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Image and the Man: Photography and the (Re)construction of American Masculinity, 1945-1960

World War II made and unmade a generation of men and women, creating heroes and legends while destroying bodies, lives, and nations. In *Shooting from the Hip*, feminist art historian Patricia Vettel-Becker explores the legacy of this war in America. In particular, she examines how photography–a practice once seen as the province of women–became a powerful tool that men used to rebuild concepts of masculinity and reassert the primacy of patriarchy.

Vettel-Becker builds her provocative thesis around film critic Kaja Silverman's idea that World War II put an end to "the dominant fiction": that is, "the ideology of masculine wholeness, mastery and autonomy" (p. xi) that underpinned patriarchy. Men revealed (feminine) vulnerability by dying in battle or returning home injured, maimed, or permanently crippled. And the public sphere of work that had mostly been theirs before the war was now dominated by women, the "weaker sex." To regain their privileged status, men had to (re)assert their right to control. To do so, however, they needed to construct strong images of themselves that would turn attention away from real-life damaged male bodies that themselves suggested a damaged patriarchal system.

The central argument set forth in *Shooting from the Hip* is that photography provided a means especially well suited to achieving the end of redefining American manhood. As a practice, it promised renewed control over what others would see and eventually, think. It had also evolved from a domestic and/or fine art–and therefore "feminine"–pursuit into one more suitably "masculine." Before it became a professionalized activity in the 1940s, photography had primarily been associated with the private-sphere art of portraiture, of which women had been the chief practitioners. By the time organizations such as the American Society of Magazine Photographers came into being, photography had evolved into a public-sphere form of journalistic expression and thus a more "manly" endeavor.

The sharp gender divisions that emerged around photographic practice at mid-century were the result of what Vettel-Becker sees as "a deep anxiety over gender roles," itself produced by the war (p. 7). As men re-established social and economic dominance, women were once again made their subordinates. In the photographic world, pro-

fessional magazines began to assume that photographers were male and their subjects and/or servicers female. Among (mostly male) professional practitioners, photography was transformed from an activity that involved "feminine" emotion and feeling to a science that involved "masculine" mastery of technical knowledge. Changing perspectives regarding the nature of photography and who could practice it not only revealed the kinds of gender(ed) distinctions that had emerged professionally, but also helped to establish amateur photography as a male preserve. Vettel-Becker argues that these changes further suggest a kind of masculine declaration of independence from women and the potentially stifling "Momism" represented by the female sex.[1]

Within photographic practice, however, Vettel-Becker suggests that competing models of (male) subjectivity–that is, between photographer as money-earner and photographer as autonomous artist–emerged. Both carried with them gendered expectations: "to be financially unsuccessful was to fail as a man but â¦ to sacrifice one's personal vision in order to sell one's work was also a form of masculine failure" (p. 16). Vettel-Becker points to one photographer, Ansel Adams, who managed to merge the two models in his own practice. But she also shows how this division caused its own "war," in this case, between proponents of photography as modernist art with limited appeal and proponents of photography as a for-profit medium with mass appeal. The appointment of former fashion and commercial photographer Edward Steichen in 1947 to the directorship of the Department of Photography at the New York Museum of Modern Art signified victory for mass medium photography. At the same time, it clearly signified the profit and security-oriented priorities that post-World War II American society had set for itself.

Vettel-Becker also posits that other sub-categories of empowered male photographic subjectivity emerged during the postwar period that were themselves manifestations of the commercial and/or artistic impulses in photography. One such category, that of the adventuring war photographer, came about as the result of the very conflict that had wounded men both physically and psychologically. By using the camera as a tool to record events from the very war that had maimed so many men, photojournalists such as Robert Capa and David Douglas Duncan revealed that the patriarchal will to dominate was alive and well. Their daring, sometimes tragic exploits (Capa died while on assignment in Indochina in 1954) elevated them to the status of superstar warrior-heroes. For although they only shot to record (rather than kill), their photographic activities required a soldier's courage and bravery. What they shot was important, too, since their images both glorified and, to varying degrees, aestheticized battlefield savagery. Indeed, combat photographers not only helped transform real war wounds into symbolic badges of honor; they also helped ease the shock and horror of the war itself.

The second sub-category of male photographic subjectivity Vettel-Becker sees emerging in the postwar years is that of the urban street photographer. Like the combat photographers who embodied and celebrated warrior heroism, street photographers epitomized and paid homage to hard-boiled urban toughness. Vettel-Becker focuses on two such individuals: Weegee and William Klein. These two men found fame and fortune in the 1940s and 50s respectively by depicting life on the streets of New York, one as a crime-scene photographer and the other as an antagonistic combatant (p. 85) of the city itself. Their aesthetic, like the one adopted by war photographers, suggested bold muscularity. In the manner of "hunters and assassins, they stalk[ed], aim[ed] and [shot]," producing photographs that were grainy, harshly lit, fuzzy and awkwardly framed–a far cry from the well-made images demanded by tradition (p. 75).

