

# Negative Female Characters in Cindy Sherman's Photo: The Changing in Thinking That Feminism Has Brought in the 1970s

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## ABSTRACT

A great number of people regard postmodernist photographer--Cindy Sherman--as feminist though she herself has never admitted the identity. In her *Untitled Film Still*, it is quite strange that almost all females have negative facial expressions instead of common smiling faces. The objective of this paper is to explore and analyze the reason why the females in Sherman's photos are depressed. In order to better understand the series of photos, Cixous's Anti narcissism theory is adopted. In her paper, *The Laughter of Medusa*, Cixous argues that women must participate in writing to expand their rights. In the photos, the females are already independent, but they still feel empty and lost instead of satisfied and happy. The females are in the conflict because on the one hand, they long for pursuing independent and free life, but on the other hand, they are in fact unwilling and unprepared to suddenly cut off the emotional connections between themselves and males. In conclusion, the females had already made choices to leave males and live on their own, but they were unsure and conflicted about whether the road not taken is better. The paper provides a comprehensive understanding of the photos which can help the readers to understand feminism from a new angle that there is not only oppression from males, but females themselves are in the strong conflict too.

**Keywords:** *feminism, change of people's way of thinking, conflict, Cindy Sherman's photographs.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cindy Sherman (born in 1954) is an American female artist, film director, and representative photographer of the Pictures Generation—a group that also includes Richard Prince, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Robert Longo. They came of age in the 1970s and responded to the mass media landscape surrounding them with both humor and criticism, appropriating images from advertising, film, television, and magazines for their art. Sherman is known for her attempts to overthrow the existing female images and male images with the bold use of oversaturated colors, unconscious expressions, heavy makeup as well as stage lighting. Consequently, there are a great number of artists and critics regarding Sherman as a spokesperson for feminism [2], but interestingly she has never acknowledged herself as a feminist.

Cindy Sherman has kept active during the five decades since the late 1970s up to today, and never stopped probing the construction of female identity based on her observations on women in reality. Her photographs portray different female images of western society through the ages.

Sherman was always interested in experimenting with different identities and she even started playing the dress-up game and dressing herself up as someone else when she was just a child. As she explained, “I wish I could treat every day as Halloween, and get dressed up and go out into the world as some eccentric character” [1]. From 1977 to 1980, she continuously produced her masterpiece *Untitled Film Stills*, in which she put on guises and photographed herself in various settings to act a variety of female characters such as the jaded seductress, the unhappy housewife, and the jilted lover. Women in these photos all put on negative expressions

instead of common artificial smiles. In other words, women in these photos didn't show up in an appearance and manner that the public especially males expected them to have. For this, Sherman explained that just like her opinion of identity construction, everyone can do anything at any time including women.

In other works, such as *Disasters and Fairy Tales* (1985), far different from the traditionally beautiful fairy world, Sherman depicted a fairy world full of violence and bloodiness by using artificial limbs, incomplete bodies, and twisted human figures. She seemed to tell people there is not only one banal interpretation of fairy tales that a girl waits for her prince and they get married happily. In her *History Portraits* (1990), Sherman satirizes the gaze and aesthetics of males towards history portraits in a playful way by using wigs, artificial breasts, and other props.

Most females in *Untitled Film Stills* have negative expressions and no one knows exactly what was happening in the scenes of the photos. Sherman says that artists do not have to explain their works and this gives rise to the existence of critics. Works can speak for themselves and audiences are expected to be given the right to understand and interpret the works by themselves [3].

*Untitled Film Stills* is the most famous work by Cindy Sherman. It took her three years to finish the series of photographs in an attic on Fulton Street. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* uses the shooting method of film stills in pornographic magazines, deliberately blurs the narrative of films and photos, and gives the audience sufficient thinking space [4]. She presents herself as the subject in her work. These photos are definitely not just self-portraits. Instead, Sherman uses herself as a vehicle for referring to the modern world and asking questions about a society that is undergoing tremendous changes in the 20th century. Sherman has developed her iconic style through these ambiguous and eclectic photographs. It represents the change of people's thinking in the 1970s by analyzing the character's negative emotions. The characters have different roles in her works such as the jaded seductress, the unhappy housewife, the jilted lover, and the vulnerable naïf. Sherman has continued to transform herself, displaying the diversity of human types and stereotypes in her images. However, almost all the subjects (usually as herself) in the photos are not blithe or even have a "negative" expression on her face. Through these unhappy faces, there are full of "conflict" on each photos-the conflict between on the one hand the women began to realize that men and women should be equal and on the other hand, they don't want to cut off the connection between the man. It is necessary to discuss the "conflict" in Cindy Sherman's work. Because it not only shows feminism's resistance to male chauvinism [5]. We also could understand Cindy

Sherman's ideas by analyzing them. We can also find the change in people's mindsets in the 1970s. However, when the female has become a successful "iron lady" they can't forget the sweet memory with the man. Therefore, we can clearly understand the "conflict" in people's thinking in that period by the following analyses.

