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CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Remembrance of things past: The cultural context and the rise and fall in the popularity of photographer David Hamilton

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Abstract: For 10 years, from the late 1960s, the France-based British photographer David Hamilton gained widespread public acclaim. His work appeared ubiquitous in popular culture, from photo shoots for *Vogue* to the publicity photography for the Nina Ricci perfume *L'Air du Temps*. His books, featuring soft focus imagery of young women in idyllic summer settings devoid of the symbols of modernity, became bestsellers in many countries, bought in their hundreds of thousands, and captured a romantic and escapist aesthetic of the time that influenced cultural products from advertising to fashion. This article examines his work and its public reception to explain both its initial phenomenal popularity and subsequent disregard. It is argued here that his photography provides insight into the cultural Zeitgeist of that early period and, by charting its reception, changing sociocultural sensibilities can be observed.

Subjects: Photography; Popular Culture; Sexuality - Gender Studies; Sociology of Media; Visual Culture

Keywords: The 1970s; photography; David Hamilton; *jeune filles en fleurs*; representation of women; popular culture

1. Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu argues in *Towards a Sociology of Photography* (1991, p. 31) that understanding a photograph “means not only recovering the meanings which it proclaims, that is, to a certain extent, the explicit intentions of the photographer, it also means deciphering the surplus of meaning which

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Since receiving his doctorate from the University of Oxford, Perry R. Hinton worked for many years as an academic in four British Universities, often as a member of an interdisciplinary team in the field of Communication, Culture and Media, primarily at Coventry University and Oxford Brookes University. He is currently working as a freelance academic author and researcher, and part-time tutor on the Language, Culture and Communication degree at Warwick University. He has written five books, published by Routledge, including *The Perception of People* (2015) and *Stereotypes, Cognition & Culture* (2000). His research is on the cultural context of media interpretation (with recent peer-reviewed articles on the interpretation of Japanese popular culture in Western media).

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

David Hamilton was a hugely popular photographer during the 1970s with his photography books becoming bestsellers around the world. His soft focus images of young women in print dresses and floppy hats in the summer sun of the south of France captured the public imagination as symbolic of romance. His work influenced contemporary fashion, advertising and commercial photography. Yet subsequently, his work fell out of public favour and he is now rarely mentioned in the history of photography. This article seeks to explain both his success and the reasons for his later public rejection, demonstrating how his work tapped into the 1970s Zeitgeist but later became out of kilter with public sensibilities. However, in the twenty-first century, his work has been briefly featured once again in a 1970s revival in modern fashion trends.

it *betrays* by being a part of the symbolism of an age ...” This paper examines the work of British photographer David Hamilton, and argues that his photographs symbolized a specific age, representing the romanticism of the early 1970s. Hamilton’s work was phenomenally successful during that time—capturing the aesthetic Zeitgeist of the period—but subsequently fell out of favour and now his photography is absent from the public domain where once it was ubiquitous. By analysing his photography, this paper examines the “surplus of meaning” in his work and argues that whilst his work is now rarely considered in the history of photography, it does, in Bourdieu’s term, “betray” a valuable insight into the aesthetic imagination of 1970s.

For 10 years from the late 1960s, David Hamilton was one of the most popular photographers in the world, with his photographic books bestsellers in many countries and his exhibitions appearing in galleries around the world. He gained a celebrity status and establishment acceptability, for example, in Tokyo his exhibition was attended by the British Ambassador (Hamilton, 1993). From his home near St Tropez in the south of France, he developed a distinctive, highly recognizable, style that became iconic of that era: soft focus, backlit images of young women in diaphanous outfits, relaxing within an Edwardian-style interior; or wearing floppy hats and floral print dresses amongst the flowers of the Provençal countryside in summer. His work was presented and promoted by the French photography magazine *Photo*, and provided the advertising imagery of the Nina Ricci perfume *L’Air du Temps*. This paper discusses Hamilton’s representation of “romance”, the use of the French term “jeune filles en fleurs” in the description of the young women in his photographs, and how these images achieved worldwide appeal at a time of sociocultural change. However, as 1970s romanticism was superseded by a diverse interplay of the personal and political in popular photography in the 1980s and 1990s, his later work conflicted with the changing cultural sensibilities, and also led to negative interpretations of his later publications. After the early 1980s, his photography disappeared from *Photo*, and subsequently his work hardly appeared in photographic magazines, with his photographs viewed as outmoded and criticized for their depiction of girls. As will be shown, in the twenty-first century, where there has been a nostalgic revival of interest in Hamilton’s photography, this interest has been highly selective around his early work within the context of a 1970s revival in modern fashion trends.

2. Jeune filles en fleurs

David Hamilton was born in London, England in 1933. He moved to Paris as a young man, working for *Elle* magazine. Later he worked for the store *Printemps*, taking up photography as a hobby. He bought a house in Ramatuelle near St Tropez in the 1960s and the area has served as the location of much of his work. In the late 1960s, his photography began to be published, particularly in the German magazine *Twen*, which, in 1969, presented his photo shoot of a young model accompanied by the words of the song *Suzanne* by singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen. With a retro-style interior, the languidness of the model and the link to Cohen’s popular song the images presented an idealized romantic scene, opposing the reality of late 1960s life. Hamilton adapted the “romantic, soft-focus technique” (Verwoert, 2001, p. 84) visible in *Twen*, a magazine replete with articles on sexual liberation and the counterculture. His distinctive imagery was rapidly picked up by French photography magazines, in particular the popular *Photo*, which combined glamour, fashion and photojournalism in its subject matter. In 1970, *Photo* showcased Hamilton and his work in a 20-page spread. Hamilton’s photographs were almost exclusively soft focus images of young women usually positioned against the light, in summer dresses and floppy hats, or partially nude, often with flowers,¹ and photographed in the natural light of the morning or late afternoon sunshine. These young women appeared to relax in a hermetic world of their own, dreaming in the warmth of a summer’s day. A headline from the article defined his work: “Le climat que m’inspire: le contre-jour des jeune filles en fleurs”. (Trans: The atmosphere that inspires me is backlit jeune filles en fleurs.) French magazine *Zoom* followed up a few months later with a 32 page spread, including text by Alain Robbe-Grillet, the writer and film-maker, promoting Hamilton’s work as a unique romantic style.

