

Foucauldian and Feminist Analyses of Bellocq's Storyville Photographs

CP 1510S: Contemporary
Theories of Photography
Professor L. Kaplan
April 22, 2003
Wendy Walgate

In 1970, twenty years after his death, an unknown photographer named Ernest J. Bellocq received a prestigious one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art. Photographer Lee Friedlander had recovered Bellocq's original glass negatives in a New Orleans junk shop and from them printed a series of photographs which received overwhelming public and critical response. As a result of this exhibition, Bellocq became one of the world's best known photographers of prostitutes.¹ Rex Rose wrote that "these portraits sharply capture a raw chaotic space of humanity, necessity and sexuality, pushing Bellocq's work beyond his half-hearted attempts at pictorialism to the cusp of modernity."² The delicate glass plates had emerged from a half-century of obscurity and neglect to become and remain a celebrated icon of early modernist American photography. As a result of the exhibition and publication of Bellocq's work, Janet Malcolm stated that "modernism . . . transformed his humble productions into the arrogant objects of twentieth-century advanced art."³ By avoiding the romanticized style of photography that was so prevalent and popular during his lifetime, Bellocq's work has now come to be critically viewed as "reflexively modernist."⁴

Originally photographed around 1912, Bellocq's unpretentious work featured clothed and naked prostitutes from "Storyville", a legalized 'red light' district in New Orleans, Louisiana. Little is known of Bellocq's personal life and therefore little can be said as to how it may or may not have informed his work. In the absence of any real information, his physical shortcomings, noted below, and superficial comparisons to Toulouse-Lautrec, appear in some of the critical commentary about his work.⁵

¹ R. Rose. "The Last Days of Ernest J. Bellocq," *Exquisite Corpse: A Journal of Letters and Life*, Issue 10, www.corpse.org/issue_10/gallery/bellocq/.

² Rose. "Last Days."

³ J. Malcolm. "The Real Thing," *The New York Review of Books*, January 9, 1997.

⁴ Rose. "Last Days."

⁵ Malcolm. "Real".

Since his irruption into the New York art world in 1970, many writers have speculated on the purpose, function, context and meaning of his images, either by reading them as having been informed by contemporary historical facts or through some other critical “lens.” This essay is an exercise offering dual analyses of Bellocq’s works as exemplifying on one hand Foucauldian power relations and on the other hand, using feminist theory to view the work as representing the objectification of women in a masculine society.

Foucauldian Analysis

Bellocq’s surviving Storyville photographs attest to a “new will to power” which John Tagg argued was emerging in the late nineteenth century.⁶ This body of work is a visual representation of what was a dynamic relationship exemplifying the Foucauldian theory of knowledge, control and utility.⁷ Residents, or “inmates” of state licensed houses of prostitution openly offered their bodies and their images in photographic likeness, as vehicles of power in a system of reciprocal social and economic productivity. This interdependency or “micro-physics” included the prostitute as commodity, the pimp as agent or broker, and the madam as landlord. The state’s role was exercised through the process of licensing and taxation, and enforced by the police who overlooked infractions for a price. Linked to this activity was the owner of the house of prostitution, usually a Creole aristocrat and city politicians who benefited in various ways from the tax base and tourist trade.⁸ Al Rose also mentions the services of rat-catchers, furniture dealers who would rent the costly furnishings needed to impress the customers, lawyers, clothing and shoe salesmen, newsboys who directed customers to the houses, druggists who supplied opium and cocaine and the jazz musicians who provided entertainment in the bordellos. As Rose

⁶ J. Tagg. *The Burden of Representation*. Macmillan Education, 87.

⁷ Tagg. *Burden*, 87.

⁸ A. Rose. *Storyville, New Orleans: Being an Authentic, Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red-Light District*. (Alabama: U. of Alabama Press, 1974) 29.

puts it most vividly “a very large part of the New Orleans public was, directly or indirectly, a huge collective whore.”⁹

Large-scale prostitution in New Orleans began when it was a new French colony under Louis XIV and Louis XV in the 1700s. The French monarchy arranged to have female outcasts from French society shipped over to service new French immigrants to Louisiana. As partner in this enterprise, the U.S. based Mississippi Company acted as “white slavers” and procured gypsies and disreputable women to send to Louisiana as “colonists.”¹⁰ A 1721 account by Charles Gayarré details a shipment of eighty girls who originated from La Salpêtrière correctional institution in Paris, who were to become wives of French Canadian immigrants. Since the immigrants were considered “the very scum and refuse of Canada,” the imported French women were supposed to take the place of the Indian females that the French Canadians apparently preferred.¹¹

