

# FEMINIST AESTHETICS

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THIS chapter provides a critical survey of English-language feminist work in aesthetics since the early 1970s. The aim is to focus on those areas of feminist inquiry that have most significantly affected philosophical aesthetics in the analytic tradition.

## 1. BASICS

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### 1.1 Definition and Preliminary Characterization

In what follows, the term ‘feminist aesthetics’ is used broadly to refer to a diverse family of theories, approaches, and models of criticism united by resistance to ‘male’ privilege and domination in the sphere of art and aesthetic experience. Feminist aesthetics, like feminism generally, begins with what might be called ‘the fact of patriarchy’. ‘Patriarchy’, as the word is being used here, is conceived of as a social system that distributes power, status, and rights to men and men’s interests, to the detriment of women and women’s interests. This system is constituted by institutions, practices, habits, and outlooks generally understood to affect nearly every aspect of human thought and experience. To speak of the *fact* of patriarchy is to affirm the controversial thesis that existing society is patriarchal or that it exhibits these structural characteristics.

As used by feminists, 'patriarchy' is not a neutral descriptive category. Indeed, it is a central tenet of feminism that patriarchy is *illegitimate*. The illegitimacy of patriarchy is understood in terms of either unfairness or domination. The fairness point is that patriarchy is a system that treats men and women unequally. The point about domination is that patriarchy could be justified only on the basis of false or distorted beliefs about the nature of men, the nature of women, and its own structure. (Typically, these beliefs involve some form of gender essentialism, the conviction that male and female 'natures' are fixed by biology or 'divine plan'.)

A central task of feminism is to reveal the fact of patriarchy. This involves uncovering and analysing the way social practices, institutional arrangements and patterns of thought differentially serve male interests, beliefs, and desires; it also means unmasking the means by which patriarchy makes this domination difficult to recognize or resist. Given this characterization of the object of feminism, it follows that the theoretical project of elucidating the true nature of patriarchy will inevitably have a political dimension. To describe a set of institutions as patriarchal is to characterize them in such a way as to undermine their legitimacy. Thus, this theoretical goal dovetails with the political goal of feminism: the abolition of patriarchy.

As characterized here, there are two aspects of feminism: one continuous with traditional political liberalism, and one continuous with the Frankfurt School and critical theory. Feminism follows liberalism in that it seeks to secure rights and liberties for individuals; it follows critical theory in that it sees patriarchy as an instance of the same type of structure as Marxists understand capitalism to be.

Feminist *aesthetics* starts from the assumption that the historical domain of art and the aesthetic is itself patriarchal. At one level, it simply extends the analysis of patriarchy to the practices of art institutions, in particular to the treatment of women in and by these institutions (e.g. demotions in the status of female-authored artworks previously believed to be the work of male artists). On another, more fundamental level feminist aesthetics introduces the concept of *gender* into the analysis of aesthetic pleasure, aesthetic value, the work of art, and other foundational notions of the discipline. The mode of analysis here is not social and political but aesthetic. With respect to the work of art, the aim is to show how distorted conceptions of gender may infect both the subject matter of art (e.g. the pervasive images of women as happy mothers, charming coquettes, willing victims) and its forms or modes (e.g. the male gaze that many works of visual art assume). With respect to the values of the aesthetic itself, the object is to demonstrate the gendered notions at work in views of both the perceiving *subject* (e.g. the masculine model at work in the characterization of pure judgements of taste) and characterizations of the *objects* of aesthetic attention (e.g. the eighteenth-century association of artistic or natural beauty with the feminine, the more dangerous extremes of the sublime with the masculine) (Korsmeyer 1998: 150–1). Feminist aesthetics thus involves an investigation that goes to the foundations of aesthetics as a discipline.

This general characterization of feminism and feminist aesthetics should not be taken to suggest a monolithic enterprise. Feminist theory takes a variety of shapes and forms; feminists themselves do not all agree over whether to emphasize or de-emphasize male/female difference, whether to understand gender in biological or cultural terms, and so on. Similar internal disputes arise within feminist aesthetics. Indeed, the use of the term 'feminist aesthetics' is itself contested. While theorists like Christine Battersby find this label appealing and useful (Battersby 1989), Rita Felski and others worry that it may be taken to imply the existence of a separate, distinctively female, 'woman's art' or 'woman's aesthetic' (Felski 1998). These disputes often turn on the way the term 'feminist aesthetics' is being construed as well as on more fundamental disputes about the proper aims of feminism.

Despite theoretical differences among feminists, feminist work in aesthetics is unified by a shared view of the importance of challenging what Carolyn Korsmeyer calls 'the gender skew' of the fundamental concepts and ideals of philosophical aesthetics (Korsmeyer 1998: 151). The excitement of uncovering what generations of philosophers and others interested in the arts never noticed also generates a common sense of purpose.

