

Research Question

Is Helmut Newton's photography artistic or pornographic?

Abstract

Photography is a very interesting media to convey messages, feelings and opinions, and leaves a wide range of styles and methods how to do so.

The photographer Helmut Newton developed a way to show his own imagination of reality and express his feelings, which is criticised by many people, for as some do not see the art in his work. They rather accuse it to be pornographic.

By looking at the development of his work over time and the true meaning of his pictures, the legal side of publishing these pictures and the reproaches of his so called greatest enemy, the feminist Alice Schwarzer, I tried to show how the question *whether Helmut Newton's work is artistic or pornographic* is related to a created war between sexes, the battle between Newton and Schwarzer.

Whilst there are many books about photography, I only could find a few information about Newton's work, mainly taken from his own autobiography, for as public places, such as libraries did not had any material. I guess this is because of the context of his work. Nudity does not seem to be at its right place in a public library. However, I was willing to research Newton's work in detail at first hand, when I for example went to one of his exhibitions. But this all just showed me how interesting this topic is. For as I only see the artistic material in his work, others totally exclude it from the art-section. This seemed to be a matter of opinion, a matter of choice.

My conclusion therefore is based on the fact, that people have their own right to decide what is pornographic, without being influenced by others.

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Background Information

Helmut Newton was born on Sunday, 13. October 1920 in Schoeneberg, Berlin as a son of a wealthy button manufacturer. His father enrolled him in the American School of Berlin, but he was expelled because he chose to dream about photography, swimming, and girls instead of completing his schoolwork. Later on in 1936, Newton started working on his career as a photographer and became an apprentice at the studio of the famous and well known Berlin photographer Yva, whose real name is Elsie Simon. He completed his placement after two years. Because of the great pressure of the National Socialists on the Jewish society, he left Germany in 1938 to go to Singapore, where he accepts a position as a photojournalist for the *Singapore Straits Times*. However, he was fired two weeks later due to

incompetence.¹ After spending a couple of years in Singapore without work, trying to “sleep himself” through life, he lost any professional ambition. He had indifferent opinions about photography.

In 1940, being only 20 years old, he got carried off to an Australian internment camp. As there was a change of government, he left the camp and after he was discharged from the army, Newton first changed his name from “Helmut Neustaedter” into “Helmut Newton” and then opened a small photography studio in Melbourne.

In 1948, Newton married the actress June Brunell, which started in 1970 her own photography career under the name of Alice Springs.

Newton began contributing fashion photos to French *Vogue* in 1961 and continued to do so for twenty-five years. During this time, he also was a regular fashion contributor to *Linea Italiana*, *Queen*, *Nova*, *Jardin des Modes*, *Marie-Claire*, *Elle*, and American, Italian and German *Vogue*.

Introduction

Helmut Newton recently had an exhibition in the NRW-Forum, Düsseldorf, Germany to celebrate his eightieth birthday. It was called *Helmut Newton-Work* and it included his 200 favourite pictures from the three most important areas - fashion, nudes and portraits- from his last forty years of work, but arranged by his wife, June Brunell, who is said to have a major impact on Newton’s photography.

As his work has fascinated me over several years and I had shown great interest in this photographer from the moment I first saw his work, for me the pictures presented in the exhibition were unbelievable fascinating and they held my attention for ages. I looked at every detail and interpreted them and made up my own little stories, to find out what lies behind these pictures. They really impressed me and inspired me, giving me lots of ideas I would like to try out in photography myself. Photography is a great method to mediate and convey messages, ideas and emotions. For as I know that to give a photo the right expression you have to be talented and skilled, I can say that Helmut Newton is one of the most talented photographer, as he creates such an extensive and controversial work. However, I should add that, from what I have read of Helmut Newton himself, I am disgusted by him, his character and his beliefs, but this does not change my opinion about his work as I am still fascinated by his pictures. I am thrilled of the way he uses his surrounding to create this famous and special atmosphere in his pictures and often caught myself wishing to be set into pose by him one time.

People’s opinions however, tend to be different when it comes to Newton’s work. Some people, mainly women, feel offended by his pictures or at least are not happy about the idea Newton uses to mediate his messages.

I went to the exhibition with my mum and afterwards we both argued about which of these pictures should be allowed to be published and which should not, and we certainly did not come to an agreement where the line is, that should not be crossed.

“The phenomenon Newton would be not conceivable without the women’s movement.”