To better interpret Cindy Sherman's works, the current article adopts Cixous's Anti narcissism theory to analyze why female facial expressions in the series of *Untitled* films show negative emotions. In 1937, Hicks published her paper, "The Laughter of Medusa," arguing that women must participate in writing to expand their rights. In these comments, she explains the Anti narcissism of men and exposes the fact that men use this doctrine to oppress women. Men define women as inferior to men, which makes women feel ashamed of their gender and envy men. It is easy for men to take precedence in society. Cixous exposed this invisible oppression, called on women to actively get rid of oppression and bondage, through writing to recapture and awaken the anti-oppression soul in their hearts. Cixous called for women's awareness, pointing out the oppression of women. She makes the audience aware of their misidentification. She acquires and provides the power of this deconstructive re-examination for a potential rethinking and rewriting of the intolerable but inevitable female subjectivity, precisely from the paradox of female orientation, the placement of the female body. Whether it is inside or outside. (Patriarchal) ideology, in or beyond the potential, fictional stills of *untitled* films or still alive [6]. The strong negative emotion and sadness expression in Sherman's works are derived from the conflict between the longing for freedom from bondage and the difficulty in getting rid of bondage. Sherman is a member of the group Women's Awareness of Oppression. She and Cixous share similar feelings -- a call for women's awakening -- but Sherman's thoughts are more complex. She is not only aware of the extent of oppression, but she is more aware of the pain of getting rid of everything because she knows deeply that women need the help and companionship of men. She noted that while women certainly needed to improve their status, the role of men in women's lives could not be ignored. So, this kind of mutually exclusive and interdependent state is worth studying. Therefore, Sherman's work will be seen as an ideological shift in the era of postmodern feminism. This article will analyze Cindy Sherman's work from an Anti narcissism perspective and explain how Cindy Sherman reflects these conflicts through a series of expressions that represent negative emotions. To explore her thoughts on the rise of women under patriarchy that she wants to express through this series of works.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF UNTITLED FILM STILL



**Figure 1** Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #11, 1978.

“Woman must put herself into the text--as into the world and into history--by her own movement [7].” As Cixous said, during the 20 years from 1960 to 1980 when American women were experiencing the second Feminism Movement, they increasingly became aware of the oppression and bondage from males. Women realized that they were supposed to be independent instead of depending on men so they were in a hurry to get rid of males hastily without thinking twice. Nevertheless, was such kind of independence really what women pursuing and desire? Did women sincerely acquire happiness and freedom? In this picture, there is a double bed in a cramped and overcrowded bedroom. A woman is lying on the double bed which is designed for a couple to share. The bedroom should have been the most comfortable and relaxing place for an individual. However, strangely, she still dressed decently and elegantly. She seems exhausted and bored. She is too tired to take off her tight lace dress, pearl necklace as well as high heels. She can neither fill the double bed nor her empty heart. Although she is already independent, she still clutches the sheets tightly with her right hand as if unwilling to let go of her husband or boyfriend and the wrinkled sheets may also reflect her twisted heart and soul. She has used to living with the men, so it is unnatural and nearly impossible for her to cut off their inside connections suddenly and immediately. The woman presents a mixed and confusing expression, with lowered eyes, slightly parted lips. At first sight, she seems to smile since she has already gained independence and freedom. But analyzing her expression in-depth, she is quite empty, paralyzed, aimless, and even desperate. She seems like falling into the sweet old memory she had with her men: sleeping together, eating together and walking together, and anyway always together instead of alone. Emotional dependence between people is quite normal and precious, but why when the dependence is from a woman on a man, it will be labeled as self-deprivation

and stupid? The woman is already independent outside, but inside she is still conflicted with herself. On the one hand, she longs for independence and freedom, but on the other hand, she can't help missing her men and their honey old days.



