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Platinum Blondes and a Bearded Lady

Berrebi, S.

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Still Searching...

1. Platinum Blondes and a Bearded Lady

Von **Sophie Berrebi**

Veröffentlicht: 01.03.2013

in der Serie **What Remains of the Photographic beyond Photography**[zurück](#)[vor](#)

“The grammar of cinema is a grammar uniquely its own.”

Jean Epstein

I remember once being fascinated at the discovery that the silky, almost-white, blond hair of many Hollywood stars from the Golden Age was only an illusion, – a contraption developed for the silver screen. The ability of platinum blond to reflect light endowed actresses clad in shimmering gowns with a radiant halo, bestowing upon them an enticing inaccessibility. Peroxide blond, which came complete with a long-lasting nasty smell that was powerfully described by Joyce Carol Oates in her novel *Blonde* was, in other words, *invented* by the movies, and thrived in its productions, even if it was, off screen, adopted by many a hopeful starlet.

Stretching somewhat the definition given to the term by early French filmmaker-critics such as Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein, we might venture to call platinum blond “photogenic.” Appropriating the word from the field of photography (Talbot’s “photogenic drawings”), these critics used the word *photogénie* to explore the particular qualities of the cinematic image, underscoring its distance from, rather than its proximity to, the real. For Epstein, *photogénie* was “the purest expression of cinema” that differentiated art cinema from the film industry. He described it as the power of cinema to render inanimate things alive; its ability to lift objects or body fragments from their common appearance and meaning in the world and emphasize their spatial and temporal presence on the screen to give them a particular signification within film.

While peroxide blond was a feature of the film industry rather than of art cinema, it fits *photogénie* by virtue of its artificiality, as something that belonged at first to the realm of the screen rather than to that of the real world. So much so that Hollywood had to create its mythology, naming a 1931 film starring Jean Harlow, *Platinum Blonde*, after the remarkable bleached color of her hair. What is surprising, however, is that peroxide blond remained a feature of the cinema when technology changed and color replaced black and white. For despite the rather lurid effect of whitish-blond hair combined with pink skin and red lips, platinum blond firmly remained a moniker of Hollywood glamor, recast into such antagonistic genres as the sexy child-woman à la Marilyn Monroe and the icy Hitchcock blonde.

This survival and reinvention of platinum blonde beyond the silver screen begs the question of its equivalent in photography. What happens to photography when its technology changes? Or to put it another way: to what extent does technological change in photography – be it from black and white to color, from analogue to digital, and so on – *not* affect the way in which we think of photography, in which we think *in* photographs?

To remain an instant longer within the field of show business, consider the typical poses of actors on red carpet photo calls, and some of the contortionist postures adopted by stars to enhance the features they are best known for. The example I have in mind here is Jennifer Lopez when, in her early days of celebrity, she adopted a signature red carpet pose that involved turning her head and attempting to align chin with shoulder blade to enable photographers to capture within a single image both **her face and her famed posterior**. Such a pose, utterly

unnatural and uncomfortable, belongs to the realm of photography. It is one of a repertory of attitudes that people unconsciously slip into when they are photographed, and one that endures, even when photography changes, when montage or several images replace the one, or when a video replaces the still image.

Beginning with this small example, this is what I would like to explore in the next few weeks: What remains when photography transforms itself? How does technological modification trigger ontological change – if at all – and how does this translate into the way we apprehend pictures as producers, sitters, and viewers? In short, what interests me is how photography has taught us to look and what remains of the photographic beyond photography. Perhaps the notion of *photogénie* re-appropriated from cinema might be suitable to think about this. If, as Epstein put it in 1926, in “The Photogenic Element,” “the grammar of cinema is a grammar uniquely its own,” what is the unique grammar of photography?

To explore these issues I would like, in my next posts, to focus on a number of images rather than on theoretical texts on photography: images that teach us to understand the grammar of photography. I will be looking at photographs – artworks that work for me as theoretical objects – in the sense given to the phrase by philosopher Hubert Damisch some years ago: objects that both oblige you to theorize and provide you with the means of doing so. I conclude, with one such image, which brings together Oates’ *Blonde* and the red carpet background: *Pin Up # 1 (Jennifer Miller does Marilyn Monroe)* by Zoe Leonard.

Reprising one of the poses of Marilyn Monroe in what is now known as the “Red Velvet session,” performer Jessica Miller lies on a red cloth, arching her back to reveal her curves, one arm folded behind her head to reveal a glorious smile and very hairy chin. Whereas Oates memorably evoked Monroe’s fear at letting the photographer expose the soles of her feet, Leonard and Miller together propose a revealing image that simultaneously repeats the codification of the mid-century pin-up photograph and unhinges it. In re-enacting the original image, they allow us to nearly experience ourselves the artifice of the pose and its uncomfortably arched back, while at the same time stretch the limits of our imagination, literally.

Tags: [artifice](#), [Berrebi](#), [celebrity](#), [digital vs analogue](#), [digitalization](#), [film](#), [grammar](#), [Hollywood](#), [Hubert Damisch](#), [Jean Epstein](#), [Jennifer Miller](#), [Joyce Carol Oates](#), [Marilyn Monroe](#), [peroxide](#), [photogenic](#), [pin-up](#), [Platinum Blonde](#), [pose](#), [technology](#), [Zoe Leonard](#)

4 Kommentar(e)

megan driscoll

Abgesendet am 01.03.2013 um 05:25

It is interesting that you enter into a discussion on the prospect of a unique grammar of photography, a search for the specificity of its look, via the body. More specifically, you highlight the poses of the sitter's body, the positions into which we contort ourselves in response to the camera. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes theorizes this very response in his own experience as a sitter: "...once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice..."