¹ <http://www.temple.edu/photo/photographers/spring03/photographers/heatherprice/newton/biography.html>

(Bild)

The women's movement has developed and grown during the period of Helmut Newton's career. Now feminist criticism is established in universities, in parts of the media, and in the minds of many people in everyday life. Whilst I really enjoy Helmut Newton's work I am aware of feminist criticism of it. Many of them title his work as voyeuristic and pornographic. It is in the context of these ideas and theories that I need to work out my own thoughts.

“This woman cannot run away, not even before Newton's fantasies.”²

(Alice Schwarzer)

There have been many writers and commentators on Helmut Newton's work, but I have decided to focus on the writing of Alice Schwarzer, whose words are quoted above. For me, these anti-Newton writings represent the best known and most extreme reaction against the photographer's work, especially in Germany.

Is Helmut Newton's photography artistic or pornographic? This is my research question.

My hypothesis and thesis and argument is that Helmut Newton's work is not pornographic. My belief is that the answer to this question lies with each individual. Therefore, I will argue that the photographs are not pornographic for me. However, Alice Schwarzer made it very clear, that they are indeed pornographic to her, and it is also clear that she would like to persuade me and all her other readers to take the same view. For me, I am not interested in trying to persuade others what to think, but simply, in exploring my own responses to the work. In this way, I feel that I am close to Helmut Newton's own point of view in that his art is made for himself.

Main Body / Development

Pictures can influence the perception of the true reality better and more effective than words. This concept was already followed by the Old Testament picture prohibition, which consists of the commandment “Thy shall not make for yourself an idol³”. However, this did not mean, that there was no allowance for art, as the religious started to use symbols (such as the white dove symbolises the Holly Spirit) to make their point. Pictures transport messages and raise emotions. And in our modern media society the dependence of simple visual perception and its power increases.

The actual meaning of a picture, however lies rather in what kind of different details in the photo cause different feelings in our selves than just its outer look. That is why the meaning and the emotional message is dependent on the person who is looking at the picture, as the personal perception and the experience of life play a major role in deciding what we observe as reality. This person then may decide, whether the artwork he or she is looking at is artistic or not.

Deciding on whether something is artistic, we first have to define the word art. Although today there is no universally accepted definition of art⁴, I would define art as an imitation of reality and an expression of what the artist feels. An artistic arrangement, design etc. therefore

² <http://www.aliceschwarzer.de/content/c1052749630440.html>

³ Bible, Exodus 20,4

⁴ John L. Tomkinson, *The Enterprise Of Knowledge*

looks attractive and has been done with skill and imagination.⁵ Our interest in art involves aesthetic evaluation, which might be positive or negative. Not just the viewers but also certain artists have different opinions of what is beautiful and artistic and how it should be expressed. Although Newton does not want to be seen as an artist (“this fine-art crap is killing photography, in my vocabulary, art is a dirty word.”⁶), looking at my definition of art and his statement “I use what God gives me, but arrange the world the way I like it.”⁷ would prove him wrong, as God gives the reality and Newton’s feelings arrange his own world.

It is said that an artist develops his own style through a creative reputation. For the artist therefore a sure measurement of achievement is, when the work produced continues to stay in our minds even a long time after we first got into contact with the works surface charms. There are many people, that see these surface charms as a barrier from looking deeper into Newton’s photographs. For them, his pictures still cause accusations of sexual voyeurism. In today’s life, nude pictures involving any kind of human being whether black or white, young or old, stand in the shadow of political and moral disapproval it could never hope to support. But why criticising and abusing Newton’s work as voyeurism, if it is said that distance generates mystery and enchantment?⁸ Though it is not just Newton's own work that bashes people, but more or less his influence, the influence on the viewer, the outside, the society.

Newton is said to be one of the best fashion photographers of his time. He often surprises us with work that goes far beyond what an magazine editor would require. It all began in Paris in 1961, when he started his career at the French *Vogue*. It is a well known fashion magazine for women, that often shows the way women are looked at. A few years later, the simple fashion photos became more taboo-breaking as he used implications of bestiality⁹. One example of this is the series he produced in the American *Vogue* in 1975. There, women with metal chains were presented in leather cloths, the reputation of fashion being clean and light was destroyed by a single picture series showing dirt and dark colours on the skinny bodies of the female models. Although the women were so powerful illustrated, they had a sense of submissiveness to the viewer. These pictures were telling a story, a story that was different from mind to mind. It was different to what people were used to. This was not just fashion photography anymore. It was new and it was created by Newton.