The reference to “jeune filles en fleurs” was not simply that Hamilton was speaking in French, but was establishing the linguistic message of his photographs (Barthes, 1977). The terms “jeune fille”

and “jeune fille en fleur” have a specific highly recognizable cultural meaning in France and French-speaking culture, and are not the “young girl” and “blossoming young girl” as girl children as a literal translation into English suggests. In French culture a jeune fille is a post-pubescent young woman, in her late teens or twenties, “blossoming” into independent womanhood (Hinton, 2016). A jeune fille en fleur can be viewed in English-speaking culture as a modern maiden, echoing the appealing “fair maid” of the British Romantic poets such as Keats and Shelley: an attractive young woman who, despite her inexperience, can be independent-minded, erotic and wilful. The jeune fille often featured in French cinema during the “Trente Glorieuses”, the 30 successful years after the Second World War, where a number of actresses famously played a jeune fille character: such as 22-year-old Brigitte Bardot playing 18-year-old Juliette Hardy in the 1956 film *Et Dieu ... Créa la Femme* (Le Pajolec, 2010), or 20-year-old Catherine Deneuve playing 16-year-old Geneviève Emery in *Les Parapluie de Cherberg* 1964 (McVay, 1967).

The cultural meaning of jeune filles en fleurs comes from the title of the second volume of Marcel Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), entitled *À l’Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, published in 1919 (which is directed translated as “in the shadow of blossoming young girls” but has a title of *Within a Budding Grove* in English to avoid confusion). Proust charts the life of the narrator Marcel, who, as a young man in the 1910s, vacations at the seaside resort of Balbec (modelled on Cabourg in Normandy). The jeune filles in question are a group of young women he meets there: Albertine Simonet and her girlfriends. They are dynamic and physical young women with an erotic appeal to Marcel. These are modern maidens at leisure: two carry golf clubs and Albertine pushes a bicycle. The “denoted image” (Barthes, 1977) of a young woman with a bicycle on a summer’s day became a familiar visual trope in Hamilton’s work. Marcel’s romantic interest is focused on Albertine. She is intriguing and complex, and knows her own mind: early in their relationship she boldly invites him to her hotel room, yet he also suspects her of lesbian relationships. Jacqueline Rose in her 2001 novel *Albertine*, based on the Proust character, portrays her as “ingénue and sophisticate” (Clark, 2001). In an adaptation of Proust’s work for French television in 2011, young Albertine was played by 22-year-old actress Caroline Tillet.

A man, captured by the beauty of the jeune fille, is likely to have his traditional expectations upset. Simone De Beauvoir argues that Bardot’s jeune fille character disrupts traditional male–female power relations (Tidd, 2004). Echoing ideas from Greek myth about the mind and body of the apparently fragile young woman, the jeune fille, such as the young Bardot, might enflame male desire as, for example, in the classical myth of the goddess Artemis, yet she also presents a challenge, as a powerful woman, to the men she encounters which may, like Actaeon, result in their demise. Indeed, in England, the revealing classical garb of Thorneycroft’s sculpture of *Artemis and her hound* (1880–1882) was taken up in the 1890s as a model of how the modern young woman should be free from the constraints of restrictive Victorian garments to engage in active pursuits such as bicycling (Faulkner, 2014). Hamilton’s images connoted these jeunes filles, appearing to live in a mythical world like Greek nymphs, into which he offered a window. In each highly constructed soft focus image, Hamilton sought to distinguish his semi-clad models from traditional glamour photography in that they neither embraced the male gaze nor, like Manet’s *Olympia*, challenge it. The viewer was positioned, as in the Victorian paintings of Tadema, Waterhouse and Leyton, as an observer—typically male and of the educated classes—and presented with captivating glimpses of young women in idyllic scenes for their aesthetic appreciation; yet these images also “connoted”, in Barthes’s term (Barthes, 1977), the emancipated modern maiden. It is these classical and cultural references that sought to elevate the image from the “primary” meaning of the purely erotic appeal of an attractive female body (for the male gaze). As Bourdieu (1984) argued, an artistic work is understood in terms of cultural schemes or codes in which the work is encoded providing its “secondary” meaning, where its aesthetic appreciation requires a viewer educated in these cultural codes.

The title of Hamilton’s first book, *Rêves de Jeune Filles* (Trans: “the dreams of jeune filles”) 1971,² specifically made this cultural connection, and also included a commentary by Robbe-Grillet eulogizing Hamilton’s work, which the readers of French *Photo* and *Zoom* would have recognized. A similar