In fact, whether we are celebrities, performers, or camera-shy academics, we are all probably acutely aware of this tendency of our bodies to mold themselves to the lens, to fill the frame with some version of ourselves that can be instantaneously conveyed through the act of posing. This experience is surely resistant to change in photographic technologies - as you point out, the red carpet pose persists whether it is intended for the single shot, the montage, or the video. And as technologies allow near-universal access not only to the means of making photographs but also to their dissemination, we can almost see a codification of such poses: the distended "MySpace angle" of the cell phone self-portrait, the forward lean of a torso looming above a webcam, the exaggerated pout that has become the young, Internet-savvy woman's answer to J. Lo's twist. Art photographers like Zoe Leonard offer us more thoughtful reflections on the history of the body's relationship to the photograph, but both point back to Barthes' observation that the body, and through it the self, is (at

least for the instant in which the shutter closes) constituted photographically, regardless of the changing nature of the camera.

If we agree that the camera's power to transform the sitter's body is part of a fundamental grammar of photography, I wonder if it might also be useful to consider the relationship between the photographer's body and the camera. I am thinking of [Germaine Krull's self-portrait](#) where the camera appears to be a literal extension of her eye, but I am also thinking about the frame-and-click hand motion that, following the proliferation of the rectangular Brownie pocket camera, has become a kind of sign-language for photography. With Krull, it is tempting to talk about a kind of erotic or fetishistic displacement as the camera becomes a part of the body, the apparatus made flesh that seems to transform the photographer as she turns the camera on herself, highlighting the camera's simultaneous power over the position of both artist and subject. But what about this simple gesture, so ingrained that it has guided the design of camera bodies for decades (and led reviewers to complain about the "unnatural" hand position required to take photographs with tablets)? Does it also suggest that the grammar of photography can be found not only in the contortions of the pose, but also in the intimate conjunction of camera and photographing hand? Of course, much like the nature of the pose - the twist of the hips, the arch of the back - the gesture that defines this relationship is subject to the particularities of history, but I don't think the producer's body can be left out of the equation.

I look forward to your further explorations on the foundations, and the remainders, of the photographic.

[Antworten](#)

David Company

Abgesendet am 01.03.2013 um 22:14

Hi Sophie,

Thanks for the post. In many respects the 'Lopez' pose is pre-photographic, quite widespread in the history of western painting. Painters were not beholden to the laws of nature and frequently depicted the 'front and back' of women in the one 'view'. An interesting transition point is Edward Hopper's 'Office at Night' (1940), a painting that on the one hand evokes a modern photographic realism but clearly takes liberties in the depiction of the woman. Once this transmutes into celebrity posing for the camera it seems even more contorted.

David

[Antworten](#)

Sophie Berrebi

Abgesendet am 06.03.2013 um 22:03

Hi David,

thanks for your comment, indeed, some of those poses come directly from a pictorial tradition - the frontal contraposto is also very common on the red carpet. I think that erotic photography is another place where the simultaneous exposure of parts of the body that are not normally visible together is also achieved through contortions and twists by which the body is turned into a two-dimensional presence. What interested me in J.Lopez is the way her 'twist' is or was part of her self branding, and thus we could say, of her turning herself into an image. Whether the poses come from painting or not, photography is the medium through which those poses are widely disseminated so that people accidentally or not slip into a 'photogenic' mode . Another example would be the photographs of El Madani, collected by the Arab Image Foundation and circulated by Akram Zaatari that shows men and of women enacting Hollywood poses (<http://flavorwire.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/al3.jpg>).

[Antworten](#)

Carol Yinghua Lu

Abgesendet am 15.03.2013 um 09:50

Dear Sophie,

Having read your example of the invention of the platinum blonde in the Golden Age of Hollywood, I had the chance to look at some of the official propaganda photography in China from the 1950s through the Cultural Revolution till the end of the 1970s and could see a parallel between such practices in that they both bore a certain projection and aspiration of their times for a kind of perfectness.

Like most paintings created this period that were able to be circulated publicly and officially, photography in China then was expected and designated by the state to convey a sense of optimism and accomplishment. To this aim, some were taken in black and white and hand-painted in bright color. These ideologically charged photographs were often taken to depict happy scenes of people, farmers, workers, doctors, and soldiers engaged in a kind of labor, being on the road, or in the field. In these images, people, especially women, posed in a set angle or posture, and were made to appear with dense black hair, either cut short, or neatly tied up in plait, with thick black eyebrows, red lips, and pronouncedly, highlight on both cheeks. They looked chubby and smiley, exposing only the upper part of white teeth. Every detail was intended to make them appear so youthful, positive, determined and almost unexceptionally glowing. Instead of bearing any proximity to the reality, they rather represented a certain suspension from the reality and truth.

During this period, photography in China was seen as a Socialist Realist propagandist tool, and a form of fictionalised 'truth telling'. Despite the great distance between these heavily orchestrated imagery and the real life, they were meant to let us believe it was the glory of socialism and to be the eulogy of the state's work. The "photogenic element" of photography enabled photography to fictionalize the truth and was thus used to the great advantage of the Chinese communist state.

Unlike the creation of the platinum blonde that remain after the time of its creation on the silver screen, this type of Chinese propaganda photography and its features were set in a very particular period of time in history and associated narrowly with the ideology of this period. It is rarely seen or explored as an artistic medium in contemporary photography. Rather, documentary photography, photography that revealed the harshness and ugliness of real life was embraced, practised and respected after the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Antworten

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