

Women's Role of Materiality: A Revaluation of the Subversive Power of Feminine Subjectivity in Hélène Cixous' "L'écriture Feminine" and Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills

Kunyuan Zhang*

School of Arts and Sciences, Brandeis University, Waltham, USA
kunyuanzhang@brandeis.edu

Abstract: Although Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* is not a practice of Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*, both of the two are gravitated toward one shared phenomenon: the representation of women's role of materiality by the feminine subject. The common consensus has held that women's active subject positioning in the system of representation makes their body expression revolt against the othered, mute female body represented in the phallogocentric discourse. This paper—based on the inductive method of investigating *écriture féminine* and Sherman's feminine iconography—questions the subversive power of the "speaking" female body. The conclusion is reached that the body expression, devoid of subversive power in both cases, would merely re-crystallize the myth of female inadequacy that fits into the patriarchal misconception. It is of great import that females stay vigilant against the role of materiality assumed by the feminine subject, which functions to disempower and misinform; it is indefatigability in pursuit of aspirations and the concrete agency in striving for victory over the intellectual discourse that empowers the female subject.

Keywords: women's role of materiality, feminine subjectivity, subversive power.

1. Introduction

A dissimilarity exists between the role of materiality in Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* and Cindy Sherman's feminine imagery. In the former, female body has no formal and aesthetical deviation from that which is represented in the male-dominated discourse. In the latter, the female body is commonly believed to alienate the phallogocentric imagination in a fashion of parodic detachment. Yet *écriture féminine* and *Untitled Film Stills* share commonalities. Cixous's theory, advocating women's role of materiality as a feminist weapon, is considered to promulgate the feminist project, while Sherman's imagery, embodying this role, is hailed as the feminist canon. The concept of feminine subjectivity—the change of women's position from the spoken object to the speaking subject—makes *écriture féminine* and Sherman's feminine images deconstructive "re-representation" purporting to resist the phallogocentric tradition. But it is questionable whether this "re-representation" of the female body is ample in its subversive power to deconstruct the phallic myth.

There is a recent tend to defend *écriture féminine* by interpreting its alleged essentialism as a strategic position rather than a dogmatic ontology. Hence women will deliberately enact the feminine role to subvert from within the phallogocentric system [1-2]. Cindy Sherman's imagery, despite its controversial interpretations polarized between Mira Schor's "reinforcing phallocracy" and Laura

Mulvey's "parodying voyeurism," is reaffirmed by Jui-Ch'i Liu as one possessing a "femme fatale's agency" that empowers female spectators to actively align with its effulgent heroines [3-5]. However, these researches neglect to qualify the subversive power of the body expression with feminine subjectivity. This paper will argue that, despite women's subject positioning in the system of representation, the feminine role of materiality in both *écriture féminine* and *Untitled Film Stills* still lacks the potential for subverting phallogocracy: its consequences would re-inscribe the antifeminist discourse.

This paper is organized into three sections. The first section will unveil the initial motives of Hélène Cixous and Cindy Sherman through their respective feminist positions; while Cixous advocates the feminine subject initiating their antilogos discourse, Sherman is emulative of the feminine allure in her work. The second section will argue that women textualized in *écriture féminine* still conform to the masculine logic and stay within the patriarchal expectation through critical scrutiny of Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975). The third section will demythologize Sherman's feminine iconography, which lapses into the phallogocentric imagination; both female and male spectatorships will be discussed through a focus on *Untitled Film Stills* #6 (1977).

2. The Lack of the Subversive Power of "L'écriture Feminine" and *Untitled Film Stills* in Expressing Feminine Subjectivity

2.1. An Inquiry into the Feminist Positions of Hélène Cixous and Cindy Sherman

As already mentioned, Hélène Cixous's theory argues that *écriture féminine* can antagonize phallogocentrism and empower the feminine subject, while Cindy Sherman's photography—despite the artist's refusal to identify herself as a spokeswoman for feminism—is canonized as an empowering repertoire of feminist representations. Here, the feminist stances embodied in Cixous's *écriture féminine* and Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* will be explored.