second book *Les Demoiselles de Hamilton* (literally, “Hamilton’s maidens”, or *Sisters* as it was entitled in English) was published in 1972. From a twenty-first century perspective, these images may appear iconic of a 1970s aesthetic, yet a photograph, as Benjamin (1999) argues, is dialectical in that there is a complex relationship between the present (of the viewer) and the past (as represented in the image). Hamilton deliberately obfuscates the historical moment in his construction of a highly specific “moment”, blurring the image not just by the use of soft focus. The “that-has-been” or the “this happened” of the image (Barthes, 1981) presents a very specific “reality” of that moment for his contemporary audience. His images capture, not the 1970s southern France of cement factories and tourists, but a Provençal countryside devoid of all the elements of modernity. Hamilton’s interiors of chintz-filled villas present an Edwardian-style décor of antique furniture and Tiffany lamps. The young women in his photographs do not wear denim jeans, tee shirts, hooped earrings or Nancy Sinatra boots. His *jeune filles* dress in white cotton or wear vintage-style summer dresses in a stylish French resort—St Tropez in Provence rather than Cabourg—connoting Proust’s Albertine and her friends. Their clothes echo Albertine’s, as if plucked from grandma’s clothes chest, and worn casually and freely in the warmth of summer. Indeed, at the time, this clothing style was referred to as the “granny look” (Verwoert, 2001, p. 84). By selecting objects and clothes from the past Hamilton offers imagery symbolic of escape (Berger, 1980). In a conceit of the daily life of these *jeune filles en fleurs*, they luxuriate in a Provençal Shangri-La of an endless summer—living the bourgeois dream of a leisured life in the south of France. The young women gaze dreamily out of windows or into Art Nouveau mirrors. Sometimes they lie on beds with their eyes closed and appear to be sleeping, or are in the process of dressing. They sit and read or play the piano. Outdoors, in printed frocks with large straw hats and ribbons, they gather flowers in idyllic country settings, or watch as doves take flight about them. The *jeune filles* in these pages tended to be tall and willowy, blonde and Scandinavian, with the physique of fashion models, typified by 21-year-old Swedish Mona Kristensen, Hamilton’s muse (and sometime partner), who was to appear in many subsequent works. *Sisters* featured many images of two young women together (Kristensen and a fellow Swedish model who had a similar look), often sitting or lying in Hamilton-style villas amongst the soft cushions and filmy drapery. There are hints of Violette Leduc’s young lesbians, *Thérèse et Isabelle* (originally an unpublished section of her book *Ravages*, 1955, but then published as a separate novella in 1966). Whilst Hamilton denied this specific influence in his work in an interview with *Photo* (1970), he acknowledged an interest in the special friendship between such young women, and again these images connote the enigmatic Albertine and her friends.³

In 1972, he also published *La Danse* containing images of ballet dancers in the studio, mostly *jeune filles* but including a few images of male dancers, particularly the famous dancer Rudolf Nureyev featured in close-up. Unlike the poor working-class dancers of Degas, Hamilton’s *jeune filles* are leisured and cultured. They drink from china cups and saucers, they read, they play the piano, but they also engage in ballet training—something requiring hard work and dedication—indicating that they doing more than simply entertaining themselves. These *jeune filles* are learning to control their bodies, at the same time as displaying them, in a socially acceptable way. Ballet signifies high culture and establishment approval (Bourdieu, 1984). Ballet ultimately involves men and Hamilton allows a few men to populate the pages of *La Danse*: famous, and, with Nureyev, sexual ambiguity. The soft focus eroticism of these images, in Hamilton’s early books, presents the *jeune fille* as desirable yet also implies her heterosexual innocence (Verwoert, 2001).

Whilst certain cultural references to the *jeune fille* were not necessarily appreciated outside of French culture, Hamilton’s photography gained worldwide popularity, with his books selling exceptionally well in other European countries, especially Britain, and also in the United States of America, with his style of photography viewed as characterizing a widely appreciated—and desired—representation of romanticism. Hamilton’s images contained all the elements connoting romance in the contemporary theory of Northrop Frye: spring and summer, sunshine, flowers, which, for Frye, form the “idyllic world” or the mythos of summer (Frye, 1971, 1976). These elements comprise the archetype of Spring–Summer in Frye’s terminology of romance, where romance is an escape into innocence—where lies happiness, security and peace—with innocence connoting a return to the

uncorrupted Garden of Eden. Fyler puts it thus: “one of the most basic elements of romance, as Northrop Frye suggests, is a nostalgic yearning for an Edenic youth of erotic innocence” (Fyler, 2002, p. 32). Indeed, Hamilton’s young women appeared to exist in this uncorrupted mythical Eden. Yet, as a photographer, he is still reflecting his social world (Becker, 1974), but unlike the social documentary photographers of Becker’s interest, there were deliberately no references in Hamilton’s images to the Vietnam War, racial tensions, feminism or industrial strife. He presented his viewers with images symbolic of escape from their anxieties about modern life. Hamilton’s photography resonated with the hippie desire to escape from a dysfunctional present and to “get ourselves back to the garden”, as singer Joni Mitchell sang in her song *Woodstock* 1970. In this cultural context, his photographs had an appeal to young people as romantic images of that “garden”. Yet his idyllic “garden” was not a revolutionary and egalitarian commune built by the labour of its members, but the Provençal countryside in summer, populated by classically beautiful young women—that is, ethnically highly distinctive—living comfortably in luxury villas. His photographs contained a distinctly class-based aesthetic—comprising specific ideas of ethnicity and gender—that, rather than being revolutionary, appealed to bourgeois sensibilities in many Western countries (Bourdieu, 1984).