## 1.2 Early History

Feminist work in aesthetics is part of the history of modern feminism. Women artists, like women generally in the early 1970s, began to make contact with one another, establishing collectives and developing a positive self-consciousness about themselves as feminist artists. The resulting Women's Art Movement gave birth to new kinds of art, all-women exhibitions, and other alternatives for recognition and support. It also led to public calls for an end to the conscious and unconscious 'masculine orientation' at work throughout the artworld (Parker and Pollock 1987: 3–8). Art critics such as Lucy Lippard used the pages of *Art in America* and other mainstream art history journals to call for the artworld to 'come to grips with sexism', enumerating specific instances of discrimination, e.g. the lack of women curators and the 'lousy records' of granting organizations and galleries with respect to women applicants (Lippard 1976: 28–37).

Hand in hand with this political activity came important theoretical debates not only about strategy and goals (e.g. assimilation *v.* a separate 'woman's art'), but also about the fundamental character of art and art institutions. By the mid to late 1970s, feminist perspectives had begun to have a marked influence on academic scholarship. In literature departments feminist scholars, teachers, and writers were challenging the sacredness of the male canon and the practices of literary criticism. They called for reading the old texts in new ways, creating what poet and theorist Adrienne Rich called 're-vision: the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction'. For Rich, as for many other feminists, literature required a radical critique, one that would allow women to read as

women. From this perspective, the works of the past were 'required reading', not to pass on the tradition, but 'to break its hold'. Rich urged women to look to literature to learn 'how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us' (Rich 1971: 35). In short, literature both embodied the old political order, an order that women must come to know and explore, and offered a means by which women could begin to appropriate the male prerogative of 'seeing' and 'naming' for themselves.

This general strategy of 'reading against the grain' would become a staple of feminist literary criticism, along with the insistence that no adequate account of reading could overlook issues of gender or the interrelated issues of race and class. Feminist theorists and critics approached other forms of art using similar strategies. The resulting linkage of art with sexual politics led, as subsequent developments would show, to a radically different way of understanding and studying works of art.

Interestingly, the issues of sexual politics at the centre of academic debate in literature and other art-related disciplines were slow to impact philosophical aesthetics. Despite feminism's explicit concern with issues such as artistic representation, an issue that Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* brought to the forefront of aesthetic debate in 1968, philosophers of art throughout the 1980s largely ignored the growing body of feminist theory emerging in the arts. In this respect, the situation in the philosophy of art lagged behind even other areas of philosophy. In ethics, for example, the work of Carol Gilligan had an early and profound impact (Gilligan 1982), and in fields such as epistemology, the philosophy of science, and political theory, feminists had by the end of the decade produced a considerable body of influential work (Garry and Pearsall 1989; Harding 1986; Okin 1989).

Change in aesthetics came only when, in 1990, *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* each published special issues on the topic of feminist aesthetics. The appearance of this body of work brought issues of feminist concern to philosophers of art and aestheticians, thus paving the way for distinctively *philosophical* work in feminist aesthetics.

## 2. CRITIQUES

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Feminist work in aesthetics can be understood as having three central concerns. The first is with the canon, and women's under-representation in the history of art; the second is with artistic representation and the ways in which women are typically depicted in and positioned by works of art; and the third is with the fundamental values and ideals of aesthetics. In each of these areas, feminists have undertaken to bring an awareness of gender to the investigation of fundamental

concepts and the pursuit of traditional questions. As a step towards evaluating the success of these interrelated projects, and their possible implications for aesthetics more generally, the following three subsections explore in detail feminist critiques of the canon, artistic representation, and the values and ideals of aesthetics.

## 2.1 The Canon

### *Under-representation*

Feminist concern with the history of art starts from the idea that women artists are under-represented in the canon. As early feminists noted, standard texts such as Janson's *The History of Art* (published in 1970) contained no mention of women artists at all. Nor, they observed, were women any better represented on the lists of great composers, dramatists, and so on.

Literature might be thought the one notable exception. Among English novelists, the Bröntes, George Eliot, and Jane Austen held considerable stature, as did the Americans Edith Wharton and Gertrude Stein. Among the poets, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Christina Rossetti were generally granted a place in the standard anthologies. In many respects, literature offered women of modest means and education the possibility of a kind of artistic accomplishment only rarely realized by women in music and the visual arts. In other respects, though, women who picked up a pen faced many of the same obstacles confronted by women who sought to paint or compose—the need, so compellingly described by Virginia Woolf, for ‘a room of one’s own’. By this, Woolf meant, among other things, the income to devote oneself to artistic creation and the sense of inner liberty that male writers so easily took for granted (Woolf 1929). Even the few who overcame these obstacles, like Woolf herself, often found themselves shut out of the canons of high art. As Alex Zwerdling points out, as late as the 1960s Woolf’s literary reputation placed her firmly among the interesting but lesser modernist writers. In short, even in literature, women rarely qualified as candidates for genius.