**Figure 2** Cindy Sherman's photograph: Untitled Film Still#12 1977.

According to the theory by Cixous, women began to realize that it was extremely unfair that women could not enjoy equal political power and social status with men in the 1970s. However, on the one hand, female would like gradually get rid of their guilt of questioning the traditional patriarchal society. With the progress and development of their thoughts, they realized that the unfairness is a legacy of history, because the whole society has been under the rule of male chauvinism for a long time. Although they are used to the unfairness that has existed for a long time. It's not that if they don't think about this kind of unfairness, it will not exist. However, on the other hand, female can't completely get rid of male's effect or they were unwilling to cut off the connection with male because women need more assistance and company especially in physical aspects. Consequently, women chose to fight or struggle with the traditional thoughts accompanying with intense internal conflict. This kind of complicated feeling can be explained the unhappy expressions on Cindy Sherman's photograph. In this picture, a woman feebly leaned against the wall beside the bed. The contents of her suitcase are scattered all over the bed. The woman's face is full of boredom and uneasiness and even pain. She seems to be on the verge of collapse at that time. Was she abandoned by a man? Did she want to go from the man before she was abandoned? The woman in the photo seems to realize that she is just a man's plaything because there are too many examples- the man abandoned woman as common as to throw away as a useful object. That's why that woman in the picture is so suffering. She is so contradictory. On the one hand, she loved the man who regarded her as a plaything. On the other hand, because she saw too many poor women who were abandoned by men like her. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life in the memory of a heartless man like them. She is young, like a red, red fresh rose.

Now she didn't want to live in the comfortable but unfree greenhouse. She preferred to live in the length and breadth of the land. She looked forward to the new life and expected to rely on her efforts. Although, the woman has determined to face the extreme weather and harsh condition which can't cause her to waver in her faith. However, a woman is afraid of loneliness since she was born which may finally become the biggest barrier that will block the process of becoming firmly feminist. The negative expression on the woman in that photograph represents this kind of painful conflict.



**Figure 3** Cindy Sherman's photograph: Untitled Film Still #27 1979.

Female had finished a necessary and historical pace in 1970s. Just as Cixous' s *The Laughter of Medusa* said, Feminist Trend of thought has begun to sprout, more and more people began to wake up from the traditional thinking of male supremacy. Although many women had bravely taken the first step and made some achievements - they had become the Iron Lady” . However, they were still hesitating and uneasy because they still had nostalgia for the old life. That was why the subject always was confused and tangled in Cindy Sherman' s photograph. In this picture, a woman sits firmly in her chair with a picture of a man on the wall behind her in the corner. She has short hair and formal clothes. One is holding a cigarette, the other is holding a cigarette box, and both hands are casually put on the back of the chair. Her face is slightly raised to one side as if thinking about something, like Auguste Rodin's world-famous sculpture *Le Poète*. While different from this woman's dignified expression, the man in the picture on the wall is smiling and relaxed. There is a sharp contrast between the two. What is the woman

think about? According to the historical background mentioned above, we may infer some points. A woman who is already independent feels her life is so empty and lonely. This caused a ripple in her heart lake. Is she really making the right choice? Or is independence just for independence's sake? Does such independence make sense? And the man in the picture next to her looks ironic and looks on coldly. It is just liked the parents watching the children who don't know how to lie. Although they have understood what happened, they are still interested in watching the children perform this poor performance. No matter what attitude the man holds, people always want to know the way which they are never chosen. It is human nature.



**Figure 4** Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #28, 1978.

The woman in the picture leans wearily in a corner and lifts her head feebly. She was barefoot, wearing a rumpled white coat, her hair disheveled and her face pale. It is like one of them just ended. Behind her was door 508, which was locked. There is a new door in front of the woman. The door was ajar, the light was dim, and it was the only way she could go to it now. At the same time, she was wandering at the door of 508 with a complicated expression.

So, the message of the woman in this painting is that she has finished her past struggles and is now wandering and thinking about her new life. The room number 508 in the angel number is Cindy Sherman's answer. Angel number 508 sends you an important message from the guardian angels. They want you to start making new choices and decisions in life. Once you start doing this, you will notice how your whole world is changing and how things are starting to go their own natural way [8].

Ambiguity is a characteristic of Ms. Sherman's work. One is never quite sure where the artist stands concerning her characters, and they in turn are often difficult to define [9].

Sherman has ended her old life, which symbolizes her freedom from the traditional patriarchal society. She was looking confused and miserable, the door in the picture

was ajar, but it was dark outside. According to Cixous, the Smile of Medusa, people need to break free from the bondage of the patriarchal society and gain equality in the status of power. But she also noted that the path would be difficult, echoing the darkness outside the door. So back to the character's expression, what new thoughts does she have besides her doubts about the road ahead? If she was so desperate to end her new life, shouldn't there have been a hint of joy on her face as she leaned against 508? But what is clear is that there is no joy in this slightly scary-looking photograph. She ended the door behind her without joy, she still felt pain. The life of 508 is her firm choice, but the little drops of this life make her feel sad when leaving. She has chosen a new life, but she is still obsessed with some of the happiness of the old life, which comes from the sweetness of the relationship. She needs to bravely choose freedom and equality on the one hand, but the original connection and happiness are still there. So, her pain stems from this dual conflict.