The books were hugely successful, not just in comparison to other photography books, but in absolute terms, with sales counted in the hundreds of thousands, with *Rêves de Jeune Filles*, for example, selling over a million copies (Baetens, 1995). During the first half of the 1970s, major booksellers promoted his work as they would a bestselling author. For example, the large Claude Gill bookshop in Oxford Street, central London, presented each new Hamilton photography book in its own special display by the front entrance. In 1973, when *Photo* magazine once again featured Hamilton, it was acknowledged that he had become one of the best-known photographers in the world with his images appearing in numerous magazines, such as *Vogue*, with strong demand for his work in Japan and the USA (*Photo*, 1973). Another successful photobook, *Souvenirs* was published in 1974, featuring more photographs clearly identifiable as “le style Hamilton” as *Photo* termed it. He had firmly established himself as a hugely popular photographer. His work became ubiquitous in magazines and could be bought in the form of posters, postcards and calendars—even printed on a tea tray—making his images a feature of the aesthetic *Zeitgeist* of the early 1970s. From the clothes of the Nina Companéez film *Faustine et le Bel Été*, 1972, set in a French summer, through to the dreamy mystery of Peter Weir’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 1975, popular culture echoed the Hamilton style. As Verwoert (2001) notes, even contemporary advertisements for the Ford Capri car and the German Social Democratic Party adopted the soft focus, romantic style.

In this cultural milieu, the images of Hamilton’s often scantily clad young models were read at the time as unambiguously—and acceptably—romantic. The widespread interpretation, or agreed meaning, of a photograph within a particular society—“the contract arrived at between creators and consumers” (Barthes, 1981, p. 28)—identifies, in Barthes term, the *studium* (Barthes, 1981, p. 26). Rather than an individual’s idiosyncratic interpretation of a particular photograph, the *studium* involves the societal meanings, which tend to become a polite—indeed, almost a dispassionate—interest. At the time, Hamilton’s photography was viewed as a safe and distinctly unthreatening romanticism. Given this view of Hamilton’s “elegant and romantic compositions” (Bertolotti, 2007, p. 199), it was not surprising for a British Ambassador to visit a Hamilton exhibition or for Hamilton himself to be accepted into establishment and celebrity circles.

Hamilton was given an exclusive contract to produce the publicity photographs for Nina Ricci’s *L’Air du Temps* perfume in 1970 (which lasted until 1990), establishing a specific brand image based on the Hamilton style (Kapferer, 1997). This indicated the breadth of Hamilton’s appeal—not only to men—in that here Hamilton’s imagery was specifically targeted at women. Marc Tagger the publicity director for the perfume at Nina Ricci wrote that Hamilton’s work: “symbolized the romantic dreams of many women. When the first publicity shots created by David Hamilton for *L’Air du Temps* appeared in 1970, the hippie movement ... had won over an entire generation which wanted nothing but to dream about life rather than to build it. Because of the climate of the time, the photographs became an instantaneous and immense success” (Tagger, 1993, p. 149). In 1976, a *Best of David*

Hamilton was published, with images drawn from his previous books and featuring many photographs of Mona Kristensen, including the cover image, where she sits demurely outdoors at a picnic table, wearing a pink sundress and a large sun hat, with a china cup and saucer at her hand—a bourgeois image of summer pleasure. Denise Couттès, in the introduction, explained Hamilton’s phenomenal success: “A deserted road in the South of France: two [jeune filles] lean on their bicycles and chat together in tranquility—time stands still ... David Hamilton has quietly imposed a fluid timelessness through which woman regains the natural beauty for which men yearn with wistful longing ... The public find this timeless beauty irresistible, and sees it as an escape from a hostile world” (Couттès, 1976, p. 7).

This idealized Arcadian idyll presented a romantic dream of women for women. The young women in Hamilton’s photographs, in their status as *jeune filles* had none of the responsibilities of wife, mother or work—and could relax in the summer of the south of France as a retreat from the hassles of ordinary life. Thus, Hamilton’s photographs (read as romantic) could be distinguished at the time from that of male-oriented glamour images and, as in his photography for *L’Air du Temps*, present images of young women that could have a strong emotional appeal to women as well as men. For Barthes (1981), the personal emotional reaction to a photograph, or a detail thereof, termed the *punctum*, “punctures” the surface of the generalized cultural interpretation to a reaction in terms of the individual’s own idiosyncratic experience and interests. For example, Hargreaves (2010) described the effect of Hamilton’s photographs on her, in *IT Post* magazine:

I used to be a very shy girl growing up and his photographs just took me to this fantasy place where unconventionally and classically beautiful teenage girls could live innocently in bohemian settings. The intimacy and various stages of undress only added a necessary frisson. I just fell in love with David Hamilton’s work and was immediately converted. It was a revelation and I saw nothing crude, pornographic or vulgar in his images, only compelling and intensely moving portraits in caressing pools of light.

As well as his own photobooks, and advertising images, Hamilton became known as a fashion photographer, with his photographic style popular in magazines such as *Vogue*. The young women in his work modelled a fashion style popular at the time, that of the “natural look” (Welters, 2008). Drawing on the hippie idea of “back to nature”, the style was a rejection of synthetic materials, heavy make-up and complex hairstyles. Plastic became a term meaning inauthentic and the opposite of natural. Hamilton’s models wore their hair loose, appeared to have no make-up and relaxed in white cotton chemises with embroidery detail or dressed in simple print or peasant-style dresses made from natural fibres. Presented in “nature” (the countryside or coast) or waking or sleeping, the nudity or partial nudity of the young women connoted a “natural” state, rather than something to be embarrassed about. The natural look represented nature, and “buying into it” gave the illusion of a more natural life style (Bourdieu, 1984; Welters, 2008). Like the nineteenth-century arts and crafts movement of William Morris, emphasizing the handmade and the “natural” offered an escape from the mechanized, multinational, mass production of modern life into an imaginary more “authentic” world. Hamilton’s *jeune filles* modelled both the fashion and the imagined life.