Hélène Cixous insists that to subvert phallogocentrism, women must breach writing—a bastion of male privilege hitherto entrenched in the logos—by initiating their anti-logos feminine discourse. Since her historical subjugation has been centered in writing, the silenced feminine must establish her active subject positioning in that which is "the very possibility of change" [6]. The history of the masculine discourse, which is the self-glorified phallogocentrism, is considered to be "the effect, the support" of "the history of reason" [6]. Therefore, "the defenders of 'theory'" are equated with the "enthroners of the phallus" [6]. For Cixous, the female subjectivity—drives, desires, and libidinal femininity—has been repressed, hence the necessity for women to write their body experimentation and multiply their heterogeneous selves of jouissance. Cixous emphasizes the body as the basis of cultural achievements and the site of struggles for socio-political change, exhorting women to wield the body as power and, from their position of difference, let their discourse surpass, permeate, and transmute the phallogocentric system.

Hélène Cixous represents the substance of the feminine to be the body, from which she derives psychic connotations so that a forceful case could be made on *écriture féminine*'s resistant force against the phallogocentric discourse. Cixous claims, "women are body" [6]. But this scenario is different (at least to Cixous) from the objectification of women in phallogocentric, patriarchal logic. Diane Griffin Crowder observed that the meaning of the body in *écriture féminine* vacillated between the material object and the symbol of the socio-cultural discourse [7]. In truth, Cixous does not suffer these two meanings to oscillate; she aims to iconize the body into the signifier of psychic energy that antagonizes the phallogocentric language. The body is, in the first place, the masturbatory flesh, represented via a woman's "passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity" [6]. The female body is mythologized as the matrix of the cosmic female libido and the vehicle for the liberation of the female unconscious. Hence it is sublimated into a metaphoric cosmos of Eros, "an immense astral

space,” whereby feminine subjects in their writing will let their unconscious flow, amorphous and diffuse, into the infinite [6]. This subjective psychosexual experience, which bears an affinity to poetry, is made to appear as a direct revolt against the language coded by the logos of phallogocentrism and the representation hierarchized by fixed meanings. With this vatic force of the “antilogos weapon” [6] as a vindication, Cixous encloses women into the role of materiality, convinced that women have reason to inscribe their feminine pride—beauty, erogeneity, and sexuality—in the graphic text.

Cindy Sherman, unlike Hélène Cixous, the *soi-disant* prophet of the empowered female subject, is non-committal in her feminist stance, although *Untitled Film Stills* has been canonized as feminist. She declines to identify herself with a spokeswoman for female emancipation, claiming in an interview that, while she wished her work to be perceived as having feminist ideas, it was not her pleasure to espouse and promulgate the claptrap of feminist theories [8]. This violently anti-theoretical assertion evinces that Sherman, whose original goal is not to promulgate the feminist project, may scarcely attempt to conceptualize the strategy to subvert the phallic dominance. Her ambiguous posture is also evidenced through her retrospective response to *Untitled Film Stills*: she acknowledged that, albeit in the full knowledge that the “fiftiness” in her film stills was disagreeable, she was infatuated with them, some of which, she feared, had come extremely close to what they mimicked: pinups in the 50s B-grade films [9]. Evading in-depth exposition of her work and dramatizing her ambivalence, Sherman also admitted her irresistible fascination with the artificers *de rigueur* of femininity as a social(ized) construct (lipstick, mascara, hairdye, and other accessories). It should be emphasized that she derives pleasure from imitating film stars whose charisma by which she is enthralled [5]. Sherman’s parodic mimesis of gender stereotypes is dangerously confounded with her obsessive emulation of “role models.” Deconstructing the myth of essential femininity, in the first place, requires the prerequisite of one’s decided resistance to it. Sherman, more obsessed with femininity than with feminism, fails to detach from the beauty myth at an ironic distance in these film stills.

