirmative action struggle. This has enabled the Queer Male body to enter the viewer's field of vision, and to be presented and given meaning in the act of documentation, photography. It enables the Queer Male body to not only enter the viewer's field of vision, but also to be presented, perceived, and imbued with meaning through the act of documentation. Furthermore, photography serves as a medium for the aesthetic experience of the body.

2 The Mediated Nature Of The Male Queer Body In Photography: As a Site Of Aesthetic Experience

As Dewey says, "art is experience"^[2]. The three subjects of the aesthetic practice of photography - the photographer's body, the model's body and the spectator's body - all receive the most authentic feedback in the expression of experience and emotional catharsis.

The photographer's body: "Taking a picture is a bodily act that requires a certain effort and competence of somatic self-use."^[3] As a photographer of queer bodies, in addition to "the somatic skill of controlling camera, posture, and balance"^[4] that is essential for good photographers. In order to capture the most 'authentic' or 'striking' shots that match the queer self-spirit, the photographer must also have the 'skill in winning the confidence of the person photographed' to put the shoot in a comfortable atmosphere to create the best aesthetic experience. For example, Photographer Nan Goldin is constantly documenting her private life and that of her friends, allowing the models to become accustomed to her presence and that of her camera, thus ignoring its presence. This free and pure way of recording, without artifice or concealment, allows the viewer to experience the intimate moments of the queers, show their lives in images without reservation, and convey that sense of real presence. In the picture below, two transgender people who have just finished a night of partying sit in a taxi. Their exaggerated make-up and sexy clothes reveal a state of exhaustion and defencelessness in their eyes. Thanks to the multiple controls on the body, the photographer is able to calmly document the struggles over sexual identity, sexual identification and sexual practice, maximising the social reality of the queer. This sense of 'authenticity' allows the viewer to feel a sense of dignity and power in the images, even if they are dressed in

what is considered 'weird' at the time, without being judged from a moral high ground. In doing so, the photographer highlights the legitimacy of the queer existence, discusses the relationship between self and society, and rewrites the mainstream norms of social acceptability regarding gender.



Figure 1 Nan Goldin, *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a taxi, NYC, 1991*

The model's body: As the subject, the model's body makes subconscious changes to engage with the camera once she understands that she is in front of it. As Barthes says, "I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image." ^[5] He argues that when we clarify the subject being photographed, the subject, or the person being photographed, has already changed their state of being. In other words, when a person sees that he is being photographed, he has already changed his state of mind. The 'reality' that the photographer is trying to capture is only a deliberate reality created by the photographed person. This means that the photographers photographed are a mirror image of the subject that the person is imagining. The subject is potentially trying to extract his or her own presence from the photographer. Moreover, in the photographic experience, the body is both the subject and the object of creation, a dual quality that makes the body the perfect medium for extreme individual expression. The directness and nakedness of the body exclude all rational and linguistic domination, and the models demonstrate with their practice that the body is a vessel that carries a rich content of self, identity and gender, and is the most direct form of expression of life, death and desire. Using their own bodies and actions to mimic and interpret, the queer subvert the traditional binary of physical beauty and gender with an intensely personal narrative, continually exploring the body's unique expressive power and the medium. The most common way of personalising the narrative of the queer is through role-playing. The artist's own face and body are intentionally hidden by a series of disguises such as make-up, costumes and lighting, and by continually transforming themselves, they perform multiple identities and carry different inner worlds, making the subject a 'signifier' that disappears into all kinds of role-playing. Man Ray has photographed the French artist Marcel Duchamp, who gave himself the feminine name of Rose Selavy, in a feminine photograph. The photograph shows Duchamp with eye make-up and lipstick, a dramatic modern hat on her head and her hands resting gracefully on a fur collar in a gentle manner. Later, Mapplethorpe took a photograph of himself as Aira, dressed in white fur, whose long, manicured nails and jewelled ringed fingers draw the viewer's eye to Aira's face. A black veil covers the face, and a white hat covers Aira's head, a feathery tendril extends from the hat and looks like she has blonde curls. With the lighting, posing, make-up and costume dressing, the overall image of Aira stands out from the black background behind her. Whether it is Mapplethorpe or Duchamp, they use the costumed face, the female clothing, these elements to represent a woman, but the viewer cannot believe that it is a woman, more that it is an intersexual person who is ambiguous in terms of gender.