In 1977, Hamilton’s first film *Bilitis*, based on a Pierre Louÿs story, was released. It was Hamilton’s world of *jeune filles* brought to life. It starred the well-known actress, 26-year-old Patti D’Arbanville⁴ playing a *jeune fille* in the summer warmth of the South of France. Ironically, the older, sophisticated married woman, Melissa, with whom *Bilitis* (D’Arbanville) learns about love, was played by Mona Kristensen, in reality just a year her senior. To complete the ensemble, the memorable soundtrack was composed by the popular French composer and accordionist Frances Lai. The film was a success and the accompanying photobook added to the Hamilton oeuvre. As an indication of its popularity amongst young people, the film poster of *Bilitis* and Melissa became “an essential element in the decoration of teenagers’ bedrooms during the late 1970s” (Verwoert, 2001, p. 89). At this time, the French magazine *Lui* (1977, p. 107) wrote “for ten years David Hamilton has revealed to us the dreams of his *jeune filles en fleurs*”, acknowledging that Hamilton’s images had become universally

known. In 1978 *Photo* magazine celebrated “ten years of triumph” of “our star” (*Photo*, 1978, p. 46)—with a 34 page Hamilton spread. Hamilton had transformed his soft focus *jeune filles en fleurs* photography into a successful representation in cinematic form in *Bilitis*.

3. The demise of Hamilton’s popularity

In 1976, *Photo* magazine noted that Hamilton was varying his style. In that year he published the full colour album, *Private Collection*. Rather than young women in summer dresses picking flowers, these images were more overtly sexual, focusing on the woman’s naked body, even on occasion cropping the model’s head. Hamilton told *Photo* (1976, p. 23): “My public always wants the same thing. I don’t know if they will like these rawer, sexier images”. In addition, in 1978, *Photo* contrasted what they called the “classic” Hamilton with photographs classed as the “other” Hamilton. Under classic Hamilton, images from his latest book, *La Jeune Fille*, 1978, were presented. Focusing on individual girls, *La Jeune Fille* was a return to his previous style: here were the hats and the flowers missing in *Private Collection*, with fewer explicit nudes. The “other” Hamilton was a mix of images, but centred on “art photography”. He declared his love of black and white photography, particularly the work of Demarchy, Clarence White, Kuhn, Steiglitz and Steichen, with his own monochrome images of an archway and a girl in mid dance demonstrating this influence. He also acknowledged the influence of Avedon and Penn. “This genre of photography is the most recent. It is the opposite of pictorialism, of soft focus, the hats and the flowers”. stated *Photo* (1978, p. 68). Yet, in the final section *Photo* also showed some unpublished photographs of Hamilton’s work (such as Kristensen in a blue dress, a vase of flowers, fruit in a bowl) where the soft focus richness gave the images a painterly feel, seemingly not abandoning pictorialism at all but picking up the objects of the painter’s still life as subject matter.

Yet in the late 1970s, Hamilton was faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, his appeal was in highly specific imagery, of *jeune filles* in the summer sun which, as fashion and culture changed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was becoming like 1970s chintz—outmoded and clichéd. The very ubiquity of Hamilton’s soft focus images, their countless reproductions, may have made them lose their originality and authenticity (Benjamin, 1968). Yet changing his style risked alienating the audience of his work, breaking the “contract” between creator and consumer (Barthes, 1981). For example, although his photographs had appeared in men’s magazines such as *Playboy* and *Lui*, their soft focus, distinctive “romantic” style meant that they had been viewed as more than simply the objectification of young women by the erotic male gaze, and its wider appeal was promoted in *Photo*, and directed at women in the *L’Air Du Temps* advertising. Yet by making *Private Collection* “sexier”, emphasizing the male gaze, Hamilton had shifted this balance. Rather than symbolizing romance, Hamilton’s work was now subject to the growing criticisms of the photographic representation—and objectification—of women in popular culture (Pollock, 1977; Thornham, 2007). In *Photo* (1978, p. 54), Hamilton acknowledged that the images of *La Jeune Fille* were preferred by his public and that *Private Collection* may have been “too erotic” for his audience.

This shift to emphasizing the male gaze can also be seen in his subsequent (and unsuccessful) films. Whilst Hamilton admitted to *Photo* (1978) that photography rather than cinema was his ideal work (*Photo*, 1978, p. 51) he undertook further films following on from the success of *Bilitis*. Although arguably like *Bilitis* in its setting—summer in the south of France—he crucially switched the focus from the *jeune fille* character to her male admirer in his next film. In *Laura, les Ombres de l’Été* 1979, a 40-year-old sculptor Paul is attracted to the teenage daughter of a former lover. Unlike *Bilitis*, where the theme of the film was the *jeune fille*’s attempt to understand love, and relationships could be fluid, both Sapphic and heterosexual (Verwoert, 2000), in *Laura* it focused exclusively on the middle-aged man’s desire for the teenage girl. In the following film, *Tendres Cousines* 1980, set in the summer of 1939, a young looking teenage boy is the central character of, essentially, a juvenile male fantasy, with the protagonist surrounded by attractive young women. These subsequent films were not well received. One of the few magazines to review all three of Hamilton’s films, the *London Time Out*, acknowledged the erotic spirit in *Bilitis* through the playing of D’Arbanville and Kristensen, but was disparaging about the other films, describing *Tendres Cousines* as having the “sexuality of a stale meringue” (Milne, 1991).

Hamilton's next film, *Un Été à Saint-Tropez* 1983 sought to recover an audience by reverting back to a "classic" Hamilton photobook come to life. Only an hour long, the film had no dialogue but simply an instrumental soundtrack. The camera observes a group of *jeune filles* in a beautiful villa in the Provençal summer and follows them through their day, offering typical Hamilton scenes—young women waking, cycling, picnicking in the countryside, picking flowers, swimming in the sea, practicing ballet—complete with print dresses and floppy hats. Yet, crucially it ended rather conventionally with one of them taking part in a (heterosexual) marriage ceremony on the beach. However romantically shot, these were no longer *jeune filles* as Arcadian dreamers symbolic of escape, and in the mid-1980s, it did not appeal. His final film, *Premiers Désirs* 1984 concerned the exploits of three young women (including well-known actress Emmanuelle Béart in her first film), holidaying in the south of France. As Hamilton (1993, p. 192) admitted, *Premiers Désirs* "was a resounding flop". He made no further films.