This state of affairs was nothing new. What was new was the radical presumption that women’s absence from the ranks of genius was a *problem*, something in need of special explanation (Nochlin 1971). The standard view was that the lack of great women artists needed no particular explanation. It was not to be expected that women artists would achieve greatness. Women might—and did—produce works of art; some, like Jane Austen and Mary Cassatt, might even achieve some renown. But women lacked the power, energy, and near divine inspiration necessary for the highest levels of artistic achievement, a lack generally attributed to female biology. In this respect, it was held, women artists were no different from their female counterparts in science, government, and the professions.

In approaching the issue of women’s under-representation in the arts, one response of feminist art historians was thus to reject out of hand the view that

'there was nothing to explain', or that women's lack of achievement should be regarded as a normal circumstance. The situation, Nochlin argued, required a different explanation. The failure to produce 'great' art, like women's failure to equal men's successes elsewhere, arose not from 'women's nature', but from women's social and material circumstances and the meaning attached by society to sexual difference. In short, Gisela Ecker would write, women's shortcomings could be accounted for in terms of 'what has been imposed on women' by 'oppressive social conditions or prejudice' (Ecker 1985).

In foregrounding the relationship between women's social and socially mediated material conditions and artistic achievement, nothing matched the influence of Nochlin's seminal essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (Nochlin 1971). Conceptually, Nochlin's work built upon the work of 'early feminists' like Mary Wollstonecroft, John Stuart Mill, and a long tradition of writers stretching from Woolf and Beauvoir back to the medieval French writer Christine de Pizan. As these and other writers convincingly established, real artistic achievement was an exacting business, requiring access to particular social and socially mediated material conditions. Talent alone was not enough.

Nochlin joined the material analysis of her predecessors to the traditional methods of art historical scholarship, showing, for example, how women's lack of access to life drawing classes (with their nude models) explained their lack of success at history painting and other 'major' genres. Without training in drawing the human figure, Nochlin pointed out, only the most foolhardy student would undertake the large-scale representation of bodies in action thought definitive of great painting from the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century. Similarly obvious, though previously overlooked, explanations were forthcoming in other areas of art historical investigation. Early feminist art historians acknowledged that systematic social change might be required for women to succeed at the highest levels, but, they optimistically predicted, once equal circumstances obtained, women would achieve the same greatness as their male counterparts.

### *Expanding the canon*

A second response to the issue of women's under-representation in the canon involved questioning the assumption that there were, in fact, no great women artists. Some women—Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Nevelson, Georgia O'Keeffe, and others—were already in the canon. Might the relative absence of other women result not from a lack of female talent but from a problem of 'under-reporting'? This question led to efforts to 'expand the canon', locating and winning recognition for the work of previously overlooked or undervalued women artists. The 'search for female Michelangelos' succeeded in adding to the canon forgotten women artists such as the Baroque Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi, and the eighteenth-century members of the British Royal Academy, Angelica Kauffmann and Mary Moser (Chadwick 1990). It also resulted in increased scholarly interest in the careers of some formerly

secondary figures, e.g. Berthe Morisot, and led feminists to pay greater attention to the work of twentieth-century figures such as Lee Krasner, Agnes Martin, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Tina Modotti, and Frieda Kahlo. Efforts to expand the canon—in effect, to write the hidden history of women—also called for an acknowledgment of the significance of women’s ‘invisible’ artistic labour: as muses, models, and subjects of art. In music, belated attention has recently come to Clara Schumann, Francesca Caccini, Barbara Strozzi, Fanny Mendelsohn, Germaine Tailleferve, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Amy Beach, and Pauline Viardot.

### *Artistic greatness*

Later, ‘second-generation’ feminists raised a separate set of issues having to do with the forms of valuation built into the canon. Liberal feminism’s efforts to ‘infiltrate and integrate’ traditional art history came under fire for reinforcing a model of freedom that ‘lies in becoming like a man’. Art historian Griselda Pollock criticized Nochlin’s acceptance of a conception of artistic activity still understood ‘in terms of greatness, risks, leaps into the unknown’ (Pollock 1988: 35). For Pollock, as for many of her more radical contemporaries, encouraging women artists to emulate their male brethren by pursuing success in ‘traditional’ terms, winning ‘one man shows’, exhibiting in conventional venues, and receiving the recognition of establishment critics and art historians, was an artistic error.

While Pollock acknowledged the importance of recovering the history of women artists, the project of historical recovery alone was insufficient, she argued. Feminist art history must also undertake to examine the discourses and practices of art history itself. The idea was to re-theorize the framework of the discipline (Pollock 1988: 55).

In carrying out this re-theorizing, Pollock, and other art historians such as Carol Duncan and Svetlana Alpers, drew upon the paradigm of Marxist cultural theory championed by John Berger, T. J. Clark, and others. To the analysis of the politics of class, they added an analysis of sexual divisions and inequalities. The result was a social history of art which integrated the imperatives of Marxism and feminism. It made possible an analysis of women’s under-representation in the canon that deepened and extended earlier efforts at exposing and explaining the ‘rigged contest’ women faced. Pollock’s own work, for example, demonstrated the correlation between conceptions of the work of art as essentially a public object and the prevailing division of masculine-feminine space (Pollock 1998: 56–66). She took a similar approach to the notion of an ‘Old Master’, pointing to the way the term ‘artist’ has become equated with masculinity and male social roles, such as the Bohemian, and to the romanticism, elitism, and individualism built into notions of artistic ‘greatness’.