Foucault states that in the 1830s, the “conventional” family became an “indispensable instrument of political control and economic regulation for the subjugation of the urban proletariat.”¹² By the late Victorian period, sexuality was strictly confined to the home, where the “single *locus* for procreation” was the parent’s bedroom.¹³ Not only bedrooms but entire districts had to be protected from rampant sexuality. Citizens of New Orleans lobbied against brothels that popped up overnight in their neighbourhoods and lowered their property values. Illegitimate or perverse sexual practices which were unacceptable in Victorian bedrooms and respectable housing districts had to be re-integrated as activities within a civil system, so authorities licensed and confined prostitution to a specific district, Storyville.

⁹ Rose. *Storyville*, 30.

¹⁰ Rose. *Storyville*, 5.

¹¹ Rose. *Storyville*, 5.

¹² M. Foucault. *History of Sexuality*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 122.

¹³ Foucault. *Sexuality*, 3.

This district operated from 1898 to 1917 and was defined by law as the only place in New Orleans that “lewd and abandoned women” could live and work.¹⁴ By accepting financial and “in kind” kick-backs from the bordellos, local police and government officials contributed to the development of Storyville, which stemmed from the trend of Victorian sexual repression. In 1857, property owners and religious groups lobbied the local government to pass a law requiring licenses for houses of prostitution.¹⁵ The exorbitant fee of one hundred and one dollars was charged and the businesses had to pay taxes as a result of being registered. Not only did this type of documentation aid in policing the districts’ population, but it made the profession a contributing element to the economic base of the city.

A technique of observation-domination used to control prostitutes involved turn of the century public health debates on sanitation and hygiene. Shannon Bell states that the prostitute’s body was territorialized as an “object of inquiry”¹⁶ and women in poor health could be isolated for long periods of time hospitals, as illustrated in one of Bellocq’s photographs. (Fig. 1) Foucault states “sexuality was a medicalizable object,”¹⁷ and the medical system was responsible for “pathologising”¹⁸ the bodies of prostitutes. An 1892 issue of the New Orleans *Mascot* stated:

. . . many of the demi-monde are diseased, yet ply their trade just the same. The consequence is that growing boys and young men contract contagious diseases which can be suppressed, but which remain in the blood . . . The evil consequences spread further, for when they marry those affections of the blood are transmitted to their children.¹⁹

By monitoring the health of prostitutes, who were perceived as the source, and not just the intermediary of disease, authorities protected the reproductive abilities and economic future of their population.

¹⁴ Rose. *Storyville*, ix.

¹⁵ Rose. *Storyville*, 8.

¹⁶ S. Bell. *Reading, Writing & Rewriting the Prostitute Body*. (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1994) 41.

¹⁷ Foucault. *Sexuality*, 44.

¹⁸ Tagg. *Burden*, 66.

¹⁹ Rose. *Storyville*, 37.

The meaning of the Bellocq photographs is located in the “regime of power-knowledge-pleasure”²⁰ which in terms of sexuality, suggests that men, parents and doctors hold the power, whereas women, children and patients do not.²¹ Pleasure is derived for man by applying a power that both monitors and pursues the women prostitutes. However, Foucault believes that power-knowledge not only works its way down from the top, but operates in “matrices of transformations.”²² The Storyville women may have been subject to the control of pimps, johns, madams and the police, but within the institution of the Mahogany Hall brothel itself, women could in turn control and influence their prominent clients. As an example of Tagg’s statement that there is no power without resistance,²³ women prostitutes exhibited the pleasure that comes from evading or challenging power by scandalizing locals with parades, wild dresses and outrageous public behaviour.

Foucault states that sexuality is the lynchpin and transfer point for relations of power between men and women, young and old and priests and the laity.²⁴ In fact, Bellocq’s brother was a Jesuit priest and a theory that was raised in Louis Malle’s 1978 film *Pretty Baby* suggests that he violently scratched out the faces on several of the glass negatives to either hide the identity of the models or to “exorcise” the offensive material.²⁵ For Foucault, religious confessions represent a form of knowledge-power or *scientia sexualis*.²⁶ With his Creole Catholic background and Jesuit schooling, Bellocq could be said to be performing a type of confession by way of the photograph, which was a fixed, public admission of his enjoyment and

²⁰ Foucault. *Sexuality*, 11.

²¹ Foucault. *Sexuality*, 99.

²² Foucault. *Sexuality*, 99.

²³ Tagg. *Burden*, 93.

²⁴ Foucault. *Sexuality*, 103.