Hamilton's soft focus style had lost its appeal in the culture of the 1980s. Also his shift from ethereal romanticism towards more male-oriented eroticism had not been popular. There was also a greater awareness of the construction of images of women in popular culture in terms of the controlling male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) and feminists were challenging the ways in which women were being represented in the visual media. Whilst Hamilton had offered a fantasy of romance and escape to an ageing "hippie" generation, there was always a tension between this interpretation and that of viewing his work in terms of traditional male erotic imagery, which was becoming more problematic. It was also at this time that Sontag's highly influential work *On Photography* (Sontag, 1977) examined the morality of photography and questioned the position of the photographer in the social context: as a voyeur rather than a responsible person? Also, Hamilton had always presented a highly specific image of women: young, white, mostly blonde and blue-eyed, highly feminized and often passive-seeming. This narrow focus jarred with the diversity of representation emerging in response to the second wave of the feminist movement, as in the photography of Hannah Wilke or Cindy Sherman. Also with the rise of punk and post-punk aesthetic at the turn of the 1980s, as in the film *Liquid Sky* 1982, his images now appeared highly limited in focus, twee and old-fashioned. His soft focus photographs of young women aping the manners of the Edwardian bourgeoisie seemed particularly irrelevant in the context of images of the social reality of knowing youth—as in the photography of Larry Clark, Bill Henson or Nan Goldin.

At the conclusion to his final film, he claims that he took stock of his work and returned to his first love of painting (Hamilton, 1993, p. 192). In 1984, he produced the photobook *Hommage à la Peinture*, which is essentially an homage to pictorialism, (re)presenting himself in terms of a turn-of-the-twentieth-century "art photographer". The black and white photographs of the models sought to echo the style of Steiglitz, or pay deliberate homage to Degas or Balthus. And, nearly half the images were landscapes, skyscapes, flowers and vases, bowls of fruit: developing the "other" work indicated in *Photo* (1978). Subsequent books at the end of the 1980s eschewed the *jeune fille* completely: *Venise* 1989 and *Fleurs* 1990. Again, in the pictorialist style, but with Hamilton's trade mark soft focus, the colour photographs present scenes and architecture of Venice devoid of the modern tourist hordes, as Hamilton attempted to present a romantic and artistic image of the city. The work had little impact, and in contrast to the popularity of the plainer, sharper style in the work of photographers such as Bruce Weber and Herb Ritts, or the fashion style of Corinne Day, Hamilton's soft focus Venice was sanitized and bland, and his flowers contrasted unfavourably with the simple and powerful contemporary flower studies of Robert Mapplethorpe.

In his retrospective, Hamilton explicitly portrayed himself as an art photographer, specifically in its title: *Twenty Five Years of an Artist* 1993. From Bourdieu (1991), in class terms, it could be argued that the status of an artist or art photographer is not dependent on commercial success or popularity, but critical praise, and this was possibly the status that Hamilton sought to obtain by presenting his work in this way (but which he did not achieve). In the introduction, it was acknowledged by Gautier (1993, p. 7) that during the 1980s Hamilton had fallen out of favour: "Once acclaimed and favoured, crowned with success for more than fifteen years it is perhaps because of the vagaries of fashion or the jaded tastes of the public that he is now somewhat disregarded". Accompanying the photographs was

autobiographical text and images from Hamilton's life and work. Crucially, rather than presenting his work in terms of fashion and popular culture—there were plenty of famous celebrities pictured in the biographical photographs in the book—or aligning his *jeune fille* imagery to Proust or the films of Bardot, Deneuve and Béart, he associated his work to Laclos, Balthus and Nabokov (Hamilton, 1993, p. 281). Regardless of the inaccuracy of this association—for example, Balthus always claimed his work had a religious significance (Weber, 1999)—making this link further shifted the interpretation of his work in the direction of the morally unacceptable to a public concerned about such issues (Mulvey, 1975; Sontag, 1977). Whereas he had been viewed as the purveyor of romantic images of young women appealing to women as well as men (as in the imagery promoting *L'Air du Temps* perfume) which, although now out of fashion, had been highly successful, presenting his work in the context of forbidden male desire could be nothing less than controversial.

The following book *Age of Innocence* 1995 stoked this controversy. This “other” Hamilton presented a catalogue of images of partially naked girls accompanied by quotes (concerning innocence and beauty) from authors ranging from Ovid to Anne Frank. The book was published around the same time as Jock Sturges' *Radiant Identities* 1994, depicting young naturists in Montalivet in France. Despite being very different books, they were combined in the public eye by a campaign against them initiated by Christian activists (Doherty, 1998) who (ultimately unsuccessfully) attempted to have both books banned from the major bookseller Barnes and Noble in the USA (in Alabama and Tennessee) on the basis of under-age nudity. In the Brentwood, California store a case was resolved by the bookseller agreeing that the books would be positioned beyond the reach of children. The linguistic message of the title and the quotes in the book emphasize the youth and innocence of the depicted girls, yet that innocence appears to be “violated” in the close-up depiction of their naked bodies as they gaze at the camera (cf. Sontag, 1977). The soft focus nudity or partial nudity of the young women in his earlier work was contextualized by the narrative of waking, sleeping and dreaming during an idealized hot summer's day. Here, such a narrative was absent.