Although Cindy Sherman intends to rid her work of theory, the premium on her work nevertheless owes to the flourish of semiotic and psychoanalytic theories of representation in her time. According to Laura Mulvey, the production of *Untitled Film Stills* concurred with a movement of theoretical aesthetics, in which women’s representation was considered by psychoanalytic feminists to be symptomatic of how the feminine was domesticated in the visual structure of the heteronormative, patriarchal hierarchy [4]. It is owing to these theoretical politics of representation that Sherman’s imagery was read as a signifier of the suffocating patriarchal atmosphere. Had some of her photos appeared in a 50s Euramerican film magazine, they would have been submerged in the pop, displayed together as a constellation of winsome, mysterious *tableaux vivants* intended for visual pleasure. Ironically, the image by one who is tremendously antagonistic to feminist theory is endowed with feminist semiotics and connotations. Due to theorists’ desire to read it as feminist, Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* series serves as perpetually blank iconography always ready to be theorized and hermeneuticized by disparate ideologies. Researchers never consider it antilogy to interpret the series simultaneously as a revealer of Judith Butler’s social(ized) constructedness of femininity and as “a writerly text of jouissance,” “an empowering *écriture féminine*” evocative of hysteria as resistance to the social order that eradicates sexual difference [10]. Today, the deification of Sherman as a feminist icon has been so ingrained in popular opinions that visitors walking through a gallery would automatically read her work as a progressive critique of patriarchy.

2.2. The Cixousian Model: The Inability of L’écriture Feminine to Contest Phallogocentrism

The re-representation of the female body, intended by Hélène Cixous as a political weapon against phallic dogma, would not subvert or antagonize the phallogocentric discourse, but, on the contrary,

serves to realize and fulfill it. The body in Cixous's theory is an overflow of uncontrollable desires belonging to subjectivity and possessing agency. However, the body must and will be textualized in *écriture féminine*, becoming the text *per se*, an object to be interpreted by the audience, who remains at the time outside the control of the feminine subject. Hence the masculine subject, as the audience, is empowered to interpret the body that discards the "stupid sexual modesty" [6] as whatever he wishes. The body, therefore, becomes an object of sexual desire and fascination, objectified and fetishized. Although Cixous intends "writing the body" to liberate the repressed female subjectivity, *écriture féminine*, as the object, is but an anti-intellectual text about feminine eroticism. Such "female-sexed texts" would surely not "scare" the male reader as Cixous has claimed [6], but, on the contrary, provides them with voyeuristic pleasure and, labeled as feminist, licenses them to be voyeurs with a righteous plea. Once again, in their own "sexts" [6], females are treated as objects made to charm males' leisure, serving to gratify male desire and becoming never anything other than physicality incarnate. Freeze-framed in a text, the body represented as the feminine reiterates and reinforces the patriarchal misconception of women as the depthless corporeality with a self-indulgent disposition. The body's subject positioning in *écriture féminine* does not thwart, but, on the contrary, validates and secures the masculine logic. The fact that the text is initiated by the feminine subject herself, who actively and voluntarily affirms the role prescribed by the phallogocentric tradition, ensures men that the feminine subject has internalized her subordinate status prescribed by them. Furthermore, the fact that women take "writing the body" as their only possible self-expression confirms the misconception about feminine incapacity: that women, incapable of intellectualism, could only manage to describe their erotic experiences/experimentation with the body. As a consequence, the phallogocentric discourse would be developed by the masculine subject with greater ease.

The feminine subject in *écriture féminine* appears as an epitome of the archetypal femininity that fits into male phantasies and misconceptions in the phallogocentric discourse. Questions are raised when Hélène Cixous insists that writing run by the masculine libidinal economy is the nucleus for women's repression [6]. Were women "repressed" because they had been denied the very access to writing? Or was it the logocentric history of writing, contaminated by the phallic language, that brainwashed women, making them "repressed?" The former scenario is a spurious one. Diane Griffin Crowder rightly distinguished repression (the blocking from the mind of what is "too threatening to the ego") from oppression (the prevention by others from attaining what one requires), pointing out that women, rather than repressed, were oppressed [7]. This claim suits the case in which a woman aspires for the realization of her self-value. Historically, womankind was precluded from achieving that which she aspired, as was voiced viscerally in 1799 by Mary Robinson:

She, like Tantalus, is placed in a situation where the intellectual blessing she sighs for is within her view; but she is not permitted to attain it: she is conscious of possessing equally strong mental powers; but she is obliged to yield, as the weaker creature. [11]

