

The

Emptiness

of the



Image

*psychoanalysis and
sexual differences*

P A R V E E N A D A M S



The Emptiness of the Image

There has long been a politics concerning the way in which women are represented, with objection not so much to specific images as to a *regime* of looking which places the spectator in a particular relationship to the woman. Artists have sometimes avoided the representation of women altogether, but they are now producing images which challenge the regime. How do these images succeed in their challenge?

The Emptiness of the Image offers a psychoanalytic answer. Parveen Adams argues that, despite flaws in some of the details of its arguments, psychoanalytic theory retains an overwhelming explanatory strength in relation to questions of sexual difference and representation. She goes on to show how the issue of desire changes the way we can think of images and their effects. Throughout she discusses the work of theorists – Hélène Deutsch, Catherine MacKinnon – and the work of artists and film-makers – Mary Kelly, Francis Bacon, Orlan, Michael Powell and Della Grace.

The Emptiness of the Image shows how the very space of representation can change to provide a new way of thinking the relation between the text and the spectator. It shows how psychoanalytic theory is simple enough to slide into and transform the most unexpected situations.

Parveen Adams teaches psychoanalysis in the Department of Human Sciences at Brunel University. She was co-founder and co-editor of the predominantly psychoanalytic feminist journal *m/f* (1978–86) and a selection from it was published as *The Woman in Question*, now a landmark text.

The Emptiness of the Image

Psychoanalysis and Sexual Differences

Parveen Adams



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The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

For Mark Cousins

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Thanks

All my thanks are for Mark Cousins

Introduction

This book is an argument for psychoanalysis and for its importance in the field of representation. It remains concerned throughout with the question of the changing relations and representations of the woman and it seeks to analyse these changes using psychoanalytic concepts.

There has been a great deal of work on psychoanalysis and sexual difference over the last twenty years. Where this work has been sympathetic, it has led either to a blanket defence of the central concepts of psychoanalytic theory, or to a somewhat partisan assertion that certain unpalatable concepts must go. The first five chapters of this book certainly raise questions about what actually constitutes sexual difference. Does it have to be governed by ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’? Does it imply heterosexuality as the norm? Simultaneously, the central concepts – castration, the Oedipus complex, the phallus – are retained. Despite the questioning, it is shown that these concepts are necessary – by spelling out the dire consequences of the ‘rectification’ of castration in the theories of Hélène Deutsch; by showing the sadistic consequences of Catherine MacKinnon’s collapse of representation onto the event (that is, the denial of the Oedipal taboo); by demonstrating that the concept of the phallus is precisely what allows us to distinguish certain contemporary sexual practices as *not* being perverse, that is to say that the concept enables us to identify different psychical structures, including entirely new ones.

So psychoanalysis is not a moribund set of propositions, but on the contrary, has great explanatory power. Far from decrying women, it shows what is at stake in their making: a case then for the flexibility and power of

psychoanalysis. In some sense, this claim is then 'tested' in the six chapters that follow. Can we analyse a film, a painting, a photograph, so as to grasp something of the psychical level of its effects? Does it matter that the question of representation is treated not as a simple referential relation, but as a complex psychical event? Does it matter that the question of vision is upstaged by the issue of desire, the spectator's and the artist's?

The issue of desire introduces a novel way of thinking about art and spectatorship, for it changes the space of representation. This space can no longer be thought of as only physical, architectural or institutional. We must introduce the idea of psychical space. Here Lacan's discursive spaces serve us well. His four discourses, that of the Master, the University, the Hysteric and the Analyst, are introduced and shown to be immensely productive in the analysis of Mary Kelly's work. Once the space of the gallery is transformed, there arises the question of transference, and dramatic consequences follow for the question of female spectatorship. For what goes on in a space is a complex affair and images organise the space and hence the way in which they are looked at.

This intrication of the social and the psychical works because not only the Symbolic and the Imaginary, but the Real are involved. The chapters on art work with Lacan's *objet petit a*, the object which is the left-over of the Real. It is a crucial term of analysis for the study of culture.

This complex and difficult idea unfolds as the analyses of different works proceeds. At the same time the Lacanian idea is altered and shaped to new ends, in particular through the development of Lacan's concept of anamorphosis. These chapters show how psychoanalysis can be used to pinpoint and understand changes in the *regime* of vision. Psychoanalysis shows how meaning can be emptied out; here, what is shown is the condition under which what is emptied out is the definition of woman. It is not the image of a woman as such that is crucial, but how the image organises the way in which the image is looked at.

Moments of emptying out occur in unexpected places. They are often moments which appear perverse or violent at the surface level. But what might appear to the spectator in this way may turn out to be moments of a powerful emptying out of meaning, including perverse and violent meanings. This is shown in the chapters on Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, Francis

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Bacon, *The Three Graces* by Della Grace, and Orlan's cosmetic surgery on video.

So this book puts forward a completely novel approach to the issue of what happens between the spectator and the art object, an approach which is modelled on the relation of analyst and analysand. This book shows that psychoanalytic theory is not resistant to change.