The work of Pollock and other second-generation feminist art historians produced a radical shift in perspective. To understand just how radical, it is worth recalling that at the time academic art history was largely an enterprise devoted to tracing and celebrating the development of one or another great artistic figure (Duncan 1993: xiii). In asking fundamental questions about what values determined prevailing notions of

significance, whose values those were, and whose interests they served, feminist art historians opened the door to questions about whether the traits the canon celebrates are those that ought to be celebrated.

### *An art of our own*

Greater awareness of the evaluative norms of traditional art history eventually led some feminists to call for the creation of a separate tradition of 'women's art', one based on a 'feminist' (or, alternatively, a 'feminine') aesthetics. Here the use of the term 'feminist aesthetics' points to a particular theoretical posture which maintains that women's art differs in important—and valuable—ways from men's. For most, this gender difference was to be understood in essentialist terms, as a consequence of women's 'nature', i.e. her distinctively female sensibility and imagination. Others understood the difference as a consequence merely of the particular social and political circumstances women faced. In either case, the result was a belief in a 'necessary or privileged relationship between female gender and a particular kind of literary [or artistic] structure, style or form' (Felski 1989: 19). So, for example, French feminists, such as Julia Kristeva, came to equate avant-garde arts, in particular experimental writing, with resistance to 'a patriarchal symbolic order'. The determinate meanings, 'artificially imposed structure', and linear logic of conventional narrative, in turn, came to be identified with 'bourgeois masculinity' (Kristeva 1987: 110–17).

This 'gynocentric' feminism sought to invert the usual privileging of male attributes over female ones. Women's purported connection with their bodies, emotional sensitivity, attention to detail, lesser aggression, and so on came to be regarded as sources of power and pride, something to be celebrated and shared. In aesthetic terms, this inversion meant encouraging women to show their artwork in woman-only, often cooperative, galleries and spaces rather than to compete with one another to gain entrance to mainstream venues. It also meant holding on to, and celebrating, just those aspects of women's traditional artistic activity that the art establishment demeaned or dismissed. Activities such as quilting, embroidery, and pottery, previously categorized as belonging to minor genres, craft, or decorative art, were to be embraced as part of the communal, life-affirming, often visceral, processes of traditionally female artistic labour. The female imagery, concern with the body and collaborative nature of art projects like Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* were meant, their advocates insisted, to provide an alternative to the values of instrumentalism, authoritarianism, and extreme individualism held to dominate Western European cultures.

For many, this celebration of the female held enormous appeal. It also carried a certain political risk. To insist that women's art and female creative processes differed *inherently* from men's reintroduced a form of gender essentialism associated with patriarchal conceptions of the nature of men and women. Critics of this approach rejected both the idea that women had a distinct 'nature' and the attribution of an inherently gendered nature to particular forms of art.

Worth noting, however, is that not all advocates of a specifically feminist aesthetics subscribe to biological views of what makes women distinctive. Christine Battersby, for one, argues that the fact that women are *treated* differently suffices to warrant a call for a feminist aesthetic, one that collectively works to establish a record of artistic achievement that, as she puts it, fairly includes both matrilineal and patrilinear patterns of tradition (Battersby 1989: 157).

## 2.2 Artistic Representation

### *The 'image-studies' approach*

Whereas the feminist work in aesthetics considered so far focuses on the institutional subordination of women, another body of work directs attention to women's treatment at the symbolic level, within the work of art itself. The idea here is that women in patriarchal societies are oppressed not only economically and politically, but also in the very ways in which its members see the world and in the 'languages of art' they use to represent it. Like language itself, art is a symbolic medium, which, it is held, disproportionately reflects and promotes male beliefs, desires, and ends, leading men—and women—to see the world and themselves through 'male eyes'. From this perspective, painting, literature, and other forms of artistic representation play a key role in the social construction of gender, teaching women and girls to see themselves as (passive) objects of (active) male desire, an alignment supportive of male privilege and useful to patriarchal culture.

One place where a concern with the power of symbolic media developed most fully was in relationship to film. The target here was Hollywood film and other forms of popular culture such as advertising and fashion photography. Film attracted the attention of feminist theorists in part because it was presumed to attract a far larger, and less critical, audience than traditional fine arts such as painting. As Marxist theorists and media critics before them had noted, the medium of film had the power to create and satisfy desires, to manufacture needs, to operate on the unconscious as well as the conscious mind. The pleasures it offered—of narrative identification, visual and erotic pleasure, entertainment—combined to make Hollywood film a perfect medium for creating and sustaining a society with what its critics deemed a 'patriarchal unconscious'. In the battle to combat patriarchal conceptions of male and female social roles, Hollywood film thus came to seem a natural target.

