

# Critique of sexual difference | analysis



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## Sexual Difference Representation

Explain how and why the critique of sexual difference intersected with a (postmodern) critique of representation in the later 1970s and early 1980s. Consider why photography had an important role and the significance of image-text relationship in this type of practice.

As Craig Owens states in his paper ‘The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism’ (Owens, 1983), the 1970s and 80s saw a coming together of the (mainly) feminist and queer theory critiques of sexual difference and the erosion of perspectivalist and univocal theories of vision and representation. As this paper shall assert, both of these positions can be seen to be traceable back to a single ontological and aesthetic rupture: the breakdown in what Lyotard was to term the grand or “meta narrative” (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv) and the subsequent rise in notions such as polyvocality (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004), heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 2000) *écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1980) and *differance* (Derrida, 1997). This paper will also assert, through of the work of Roland Barthes especially, that photography had a major significance in exemplifying the kind of aesthetico-ontological concerns and strategies of postmodernity and poststructuralism; chiefly through such notions as the punctum (Barthes, 2000); “the obtuse meaning” inherent within still visual images (Barthes, 1983) and the play of meaning between image and linguistic sign. This paper represents then an attempt to not only understand photography’s place within critical theory over the last two decades or so but how this provides a mirror to the wider movements of philosophical thought.

The critique of sexual difference can be seen to emanate from a wide variety of authors (Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Wittig etc) however, within the mandates of this paper, I should like to look at two main theorists that have special relevance: Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous, both of whom have been seen to challenge the phallic hegemony and its role in normative representation. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) points out, one of the chief critiques inherent within the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s and 80s was its contention that the philosophical and social subject had always been thought of gendered, as Grosz states:

The enigma that Woman has posed for men is an enigma only because the male subject construed itself as the subject par excellence. The way (he fantasizes) that Woman differs from him makes her containable within his imagination (reduced to his size) but also produces her as a mystery for him to master and decipher...

The construction of the male universal subject, asserted many feminist thinkers, resulted not only in the normalisation of phallogentrism but a privileging of its many dependants (reason, univocity, vision and so on). By positing Woman as the symptom of man through such notions as (among others) the castration complex and the psycho-sexual other, a phallogentric regime suppressed many of the discourses and thought processes associated with the feminine. Thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous attempted to challenge this position by asserting the prominence of other discourses and narratives that avoided or sometimes even challenged, the dominance of the male point of view. In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1980) for instance, Cixous suggests that women's writing and artistic

creativity (disciplines such as photography for instance) should recognise the value of multiple readings, intertextuality and indistinct poetic expression, for her the notion of sexual difference was inextricably tied to textual and visual representation and both were dominated by a single, male-centred, vision, as Cixous details:

Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self congratulatory phallogocentrism.

This same theme is continued in the essay ‘ This Sex Which is Not One’ (1985) by Luce Irigaray where the example of the female genitals is cited as existing as an intensive binary, each part relying and drawing stimulation from the other, thus challenging the oneness and singularity of the phallus. Irigaray also makes the point that, for female sexuality, touch is more meaningful than vision, the first suggestion that there maybe some cross over between the critiques of sexual difference and representation.

As Owens (1983) suggests, postmodernity and the critique of representation also aimed to challenge the accepted (male dominated) field of vision by, firstly, exposing the links that exist between representation and phallogocentrism and then by asserting the value of multi-perspectives, multiple readings and other modes of viewing. The postmodern image, as Jameson (1991) states, is one that has lost its originary connection to a real world and exists instead in a circuit of self referencing images whereby “ The world...momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a

stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density.” The postmodern image elides notions such as authenticity and distinct critical reading because it has lost what Benjamin (2008) described as the aura of original authorial intent. Commensurate with notions such as the death of author (Barthes, 1988) the postmodern critical position asserts the validity of multiple readings and the inherent intertextual nature of image and text, as Owens (1983) states:

It is precisely at the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that the postmodernist operation is being staged not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose the system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others. Among those prohibited from Western representation, whose representations are denied legitimacy, are women.

The critique of sexual difference, then, and the critique of representation are inextricably linked, being as they are both attempts at challenging traditional modernist and phallogocentric modes of thinking. Each can be viewed as a strategy that seeks to overcome not only specific areas (gender inequality, monolithic modes of representation etc) but the regime that provides their ground. Each attempts to do this through a series of critical re-framings and theoretical positions that uncover the inherent inconsistencies and internal fissures in the dominant discourse.