The spectator's body: as Nan Goldin says, "I'll be your mirror" ^[6]. By connecting with the viewer, the photograph allows the viewer to read another person's emotions and thoughts and at the same time to see themselves, to feel the inextricable link between individuality and commonality. In the artistic experience of photography, for the viewer to connect and interact with the photograph, Barthes' view shows two main elements: the "studium" and "the punctum" ^[7]. Studium refers to a focus on one thing, a preference for a particular person, a certain general mental commitment, with

the enthusiasm of course, but not particularly strong, to appreciate these images (people, things, landscapes) from a cultural point view. A photograph with this characteristic is already above-average good. It proves that things existed and tells us useful information. The photographs of photographer Anthony Friedkin are very much of this quality. Always with the aim of being an objective witness, he blandly portrays the struggles, humiliations and eventual triumphs of Queer culture. Whereas queers were often packaged in the mass media as law enforcement, scandalous and satirical events during the long militant political struggle, Friedkin rarely focuses directly on these subjects, establishing a friendly and uncomfortable relationship with his subjects through calm witnessing, the people in his photographs are quiet and calm, not the grief-stricken militancy and aggressiveness of the marches, they are confident and dressed in an original way and have relationships and they are the same ordinary people. They are confident and well-dressed, healthy relationships like ordinary people, showing ordinary queers living their lives. As a result, when viewing his work, the spectator can easily identify the marks of their own ordinary lives, thus creating an emotional connection to the work and the queer community. Punctum is "sting, speck, cut, little hole-and also a cast of the dice"^[8], and it also means to take a chance on something that touches or pains you in some detail of the photograph. For example, an old pair of leather shoes, a little boy with a bad tooth, etc. This is not about emotion or aesthetics, it is simply a personal experience. Also, time is also a punctum. In Andy Warhol's *Querelle de Brest*, the tongue, deliberately painted red, can be a punctum in the side. The upturned tongue in the centre of the picture is painted red to represent passion, locking the spectator's gaze and arousing his or her desire for love. In addition, the profound impact that the art of photography has had on people's view of social life. Photographic images of the body cover a wide range of people's lives. In particular, the 'idealised' human figure is everywhere, reminding us of how we are today and what we will know tomorrow through our efforts. The queer, who are particularly concerned with themselves because of their 'unique' social identity, have become more sensitive to appearance, physical presentation and 'look', guided by images of the body. Whether it is the straight-acting image of the muscular man or the 'fresh meat' male's feminine image, they are often caught up in a narcissistic world of self-regulation.



Figure 2 Andy Warhol. *Querelle de Brest*. Serigraphy in color. Private collection

3 The Mediated Nature Of The Male Queer Body In Photography: Connecting The Real Material World With The Imaginary Sensual World

The word "photography" is a combination of the Latin words "photo" (light) and "graphy" (depiction) and has evolved into The word "photography", which, by its surface meaning, means the use of light as a medium for the recording of images. The real material existence of a queer body is reflected and imaged by light and is recorded as a body in an image. As Sontag says, a photograph is "not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask."^[9] The factual or objective basis of the photograph seems at first glance indisputable in terms of the mere documentation of photography itself. The sensual world, represented by the "tacit imperatives of taste and conscience", combines reality and the self in photography in an unprecedented depth. On the other hand, the illusion of reality and the self's illusion are intertwined, giving photography a strong technical promise of the "real", but in reality, the problem is essentially complicated.

3.1 A Combination Of The Realistic Queer Body And The Sensual Self

In the book "The Decisive Moment", Bresson's aesthetics of photography presents the idea of the "decisive moment", a photographic concept which, in summary, means capturing the most useful information in the shortest possible time, summarising the crest of a powerful thing or event, and making the most potent visual composition of the photograph. The natural material and actual life events are incorporated into the photographer's thinking through his grasp of all aspects of composition, light and dark tones, authenticity, harmony, emotion and association. Like this picture by Brassai, there are no eye-catching colours, no particular shadows, no unique camera angles or unusual compositional techniques, but there is a power that moves the heart. This power is made up of the material of the world contained in the image. The photograph focuses on a pair of suited young men who are immersed in dance, smiling and enjoying an emotional connection with each other as naturally and casually as the other two male and female couples in the photograph. These moments of material and reality from the world, with the photographer's sensual intent, create a real and unreal mood. This is the unique power of photography, the complex aesthetic power of authentic materials, unlike the subjective illusion inherent in painting.