²⁵ M. Bartelik. “Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville, the Red Light District of New Orleans,” *Print*, July-Aug. 1997, 28. This theory is contested by Lee Friedlander who did tests on the plates that prove that the emulsion was wet when it was scratched. Either Bellocq did it himself, or possibly one of the women scratched them. See N. Goldin, “Bellocq Époque,” *Artforum International*, May 1977. 142.

²⁶ Foucault. *Sexuality*, 58.

exploitation of prostitutes. If Bellocq himself was responsible for the defacement of the plates, then this may have been motivated by guilt, love or respect for his models.

Although taken inside the bedrooms and parlours of Lulu White's Mahogany Hall,²⁷ these images appear to deny the feminist 'procedure of objectification and subjection'²⁸ which might otherwise be read into them as simple pornography. Instead, the innate will of women working within the system is demonstrated. Bellocq's images speak of the strength and resilience of women led by degraded power relationships, to rebuild them with their one privileged source, their bodies. They appear to be women who could be bought but not owned, women who took while giving.

As a Panopticon of pleasure, organized houses of prostitution allowed the gaze of the "madam" as seller, the "john" as buyer and the paternalistic gaze of the state to efficiently observe the actions of the female inmates. In return, framed photographic images of the women displayed on the walls of the bordello became part of the business of observation and confrontation and operated as John Tagg has stated, as sites of power.²⁹ (Fig. 2)

The format of Bellocq's images ranges from formal, seated portraiture, to mildly seductive, erotic nudity to casual "Kodak moment" photos of girls interacting with their pets. (Fig. 3) (Fig. 4) Bellocq took these photographs in front of hastily arranged backdrops, suggesting in a single image both the theatricality and transience of the trade in sex. Whether the women chose their own poses or were posed by Bellocq, or both together in some collaborative way, the viewer can discern power relations which "penetrate the body . . . without depending even on the subject's own representations."³⁰

²⁷ N. Goldin. "Bellocq Époque," *Artforum International*, May 1977. 91.

²⁸ Tagg. *Burden*, 92.

²⁹ G. Batchen. *Burning with Desire*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) 188.

³⁰ Batchen. *Burning*, 196.

In one of this series of photographs, a young woman grins at the viewer, posed with her robe lowered and her breasts exposed in front of a white backdrop. What appears to be a tree trunk is to the right of the figure, presumably holding up the backdrop sheet. (Fig. 5) Since Bellocq's commercial photographs of public monuments, sports teams and graduation classes were always cropped and framed, it may be assumed that the incongruous assortment of information on the margins of this photograph were intended to be cropped and reframed, perhaps to show only neck and face. The outdoor scene that we see now, with breasts exposed, may have been a playful interlude between photographer and subject, which would disappear in the formal setting of a parlour photograph. The final print of the photograph might have been intended to meet any number of societal conventions of framing and display, but the photographic glass negative evidences both a pleasure and a power relationship between photographer and subject.

Bellocq retained his fragile glass plate negatives from the Storyville photographs in a wooden trunk until his death. Speculation on his motives for taking these photographs range from personal gratification to commercial gain. A resident of New Orleans, Joe Sanarens, who actually visited Bellocq and witnessed his collection of glass plates, stated that Bellocq had pointed out a favourite model to him named Adele and had told Sanarens that the "nudes were just for his own."³¹

John Szarkowski appears to disagree with Sanaren's recollections and suggests that these photographs were a commercial assignment by Bellocq so that the women subjects might seek work in a better house or use the photographs as erotica to encourage customers.³² Al Rose suggests that photographs similar to the Storyville photographs were published in the "Blue

³¹ J. Szarkowski. *Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville*. (New York: Random House, 1996) 74.

³² Szarkowski. *Bellocq*, 76.

Books” which catalogued local brothels for the benefit of travelers. Whatever the purpose of the images might be it would be true that posting photographs on the walls of the brothel, allowed the women to be inspected and compared by Bellocq, customers, management and even by themselves as commodities for hire.

Foucault has written that, “the relationship between sex and power is characterized by repression.”³³ This, too, is a feature of the world inhabited and photographed by Bellocq. Prostitutes could be arrested for working outside the Storyville area.³⁴ A suitable state response to the issue of confinement of the residents of Storyville was surveillance which could be achieved by documenting them photographically, as John Tagg states, “as a means of record and a source of ‘evidence’ for medical, legal and personal files.”³⁵ However, Bellocq’s photographs do not appear to be sterile, strictly administrative documents and offer the viewer some ambiguities between the information that is perceived and represented to the viewer.