Hence it is highly questionable as to how women's coercive divorce from the testimony of greatness—writing—could be equated by Cixous with women's repression of the unconscious with uncontrollable impulses for "pleasure" which they "don't forgo...as 'wisely' as [men]" [6]. Cixous's assertion about pleasure merely echoes the archaic treatment of women as hedonistic, un aspiring, and hopeless at sublimation to which only the virile mind is beckoned. As for the latter scenario, that male writing itself has led to women's "repression," its logic is problematized by the essence of the phallic language. The system of representation in the phallogocentric discourse concerned with women scarcely disseminates aesthetics that desexualize or negate the female corporeality. On the contrary, women are often materialized, sexualized, and eroticized, demanded to be no more than the fetishized body, with their identities dependent on their looks. It is dangerously unwarrantable when Cixous insists that "women are body" [6]. Its embodied position would be perceived by the masculine subjects as an internalization of the feminine role of materiality. Cixous, however, is unsuccessful in articulating

“women are body” as only a strategic, politic position; she excessively indulges in the sentimental luxury of elaborating on the feminine body, incanting in breathless ecstasy:

[Women] have furiously inhabited these sumptuous bodies: admirable hysterics who made Freud succumb to many voluptuous moments impossible to confess...more than naked underneath the seven veils of modesty. [6]

Cixous—despite her deliberate elevation of the female body as psychic energy—is rhapsodizing over the feminine with an admiring voyeur from the nineteenth century in her inmost mind. Furthermore, her characterization of the “New Woman” [6] is trapped in clichés of the traditional masculine narrative such as lacking reason, proneness to hysteria, being driven by uncontrollable impulses, the chase after sensual pleasure, and vulnerability to unrealistic fantasies. In one place, Cixous cursorily attacks the texts written by female writers which are indistinguishable from masculine writing, accusing them of reproducing “classical representations of women (as sensitive—intuitive—dreamy etc.)” [6]. Assuming she has objection to how men have traditionally defined women, it is then hard to logicize why Cixous spends her entire essay valorizing women’s instinctive drives against “the history of reason,” claiming that “women’s...stream of phantasms is incredible” [6]. Such ideological inconsistency mirrors that the *féminité* celebrated by Cixous is exactly that which was classically represented in the phallogocentric discourse. Cixous ennobles women within the purview of the traditional masculine gaze, immensely glorifying and glamorizing their stereotypical characteristics and archaic aesthetics. Beyond one’s expectation, Cixous’s “New Woman” in *écriture féminine* lives herself up to “the mystifying charms of fiction” with which the phallogocentric discourse is gilded and bedecked [6].

Hélène Cixous’s is a disempowering insistence on women’s positive resignation to where they were kept in subjection. Patriarchal logic would not be subverted by women from within phallogocentrism, for Cixous has placed the feminine subject in a disadvantageous, paradoxical position both inside and outside the phallogocentric system: she remains inside the phallogocentric discourse, yet outside the logocentric discourse. The concept of *écriture féminine* is founded on the conviction that what has been appropriated or hegemonized by men is what has been inherent in the masculine. Cixous, like other French feminists, observes at the surface level: the phallus and the logos are simultaneously possessed by the empowered masculine subject, who prides in their phallic power and at the same time dominates the master narrative of Western thought. A meaning of phallic dominance is accordingly attached to the logos, leading Cixous to the fallacious conclusion that “the history of reason” is the culprit in and the axis of phallogocentrism [6]. Cixous insists, therefore, that the feminine discourse—somatic writing in a language devoid of contours and single-mindedness—would never take place in the “philosophico-theoretical domination” [6]. In such insistence, Cixous nevertheless acknowledges women’s exclusion from the philosophical and scientific system, affirming it as the masculine prerogative. Instead of confronting the radix of women’s absence from history, Cixous believes that women would neither “appropriate...[men’s] places” nor “begrudge them their position of mastery” [6]. Here, the womanly renunciation of the “masculine anxiety”—domination—is the resignation to subordination [6]. Contrary to Cixous’s desire, women would still abide in the margin, where they are expected to flourish feminine eroticism as a no longer forbidden beauty of *volupté* and *jouissance*, with compulsory pride and blind confidence. Cixous has a proclivity to conceal her echoes of archaic ideology in her meretricious panegyric to women:

Unlike man, who holds so dearly to his title...woman couldn't care less about the fear of decapitation...adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity, which she can merge with without annihilating herself. [6]