Concern with film's presumed ideological powers led feminist film theorists initially to studies of how women in individual films were represented (positively or negatively). Works such as Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974) adopted a basically sociological approach, tracing the characterization of women on-screen in the context of the social, political, and cultural circumstances of women off-screen. These studies of the image of

women in film paralleled similar work on the representation of women in literature and in other arts (cf. Heilbrun and Higonnet 1983; Millett 1970).

### *The male gaze*

In film, the analysis of content and style in this 'image studies' approach gave way rather quickly to a more abstract, theoretical analysis. As Claire Johnson and other critics of the image-based approach insisted, feminist film theory would have to go further than a concern with positive female protagonists and women's problems if it was to have any real political impact. In Johnson's words, 'If it is to impinge on consciousness', feminist film theory would require 'a revolutionary strategy'. What was needed was a way of unearthing a kind of 'deep structure' beneath the 'surface structure' of entertainment and visual pleasure that cinema provides. In undertaking this task, feminist film theorists adopted a theoretical combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis with Althusserian Marxism and semiotics (Freeland 1998: 201).

Seminal in developing this approach was Laura Mulvey's 1975 classic, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (in Mulvey 1988). Mulvey shared with Marxist film theorists a tendency to regard film as a highly successful purveyor of bourgeois ideology. What distinguished her work from its Marxist predecessors, however, was its linkage of art with *sexual* politics and its reliance on psychoanalytic theory as the political weapon of choice. Mulvey begins from the assumption that cinematic representation duplicates the division of the dominant patriarchal order. On this interpretation, film relies on a 'split' between (active) looking and (passive) being looked at. Man is the 'bearer of the look', woman its object. Put in non-theoretical terms, Mulvey's claim was that the camera aligned the spectator's gaze with that of male characters within the film, establishing identification with the male hero of the story and depicting women on screen as objects of male desire. On this analysis, Hollywood narrative film embodied this so-called male gaze, operating on patterns of male fascination, desire, and pleasure. It was these patterns that Mulvey's essay attempted to analyse—and, in analysing, to destroy.

Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze' came in for intense criticism, both by feminists working within a Marxian/psychoanalytic paradigm and by those working outside it. Even feminist film theorists sympathetic to Mulvey's basic approach, such as E. Ann Kaplan, called her to task for oversimplifying the experience of the female spectator. For Mulvey, the female film-goer either identified with the male protagonist or enjoyed the masochistic pleasure of her own objectification (Kaplan 1987: 231). The possibility of an 'oppositional' gaze Mulvey had apparently overlooked. But, as bell hooks has argued, black women spectators have long seen films both aware of and resistant to the disabling effects of mainstream Hollywood, whether in *Birth of a Nation* or Shirley Temple movies. hooks assumed that white women did so too (hooks 1992). Others objected to Mulvey's assumption of a monolithic, dominant male spectator, an assumption that made real differences in power between men invisible (Devereaux 1990).

From a different direction, Noël Carroll brought the methods of analytic philosophy to bear, arguing that Mulvey's theory of the gaze—and psychoanalytic approaches to film more generally—rested on the faulty assumption that cinema is *inherently* ideological and the misguided belief that a general theory of visual pleasure based on sexual difference is either possible or desirable (Carroll 1995). For Carroll, the psychoanalytic approach to film should be rejected altogether in favour of a return to the earlier, more cognitivist, 'image-based' approach represented by Haskell and Millett.

Despite these and other criticisms, Mulvey's theory of the male gaze made gender an integral part of the analysis of film, going far beyond Haskell's emphasis on male and female stereotypes and paving the way for an explosion of work in feminist film theory.

### 2.3 The Ideals and Values of Philosophical Aesthetics

The third concern of feminists working in aesthetics is with the ideals and values of philosophical aesthetics itself. In turning their attention to philosophy, feminist aestheticians, like their counterparts in other disciplines, seek to demonstrate the inadequacy of a theoretical framework that fails to take into account the influence of gender and gender considerations. In principle, this project involves a critical reappraisal of any and all aesthetic theory that is unaware of, or indifferent to, the insights of feminism itself. One might therefore expect feminists to undertake a critical reappraisal of the history of aesthetics (e.g. the classical works of Plato and Aristotle, the aesthetics of romanticism associated with Schiller, the theories of expression and communication espoused by Tolstoy and Collingwood). An even more natural target would include the theories of major contemporary figures such as Monroe Beardsley, Nelson Goodman, Arthur Danto, George Dickie, and Richard Wollheim. In point of fact, feminist critiques of philosophical aesthetics have focused almost exclusively on a single, far narrower, target: Kant and the tradition of neo-Kantian formalism. In targeting the Kantian tradition, feminists have in mind the Kant of the *Critique of Judgment* and the trajectory of aesthetic thought associated with Oscar Wilde, twentieth-century Modernism and the work of Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Clement Greenberg. Indeed, it would be no great exaggeration to say that critiques of 'Kant and formalism' have largely come to define what is meant by 'feminist critiques of aesthetics'.

