Sarah Niblock (London): “Prince’s 3rd Eye: Negotiating Masculinity through Style in a Digitized World”

Abstract

Since bursting onto the music scene 30 years ago, the pop icon Prince has used dandyism along with gender and ethnic ambiguity to disrupt conventional codes of masculinity, especially those promoted by the music industry. His celebrated attention to self-styling, right up to his untimely death in 2016, utilized a breath-taking, subversive array of politically-charged signifiers to create a confusing and provocative image. From a visual culture perspective, this presentation will fuse psychoanalytic theories of the gaze with discourses of gender and culture to analyse Prince’s stage costumes during the final two years of his life. Wearing screen-printed tunics bearing his own image with his ‘third-eye’ sunglasses Prince, it could be argued, was negotiating manufactured masculine identities in the highly technologized and rapidly changing environment of pop music. The images – those of Prince himself and the image he bears - while not of his own making in the sense of Cindy Sherman, are still “self-portraits” in the sense that they convey to the viewer the very subject who was responsible for staging the image. They work reciprocally to construct bodies and selves across the interpretive bridges that connect them. By wearing these tunics, Prince was not only encouraging an embrace of otherness both within and without the self, he could also be commenting on the fakery of mass-produced pop identities.