Figure 3 Estate Brassai,
Young (Male) Couple at the Bal de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, Paris, 1931.

Thus, the photograph became a strange intermediate thing, a new form of illusion: false on the level of sensation, real on time. Through photography, the once vibrant queer in time, as well as every day, is cut down by photography into a square, material entities. The queer body in the photograph breaks down the dichotomy of existence and extinction, and the event that dies in the real world lives on in the virtual world. The punctum that diffuse from the photographs make the viewer want to embrace the photographs' temporal reality but only get the illusion of perception.

3.2 Queer Illusion Of Reality Intertwined With The Illusion Of Self

As mentioned earlier, when faced with the camera, the subject always seems to "reconstruct" a self without being himself. The queer, in turn, use the documentary nature of the photograph to role-play in front of the camera in order to create another 'real' self. In addition to the reality of the subject's fantasy, photographers can also manipulate photographs to create the illusion of their desired reality. This can be through manipulating scenes and props, the staging of people, or post-production retouching or jigsawing. For example, the Nigerian-born, American-schooled, British-based queer artist Fani-Kayode, in *Nothing to Lose IX*, deliberately places the male body in the frame with modern erotic leather straps and African masks. In his *Nothing to Lose IX*, he deliberately places the male body in the frame with modern erotic leather straps and African masks, thus constructing his fantasy of a body with multiple meanings of identity 'in reality'.

4 The Mediated Nature Of The Male Queer Body In Photography: Connecting The Private And Public Areas

Photography is seeing. Photography mirrors from fragmented photographs to present the public with the world as it appears to the photographer and leads the viewer into it. Furthermore, the photograph makes public the private life, whose work, whether or not it is the photographer's work, is the beginning of the passage from the private to the public sphere. As Roberto Filippello says, "The role of queer aesthetics is, then, to map out social relations and worldviews as well

as propel their affective transmission and dissemination to the publics.¹¹⁰ A number of contemporary photographers, including Goldin, use photography to make their private lives public in a hidden way. She brings the camera directly into every corner of her life, without embellishment or evasion, and shows the bodies and lives of queer on the margins of society in a barely visible way, forming a chronicle of personal emotions. These random diary-style selfies have evolved into a genre of expression, a presentation of one's own life or a monologue on one's state of being and psychological state, like a confessional 'private novel'. Often, this type of selfie may seem to be presented in a random manner, but it is still the result of the photographer's deep thinking. The photographer can use a cold, rational machine to directly and honestly present his or her emotional state and appeal to others, mainly in relation to family memories, life circumstances or a visual autobiography characterised by self-expression and emotional catharsis. In the social media environment, the birth of mobile phone photography, in particular, has brought about a national orgy of photographic art. Everything in life, whether it be food, clothing, housing or transport, can be documented in photographs. Since the Middle Ages, the Queer life, the naked body, and sex, which had been hidden in the private sphere, were also exposed to the public domain.

In the picture below, Simon Porte Jacquemu, the founder and designer of Jacquemus, shows his private life with his boyfriend to the public on its social media. On the one hand, through the body in photography, the private sphere can be exposed to the public sphere. On the other hand, the public sphere can also influence the private sphere through the body in photography. This influence can be the profound effect that the art of photography has on people's social life view, as in the previous section. It could also be the public's impact or the intervention in the creator's life caused by the publication of his private photographs in public.



