Diversity in gender and visual representation: An introduction

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This Special Issue builds upon key arguments that emerged during the course of an interdisciplinary conference that was hosted by the Centre for Gender Studies (University of Winchester, UK) in September 2012. The conference, themed 'Gender and Visual Representation', aimed to encourage and develop understanding concerning the social category of gender, the concept of visual representation and their relationship. In doing so, it hoped not only to bring people together with an interest in this field, but also to stimulate discussion within and between disciplines, research paradigms and methods. An added emphasis on 'real world' issues sought to inspire and contribute towards broader feminist activism.

The conference's greatest success was, arguably, its contribution in highlighting differences in understanding the field of gender and visual representation. For those accustomed to working from an interdisciplinary perspective, such a difference is a par for the course. Although ushering in conceptual contradictions and tensions, these at times irreconcilable, an interdisciplinary perspective remains productive. This is most notable in problematising disciplinary orthodoxies and thereby extending understanding.

Evans, in her commentary concerning this Special Issue, underlines the central position analysis of gender and visual representation has inhabited in feminist and gender studies for an extended period. Yet she helpfully points towards atrophy in its study; in part as a consequence of our digital age in which our language of representation now seems outdated and ill-equipped to describe contemporary realities.

It is therefore tempting to argue that we should move beyond discussion of gender and visual representation. An argument of this sort is appealing, not least because it implies the promise of avant garde conceptual development. However, rather than offering genuinely novel conceptual advance, this runs the risk of 're-inventing the wheel'. We agree with Evans' assessment that 'what is needed is an approach that makes representation mean something again' (p. x). We argue that this must begin with an appreciation of diversity in the field of gender and visual representation. The contributions towards this Special Issue illustrate such diversity across, for example, context, discipline, methodology, theory and topic.

Welch's historical analysis connects the past with the present by contextualising gendered European representations of Death and the Maiden artworks. In comparing imagery in the genre produced by early modern artists with contemporary coffin calendar shots (2003–2013), she exposes the socio-cultural and religious contexts of gendered visual representations, and highlights the role that iconicity plays in sexualised gendered visual imagery. Frith too explores sexualised imagery, although her focus lies on representations of the female orgasm in professional and amateur porn films. She highlights the gendering of authenticity as it relates to the female orgasm, noting how culture informs the outward expression of a woman's response to sexual pleasure. Through an analysis concerning the gendered dynamics of the fake orgasm, and consideration of lived experience, Frith exposes the stickiness of the dichotomy between the authentically

felt and deliberately performed. She also notes how porn can influence perceived norms concerning sexual pleasure among young people.

The centrality of new media in discussions of gender and visual representation is highlighted by Ricciardelli and Afful. In their thematic analysis of fat acceptance blogs from the United States and Canada, they examine how four self-identified fat acceptance bloggers draw on discursive strategies from established social justice movements in order to create a political space from which to critique fat phobia in Western society. Through connecting the heteronormative male gaze and the hyper-sexualisation of woman, the authors stress the narrowness of socially acceptable standards of beauty, and relate dominant Western gendered representations of women to the liberal capitalist economy.

The theme of capitalist society and gendered visual representations is also one taken up by Steel and Shores who, through a case study on the American anti-trafficking campaign 'Real Men Don't buy Girls' (2011), explore the visual representation of masculinities. Their analysis of this online campaign examines the contentious issue of male stardom in mediating idealised versions of 'real' masculinity. The authors briefly touch on issues concerning the commodification of women's bodies and its role in perpetuating the exploitation of girls, but stress that in focusing on this alone, the gendered representation of masculinity is frequently overlooked. The notion of 'real' is similarly salient in Frith's paper. Whilst her analysis explores the real embodied orgasm vis-à-vis a performed fake counterpart in porn movies, Steel and Shores analyse the disjuncture between everyday men's behaviours from those of the 'real' men in the online campaign.

The politics of gendered visual representations emerges as a pervasive theme throughout the papers. Just as Ricciardelli and Afful's analysis of fat acceptance blogs indicates growing resistance to fat phobia in Western society, Sandercock's analysis of the way in which teen TV dramas – Glee (2009-) and Degrassi (2001-) – present their fictional trans characters, suggests challenge to dominant gender representation. Welch's paper explores, in part, how these dominant gender representations come about by examining the theological background to heteronormative gendered representations in early-modern artworks, such as the hyper-sexualisation of women. She also examines how socio-cultural shifts, such as secularisation, can result in changing visual representations and create spaces for challenge and potential change.

Yet, we are reminded that potential for change is, at times, limited. The lack of change in contemporary visual representations of 'real' masculinities is a topic explored by Steel and Shores. The authors question the efficacy of an anti-trafficking campaign that undermines its own goal of reshaping harmful masculinities through re-instantiating normative ideals of manhood, whilst simultaneously denying the perpetrators of human trafficking personhood, thus rendering them incapable of change.

Even in instances in which representational space for challenge and potential change is created, as is described in both Frith and Sandercock's papers, countervailing normative trends may persist. Frith describes how amateur porn is reputed to represent more diversity than its commercial counterpart, and yet tends to adhere to the same structural and stylistic conventions set out by the latter; for instance, camera angles that imply male agency and female submissiveness. And Sandercock reveals how depictions of transgendered protagonists in teen TV series are informed by, and within the constraints of, heteronormative representations of gender relations.

Our description of the papers included in this Special Issue is by no means exhaustive. Their contribution towards making sense of the field, alone and together, is best appreciated through their reading. In describing them, we hope to illustrate some of the diversity in how gender and visual representation is understood. Similarly, whilst we

believe diversity is well illustrated by these papers, the project is not yet complete. How, for example, may we begin to understand gender and visual representation beyond Western contexts; what contribution do quantitative methodologies make towards the field; and what other 'real world' issues might we explore so as to contribute towards broader feminist activism?

We therefore invite you to read further in an interdisciplinary spirit, suspending your taken for granted assumptions, accepting conceptual contradictions and tensions as they may arise, but aspiring to 'make representation mean something again' within our dynamic and changing digital age.

Blu Tirohl (Editor in Chief)