It is thus worth asking why feminists have chosen to focus almost exclusively on this one tradition. Is Kant or the neo-Kantian aesthetic culture he spawned any more exclusionary, or any blinder, to key feminist concerns than most of the rest of the history of aesthetics? And if not, what makes it the primary object of feminist suspicion?

One reply is that, in focusing on Kantian aesthetics, feminist critics merely adopt the mainstream's own understanding of its history and heroes. For the 'analytic' aestheticians under discussion (the progeny of Sibley, Isenberg, Beardsley, etc.) it is

Kant—or Kant and Hume—not Plato or Nietzsche or Hegel, who primarily sets the modern agenda, just as it is commitment to a Kantian legacy of aesthetic autonomy and disinterestedness that continues to distinguish ‘traditional’ analytic approaches in aesthetics from the more overtly political approaches adopted by the Frankfurt School or the more historically contextual approaches of hermeneutics and continental philosophy generally. From this perspective, a critique of Kant just *is* a critique of traditional aesthetics.

Important to note, however, is that feminist critiques of ‘Kant’ presuppose a particular conception of Kant. This Kant is not the historical Kant or the conception of Kant derived from a careful reading of *The Critique of Judgment*, but a set of ideas associated with, and advanced in, Kant’s name. Thus, with few exceptions, feminists critical of this legacy pay little attention to historical or exegetical questions. Nor should this be surprising, since feminism’s real quarrel is not primarily with Kant, but with twentieth-century versions of formalist theory, in particular the theories of Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg. It is the deep and abiding hold of this Kantian legacy on contemporary aesthetics—what Estelle Lauter identifies as the ‘master theory’ of the last century of Anglo-American aesthetics—that so many feminists heartily reject. (To be fair, it is also largely rejected, if on different grounds, by many contemporary Anglo-American aestheticians, as noted later.) As with feminist criticisms of Kant, the primary object of attack here is not the specific theory of Greenberg or Bell, but a more generalized conception of formalism. This generalized or ‘generic’ formalism, often identified with a notion of ‘aesthetic autonomy’, includes a commitment to the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgement and the firm separation of art from life.

This formalism feminists criticize first on general grounds. Like members of the Frankfurt School and other critical theorists, feminists have a conception of art as deeply entwined with life, in particular with political life. From this perspective, formalist theories of art suffer from two failings: a misunderstanding of the nature of art, and a reliance on standards of classification and evaluation that are exclusionary and discriminatory, in practice if not also in theory. Formalism, its critics charge, refuses to recognize the political dimension of both the creation and evaluation of art. In setting off the category of the moral and political from the aesthetic, and calling upon art’s audience to ignore or bracket art’s content, its history, and so on in favour of form alone, formalism makes it difficult or impossible to appreciate the real value and appeal of many kinds of art. Here formalism’s opponents point to examples of political art like Goya’s *Caprichos*, religious art like Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the novels of Dickens and Orwell, and other works of social criticism. None of these, they claim, can be grasped as the works of art they are in terms of a formalist theory of value. Moreover, this view of art makes art something marginal, unlikely to find an audience or be thought of much importance, outside a rather narrow circle.

Feminists also criticize formalism, more specifically, for its gender bias. This bias, understood broadly to include racial and class bias as well, consists in formalism’s

blindness to how purportedly universal forms of art privilege some kinds of speakers and audiences over others. Similarly, standards of classification and evaluation meant to rest upon universal aesthetic values deliver far less than they promise—not objectivity and fairness but, its critics charge, judgements based on male-defined assumptions about gender (how men and women think, how they paint, what they are and are not capable of) and art itself (an equation of ‘significant’ with large-scale history painting or the bold, ‘masculine’ sweep of modernist painting; a downgrading of domestic subject matter, small-scale works, craft and ‘feminine’ forms of art in general).

Feminist theorists are not the first nor the last to call formalism to task for the narrowness of its conception of art and the inadequacy of its theory of aesthetic value. Indeed, formalist theories have received trenchant criticism within analytic aesthetics itself, for example the work of Isenberg, Danto, and Wollheim (Isenberg 1973; Danto 1981; Wollheim 1995). But feminist critiques of formalism have significantly advanced the anti-formalist cause, bringing greater prominence to the view that works of art play a variety of social roles, not just in European culture but throughout the world. Moreover, by revealing the specifically gendered assumptions at work in formalist evaluative practice, feminist critics have demonstrated that what are presented as ‘purely formal’ aesthetic criteria actually reflect local, historically specific attitudes and assumptions. So, for example, the ‘universal’ preference for history painting over still lifes may have more to do with attitudes about the relative value of action over contemplation, or of large works over ‘small’ or domestic works.