Roland Barthes' work *Camera Lucida* (2000) is an ideal example of how such ideas can be translated into literary and photographic theory. In his notion of the punctum, for instance, Barthes details how time, sentiment and personal

interest can alter our reception of a photograph far beyond the intents of either the photographer or the photographic model. The punctum, or as Barthes details “ a partial object” (Barthes, 2000: 43) is that which exists outside of the normalised view of what is representable in a photograph, it elides direct visual recognition and changes with each viewer and viewing; Barthes describes his experience of a photograph by William Klein from 1954 of poverty stricken children in New York’s Little Italy for instance, despite the overtly socio-political message of the photograph (an adult hand holding a gun to a smiling boy’s head) what could be considered the traditional representational, rational meaning, Barthes can not help but “ stubbornly see one child’s bad teeth” (Barthes, 2000: 45). In his notion of the “ third meaning”, also from his essay of the same name, Barthes points to the ironic and sometimes comical accidental elements of a photograph or a still image of a film, what he calls the obtuse meaning, speaking of a still from Romm’s *Ordinary Fascism* , he says:

I can easily read (in this still) an obvious meaning, that of fascism (aesthetics and symbolics of power, the theatrical hunt), but I can also read an obtuse meaning: the (again) disguised blond silliness of the young quiver-bearer, the flabbiness of his hands and mouth...Goering’s thick nails, his trashy ring...

For Barthes then, that which was not intended to be represented – the inherent phallic instability of the Nazi party – can be discerned in photography, not in the elements that form the centre of the picture (the ‘ studium’) but those at the periphery that elide the rational and studied gaze. As Shawcross (1997) details, Barthes’ notions here reflect the desire to

challenge the kinds of discourses we have looked at above, it stresses the importance of multiple readings when dealing with photographic images and also attempts to challenge traditional (Western phallogocentric) notions of single point perspective.

In allowing such multiple readings, asserts Barthes, the photograph brings into question the relationship between image and text and, more rightly, exposing the play that exists between the two. In a process that Barthes calls “anchorage” (Barthes, 1977: 38) text pins down the multi-faceted meaning of an image, suppressing the natural polyvocal nature of a photograph and re-establishing the rational search for a unique interpretation. In the series of photographs by Gillian Wearing, for example, where ordinary members of the public were photographed holding up textual messages such as “I’m Desperate” and “Help”, it is the text that is assumed to be the underlying truth behind the photographic image, highlighting the extent that textual and linguistic signifiers have historically dominated visual ones.

Feminist photographers have often played with the inherent slippage of meaning within the photographic image; the work of Cindy Sherman, for instance, exemplifies many of the issues we have been discussing here. Photographed in a series of ironic and iconic poses and ‘disguises’ Sherman’s work is both postmodern, in that it is self referential and kitsch but it is also considered feminist in that it attempts to rediscover and reclaim patriarchally constructed images of womanhood (the housewife, the screen starlet, the victim etc). As Shawcross (1997) details, by using herself as a model, Sherman also deconstructs the notion of identity and surface

appearances – who or what are we reacting to in these images, Sherman the photographer, Sherman the icon, Sherman the disguised housewife or the housewife per se as an image in itself? As Barthes would suggest, the contribution of the photograph to the debate on the relationship between image and text (Sherman tellingly does not title any of her photographs) is the very play of interpretation that such photographs expose.

Ultimately, then, as we have seen, there could be considered a direct link between the failure of grand narratives such as sexual difference and perspectivalist representation and the rise in critical interest in photography. As an art form that is both indexical and open to manipulation, photography is ideally suited to exemplify debates on the nature of interpretation and semiotics, something that has had a marked influence on both critical theorists and photographers alike.

### *References*

Bakhtin, M (2000), *The Dialogic Imagination* , Austin: University of Texas.

Barthes, R (1977), *Image Music Text* , London: Hill and Wang.

Barthes, R (1980), *Barthes Selected Writings* , London: Fontana.

Barthes, R (2000), *Camera Lucida* , London: Vintage.

Benjamin, W (2008), *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* , Cambridge: Harvard University.



Cixous, H (1980), 'The Laugh of the Medusa', published in *New French Feminisms*, London: Harvester.

Deleuze, G and Guattari, F (2004), *A Thousand Plateaus*, London: Continuum.

Derrida, J (1997), *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University.

Durand, R and Criqui, J. P (2006), *Cindy Sherman*, London: Flammarion.

Grosz, E (1994), *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Indianapolis: University of Indiana.

Heidegger, M (2007), 'The Origin of the Work of Art', published in *Basic Writings*, London: Routledge.

Irigaray, L (1985), *This Sex Which is Not One*, New York: Cornell University.

Jameson, F (1991), *Postmodernism, or The Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso.

Lloyd, G (1984), *The Man of Reason*, London: Methuen.

Lyotard, J. F (1984), *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester: University of Manchester.

Owens, C (1983), 'The Discourse of Others' available online at <http://216.239.59.104/search?q=cache:Fb1ceOH6t0AJ:www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/PoMoSeminar/Readings/OwensOthers.pdf+the+discourse+of+others&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=uk>

<https://assignbuster.com/critique-of-sexual-difference-analysis/>

Paley, M (1997), *Gillian Wearing – Signs that Say What you Want Them to Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants* , London: Interim Art.

Shawcross, N (1997), *Roland Barthes: On Photography* , Gainesville: University of Florida.