Figure 4 Simon Porte Jacquemu & Marco Maestri, 2021 Courtesy of Jacquemus brand Instagram

In addition, there is a concept of the 'gaze' that we can't avoid when we talk about the public viewing of photographs. The British scholar Dani Cavallaro's work, *Critical and Cultural Theory* includes the term 'gaze', which the author explains as follows, The concept of the gaze describes a form of power associated with the eye and with the sense of sight. When we gaze at somebody or something, we are not simply 'looking'. The gaze probes and masters. It penetrates and objectifies the body. A lot of the time, we simply 'see' things: we register certain sensations to do with light, colours and shapes without any ulterior motives. Sometimes we 'observe' things: we look at them carefully in order to find out about them in detail. Then there are times when we 'glance' at things: our eyes skim over them and caress their surfaces in a casual way. But when we gaze at things, our aim is to control them.¹¹¹ Cavallaro argues that the essence of the 'gaze' is that there is a mechanism of power in vision and that our use of vision imbues it with a social dimension. In Foucault's eyes, the gaze is power. The other's gaze brings about a kind of discipline. In the gaze theory, the viewer is the 'self', and the viewed is the 'other'. For a long time, under Western patriarchy, women have been the 'other' in terms of gender, black people of colour have been the 'other' in terms of race, non-Western cultures have been the 'other' in terms of culture, and ethnic minorities have been the 'other' in terms of ethnicity. In essence, the 'other' is the weaker side of the dichotomous mode of thinking, while the 'self' or 'subject', having the status of naming the 'other', is on the stronger side. Thus, the gaze theory exposes the gaze of the self on the other, which is different from the self, with its implied mechanism of dichotomy

and there “surely are many gazes around”.^[12]

The body of the queer, with its gender ambiguity, dismantles the dichotomy and thus dissolves the power in the gaze. Mapplethorpe's selfies are certainly an example of the queer body dissolving the power in the gaze. A thorough examination of Mapplethorpe's photographs provides a valuable insight into his self-perception and the manner in which he positioned himself in front of the camera as he said, “One must ease the public into it – that’s an art in itself.”^[13] On the one hand, in the photographs he presents himself as the opposite of the male body that was the normal gaze of the time. By wrapping his thin, feminine type of body in a leather corset which is full of supposedly masculine symbols, he focuses on the unspecified sensuality of the body, reflects on the uncertainty of the gender aesthetic, and considers multiple ways of interpreting the body and gender, thus dismantling the gender binary in the gaze. On the other hand, since ancient Greece, the fundamental opposition between different types of sexuality is not that of homosexuality and heterosexuality, but that of the active and the passive. The 'active' and dominant role represents being rich in dominance, being entitled, a characteristic of adult men. At the same time, the passive, dominated, and inferior position were reserved for women and boys.^[14] In Mapplethorpe's photographs, he inserts a leather whip, which is also a symbol of male entitlement, into his anus in a sexually active way, interpreting what the public sees as 'passive' sexuality. This hybridization of the active and passive sexuality further dissolves the right in the gaze. Moreover, the gaze of the other from the object can also subvert the existing polity of vision. To give voice to one's own gaze is to place oneself in a position of agency, set aside the influence of race, class, and gender to occupy the position of the subject. The field of gaze thus becomes a political space. That is, looking can be confrontational, a gesture of resistance, a challenge to authority. In the photograph, although his back is to the camera, Mapplethorpe deliberately turns his head in a provocative gesture to gaze at the camera, as if he is gazing at the viewer watching him. This strategy of reversal creates a complex viewing game, thereby making what is hidden clear and shifting the meaning of the gaze.

5 Conclusion

The queer male body has evolved into an aesthetic field that is both contradictory and political in the medium of photography. It is both a historical remnant of patriarchal gender discipline and a symbolic weapon of resistance to heterosexual hegemony. The visual rhetoric of real serves to deconstruct traditional conceptions of masculinity, thereby reconstructing a multifaceted narrative of gender fluidity. This reconstruction is achieved by interweaving light and shadow. The medium of photography has been instrumental in transforming the experience of queer from a private struggle to a public declaration of political resistance, compelling mainstream society to confront the marginalised and silenced. Notwithstanding the global progress of the affirmative action movement for queer individuals, the structural oppression of patriarchy continues to profoundly impact the survival of queer individuals. In this context, photography is not merely a recording tool, but also a cultural battleground for the right of discourse. Through the visual tension of somaesthetics, it constantly breaks through the boundaries of gender discipline, opening up new possibilities at the intersection of image and reality.

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