Janet Malcolm and John Maklansky have each questioned our perception that the women in the Storyville photographs are actually prostitutes. For example, Bellocq photographed one woman sitting primly with a high buttoned blouse, closed with a cameo and wearing an expensive-looking feather hat. (Fig. 6) The only indication to her reduced circumstances is the clothing drying on a line behind the backdrop of the photo. If this photograph was cropped and matted properly, there would be no indication to the viewer that she was anything but, as Malcolm states, “a respectable woman.”³⁶ John Maklansky reports that when he studied contemporary police files of prostitutes, he found no resemblances to Bellocq’s models.³⁷ It is also interesting to note that Victorian “vignetting” of some of Bellocq’s photographs would have

³³ Foucault. *Sexuality*, 8.

³⁴ Goldin. “Bellocq,” 91.

³⁵ Tagg. *Burden*, 66.

³⁶ Malcolm. “Real”.

³⁷ Bartelik. Bellocq, 28.

changed our notion of the identity of the subject, and it is only by viewing the entire negative, something private to the photographer, that the viewer begins to assign the women the character of prostitutes and, therefore, persons on the fringes of society.³⁸

Treating the photographs as ‘shop window’ display is a mode of cultural production which John Tagg relates to specific “conditions of existence.”³⁹ In turn of the century New Orleans, erotically charged photographs of prostitutes were commonly displayed in saloons for men to browse while eating and drinking. These images, subjects of the unreturnable⁴⁰ male gaze, both created appetite, and suggested a method of satisfying it.

One of Bellocq’s models spoke of the number and types of “dirty pictures” that were taken of them, stating that “there were so many taken, that I don’t know why they’re so scarce.”⁴¹ Although providing opportunity for voyeurism, Bellocq refrained from explicit sexual portrayal of his subjects and favoured subdued compositions, involving women posed standing, seated on chairs, or lying on couches. As Susan Sontag observes, the women are photographed in “homely circumstances that affirm both sensuality and domestic ease.”⁴²

The fact that many of the photographs show women smiling at the camera is suggestive of willing participation in the societal system of surveillance and control. These smiles, no matter how real or artificial they may have been, no doubt eased the consciences of patrons and encouraged business. The relaxed attitudes and willing expressions of Bellocq’s subjects may also indicate his perhaps unique position of neutrality within the Storyville community. As a physically unthreatening male,⁴³ he may have had been allowed freer access than paying

³⁸ S.S. Phillips. “Identifying the Criminal,” *Police Pictures*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books) 29.

³⁹ Batchen. *Burning*, 196.

⁴⁰ Tagg. *Burden*, 85.

⁴¹ Szarkowski, *Bellocq*, 79.

⁴² S. Sontag. “Introduction,” *Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville*. (New York: Random House, 1996) 8.

⁴³ During Szarkowski’s interview, Bellocq’s contemporaries describe a very short, bald male with an unusually large head. *Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville*. (New York: Random House, 1996) 71. S. Maklansky and Al Rose.

customers. We can speculate that he may have bartered his photographs for intimacy, or even allowed himself to be favoured as a “mascot” of a given house of prostitution, or the district itself. It has been speculated that the physical deformities which made Bellocq outcast in conventional society, may have given him something in common with prostitutes who were pariahs of civilized Victorian culture.⁴⁴ A simpler reading would be that Bellocq was a well-liked customer and friend of the prostitutes whose comfort and familiarity with their bodies, attitudes and social position may have resulted in what appears to be the welcoming body language of the subjects.

In 1917, New Orleans followed what Foucault calls modern Puritanism, which imposed “its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence and silence”⁴⁵ by making prostitution illegal once more. The U.S. Navy deemed Storyville too close to their naval base but gave no alternatives for relocation. This governmental action took place directly before World War I. Since the base was preparing its armed forces for combat, Storyville must have been viewed as too much of a distraction. According to Foucault, the government would have repressed the sexual activity of its soldiers because “it is incompatible with the intensive work imperative, which was being systematically exploited.”⁴⁶

One of the local madams, Gertrude Dix legally contested the Navy’s ruling to close Storyville by stating the district was a legal entity that ensured the “protection of public morals and public health, good order and the peace of the community.”⁴⁷ By closing down Storyville, the state demonstrated its power through prohibition, censorship and denial⁴⁸ of the acts of

found a photograph of Bellocq as “dapper”, normal-sized man. J. Malcolm. “The Real Thing,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 9, 1997.

⁴⁴ J.L. Ruby. “Letter re: Bellocq’s Women,” *The New York Review of Books*, March 6, 1997

⁴⁵ Foucault. *Sexuality*, 5.