Hamilton's book was defended by Anderson (1997) in the London *Times Literary Supplement* (in a review that also considered both the Hamilton and Sturges books), not entirely on the basis of its artistic merits, but as an attempt to capture and preserve the beauty of the young models. Some of the photographs in the book were nearly 30 years old and, as Anderson noted, the models were now mature women. As Barthes (1981) suggests, photography is a form of melancholy, fixing a moment now past (which was particularly poignant for him in viewing an image of his mother when young, but now dead). Anderson pointed out that Hamilton had dedicated the book to these women—his models—and the dedication stated that, through his book, they stayed forever young. In this narrative, the book becomes a reflection on the fragility of youth, its transient beauty and the sadness at its loss. In a contemporary interview with Pascal Baetens, Hamilton sought to explain this later work. He acknowledged that it had become simpler—no longer including the summer dresses and floppy hats that he had once used as props, telling Baetens (1995, p. 114) that: “Nudity and purity, sensuality and innocence, grace and spontaneity – we made contradictions of them. I try to harmonize them, and that's my secret, and the reason for my success”. Yet it was the “indirectness” of Hamilton's early photography that connoted romance through well-known bourgeois cultural codes, whereas the “directness” of *Age of Innocence* (even more so than *Private Collection*) was likely to be read by that same audience as crude and unacceptable (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 5–6). Also its publication followed soon after Sally Mann's depiction of her naked children in the book *Immediate Family* that had engendered considerable media debate, particularly concerning whether children could consent to such imagery (Woodward, 1992). At the same time, much greater public focus was being placed on the nature of childhood and the protection of children, particularly in the context of greater reporting of issues such as child abuse (Best, 1990). Through the lens of such publicity, public perception tends to coalesce on the issue, leading to the view of Hamilton's oeuvre as exclusively about the erotic male gaze of the “young girl” (which was also the poorly chosen translation for “jeune fille” used in the titles of Hamilton's earlier books in English). Within the cultural context of the 1990s, with its concerns about representations of under-age nudity, this led to a tendency to view Hamilton's work generally as being unacceptable to public sensibilities.

There was a change of focus in Hamilton's next book, *A Place in the Sun* 1996, echoing his earlier book *Venise*, as if seeking to avoid further controversy and return to a universally agreed romantic image. Appearing like an idealized holiday brochure, this contained photographs of some of the most iconic places of beauty in the world: the palm trees and white sand of Tahiti, Moorea and Hawaii, alongside St Tropez and the south of France, in soft focus, bathed in the warmth of the sun. Bowls of ripe fruit and colourful flowers all combined to present an idyllic world. Where they appear, the young women supplement the landscapes rather than being the sole focus of the image: lying on the beach or in the crystal clear water, beside a yacht, horse riding on the beach. The French title—*Le Monde du David Hamilton*—implied that this was the world in which Hamilton lived—a South Sea island idyll surrounded by beauty. Yet, delightful as this tropical island imagery appeared, it now evoked ideas of private islands of the wealthy rather than an alternative, more “natural” life style. At the close of the century, as Nuridsany (2006, p. 7) noted in a later retrospective, David Hamilton had been accused everything and its opposite: of being “too soft”, and of “flirting with pedophilia”. Whereas 25 years earlier Hamilton's photography had seemed ubiquitous, by the end of the century it had disappeared from mainstream popular culture.

4. Selective nostalgia

The new millennium, however, led to a revival of interest in Hamilton's work, but in a very specific and nostalgic way, exclusively on the successful *jeune fille* photographs of the early 1970s, and presented as if Hamilton had stopped working at the end of that decade. As if seeking to deflect public opprobrium, this choice was a reminder of the uncontroversial, successful Hamilton photographing women in “romantic” fashion-shoots. The British men's magazine *GQ* in 2000 portrayed his work in terms of nostalgia for more “innocent” eroticism, as an antidote to modern times (which they referred to as the “porn age”). They also argued that modern fashion's focus on youth showed that Hamilton was “decades ahead of his time”. In an acknowledgement of the criticism of his later work, Hamilton responded: “... there always has to be a line, and I never cross it. I never photograph children” (Jones, 2000, p. 121). In a commissioned fashion shoot for the magazine, the women models are presented by the sea in classic Hamilton style, including a floppy straw hat. In the following year, the art magazine *Frieze* also discussed Hamilton's work up to the film *Bilitis* (Verwoert, 2001). The photography is presented as if from another age: *Frieze* locks his work into the aesthetics of the past with no reference to the following twenty plus years. Hamilton is seen through his imagery as presenting a romanticized idyll, an “artificial heaven” against the harsh backdrop of the changing 1970s which was eventually unsustainable in the face of the reality of the times. Both articles do not discuss his later work.

In *David Hamilton* (2006); a coffee table retrospective of his work published in France, Hamilton himself appears to seek reappraisal by disregarding most of his later work, portraying himself as (almost exclusively) a photographer of the 1970s. In the preface, Nuridsany (2006, p. 7) argued that David Hamilton invented a highly distinctive style, with a Hamilton photograph immediately recognizable “amongst a thousand others”. The selection of photographs for the retrospective is indicative of Hamilton's choice of self-presentation, with 85% of the photographs in the album from the late 1960s until 1983, with a mere 5% from the 1990s onward. Interestingly, each photograph is accompanied by a date, locating it in a “nostalgic” past (Sontag, 1977). The book is a celebration of the “classic” *jeune filles* work of Hamilton, starting with a photograph of Mona Kristensen from 1970, aged 20, with images of girls and bicycles, floppy hats and flowers all present in the album.