Fashion photography started in the early 20th century and is said to create an image of the society, reflecting the reality and creating an important role that women play in it. It is used to sell the product that it displays, using the agency of temptation and the desire they inspire. From the start, fashion photography had close similarities with portraiture and it was not clear, where the dividing line between these two categories laid. But as no other photographer did, Newton succeeds in overshooting these lines between fashion and portraiture, combining it with nudity and nearly dissolve these lines, so that there is no clear difference anymore. It is not simple to classify a picture of Newton’s to a particular genre, as it often happens that a fashion photo is nude, a nude is fashion and also portrait at the same time. It seems like Newton really enjoys playing with these genres, making it not clear to the viewer which one it belongs to. These created images constantly evoke contradictions. Real and artificial, feminine and masculine, subject and object, nude and dressed, are just some of them.

(PICTURES)

⁵ Longman Dictionary of contemporary English

⁶ http://www.rpadel.dircon.co.uk/rp_helmut_newton.htm

⁷ http://www.rpadel.dircon.co.uk/rp_helmut_newton.htm

⁸ Helmut Newton, Autobiografie

⁹ http://www.rpadel.dircon.co.uk/rp_helmut_newton.htm

Women that are once dressed and then undressed again, in the same situations and poses, great, large images of nude women executed in series (such as the "Big Nudes", "Naked and Dressed", "Domestic Nudes") - he developed an infinitive repertoire. Infinitive are also the different poses and situations the models are shown. No other photographer has ever shown the female body in so many different ways, though with the help of unusual material, leaving many imaginary situations, desires and stories, which do all evoke and express his life (and ours) in a miraculous way. This is not typical and certainly not required in fashion photography, however, it is what makes Newton's work so unique over the past time and compared to other artists work. Therefore we can say, that Newton has always been much more than a fashion photographer not only, because he created this own unique style but also because he insists that concept is more important than cloths.¹⁰ He became one of the most famous star photographers in every way. Politician, actors, artist – everyone wants to be set into pose by the master of the oppressive fantasy. He portrayed people from every kind of political and aesthetic matter: Helmut Kohl in front of the German oak, Gerhard Schroeder in front of a brick wall, Andy Warhol in bed and Anthony Hopkins with an evil but mystical look. For me all these different pictures show that he is definitely a figurative artist who has the skill of using the medium of photography to create a unique imaginative world.

(PICTURES)

A remarkable change to the view of fashion photography happened in the years between the sixties and eighties. In this decade years of extreme creativity and productivity were created and it was during these years that the unique originality of Helmut Newton's vision took shape, that is to always try to find a new concept of beauty. In his tending to be aggressive and provocative photos, Newton reached the point where he displayed the difference between the sexes to such an extent that many parts of the society, mainly feminists, titled him with the presumption of misogyny and grouped together to make a clear stand against him. Although Newton always tried to imagine and visualise women exactly as they are. He seems to be interested especially in presenting those women that are not following but leading themselves, women, that desire and love whomever and whenever they like, most important in whatever way they like. He shows women that have command upon their own bodies and are free and willing to present them in this powerful way, that he is most famous for, women who are both responsible and willing.¹¹ Newton insists on the question: "How do we see the women?" Definitively, he has already left his answer for the world.

The phenomena Newton would also not be considerable without the women's liberation. Looking at Newton's work from the beginning, one can see that parallel to his development of photography in the past forty years, the women rights and therefore their self-confidence has also changed. Women became more self-confident and independent and claim their rights of their own body. This development is visible in the art work of Newton. Whereas the women in Newton's photos from the 70s and the beginning of the 80s look less confident with their eyes slightly to the floor looking bashful into the camera, the women of the 80s and 90s radiate self-confidence. A development that Newton could not influence. Looking at that perspective, one could see Newton's work as a mirror of our time, reflecting the past and the history.

(PICTURES)

Accused of treating them like objects, called misogynous, porno-chic or perverted, the photographer has never been afraid of crossing the frontiers between moral and aesthetic and in his way, reinvent concepts such as the feminine, eroticism, sexuality and power. Ironically, it is the feminine side, that accuses and dislikes Newton and his work the most, although it is

¹⁰ www.uol.com.br/modabrasil/london_link/english/helmut

¹¹ *Helmut Newton – Work*, Taschen

him who seems to command and admire women to a great extent, just as he wants the viewer to admire and love them.