⁴⁶ Foucault. *Sexuality*, 1.

⁴⁷ Rose. *Storyville*, 47.

⁴⁸ Foucault. *Sexuality*, 10.

prostitution that would subsequently take place embedded furtively within society. Censorship and denial was evident in the public library files, which Al Rose tried to use for his history of Storyville. He found that newspapers and periodicals had been vandalized “by persons who had a stake in suppressing the information.”⁴⁹ The power of the illustrated women, who had moved from prostitution by marriage into high society, may have resulted in the censorship of the printed knowledge of Storyville.

Feminist Perspective

From a feminist point of view, Bellocq’s photographs portray these women as an index of their culture and society or, as Rosalind Kraus states, “a kind of deposit of the real itself.”⁵⁰ To understand the purpose of the photographs using feminist analysis, one must look behind the smiling faces of Bellocq’s women, to reveal their real life circumstances. In her memoirs, Nell Kimball, a New Orleans madam who was contemporary to Bellocq, describes the background of many prostitutes:

Most of the girls who went into the parlour houses had found themselves in the city, hungry, no job, no rent money, clothes getting tattered. Whoring . . . was better than going blind in sweat shop sewing, or twenty hours’ work as a kitchen drudge, or housemaid, with the old man and the sons always laying for you in the hallway with their flies open. Wages were low for women in the town, and no one had much respect for a girl who had to work. Believe me, it’s the Good People who exploit poor girls who made a lot of whores. . . The parlour house did have a good side . . . seeing and enjoying things different from their mothers bent over a hot stove all day, a half dozen dirty-nosed kids dragging at her skirts, and a husband who never bathed, treating her like a breeding sow till often he began eyeing his daughters.⁵¹

Similarly, Dr. Leonore Tiefer comments that “modern day sex industry workers, like all women, are striving for economic survival and a decent life, and if feminism means anything it

⁴⁹ Rose. *Storyville*, ix.

⁵⁰ Batchen. *Burning*, 196.

⁵¹ N. Kimball. *Nell Kimball: Her Life as an American Madam*, (London: Granada, 1981) 273.

means sisterhood and solidarity with these women”.⁵²

In contemporary feminist theory, the purpose of these images may be explored through three theoretical positions: gender feminism, liberal feminism and pro-sex feminism.⁵³ A reading of the photographs from the point of view of gender feminism suggests that they are an expression of male culture which illustrate the commodification and exploitation of women.⁵⁴ Liberal feminism might interpret the photographs, produced in an era of legalized prostitution, as suggesting an element of choice. It might be deduced that the women’s choice of participation in decriminalized prostitution exhibited the liberating principle of “a woman’s body, a woman’s right” within a legitimate industry.⁵⁵ Pro-sex feminism would interpret Bellocq’s photography and the labour or work of prostitution as producing value for the women illustrated, their viewers and for Bellocq, himself.⁵⁶

Looking at these theories again, in greater detail, gender feminism would interpret Bellocq’s work as objectification of women who have already been cast off by the patriarchal, capitalist structure of Victorian society. In one of Bellocq’s photographs, a naked woman sits on a chair, surrounded by ‘fin de siecle’ bedroom décor. Her face is masked, either by choice or by Bellocq himself in posing the photograph. (Fig. 7) Modernist photographers such as Edward Weston believed that cropping the face or removing the subject’s gaze from the viewer, served to isolate the body as a study of pure form. The negation of the subject’s accusing gaze allows the viewer-voyeur to consume the image without interference. Bellocq’s masking of a prostitute’s

⁵² Wendy McElroy, “A Feminist Defense of Pornography,” *Free Inquiry*, on-line at: http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/mcelroy_17_4.html.

⁵³ McElroy. Feminist.

⁵⁴ McElroy. Feminist.

⁵⁵ McElroy. Feminist.

⁵⁶ McElroy. Feminist.

face could be a comment on sexual act itself within the world of prostitution, which exchanges money for use of particular parts of a body, to the exclusion of others, such as the mind.

Aggressive, apparently violent scratches deface some of Bellocq's plates. These too could be described as an act designed to obliterate or mask the subject's gaze, permanently. Janet Malcolm believes that 'negated faces' impart lewdness and illicitness to the women's bodies.⁵⁷ The apparent force of the scratches makes an emotional statement intent on obliterating the identity, memory, meaning and gaze of the woman in the image. (Fig. 8) The woman in this photograph is placed in an awkward and vulnerable position, splayed against the wall in an unflattering pose. Removal of her facial features emphasizes the objectification of her body as a commodity.