However, rather than a reappraisal of his work, the interest in Hamilton may simply be that, as a famous photographer of the 1970s, his style is likely to feature in any 1970s fashion revival. Walter Benjamin argued that fashion can be characterized as a “tiger-sprung” (“tiger's leap” in English), jumping into the future (the modern) but also back to the past in the formation of contemporary style (Lehmann, 2001). Twenty-first century fashion has drawn on a number of “retro” styles, with a 1970s revival a consistently reported feature (e.g. Ings-Chambers, 2008; La Ferla, 2015). The selection of Hamilton's romantic style of the 1970s places him within this nostalgic revival, (and also explains why his later work was not of interest). As a result, once again his photography appeared in

life style and fashion magazines, presenting the models as *jeune filles en fleurs*, particularly in continental European countries. In 2009, he photographed French actress Mélanie Thierry in lingerie with flowers in her hair for *Soon International* magazine (Soon, 2009) and, in the same year, Russian model Natasha Poly in a cotton chemise in a shoot entitled “D'Été et de poésie” for *Muse The Fashionart Magazine* (Muse, 2009). In 2010, he photographed the Spring/Summer women’s collection for the Barcelona-based fashion house *Oysho*, with young women relaxing outdoors, backlit by the sun of a summer’s day (Braukämper, 2010). In the following year, Hamilton made an explicit link to his earlier 1970s work in the photo shoot for *Soon International* magazine in 2011 (Soon, 2011). It was entitled *Sisters* and featured two Russian models, Olesya Yarokhina and Lidia Kochetkova. In style and form, it echoed his identically titled photobook *Sisters* from 1972. The twenty-first century fashion “Russian look” (blonde, willowy, doe-eyed) very much reflected the look of the Scandinavian models that Hamilton chose in the 1970s. In the *Soon* photo shoot not only did the Russian models wear flowers in their hair but also appeared in the iconic ballet outfits typical of Hamilton’s earlier work (especially *La Danse*, 1972), and posed in the style of the earlier book. Ironically, in reprising this highly recognizable imagery 40 years on, Hamilton offered an intriguing “authenticity” (Benjamin, 1968) to a 1970s revival in the new millennium: these images were not just in-the-70s-style-of-David Hamilton but by the actual photographer himself. Yet outside of the context of a 1970s revival, his work has not featured in popular or art photography of the twenty-first century.

5. Conclusion

This analysis of the work of photographer David Hamilton has shown that his images, and their popularity, can be used to examine both the meanings proclaimed by him and the meanings betrayed by them within their cultural context (Bourdieu, 1991). In the late 1960s, David Hamilton created a distinctive soft focus photographic style that was highly recognizable and, at the time, generated many imitators. In the culture of the early 1970s, his imagery of *jeune filles en fleurs* (particularly Mona Kristensen and her fellow Scandinavian models) gained huge popular appeal. In their summer dresses and floppy hats, lazing dreamily in an endless idyllic summer day in the south of France, devoid of all the stresses of modern life, these *jeune filles en fleurs* appeared to inhabit an alternative world that resonated with the escapist sensibilities of both men and women at the time. Hamilton’s photographs presented the illusion of escape into a magical world connoting romance. In these photographs, his models, as *jeune filles en fleurs*, appeared to live “mythically” outside of ordinary existence, like Greek nymphs, in a life of leisure and erotic potential. Despite its obvious illusion, these images provided a romantic dreamworld that was hugely popular in the cultural context of the early 1970s, and had a major influence on popular cultural imagery of time, from fashion through to advertising, in the construction of the cultural *Zeitgeist*.

The response to Hamilton’s images also demonstrates the changing cultural context at the end of the 1970s, with concerns about the male gaze and the objectification of women in popular culture, with popular images of the 1980s presenting a diversity of socially aware photography, opposite to Hamilton’s Proustian romanticism that appeared twee and outmoded. During the 1990s, Hamilton’s portrayal of “sensuality and innocence” was challenged by oppositional readings of his work, in the light of social concerns about representations of children in popular culture, and led to public rejection of his work. In the new millennium, the selective interest in Hamilton’s work has been part of the 1970s revival in modern fashion, with an acknowledgement of his influence on 1970s style, completely ignoring his later work. In his new fashion shoots, Hamilton appears to agree with this representation of his photography. However, it is quite possible that when fashion changes, and the interest in the 1970s dissipates, the interest in Hamilton’s work will also disappear once again. Yet, through this analysis of Hamilton’s work, and his fluctuating popularity, the symbolic meaning of his imagery has revealed critical aspects of the sensibilities of society at different times, in particular, revealing the denotation and connotation of his early work “betraying” the aesthetic *Zeitgeist* of the early 1970s (Barthes, 1977; Bourdieu, 1991). During that period, it should be remembered, Hamilton was one of the most successful and famous photographers in the world.

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Notes

1. Resonating with the counterculture idea of “flower-power” but presented in a romantic “mythical” setting.
2. The title of *Rêves de Jeune Filles* was indeed rendered as *Dreams of Young Girls* in English, which was not controversial at the time, but did not help Hamilton’s case when 20 years later there was concerns expressed in Western English-speaking countries about the age of the female models in some of his work.
3. Susie Bright writes that when she came out in 1974 she and other lesbians did have posters from *Sisters* on their walls as there was no mainstream imagery for them. However, this was replaced by more authentic material such as Tee A. Corinne’s *Sinister Wisdom* 1977 when it became available (Bright & Posener, 1996).
4. She was also recognizable by the highly successful song *Lady D’Arbanville*, written and sung by former boyfriend and popular singer Cat Stevens in 1970: the well-known lyrics providing an association that added to the aesthetic appeal of the film.

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