Whether the same charge can be substantiated against the formalist theory of aesthetic value itself remains to be seen. From the fact that formalist *practice* often departs from purely formal considerations, it does not follow that there is anything wrong with the *ideal* of formal assessment itself. It sometimes looks, however, as if feminist critics of formalism are committed to just this thesis. If the claim is that evaluating works of art in terms of colour or line (or other strictly formal features) is inherently a gender-biased process, then it needs to be specified in exactly what the gender bias consists—in the preference for work with these formal values or in the exclusion of women from the opportunity for training and practice needed to attain professional mastery (Devereaux 1998a).

For many outside philosophy, the continued preoccupation with formalism evident in feminist aesthetics is rather puzzling. For literary and film theorists, many working within the parameters of deconstruction, poststructuralism, and post-modernism, such arguments—from whatever political quarter—hardly need making. As they observe, the art world and their own disciplines have long since abandoned formalism and the division of art from politics. From their standpoint, this battle has already been won, in no inconsiderable part because of feminism itself. In one sense, this is true. In recent decades, many philosophers of art have embraced a far more contextual, historical approach to art. This does not mean, however, that they have themselves *become* feminist theorists, or that their work

evidences any greater awareness of the subtle and not so subtle biases still operative in art theory and practice. So, while 'Kant and formalism', strictly speaking, may be an already vanquished enemy, feminists rightly insist that, for analytic aestheticians generally, issues of gender and gender-bias have yet to win anything more than a marginal place in the conversation of the discipline.

Acknowledging this last point, however, does not change the fact that many feminist criticisms of Kant and formalism miss their ostensible targets. Why should this matter? Some may argue that labelling its opponents 'Kant and formalism' merely provides a convenient handle for what is, after all, an objectionable and still pervasive set of politically regressive assumptions and commitments. What matters is the politics, not the name.

Looked at differently, however, this misnaming *does* matter. It matters first of all because what we get is a false or distorted picture of who or what the real obstruction to feminist political and theoretical goals is. In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant is not talking about art and politics; on most accounts, he lacks a worked-out theory of art altogether. And, while formalist evaluative practice falls short of the objectivity and universality claimed by the theory itself, the ideal of formal assessment *per se* may or may not turn out to contain an inherent gender bias. Second, this misnaming may turn out to have political consequences. Altogether dismissing Kant or rejecting the ideal of aesthetic autonomy may deprive feminist aestheticians of a part of their lineage on which they might usefully draw, for example, in protecting works of political art from various forms of interference (cf. Devereaux 1998a).

None of this is to deny that there are sound criticisms of Kant and the aesthetic tradition he fostered, or that feminists have done important work in advancing such criticisms. The theory of genius, the commitment to the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgement, and other aspects of Kantian aesthetics do present genuine problems, not only from a feminist perspective but from a variety of critical standpoints. But much careful scholarship and exegetical work using the tools of feminist analysis remains to be done on the *Critique of Judgment*, on the historical theories of Bell and Greenberg, and on earlier varieties of formalism such as Alberti's or Wilde's. Much otherwise strong and interesting work in feminist aesthetics manifests a tendency to *essentialize* formalism, overlooking the subtleties and points of difference between Wilde's position, say, and Bell's, or the settings in which these different theorists wrote, in favour of a generic formalism that few, if any, contemporary aestheticians would embrace.

The same tendency to essentialize is also found in some feminist discussions of Anglo-American aesthetics itself (cf. Lauter's critique of the 'master' theory said to govern twentieth-century aesthetics). Broad characterizations of the work of particular figures or features of the tradition admittedly play an important role in generating calls for reform, but this tendency is one that feminists, who have done so much to call attention to the importance of history and particularity, now have good reason to move beyond.

### 3. IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES

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The introduction of feminism into philosophical aesthetics has done a great deal to reinvigorate the discipline. Feminists working in aesthetics have challenged themselves and their discipline to develop a new self-conception: to see the philosophy of art and aesthetics as a theoretical enterprise with its own political content and political consequences, one deeply enmeshed in a patriarchal view of the world. This change in perspective—making visible what was once difficult, if not impossible to see—has proven highly fruitful. As feminist artists have created new forms of art, feminist art historians have succeeded in winning recognition for the works of women and others typically excluded from dominant traditions. They have also initiated a historical and conceptual investigation of the methods and practices of art history. In criticism, feminists have devised a variety of strategies for actively resisting or reappropriating artworks and traditions thought harmful to the interests of women. In this reading ‘against the grain’, feminist critics do what good critics have always done: they see the text with new eyes. For their part, feminist philosophers of art have begun the difficult work of developing feminist conceptions of art and models of appreciation and evaluation. One result is a lively and provocative dialectic between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ aesthetics.

Whether this conversation ultimately results in merely rethinking a few familiar concepts or developing an entirely new theoretical framework, the process of rethinking is likely to prove enlivening. It may also prove disquieting. To question the value of the Kantian notion of artistic autonomy, to abandon the confidence that our aesthetic judgements and our institutions are impartial and fair to all comers, to see gender biases infecting the prevailing notions of artistic value and the standards based upon them cuts to the foundations of the discipline of aesthetics itself.