Shannon suggests that in the masculinist regime, "men create the world from their own point of view, which then becomes the truth to be described."⁵⁸ In legal language of 1890s New Orleans, prostitutes are consistently referred to as "notoriously lewd and abandoned women."⁵⁹ This attitude, that female sexuality is 'notorious' and that women 'abandoned' by family or society were inferior and possessed inherent weakness is evident in the writing of Stephen Longstreet who began his research on prostitutes and jazz players in New Orleans in the 1930s. In his book on "sportin' houses" he writes:

Sociological study has shown that poverty, laziness, neurotic flaws, and often just the wish to please some man was what made whores in New Orleans, as elsewhere. Few were driven by flaming sexual needs, not many got any ecstatic reaction or pleasure for all their moaning . . . orgasm-racked tarts could hardly keep in business. Their nervous systems would have shattered, to say nothing of the physical conditions of girls and women who in the low-rivers cribs took on forty to fifty customers a night.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Malcolm. "Real".

⁵⁸ S. Bell. *Reading, Writing & Rewriting the Prostitute Body*. (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1994) 81.

⁵⁹ Rose. *Storyville*, 189.

⁶⁰ S. Longstreet. *Sportin' House*. (Los Angeles, Sherbourne Press, 1965) 82.

In spite of their agreeable demeanor, the women captured on Bellocq's glass plates were part of an industry that enslaved and destroyed the lives of young girls for the sake of male pleasure. In her memoir, Nell Kimball details the illegal importation by ship to San Francisco of loads of young girls from China.⁶¹ One shipment, labeled "dishware", contained forty-four girls from the ages of eight to thirteen years and was passed by authorities who had been bribed. These young girls were shipped all over the U.S. to serve as prostitute/slaves in Chinese "cribs" or brothels. It was rumoured that Bellocq did a series of unrecovered photographs of the opium dens in the "Chinatown" of New Orleans, and no doubt he witnessed the involvement of young girls in these activities. One of his photographs portrays a younger girl with long, unstylized hair, posed rather stiffly on a wicker lounge. (Fig. 9) Lying on her side and facing out at the camera, a shadow falls over her resigned and stoical expression, while her body exhibits the physical development of a twelve or thirteen year old girl. Of all Bellocq's published works, this one in particular conveys to a modern viewer a sense of inappropriateness on the part of the photographer and of genuine reluctance on the part of the subject. The image seems to reinforce the gender feminist principle that "prostitution cannot be voluntary in a racist, sexist, capitalist, patriarchal social field."⁶²

According to liberal feminism, the prostitute "does not sell herself or her body . . . she sells a sexual service." Nell Kimbell wrote that the women in her brothel could make between one hundred and fifty and two hundred and fifty dollars a week.⁶³ For an impoverished, young girl, this was undoubtedly a large sum of money at the time. Profitable brothels in New Orleans were furnished with marble and bronze sculptures, oil paintings with heavy gold frames, Tiffany

⁶¹ Kimball. *Nell*, 269.

⁶² Bell. *Reading*, 81.

⁶³ Kimball. *Nell*, 277.

glass, mother-of-pearl inlaid bedsteads and silk drapery.⁶⁴ Women such as Nell Kimball, raised in morally strict and financially destitute rural conditions, saw in the brothel an opportunity to work and live a better class of life. Such an affluent lifestyle would not have been possible for these women if conventionally employed in backbreaking domestic labour or as factory workers.

A 1961 interview with eighty-one year old “Madam J.” from New Orleans, describes a resourceful woman who could function as a “poster-girl” for liberal feminism, as she chose to exploit the patriarchal system to excel.⁶⁵ In 1896, at sixteen years of age, she was involved in a public, sexual scandal in her hometown and her prospects were consequently “ruined.” She had come from a prominent family, and her father gave her one thousand dollars on the condition that she never return home. After arriving in New Orleans, she decided to start at the top and used her capital to finance a successful and profitable brothel. After years as a rich and powerful madam, she married two wealthy husbands in succession, who knew nothing of her past, and became active in public works. Madam J. overcame the stigmatization of Victorian morality and actually found liberation, wealth and power through the commodification of the female body.

For a liberal feminist, the censorship of pornography is generally frowned upon and women’s choice to speak and act freely is paramount. Pornography has been legally defined as the “sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or words.”⁶⁶ While the specific element of subordination is not explicit in Bellocq’s photographs, the social relations that led to the women being inmates of a brothel and therefore easily available to be photographed nude, could be interpreted as a form of subordination. Many of the photographs reflect the following characterization given to us by liberal feminist Sara Diamond:

⁶⁴ S. Longstreet. *Sportin’ House*. (Los Angeles, Sherbourne Press, 1965) 154.