The war between the sexes

(PICTURES)

One woman became very famous because she raised her voice against this man, that uses the power of popularity and might to present his fantasy, feelings and thoughts in a way that no one else has done before, using the female body to illustrate all sorts of situations. Here, we are talking about a war between the sexes, a war that has not found an end yet. It is an continues back and forth in propaganda and cross propaganda between the most famous photographer, Helmut Newton, and the most famous German feminist Alice Schwarzer. It is she who accuses him of supplying propaganda material to this war of sexes, giving higher doses year after year.

Alice Schwarzer was born in 1942 in Wuppertal, Germany. She lived with her grandparents, who took great care of her. It is said that she had the best relationship with her granddad, that she had ever had with a man. In 1970 she became a member of the Paris women's liberation (Mouvement de Liberation des femmes, MLF). After she moved back from France to Germany, she then became a liberal author until the 26. January 1977 where she found *EMMA*. *EMMA* is a bi-monthly magazine that comes out the last Thursday of every even month. It is available in every German-speaking country at large news-stands. Read by about 120.000 people *EMMA* is the only magazine for women published by women in Europe. Until now, Schwarzer is still its editor-in-chief and publisher. She has written many books and articles, where she mentioned the work of Helmut Newton, where she asked other women to stand up for the women's right and especially, to stand against this so-called voyeuristic photographer, Helmut Newton. One article is directly written about Newton's work. It was published in *EMMA* 6/1993 and also in Schwarzer's book "Alice in the men's world – an interim balance"¹². In this article, Alice Schwarzer definitely makes her point and opinion clear. There is no sympathy to Newton, no admiration, not a single positive statement. She lists every point that she can mention in a negative way and finds interesting methods to relate his voyeuristic, sadistic and pornographic work to Newton's past. It happens in her article, that she draws the readers attention to the fact, that Helmut Newton is descended from a Jewish family and that his first photography teacher, the by him admired and famous Yva (whose real name was Else Simon), was later murdered in Auschwitz. She relates this fact to his alleged sadistic and black fantasy and is shocked that any respect and honour and pride is missing to what has happened to the Jews in the second world war. She says that his fantasy world is full of offenders in uniform or pinstripes and victims, that have the meaningful expression of being strong. Tall, blond girls, shiny black slaves and greedy mistress, that wait for their masters to get broken down. Basically she is not wrong in saying this as he indeed said in his autobiography, that he was fascinated by the domina and prostitutes and the dark atmosphere that surrounds them at the time he was living in London (1957). But Schwarzer does not only want to explain what sort of women, in her opinion, Newton presents, but she wants to build a connection between his passion for cruel, dominating but beautiful women and his past, the fact that he is Jewish and grew up in a time where pictures were made to produce propaganda. Hitler used posters and pictures to show the Germans whom they shall like and whom they should not pointing at the Jews and declaring them as bad. These pictures showed Jewish people, looking like criminals, explaining the German nation that this is how the people look like that can be ridiculed, carried off and killed. This equation forms a courageous thesis. But, however, you can feel her anti-sympathy for Newton, as she is

¹² = „Alice im Männerland – eine Zwischenbilanz“ (Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2002)

stunned about the phantasm Newton publishes, where no picture is the product of a better one, only showing the tortured view in the own chasm¹³. She has the opinion, that Newton's pictures do not disturb but confirm the existing relations in a world of violence, war and torture. Newton's pictures are comparable with the fantasy of men and the awe with which the male imagination regards all women. He shows the insecure men a strong, powerful and demanding woman, and these pictures do not ask "productive questions" but give straight answers to the modern society – therefore they are pure pornography (Schwarzer).

