

*Structured to move from a particular controversy—Kim Kardashian’s nude selfie—to the larger questions it raises, Milne’s essay stages a conversation between critics about the relationship of photography to gender and self-presentation in the twenty-first century. (Instructor: Lane Anderson)*

## NO LONGER A PASSIVE SUBJECT: THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF THE NUDE SELFIE

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To be on display is to have the surface of one’s own skin, the hairs of one’s own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress.  
— John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (54)

**I**n the televised *Ways of Seeing*, visual arts theorist and critic John Berger speaks about fine art, focusing on depictions of female nudity. Although photography is arguably the primary visual medium through which we now communicate, many of Berger’s theories about the interaction of art, subject, and audience are still applicable. Berger begins *Ways of Seeing* by explaining that women were the principal and enduring subject of nude paintings. He delineates between simply being naked and being nude in the context of aesthetic art. Whereas being naked allows a woman to be wholly herself, being nude renders her as a sight to be seen by another who is dressed. According to Berger, “a nude has to be seen as an object in order to be a nude” (“Episode 2”). Most nudes have been lined up for the pleasure and judgment of a male proprietor; those who are judged beautiful become owned and available. The nude becomes a sign of submission to the proprietor’s demands. In today’s image- and media-saturated world, the female nude remains a popular subject. However, the increased accessibility of art means that it is often ordinary people—women, the ‘subjects’—who hold the power and drive the creative direction of such work, even producing it themselves. Arguably, photography and its position within social media have democratized

the female nude to the point where Berger's analyses are no longer indiscriminately applicable. Can women transcend his definition as merely 'passive' subjects in depictions of nudity? Can they instead use their own photographs to reclaim their own narrative and sexuality?

To explore these statements and thus perhaps problematize Berger's work, I will examine the nude photograph Kim Kardashian posted to her personal Instagram and Twitter account on March 7, 2016. The photograph depicts Kardashian posed nude in front of a mirror and focuses almost entirely on her famous and well-documented curves. The image is not pornographic in nature—the composition, Kardashian's expression, and her humorous caption, "When you're like I have nothing to wear LOL" (Kardashian)—places it more in the realm of an intimate artistic nude. Kardashian is a social media star whose career depends in part on her ability to create controversial and conversation-provoking content, so posting this nude selfie may have been a concerted effort to rise above a constant stream of digitized content and generate attention. As such, Kardashian's performance was successful. The response was enormous and immediate: commentary, controversy, attention from individuals and media platforms alike. The image was lauded and decried in turn, and the discourse moved to a consideration of female sexuality and the representation of women in media. Harriet Harman, former deputy leader of the U.K.'s Labour party, commented, "there's a kind of bravery and pioneering spirit" in Kardashian's image (Burnett). However, not everyone has shared this view—Kardashian faced backlash for behaving inappropriately, revealing too much, and acting in a way that was unsophisticated and unbecoming of a mother. Fellow celebrity Chloë Grace Moretz tweeted at Kardashian, "I hope you realize how important setting goals are for young women, teaching them we have so much more to offer than our bodies" (qtd. in Moon). Similarly negative sentiments echoed across the Internet.

Given that the nude female body has been appearing in media since the advent of art, what is it about Kardashian's selfie that provokes such disparagement? What does that response say about the way modern women can or cannot use photography as a tool for empowerment? John Berger's theories on the painted nude seem applicable in this circumstance: "You painted a naked woman because

you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting ‘vanity,’ thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure” (*Ways of Seeing* 51). Viewers of Kardashian’s photograph condemn her for her enjoyment and celebration of her own naked body. Historically, in the periods Berger discusses, women had no agency over the way they were depicted and represented. Contemporaneously, however, women can exercise some such agency, but this is still subject to the demands of the patriarchal gaze Berger describes. Arguably, it is the fact that Kardashian exercises agency outside of the space society has designated for her, thus controlling the depiction of her sexuality, that acts against dominant historical norms and causes such controversy. Kardashian is a celebrity who has made her living by performing for a public fascinated and excited by her body and its propensity to be seen as a sexual object.