⁶⁵ Rose. *Storyville*, 156.

⁶⁶ L. Duggan. “False Promises: Feminist Antipornography Legislation in the U.S.,” *Women Against Censorship*. (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1985) 132.

In daily life a woman's stance and facial expression communicate her sense of self, how she wants to be treated and what can be done to her. In pornography, the woman is often posed facing the viewer, her expression expectant or eager; or with her back to us, face turned over the shoulder to look at the viewer, waiting or even cowering submissively.⁶⁷

The historic charm of Bellocq's surviving Storyville work, coupled with the acquiescence revealed by the women's features, could lead a modern audience to classify this work not as pornography, but as mere erotica. Janet Malcolm states that Bellocq's work seems to be "least suited to be read as the site of gender collision or of sexual arousal" and that Bellocq neither objectifies his models nor assigns them a specific role.⁶⁸

Given the demeanor of Bellocq's subjects, his work may be interpreted as being empathetic, atypical of the traditional male gaze and illustrating a "reciprocity that flowed between him and his subject."⁶⁹ The pleasant, domestic atmosphere in the photographs suggests that the women freely chose to participate either clothed or naked. Whether they were paid by Bellocq to pose, or traded services with him, as Nan Goldin puts it, "Bellocq never betrays his respectful and nonjudgmental position in his portrayal of the women."⁷⁰ Liberal feminists would approve of the non-violent eroticism of Bellocq's works and the comfortable, trusting relationship between subject and photographer they depict.

The pro-sex feminist perspective, often held by current or former sex-workers, recommends that every woman has the right to define what is degrading and liberating for herself.⁷¹ McElroy suggests that pro-sex feminism or "rights discourse" insists "every peaceful choice a woman makes with her own body must be accorded full legal protection, if not

⁶⁷ S. Diamond. "Pornography: Image and Reality," *Women Against Censorship*. (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1985) 43.

⁶⁸ Bartelik. Bellocq, 28.

⁶⁹ Malcolm. "Real".

⁷⁰ Goldin. "Bellocq" 91.

⁷¹ McElroy. Feminist.

respect.”⁷² Behind a number of Bellocq’s women, the viewer can see other photographs mounted on walls and placed on fireplace mantels. Their prominent display indicates that these photographs were important to the illustrated women and helps to portray them as visions of female strength. The display of personal photographs suggests an innate sense of pride, appreciation of their own self and a desire for their colleagues and customers to appreciate their own beauty. Bellocq seems proud of his subjects and of his photographs of them. Appearing as part of his own domestic space, Bellocq arranged photographs of females, clothed and nude, with accompanying “knick-knacks” and clocks in the corner of his studio. (Fig. 10) This display may have been for customers to browse, or it may have been a personal tribute by Bellocq to his favourite subjects and friends.

Not only do the photographs suggest a sense of choice in the women but we, the viewer are confronted with “choosing” an interpretation of who and what the women represent to us. From their natural, relaxed gestures and kind, playful glances they do not seem to be coerced into the sex trade. Instead, Bellocq seems to function as a recorder documenting the authenticity, energy and individuality of these unique turn of the century women, who seem to enjoy who they are and what they are doing in front of the camera. Modern day “rights activist” Annie Sprinkle writes about the error of assigning a limited and judgmental reading to the vocation of prostitution:

As a prostitute I did feel used and really treated like shit, really taken advantage of. There were times when I was in total power. There were times when I received a lot. There were times when it was wonderful. I got in it for the money. But I also got in because I needed to be touched. I wanted the attention. I wanted the status. There are so many reasons. The problem is that everyone is always trying to simplify it.⁷³

⁷² McElroy. *Feminist*.

⁷³ S. Bell. *Reading, Writing & Rewriting the Prostitute Body*. (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1994) 109.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen that by applying Foucauldian theory, the subjects of the Bellocq Storyville photographs are part of a self-regulating power system which allows women to create their own power-knowledge base within that system. Their actions create reciprocal action with their contemporary society and this results in a sense of choice and power, even for women who are traditionally disrespected and minimized. Feminist theories, on the other hand, use many theoretical models to attempt to understand prostitution and the representations of prostitutes in text and image. Similar to Foucauldian theory, feminism states that women are controlled by both circumstance and society, yet it is possible for them to exert a positive counter-force of their own, even in a male-dominated culture.