Pornography, that is what Schwarzer sees in Newton's work. Pictures, that are made by humans of humans, have an effect of their social and psychological reality – where it does not matter whether it is a pornographic, racist or anti-Semitic picture.¹⁴ According to the law, however, representations are only pornographic, if they cause sexual state of arousal to the viewer and at the same time go beyond the agreed limits of the social values to the sexual sense of decency.¹⁵ This would mean, that this paragraph serves to the general feeling for decency but not for the safety of the women's dignity. A point that makes Schwarzer despair. Over and over again she makes that clear. But not only through words, speeches, written articles and books, but also through legal movements she raises her voice to emphasise the importance of this topic. In 1978, Alice Schwarzer sued the German magazine *Stern* for offence against §823 BGB¹⁶, that says "Who offends intentionally or negligently the life, body, health, freedom, ownership or any other right of another in any way, is obligated to compensate the victim for the arised damage". It was simply the publication of some of Newton's pictures, (In July 1977 the *Stern* published a picture showing a naked female backside placed on a bike's saddle; in March 1978 a naked woman on the beach, covered with sand on the decisive parts of the body; and in April 1978 it was the publication of a picture showing a black female, naked, holding a microphone in her hand, however, being tied up in heavy, metal chains) that caused Schwarzer and many other women to go to court and to sue the *Stern*. The statement of claim of Schwarzer's side said, that not only the way and manner of the presentation, but also the summery shows that there is a simple system behind it: The representation of women as an instrument of power. Schwarzer had the opinion she had deciphered a global, male conspiracy, based on a "gentlemen's agreement" not to see women as actors but as objects of male controlled art. She also accused Newton to be the leader of this egoistic and little-caring male party, for as not many are as talented and as cold at the same time as he is. However, Schwarzer lost the conflict. The judge saw no conclusive element in Schwarzer's allegation, more or less because the plaintiffs could not be in force of the personal violation of own law. Women as a group are not able to be collectively insulted, so the judge. The plaintiffs should present their concern to the legislator, as he went on.

And that is what she followed the next few years. Her aim is to gain a law against the production, spreading and possession of pornography. In other words: The censorship of Pornography. She demands more rights for women, the right for women to stand up against the pornographic representation of women by artists such as Newton, to stand up for the dignity of (wo-)men with all strengths, because pornography is the propaganda for the degradation of women and has nothing to do with morality (Schwarzer). Following that concept, at the end of the 1987, EMMA got the Anti-Porn-Campaign started under the name *PorNO*, led by Alice Schwarzer. Being a representative of this campaign means you have to agree with Mrs Schwarzer's opinion that pornography does support the violence on women and children, as pornography displays women in a humiliated position or rather as pornography is the humiliated act against women. It gives a picture of women that are human beings of second rank, born to be victims, just good enough to be used, taken, raped, and

¹³ „Alice im Männerland – eine Zwischenbilanz“ (Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2002)

¹⁴ Alice Schwarzer, EMMA 12/1987

¹⁵ German law, §184 StGB Strafrechtliches Gesetzbuch (=Criminal/Penal Civil Code)

¹⁶ German law, §823 Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch (=Civil Code)

tortured. According to EMMA¹⁷, pornographic pictures and movies give rise to the pressure and constraint for women to give themselves away to this humiliation. But the actual centre of the campaign against pornography lies in the argument that “Pornography causes violence”. And it is so much more than just the expression of the brutality as a whole. To strengthen her thesis, Schwarzer always follows the same pattern when writing her articles. Although still seen morally wrong, women who show their body for published pictures or sell sex are still allowed to continue their trade. Schwarzer asks the women why this has been allowed to continue and gives a straight and simple answer: men.

Conclusion

Is Helmut Newton’s photography artistic or pornographic? Working on this research question whilst looking at the developed war between Newton and the feminist Schwarzer was really interesting and had taught me many things I had not known before. I have to say it was difficult criticising Newton’s work from the perspective of Schwarzer, as I do not share her opinion. Studying the feminist view on Newton’s work did not hold me away from the belief that his work is fantastic and by all means artistic indeed. Though I do understand what causes Schwarzer’s anxiety, I still do not agree with how she tries to persuade others to acquire her opinion and do not see any value in her argument. However, I respect her opinion for as my belief is, that every individual has to decide on his or her own whether Newton’s work is artistic or pornographic.

Art is just the presentation of the visions and fantasies, emotions and thoughts of an artist and should not be doubted by outstanding people, for as I think that Newton only shows the forbidden desire, no one else dares to talk about, whether male or female but still captures in his/her mind.

“I use what God gives me, but arrange the world the way I like it.”¹⁸
(Helmut Newton)

Appendix

The following pictures are added for the reader of this written piece to decide for his or her own whether Helmut Newton’s photography is pornographic or artistic.
(PICTURES)

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¹⁷ EMMA Sonderband 5, page 6f

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