Women are once again associated with that which was ingrained by men in their minds from ancient times, the indisposition to fame, “the desire to be veiled” that “runs in their blood” [12]. Anonymity had been the destination dictated to women. In affirming women’s suitability for anonymity as their

difference from men, Cixous contradicts her rhetoric on women's "shattering entry into history" [6]. It is oppressingly anachronistic to admire women for exploring anonymity with the feminine gesture and becoming one with it without losing their identity. In her ascription of "social success," "sublimation," "title," and "crown" to the demonized masculinity [6], Cixous disempowers the female subject who aspires for glory, illustrious eminence in history, and unbounded vistas beyond the confinement of the home. She also disempowers the female subject who defies the traditional masculine gaze. This oppressive way of seeing does not forbid beauty and desexualize femininity, dictating her to be the hideous, dreaded Medusa; on the contrary, that which lacks the likelihood of its fetishization would fall into immediate disfavor. Cixous's is an insistence on women's affirmative observance of patriarchal expectation. It is the cling to archaic aesthetics repackaged as a militant, farsighted ideology and the reincarnation of the culture's antiquated, oppressive customs in a new vocabulary of psychoanalytic conceptualization.

2.3. Sherman's Imagery: The Opposite of Subversive Deconstruction

The interpretation of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series as subversive deconstruction is dependent upon one concept: Cindy Sherman's omnipotent female subjectivity. The treatment of her images as the reinforcement of the male gaze is dismissed as the perception at the surface level: closer scrutiny is needed for the realization of the "deep" connotation of these images, for Sherman's position as the omnipotent female subject is able to draw attention to everything opposite to the phallogentric, patriarchal plot [10]. Laura Mulvey argues that when male spectators are engaged in voyeurism on offer, the "fact that each character is Sherman herself, disguised" makes them aware that they have been illuded: while "Sherman-the-model" assumes the role of the female star in film stills, "Sherman-the-artist" is revelatory of the female star as a charade [4]. Male spectators then feel discomfited as it transpires that the artist/subject has initiated this voyeuristic experience and made him its captive. Mulvey's case is an archetype of interpretations of Sherman's imagery as one of subversive parody. Such interpretations—some of which go so far as to incorporate the gendered identity as social performance, some of which approach the text from the position of female spectatorship, and vary only in methods, perspectives, and levels of elaboration—never depart from the original stand of the same logic: it is Sherman the almighty artist-subject who turns her own reproduction and repetition into subversive deconstruction. In this logic, no matter to how large an extent her work uncritically conforms to the grain of patriarchal, phallogentric vision, it possesses the female agency; no matter how close have its female characters come to fetishized objects of the male gaze, Sherman, with the power to maneuver, has control over visual experiences of the spectator; no matter how some of her photos are attached to the beauty myth of femininity, the fact that they are all produced by Sherman herself predetermines femininity as an artificial construct.

Such a power myth of female subjectivity is a reflection of Cindy Sherman's semi-deified, predeterminate status as a feminist artist pedestalled beyond criticism. The interpretations of researchers who resort to the *soi-disant*, pseudointellectual profundity of repeating the film stills' subversive power are uncritical acceptance and mythologizing enthronement of Sherman's power myth as the female subject. Sherman-the-artist," in the first place, has no impact on the spectator. The death of the subject marks the supplantation of modernism by postmodernism: postmodernist artists no longer possess the "unique self and private identity" for which the modernist artists had striven [13]. This demise of individuality forecloses any power the artist might have autonomously exerted on the spectator. Sherman herself also confirms: "I feel I'm anonymous in my work. When I look at the pictures, I never see myself...I disappear" [14]. Such obliteration of the self indicates that Sherman, submerged in masquerade, has become one with that which she assumes, and in doing so serves subliminally to heighten its existent status and confirm its verity. To eulogize Sherman as a revealer of the masquerade of femininity is as illogical as to crown a thespian (and/or director) for

her potential of making the audience aware of how unrealistic the role she assigns to herself is. If one insists on the sovereignty of Sherman as the artist, s/he risks adopting a *double standard* on Sherman—a concern voiced by Nadine Lemmon—of simultaneously canonizing her as the anti-elitist postmodernist quintessence and heroizing her as the autonomous modernist genius-artist [15]. Critics applaud Sherman for her heterogeneous, nomadic identities in her work that shatter the myth of the self, yet, without the coronation of the unitary, autonomous Self of “Sherman-the-artist,” her work could not have been fetishized as the feminist revelation performing deconstructive parodies. Sherman has no control over her images or the power to dominate her spectator’s experience and desires. “Having control” means that Sherman, dressing up whatever she wishes, could produce and modulate the images to her heart’s content. Publicized, they are frozen and freeze-framed into visual signs of female passivity, vulnerability, and corporeality, outside her control, left for interpretations of the spectator exorcised of Sherman’s power myth.