Bellocq's photographs offer an inquiring view of Victorian women who by their poses and expressions lead the viewer to believe that they too, had a choice.

Bibliography

- Bartelik, M. "Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville, the Red Light District of New Orleans," *Print*, July-Aug. 1997.
- Batchen, G. *Burning with Desire*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999.
- Bell, S. *Reading, Writing & Rewriting the Prostitute Body*. Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1994.
- Diamond, S. "Pornography: Image and Reality," *Women Against Censorship*, Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1985.
- Duggan, L. "False Promises: Feminist Antipornography Legislation in the U.S.," *Women Against Censorship*, Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1985.
- Foucault, M. *History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Goldin, N. "Bellocq Époque," *Artforum International*, May 1977.
- Kimball, N. *Nell Kimball: Her Life as an American Madam*, London: Granada, 1981.
- Longstreet, S. *Sportin' House*, Los Angeles, Sherbourne Press, 1965.
- Malcolm, J. "The Real Thing," *The New York Review of Books*, January 9, 1997.
- McElroy, W. "A Feminist Defense of Pornography," *Free Inquiry*, on-line at: http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/mcelroy_17_4.html.
- Phillips, S.S. "Identifying the Criminal," *Police Pictures*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Rose, A. *Storyville, New Orleans: Being an Authentic, Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red-Light District*. Alabama: U. of Alabama Press, 1974.
- Rose, R. "The Last Days of Ernest J. Bellocq," *Exquisite Corpse: A Journal of Letters and Life*, Issue 10, www.corpse.org/issue_10/gallery/bellocq/.
- Ruby, J.L. "Letter re: Bellocq's Women," *The New York Review of Books*, March 6, 1997
- Sontag, S. "Introduction," *Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville*. New York: Random House, 1996.
- Szarkowski, J. ed. *Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville*. New York: Random House, 1996.
- Tagg, J. *The Burden of Representation*. Macmillan Education.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. J. Szarkowski, ed.
Bellocq: Photographs
from *Storyville*, (New York: Random
House, 1996) 13.



Fig. 2. J. Szarkowski, ed.
Bellocq: Photographs
from *Storyville*, (New York: Random
House, 1996) 12.



Fig. 3. J. Szarkowski, ed.
Bellocq: Photographs
from *Storyville*, (New York: Random
House, 1996) 27.



Fig. 4. J. Szarkowski, ed.
*Bellocq: Photographs
from Storyville*, (New York: Random
House, 1996) 19.



Fig. 5. J. Szarkowski, ed.
*Bellocq: Photographs
from Storyville*, (New York: Random
House, 1996) 33.



Fig. 6. J. Szarkowski, ed.
*Bellocq: Photographs
from Storyville*, (New York: Random
House, 1996) 25.



Fig. 7. J. Szarkowski, ed.
Bellocq: Photographs
from *Storyville*, (New York: Random
House, 1996) 39.



Fig. 8. J. Szarkowski, ed.
Bellocq: Photographs
from *Storyville*, (New York: Random
House, 1996) 60.



Fig. 9. J. Szarkowski, ed.
Bellocq: Photographs
from *Storyville*, (New York: Random
House, 1996) 55.

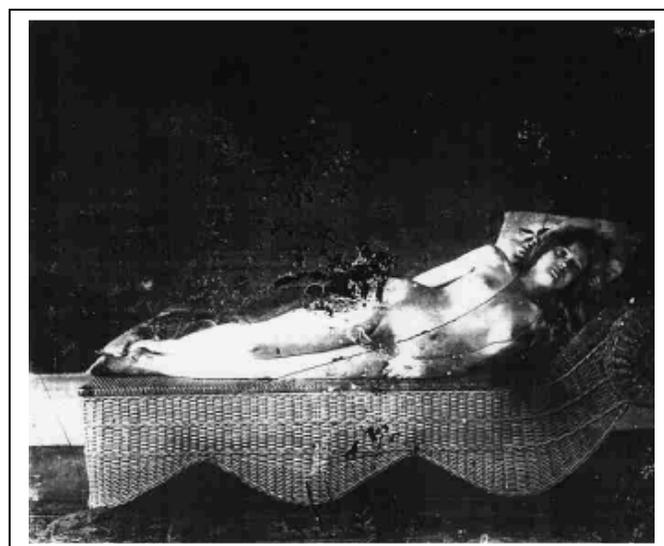


Fig. 10. A corner of the studio of Ernest Bellocq, about 1912/13. The painting in the centre is signed “Bryson – 1902.” *Storyville, New Orleans*. (Alabama: University of Alabama, 1974) 59.

