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Representing Women: Women in Visual Culture

*Claudine à l'école* was an ingenious piece of literature to be released when it did. It took the turn-of-the-century Paris by storm, even though it was just a story of a schoolgirl living in Burgundian village. The initially credited author of the books, Henry “Willy” Gauthier-Villars made some pretty penny off of this book, as well as the three other installments that followed it. The thing about the Claudine series is the fact that they were not written by Willy. In fact, these books were written by his own wife. Famously known a Colette, she was neither given a part of the earnings the books made nor was she given the credits to writing the books until she proved her mettle as a writer and took it by force.

From Mary Shelly to Bronte sisters, to Jane Austen, to J.K. Rowling, women always had to work twice as hard as a man to make a name for themselves in the creative world. If we turn towards the visual culture, the mere thought of feminism in the field was considered a work of fiction. Take Christo for example. Christo and Jeanne-Claude are one of the most dynamic duos and well-known names in the art industry. Their projects, the insight they put into their art pieces and the finesse they execute with the fleeting pieces of art are truly legendary. While they were rather famously known for their work and the fact that the husband-wife duo worked together on most of their projects, the credit of their work was mostly affiliated to Christo alone. This is because Jeanne-Claude though that the world will not be as accepting of their art if a women’s name was put up right next to Christo.

Whether you talk about critics, theorists, historians, artists and even activists, all had to prove themselves to the world in order to make an impact on the masses. Amelia Jones, in her book *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader,* takes a dive into the very topic, dissecting the issue and looking for ways that can change the focus of feminism in visual culture and alter the perspective placed on it by culture and media. One of the strongest examples that come to mind when we think about feminism in visual culture is the stance taken by Gloria Steinem. Not only was she an influential political-social activist of her time who was known for changing the view of the world on liberal feminism, her choice to place Wonder Women on the very first edition of *“Ms. Magazine”* was controversial and awe-worthy at the very same time.

At this time, the Wonder Women was a controversial subject, given the turn its author has chosen to give it. Steinem played a significant role in restoring Wonder Women and Diana Prince to her former glory, pushing it back in the limelight. This herald the change of a strong narrative change, which gave female artists the room to express themselves. This is probably the reason why, in an age where superhero blockbuster movies are all the rage, the revival of Wonder Women, Captain Marvel and Supergirl have taken the world by storm. Add in the fact that these productions, especially Wonder Women, is one of the very first blockbuster productions to be directed by a female director, Patty Jenkins, is simply the icing on the cake. These movies are as intrinsically tied to the idea of the feminine identity and the power they possess, as their male counterparts are to the male identity.

Over the past decade, changes in visual culture are making more and more room for women. It is more accepting, as well as accommodating of female creativity. However, the recent bough of sexism in politics has surfaced as a threat to a culture that promoted feminism on all levels of cultural and social development. With the former presidential candidate and the current president of the USA being as vocal about objectifying women and choosing to vilify them as opposed to highlighting their issues just shows how much of a setback it can be to progress made so far to the progress visual culture has made over the years. In order to prevent the setback, the raging social media debate has culminated in a number of women’s march ever since President Trump moved into the White House.

While the outreach of women in media culture is only growing every day, women are also at risk of being the prime targets of digital violence. This is a timeless event that has been brewing in the back burner for a very long time and has not been brought into the light until very recently. Steinem has been famously known to have quoted the fact that back in the day, women having to silently suffer through sexual harassment at the workplace was a norm. The idea that they had a job in the first place was more than enough to keep them quiet about the topic. Similarly, women being objectified and subjected to sexual harassment and sexual violation, including non-consensual sex and even rape, in Hollywood was another norm that was silently accepted by actresses. Men could advance their career easily on the basis of their merit and their finesse as actors, directors, or whatever field of creative arts they chose to pursue. However, women would have to suffer from sexual violence to get anywhere. While it was not always the case, it was usually attributed as the reason behind a women’s success in the industry.

The recent movements, in the form of #MeToo, #WhyIStayed, #TheEmptyChair, and #beenrapedneverreported have made it possible to come forth and put their stories in the light. It hs taken away the stigma associated with the success of a woman in visual culture. Furthermore, these movements have been brilliantly received by the masses and the women that have chosen to come forth have been applauded. And that is not all, the men accused, such as Harvey Weinstein, have been appropriately slandered and punished for their role in the matter. This has improved the situation and made it easier for women to actively participate in adding to and developing the media culture.

Works Cited

Jones, A. *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Taylor and Francis, 2009, https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=XQyxmgEACAAJ.