**Figure 5** Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #58, 1980.

When I say "woman," I'm speaking of a woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses [10]. According to Cixous, in the 1980s, there were not only struggles between awakening women and conventional men but struggles against women themselves. A great number of women already achieved independence, but they still feel confused and depressed. The picture is set on the street and behind the woman, there is a skyscraper standing on the street. The independent woman stands in front of the high building alone, however, she can't help staring back into the distance over and over again. Although she decided to leave her husband or boyfriend of her own accord, she can't easily control her inner impulse to look forward to seeing the figure of her man again, but the man may never appear again. She wears a scarf that could not only protect her from a severe cold but also pose her under the threat of being smothered. The scarf she wears is just like her husband, her father, or other males in her life who support her material costs while they set and raise some burden--the so-called rules and standards on her. The scarf may be a symbol of male oppression towards females. But she is still unwilling to take off the scarf or erase all the old memories of their relationship

from her mind. Her feelings are conflicting for she is still unready to become a totally independent individual and live alone. Instead of relief and happiness, she feels lost, lonely, and even empty. She is not sure enough whether she made the right choice and she hesitates to continue to walk forward along the road she chose. The picture reflects the woman's increasing awareness of the long-existed male oppression and her progressive protest against males. But she is uncertain about the road to independence she chose.



**Figure 6** Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #84, 1978.

The scene is clearly at home in the kitchen. For example, the walls are covered with a variety of pans, as well as a cupboard full of dishes, a cooking stove, and a refrigerator, which are all kitchen amenities. But the surprise is the heroine -- the woman in the kitchen. She wore heavy makeup, an overcoat, and long boots. None of these decorations would appear on a woman cooking in the kitchen. She reached for instant food and drink on the floor. The cabinets are so clean, one has to wonder if this woman has just moved into her new home, ending her old life, and since she has had no time to stock up on food, she can now only choose practical fast food.

Compared to other images of women from the same period in advertising, the photo shows the conflict between the imagined woman in the kitchen and the real woman in the photo. Cindy Sherman's message is clear: women are not as happy in the kitchen as everyone thinks. This nicely validates Cixous's theory that women are unhappy with traditional patriarchal repression and need to break away from it.



**Figure 7** Advertisements for household goods from the 1960s.

As a result, this photo shocked a lot of people at the time and went against most of the "imagined woman" image. In the eyes of men, women are beautiful, love family, love husbands. They will do anything for their family. This is the root of male confidence in Sykes's anti-narcissistic theory. They believe that women love men and that they feel comfortable and happy by giving to them. Cindy Sherman is fighting back: women don't like it, they're unhappy, they don't care much about men, they don't want to please men. Cindy Sherman shows something different on top of that, and she does it in a very direct way. But back to the picture, she has moved into a new home which means she has finished her old life. Why does this woman still look so miserable? This is what Cindy Sherman thinks about life that woman is free from bondage. The character instant food, which means the quality of her life is not good. This is proof that men's help and companionship can make women's lives better. There are sweet memories between men and women, which women cannot get rid of. This kind of road women have chosen and the little bit of nostalgia for traditional life is expressed through sad expressions. Although they want to be equal to men in status and power, this does not mean they can totally be separated from men. They still miss the company and care. So, the negative expression on the character's face in this picture comes from this strange conflict.

### 3. CONCLUSION

There are massive negative expressions on the subject of Cindy Sherman's photography. We can easily find that the women have one common-all of them have a "conflict". They would like to pursue a free life yet they can't be completely free from the shackles of their mind. This kind of "conflict" leads to the women who usually feel vast and hazy. They cannot sure the taken road is better than another. Or even some of them believe that another road is more suitable for them. As people always like that. Although feminists emphasize women's independence, they will miss their connection with men after they are truly independent. Maybe for the vast majority of people, once people make a choice the road not taken become the best. When we really experience the bumpy mud pits on the road and the beautiful wildflowers blooming on the roadside. Everything on the road becomes a certainty thing for those who choose the road. As a result, people begin to complain about the muddy road and then they begin to imagine the road not taken. Maybe there are tall ancient trees on that road, which sheds shade for tired travelers. Maybe there are full of roses and lilies, which makes travelers feel refreshing all the time. The road not taken may not be better than your current road. However, because you don't choose that road. Everything is unknown. Therefore, people's hearts start to supplement, imagine and beautify it. Therefore, people always feel that what they cannot get is the best.

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