However, many members of that same audience consider it impermissible for her to reclaim and repurpose this sexuality in an exaggerated and playful way. In her essay “In Plato’s Cave,” Susan Sontag describes the act of photography as one with the capacity to “presume, intrude, trespass, distort, exploit” (9). She links this quality with that of the camera as a tool for perversion, for acting out fantasies that are both “plausible and inappropriate” (9). To illustrate this correlation, she references movies including *Peeping Tom* (1960) and *Blowup* (1966), both of which utilize cameras to execute literal or metaphorical violence against female protagonists. These images graphically and intentionally illustrate Berger’s propositions about the subjugation of female bodies by men through art. A more salient point is that movies like *Peeping Tom* and *Blowup* receive respect and critical acclaim, whilst the image of Kardashian is critiqued.

An apt contemporary illustration of this kind of violence is the public reaction to leaked naked photos of female celebrities. Vanessa Hudgens and Jennifer Lawrence, women of similar public standing to Kardashian, have privately taken nude selfies, which were released publicly without their consent. As with Kardashian, these images created an Internet firestorm, but one of a different tone: these images were forwarded, circulated, crowded over by the (male) public. A cursory Google search will reveal entire websites—vanessahudgens-

nude.org, celebsunmasked.com—with headlines such as “YES! Vanessa Hudgens NUDE Pictures Leaked!” These outlets position the images as titillating, sexy, exciting, and focus far more on their potential as masturbation aids than on the morals of their subjects. It could be argued that when a woman is in control of these sorts of images—consenting to or even enjoying her own sexualized representation in the public forum, like Kardashian and unlike Hudgens and Lawrence—then that representation suddenly becomes unacceptable. This follows Berger’s theories about the patriarchal understanding of the nude, and how one must satisfy the male gaze in order to obtain validity and legitimacy. These public reactions demonstrate that it is the context as well as the content itself that make up this satisfaction. Kardashian is criticized for having the “mirror in her hand,” or, as it may be, having a mirror in front of her (Berger, “Episode 2”).

Sontag refers to this phenomenon as the “camera as phallus” (10). When the metaphorical instrument of male desire becomes repurposed by a female subject, when the sexualized image ceases to covertly titillate its audience first and foremost, and instead works as a transparent, intentional addition to discourse on the female body, the audience decries it.

Can Kardashian’s photograph—which operates in a space of self-awareness and self-reference—transcend Sontag’s theory of exploitation, as well as Berger’s ideas of the female nude? Is she really showing how the power of photography, by virtue of its position in social media, can be used by women to subvert and counter dominant, oppressive norms related to their representation? In both Sontag and Berger’s works, the idea circles around the artist’s ability to exert a measure of force. The artist may utilize their subject(s) to showcase their own artistic vision, to promote their own agenda, or perhaps to participate in the economic circulation of images, motivated by personal gain of a more material kind. However, the fact that Kardashian created this image—that it is still wildly popular, and thus successful personal marketing—indicates that perhaps by seizing back control with enough conviction, women are able to reject this dominant paradigm.

Kim Kardashian rose to fame and notoriety on the back of a leaked sex tape and has since maintained her position in the public eye

in some part due to her famous curves, which she showcases in a way that plays directly into what her audience wants. The photograph in question is self-referential in the extreme. From her caption to the focus on her famous figure, it fits with the image of herself Kardashian has created, capitalized on, and has a vested interest in perpetuating. One could say that this selfie is in fact a complete distillation of her personal brand and message. It's a reductive encapsulation, perhaps, but an encapsulation nonetheless. The photo is Kim Kardashian's assertion of what she purports is the very essence of Kim Kardashian. She is the one who will ultimately profit from the attention and excitement it generates. When this image inevitably generates clicks, sells magazines, and encourages viewers, she will gain both capital and, more importantly, recognition.

Sontag claims: "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore, like power" (2). But in Kardashian's case the 'subject'—the other, the alterity, the objectified—becomes complicit in her own objectification. As exemplified by her selfie, the subject's intention is to commodify her physical form and fully realize this commodification in the final work of art. Kardashian's selfie would appear to subvert the traditional hierarchy of artist-over-model. More specifically, contrary to both Sontag's and Berger's assumptions, it subverts the tradition of male-artist-over-female-model. Thus, Kardashian's presentation of her own narrative through her selfie suggests that photography can, in fact, be used by women as a means of relaying their narratives and aims, a much more hopeful and modern assessment than that of Berger or Sontag.

What about this selfie allows it to transcend our understanding of the photographed as passive or exploited? Obviously, there is the fact that Kardashian took the image herself, with no other photographer holding power over her. However, there is arguably a particular aspect of this photograph that makes it perfectly representative of the way social media can be utilized to redirect and repurpose the portrayal of marginalized social bodies (in this case, female bodies). It involves the way the image combines public and private photography.