Suggesting that feminist challenges to this tradition ought to be taken seriously need not imply that traditional aesthetics is useless, or that a century of analytic aesthetics has accomplished little. Nor need it mean the end of aesthetics as a single tradition. Joseph Margolis, for example, argues for the possibility of a cooperative future, one in which analytic aesthetics and feminist concerns are reconciled through the embrace of a variety of pragmatism (Margolis 1995). But for some, such ‘reconciliation’ may prove difficult, or undesirable. Joanne Waugh questions the role that even sympathetic varieties of analytic philosophy can play in the future of feminist programmes. For Waugh, the ironical and critical approach that feminists must take towards the aesthetic past makes Margolis’s ‘cooperative’ future difficult to envision (Waugh 1995).

Whether feminism and various forms of traditional aesthetics can be reconciled or not, many would agree that aesthetics cannot now avoid confronting questions of gender. Issues of gender both inflect our view of the discipline’s past and play a role in our way towards the future.

## 4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several recent developments suggest exciting new directions for feminist work in aesthetics. The first is the renewed attention to the nature and role of the aesthetic in literature and culture. The joys and pleasures of good—even beautiful—writing is no longer a forbidden subject. Happily, advocates of renewed attention to the aesthetic are not simply returning to a narrow, pre-feminist, formalism or to critical standards divorced from social and cultural realities. The current ‘recuperation’ of the aesthetic is for many scholars an effort to end the standoff between artistic form and moral value, to investigate the rich history of the art and politics debate, and to move forward in understanding the impulse to create and revere works of art (Devereaux 1998*b*). One result of this recuperation is a revived interest in the subject of beauty, not only in philosophy, but in art criticism, art theory, cultural studies, and performance art. The claim that ‘beauty is back’ finds support in a rash of new work on the topic. Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) attempts to defend beauty against decades of political complaints; Peg Brand’s aptly titled collection, *Beauty Matters* (2000*a*) aims to extend the philosophical investigation of beauty into areas such as body art and female methods of beautification; Mary Mothersill’s earlier *Beauty Restored* (1984) revives the notion of beauty as perception and pleasure.

These developments and the changes they harbour are matters of obvious significance to feminist scholars, not only because of the critiques they themselves have made of beauty and the aesthetic, but also because of the historical association of these notions with the elitist and exclusionary practices of the past. For Brand and other feminists working in aesthetics, the concept of beauty they want ‘back’ is not the purportedly timeless, unchanging, universal beauty of the past, but something that moves beyond standard notions. Feminists are already busily at work, exploring whether the concept of beauty can be divorced from ‘the beauty myth’, what a more positive notion of beauty, both male and female, would look like, and what, if anything, beauty has to do with health, virtue, and human flourishing. In this latter connection, feminist aestheticians might usefully draw upon, and extend, philosophical work on the relationship of aesthetic and moral value (cf. Levinson 1998).

New work in evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology provides a second arena of fertile exploration. How do evolutionary accounts of standards of human attractiveness, in the work of Nancy Etcoff (1999), Sander Gilman (1999), and others, bear on feminist attitudes towards serial plastic surgery and chronic dieting, and the conceptions of self and body they imply? What does biological science tell us about how beauty influences our perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, and what are the implications of this research for understanding human responses to art?

Lastly, and perhaps of most central importance for those working in philosophical aesthetics, the history of aesthetics itself is ripe for future exploration. Here, unlike in the areas mentioned above, feminists have shown little interest.

Feminists in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and other areas of philosophy have done first-rate work on Aristotle, Descartes, Hobbes, Hume, Hegel, and other figures in the history of the discipline, but feminists in aesthetics often ignore large sections of the history of philosophy. This is unfortunate. Aside from undertaking scholarly work on Kant and formalism, feminists might usefully turn more attention to Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies of art, medieval theories of beauty, Hume's theory of taste, theories of aesthetic morality in the eighteenth century (e.g. Schiller's), and Iris Murdoch's essays on the relationship of literature and philosophy. Indeed, as the case of Murdoch illustrates, women have played a distinguished role in the aesthetics of the second half of the twentieth century (consider the contributions of Susanne Langer, Susan Sontag, Eva Schaper, Jenefer Robinson, and Martha Nussbaum), a role worthy of further investigation. One might ask about the relationship between aesthetics written by women and feminist aesthetics, particularly as few of these early figures would have identified themselves as feminists. One might also usefully inquire into the feminization of aesthetics itself, i.e. its characterization as a 'softer', more marginal, division of philosophy.

These and other such investigations would be of obvious value, not only to feminist aesthetics, but also to the history of aesthetics and philosophy more generally. With luck, they will also open the way for further interaction between feminist aestheticians and moral philosophers, philosophers of mind, and historians of philosophy, thus bringing aesthetics into closer proximity with other areas of philosophy.

*See also:* Beauty; Painting; Film; Creativity in Art; Representation in Art; Interpretation in Art; Art and Politics; Art and Morality; Aesthetics and Ethics.

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