Although the realities depicted by Weegee and Klein were at times as brutal as the those caught by their colleagues in the battlefield, the photographs that captured these realities sought neither to glorify urban life nor to document social conditions and propound a (usually leftist and therefore "soft" and "feminine") political view. As Vettel-Becker sees it, wartime and postwar street photography was evidence of an emergent existentialism, of the kind articulated and popularized by Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre in the 1940s and 50s. Such visual work tended towards the apolitical and expressed "the alienation and loneliness of modern man, the chaos and uncertainty of modern life and the â¦ paranoia and dread that permeated modern existence" (p. 82). In gendered terms, street photography signified an attempt by its male practitioners to know, master, contain the (feminine) unruliness of the city and transform social documentary into a more objective–and therefore masculine–form.

The fashion photographer/photographer of female bodies is the third sub-category of male subjectivity studied in this text. Men whose work involved women and "their" concerns (e.g., fashion) were more at risk of becoming feminized than those who worked with dangerous or worldly subjects. To become successful, Vettel-Becker suggests that male photographers like Richard

Avedon and Irving Penn had to be more aggressive in their displays of masculinity (and thus, heterosexuality) by having intense romantic or quasi-romantic relationships with their models. They also needed to show that they were masters of–and not mastered by–the women who posed for them. Avedon and Penn were especially successful in doing both and constructed photographic identities–the former as a "theatrical director," the latter as an "artist in his studio" (p. 95)–that emphasized their total creative control over the (female) matter they shot. In so doing, these photographers not only demonstrated formidable abilities as family wage earners but also a stylish machismo. Despite private-sphere ties of marriage and family, in the public sphere they could still be involved with other women.

A related sub-category of male photographic subjectivity–what Vettel-Becker calls the playboy–emerged in the 1950s with the publication of Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* magazine. The men in this group were most closely related to "tough guy" street photographers in how they "reject[ed] domestication" (p. 98). At the same time, though, and unlike their hard-boiled predecessors, playboys came to represent the ultimate consumers of females and material goods in general. The changing images *Playboy* provided each month transformed women's bodies into disposable pleasures made for male photographers and viewers alike. Celebrated photographers of the female nude further embodied the sexual freedom that Hugh Hefner sought to sell to his male readers. One such man, Andre de Dienes (who became famous for shooting the ultimate sex symbol of the period, Marilyn Monroe), often made his models into his short-term lovers.

If the photographing and viewing naked female bodies reaffirmed masculinity, so too, did photographing and viewing images of male bodies, especially those that called attention to the strength and/or independence of men in general. Vettel-Becker notes that during the 1950s men found themselves in an interesting gender dilemma. Part of their success as males was determined by their ability succeed economically. At the same time, being good company men threatened to feminize them, since being part of a corporate structure meant using "persuasion, manipulation and even charm" rather than brawn to get ahead (p. 116). Images that represented rugged individualism–for example, those featuring cowboys, athletes, and young hoodlums–thus became especially popular. Not only did they suggest that "real" masculinity could and did exist in a conformist society; they also provided a way in which men could safely engage in male-male bonding without being identified as homosexual.

Vettel-Becker further observes that such male-identified images tended to follow the aesthetic established by hard-boiled photographers like Weegee and William Klein. With its propensity for blurriness and unusual (methods of) framing, this aesthetic emphasized a photographer's active participation in the photographic act than had earlier ones. For its late postwar practitioners–notably, Robert Frank and his contemporary, Bruce Davidson–the camera was no longer merely a tool to record visual information. Rather, it was a (phallic) extension of the male photographer's body that allowed him to express his own unique and highly subjective responses to the realties he explored. In this way, the camera became part of a "practice in which the photographer journey[ed] through space searching for truths about modern masculinity" (p. 124).

The analysis Vettel-Becker presents in *Shooting from the Hip* owes much to the work of another distinguished feminist art historian, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, whose trail-blazing *Photography at the Dock* (1991) examines how cultural institutions have defined and constructed photographic history and how photography itself has (re)produced social and sexual ideologies. Where Vettel-Becker's book differs from its predecessor is in the specificity of its analysis. *Photography at the Dock* offers a broad overview of gender in photographic history, while *Shooting from the Hip* considers gender identity issues in mid-twentieth-century American photography: and for what the latter text studies, it stands alone in the field. The book does falter somewhat towards the end in barely touching upon the decline of photography and subsequent rise of television in the early 1960s as America's central image-making medium, and it offers only a hasty "postscript" in lieu of a more considered conclusion. This small flaw, however, detracts neither from its readability nor its importance. *Shooting from the Hip* is both a useful introduction to the photography of post-World War II America and a fine study of the cultural tensions underlying an era fraught with anxiety and paradox.

Note

[1]. Coined by Philip Wylie in 1942, this term refers to the smothering, potentially emasculating behaviors in which Wylie believed mothers and women engaged in their relationships with men.

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