In her essay "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," critic bell hooks describes the ability of black people to take private pictures

of themselves as a way to “transcend the limits of the colonizing eye,” calling these images “counter-hegemonic” (60-61). Although the narratives of women and black people are not equivalent, a parallel can be drawn. For both these types of social bodies, private photos display a side of the subject that counters public, oppressive discourse. However, social media has allowed the nude selfie, a conventionally private photo, to transcend its boundaries and let women make these ‘representative’ discourses public.

Similarly, in his later work “The Uses of Photography,” John Berger remains hopeful about the revolutionary potential of photography, if only it can be harnessed correctly: “It is just possible that photography is the prophecy of a human memory yet to be socially and politically achieved” (57). The vital distinction between private and public photography is particularly important to Berger. He argues that private photographs—“the portrait of a mother, the picture of a daughter, a group photo of one’s team”—retain meaning because they have a context and thus “contribute to living memory” (“Uses” 51-52). By contrast, public photographs present strangeness. Thus, what is problematic, and needs to be challenged, is the public use of photographs. Kim Kardashian’s photograph can be considered a ‘public’ photograph and thus, according to Berger, cannot create meaningful social change. He says that it can only reinforce established views because of its lack of context. Berger asserts: “The contemporary public photograph usually presents an event, a seized set of appearances, which has nothing to do with its readers or with the original meaning of the event” (52). Arguably, Kardashian’s portrait stands in contrast to Berger’s ideas about the public photograph being ‘ripped’ from original meaning. Whilst it is clearly meant for public consumption—it is not an intimate personal photograph of the kind he would define as ‘private’—it nevertheless contributes to a living memory and is surrounded by, and carries its own, meaning. Kardashian’s photograph does freeze an individual event and appearance, thus supporting Berger’s critique of photography as appealing closely to our form of visual perception, that a photograph becomes the preferred means of isolating and fixing an event in memory. However, it seems inescapable that it directly references the surrounding context of

Kardashian's life. The context of her role as a celebrity figure cannot be ignored.

I would propose that Kardashian's selfie illustrates the idea that the wholly private image is rapidly becoming antiquated with the availability of social media, thus eroding Berger's binary understanding of public and private photography. Images that previously would have been understood as public can be part of an extenuating narrative, due to the public's ability to witness and participate in the lives of others via social media. These 'public' images can thus resonate and generate meaning just as 'private' ones do. This erosion, when occurring in images like Kardashian's selfie, can be utilized to further women's ability to claim control over their public portrayals.

The increasing public availability of private images is making it easier than ever for women to control representations of their bodies and sexuality in highly visible and effective ways. However, it must be conceded that this may be a privilege afforded only to images of (recognizable) westerners, or, to be more precise, celebrities. Given that these subjects already have a discernible public identity prior to being photographed, images of them are a reinforcement for or a supplement to their pre-existing public personas. Kim Kardashian is still considered an autonomous being irrespective of this photo, illustrative as it may be. Berger describes a private photograph's power as being "read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it," and Kardashian's decidedly public photograph also fulfills this function (51). Her images are read in the context of her reality show, her Instagram feed, and her published book of selfies. However, for unrecognizable or unremarkable faces, a portrait can be seen to reduce, rather than supplement, identity. To an observer, there is no extenuating personhood or narrative, merely what is captured in a still image. Without the contextual information that we automatically call up when looking at a celebrity, a photograph becomes a summation of its subject's entire existence. To the viewer, that person is not a person because "photographs in themselves do not narrate. Photographs preserve instant appearances" (51). Therefore, whilst it is perhaps admirable for Kardashian to reinforce and simultaneously repurpose her public identity, it is worth recognizing that

other people operate within limitations that prevent them from doing the same.

Kim Kardashian's selfie exemplifies the ways in which modern media, and social media in particular, democratize photography and blur the boundaries between its private and public uses. As Sontag says: "Photography is not practiced by most people as an art. It is mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool" (5). I believe the importance of this shift lies in its redistribution of power to the subjects, allowing them the immediate ability to craft and cultivate their own image and to control how their narrative is presented to the world. As such, women are, more than ever, capable of reclaiming their own identities, whether they are performed or not, thus rejecting the previous passiveness and exploitation that both Berger and Sontag present. Although this power is still unavailable to those most marginalized, who do not have access to the visibility and resources that people like Kardashian command, public photographs are starting to act in the same way that Berger claims only private ones do: as a "memento from a life being lived" ("Uses" 52).

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