Female spectators watching *Untitled Film Stills* undergo all but an empowering experience. It is far from what Jui-Ch’i Liu considers to be the joyous and privileged fantasy “of identifying with the *femme fatale*” [5]. The experience is a kind of subterranean anxiety. As already mentioned, Sherman herself, emulative of the apotheosis of female glamour, fails to resist the beauty myth of the feminine essence. Hence female spectators would correspondingly experience a kind of emulative envy—though sometimes repressed—when confronted with the proud physical idea in Sherman’s images. When such emulative envy fails to gain oneself the desired results of catch-up in physical beauty, it could easily turn into disempowering anxiety of not fitting into the sexual expectation and gender-normed fantasy of (heterosexual) males. Those images considered to denaturalize the female body, such as *Untitled Film Stills* #6, would nevertheless engender another disempowering experience. In *Untitled Film Stills* #6, the model is lying upon a floral quilt occupying the entire background. Indulged in reverie, she held in her right hand a vanity mirror, signifying her obsession with appearance. Her negligee opens revealingly to show her undergarment and body, whose erotogenous zones—the bosom and the hip—are placed in the focus of the composition. The camera’s viewpoint is from above, looking down at the subject. The close-up enables the spectator to experience her with familiarity, if not intimacy, its concomitant shallow depth of field emphasizing her corporeality. The model strikes, with an effort, a sultry pose. She herself represents the very effort to fit into the phallic eye. However, the flattening of her physical contours suggests her failure to achieve the ideal vision of male fantasies. Instead of gaining the epiphany of the essence of the phallic myth—for Sherman does not even confront what the phallus is in her image—female spectators are merely greeted by a misogynistic caricature of women: vacuous, superficial, vain, self-indulgent, and unintelligent. Female spectators are disempowered at seeing their gender encapsulated in that incarcerated mentality—the anxiety to please—which has haunted their gender for millennia, simultaneously feeling frustrated at the model’s failure, which reminds them of the aforementioned fear of being unwanted by the male sex. Female spectators, stifled at the sight of how the feminine is reduced to the depthless corporeal form, are at the moment dispossessed of any ebullient vitality of being intelligent and powerful. Their visual experiences are anything but active empowerment.

The model in *Untitled Film Stills* #6, still ample in her potential for being objectified and victimized by the male gaze, does not alienate male spectators by denaturalizing the phallocentric imagination. On the one hand, the model in the image possesses the (stereo)typical *féminité*. Her facial expression, characterized by the longing gaze and parted mouth, is that of typical erotic expectancy from a female. Scrutinizing her as an object of physical attractiveness, male spectators derive visual pleasure from her excessive femininity, thus having their scopophilia gratified. On the other hand, the model’s state of partial undress not only denotes her sexual availability but also suggests a space reserved for private activities. Unsuspecting in her erotic daydreaming, she firmly anchors the role of male spectators to that of the voyeur. The model, as nothing but an erotic spectacle,

is rendered the victim of a gaze. Referring to his experience in watching the Whitney Sherman show, Peter Schjeldahl admitted that he, as a male, found her images “sentimentally, charmingly, and sometimes pretty fiercely erotic” and that, enamored of “the insecure blonde,” he responded to how adept Sherman was at conveying “feminine vulnerability, thereby triggering (masculine) urges to ravish and/or to protect” [15]. The commentary itself indicates that the provoked male gaze would ineluctably spell the language of phallic dominance (“blonde,” “female vulnerability” and “ravish”). Consequently, the antifeminist, phallocentric discourse will be abetted and aggrandized, causing the power imbalance.

3. Conclusions

Researchers have believed that the female body, represented by women from the position as the speaking subject, can thwart the masculine logic and exert a counteractive effect on the masculine discourse. Feminine subjectivity is purported to make everything different about the embodied role of materiality. However, there is no subversive power in the female corporeality represented by the feminine subject in Hélène Cixous’s *écriture féminine* and Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*; contrary to the purpose of the former and the consensus on the latter, both of them function to secure and consolidate the phallocratic authority.

Beneath the veneer of gynocentric empowerment, behind the millenarianist prophecy of the liberated feminine subject, Cixous unyieldingly clings to the antiquated customs bequeathed by the phallic convention. Hence the masculine subject, empowered to interpret *écriture féminine* as the object, is tempted to objectify the textualized feminine subject, perceiving the voluntarily assumed feminine role as women’s internalization of what has been prescribed by men. Despite the fact Sherman’s parody of gender stereotypes is confounded with her emulation of film stars as role models, *Untitled Film Stills* is canonized as a feminist exemplar due to the theoretical aesthetics of the body representation in her epochal context. Consequently, theorists invent the myth of Sherman’s power as the feminine subject, having her work’s deconstructive nature depended on the mythologization of the autonomous, unitary Sherman-the-artist. Enclosing women within the role of materiality, both *écriture féminine* and *Untitled Film Stills* disempower the female subject who aspires beyond patriarchal expectation.

This paper reveals that feminists have to stop hyperbolizing the far-fetched function of “feminine subjectivity” to justify women’s role of materiality, a subordinate position prescribed by the masculinist convention. “Feminine Subjectivity,” which makes no difference, merely signifies women’s ready embrace of feminine incapacity. It is critical that researchers refrain from being the apologists for *écriture féminine* and the iconodules of *Untitled Film Stills*. While women, if they choose, are free to indulge in the imprisoned mentality of assuming the role of materiality, this feminine role must not be glorified as an empowering agency for the feminist project. The elevation of femininity, corporeality, and sexuality as female empowerment mirrors the pervading nature of the phallic power: it is women’s anxiety—that they might be frowned upon as anti-sex, unattractive, and “unfeminine”—repackaged as an empowering neologism; but there is essentially nothing empowering about such anxiety.

References

- [1] Vachhani, S.J. (2019). *Rethinking the politics of writing differently through écriture féminine*. *Management Learning*, 50, 11–23. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507618800718>
- [2] Xu, P. (1995). Irigaray’s Mimicry and the Problem of Essentialism. *Hypatia*, 10, 76–89. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810206>
- [3] Schor, M. (1989). *From Liberation to Lack. Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Arts & Politics*, 24, 17–19. Retrieved from <https://jstor.org/stable/community.28038322>

- [4] Mulvey, L. (1991). *A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman*. *New Left Review*, 188, 136-150. OneSearch, <https://newleftreview-org.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/issues/i188/articles/laura-mulvey-a-phantasmagoria-of-the-female-body-the-work-of-cindy-sherman.pdf>
- [5] Liu, J.C. (2010). *Female Spectatorship and the Masquerade: Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills*. *History of photography*, 34, 79–89. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087290903361399>
- [6] Cixous, H., Cohen, K., and Cohen, P. (1976). *The Laugh of the Medusa*. *Signs*, 1, 875–93. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/3173239
- [7] Crowder, D.G. (1983). *Amazons and Mothers? Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous and Theories of Women's Writing*. *Contemporary Literature*, 24, 117–144. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208100>
- [8] Berne, B. (2003). *Studio: Cindy Sherman*. Tate Research Publication. Retrieved from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/cindy-sherman-1938/studio-cindy-sherman>
- [9] Brittain, D. (1999). *Creative Camera: Thirty years of writing*, 189, Manchester University Press.
- [10] Kérchy, A. (2003). *The Woman 69 Times: Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills."* *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 9, 181-189. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41274221>
- [11] Robinson, M. (1799). *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*. Printed for T.N. Longman, and O. Rees, 39, 84. Paternoster Row. Retrieved from https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CB0127276681/ECCO?u=mmln_m_brandeis&sid=gale_marc&xid=439be1d6&pg=88
- [12] Woolf, V. (2019). *A Room of One's Own*, 104-106, The Commercial Press.
- [13] Jameson, F. (1998). *The Cultural Turn*, 6, Verso.
- [14] Collins, G. (1990). *A Portraitist's Romp Through Art History*. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com/1990/02/01/arts/a-portraitist-s-romp-through-art-history.html
- [15] Lemmon, N. (1993). *The Sherman Phenomenon: A Foreclosure of Dialectical Reasoning*. *Discourse*, 16, 100–117. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41389316>.