

Is aesthetic judgement gendered? – A critical comparison of feminist aesthetic theory and Kantian formalism

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Kantian aesthetic formalism holds that aesthetic judgement is not a matter of knowledge or cognition, nor does it implicate the contexts of the artist or beholder. By contrast, feminist aesthetics maintains that the work of art and the ‘gaze’ of the beholder are gendered and, by extension, politicised: this obliges a contextualist approach to aesthetic philosophy. In this essay, I explore the conflicts between these two approaches, the failures of formalism and the necessity of feminist aesthetics to analyse art in the 21st century.

This essay has a dual focus. Firstly, I will examine the claim that all art and aesthetic judgement is gendered. This claim is fundamental to feminist aesthetics, which I will refer to as an organic whole but with specific focus on the perspectives of Mary Devereaux and Laura Mulvey. Moreover, this essay will also address the points of contention between feminist/contextualist claims and traditional (neo-Kantian) aesthetic philosophy which regards aesthetic worth as something formal, and whether this formalist approach is ultimately undermined by the feminist critique.

In 1971, Linda Nochlin published the article, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* An art historian and Second Wave feminist, Nochlin sought to determine why names in painting like Artemisia Gentileschi are marginalised by Rembrandt and DaVinci, or, in film where D.W. Griffith’s achievements in silent cinema appear to overshadow the pioneering works of Lois Weber, especially since these women’s oeuvres showcase no dearth of artistic innovation nor profound disparity in formal ‘value’. The feminist perspective applies a contextual approach to artistic appreciation to deconstruct the “coded systems at play that [have historically objectified] women in art”¹ and enabled patriarchy by assuming patriarchal power relations within aesthetics. To analyse the gendering of art and artistic appreciation, it seems logical to approach these respectively.

However, as was Laura Mulvey’s project in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* against the ‘representation theory’ of prior aestheticians, the persistence of the “patriarchal-dominated mass media”² and the male gaze throughout the history of art denies “the eye’s innocence”³ in traditional artistic spectatorship, and thus the political division between the artwork and the spectator. While representation theory argued for an empirical criticism – that the artist’s work simply represented the sexism of the world in which it was made – Mulvey’s influential position incorporated neo-Freudianism to dismantle the division between art and appreciator. She argued that all parties involved in the aesthetic (artists and audiences) are entangled in the same system of signs which suppress femininity and undervalue the subjectivity of women. In this sense, the art and the gaze are both products of patriarchy.

In Devereaux’s words, the “notion of the gaze has both a literal and figurative component.”⁴ In the more literal sense, ‘art’ as we understand it has been an overwhelmingly masculine sphere of influence throughout history. One need only tour the Louvre with this assumption to fully realise the immensity of patriarchy’s influence over the production of the innumerable portraits, sketches,

¹Mullins, C. (2019) ‘A Little Feminist History of Art’, *Tate Enterprises Ltd.* p.10

²hooks, b. (1994) ‘Outlaw Culture’. *Routledge.* p.87

³Devereaux, M. (199) ‘Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers and the Gendered Spectator: The New Aesthetics’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 48, no. 4. p.337

⁴Ibid.

and sculptures of the female body, appropriated as objects of fetishist fascination by male artists. But the curation process within the establishment of the Louvre (arguably an ‘invention’ of the Western canon) exposes the canonization processes which have defined European art, typically enacted by white men in favour of white men – Ruskin and Shaw may be household names, but how many art history students cite Charlotte-Catherine Patin nowadays? The canon typically refers to the artistic products associated with ‘high culture’ or highly valued cultural products; these products achieve this status by being valued highly by the powerful.

Take Mulvey’s filmic examples, usually belonging to the canons of Film Noir or 1950s melodrama (Sternberg, Sirk, et al.): the vast majority of which were directed by white men which position their white male protagonists in active subject positions and reduce female characters to passive plot décor – or, in the case of Film Noir’s quintessential ‘femme fatale’, an object of anxiety when they do in fact influence the film’s events. Films have been regularly canonised throughout the 20th century with films foremost depicting the white male perspective considered the most important – i.e., *Citizen Kane* and *Vertigo* – and including films featuring female protagonists like *Mildred Pierce* primarily conceived by men because theirs was the heterosexual-masculine perspective which critics, curators, and archivists most identified with.⁵ As Devereaux continues: “the Hollywood film reflects and encourages the cultural proclivity to treat the female body... only as [an object] of aesthetic contemplation”⁶ rather than a subject of her own will. Her perspective corresponds closely with John Berger’s arguments about the confinement of women to the phallogocentric desires of the patriarchal order which renders them inactive “appearances” within the *mise-en-scène* of male ego satisfaction. “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.”⁷ This is the meta-narrative of artistic representation and power relations that feminists seek to expose.

An analysis of the gaze is incomplete without addressing the psychoanalytic foundation with which Mulvey proposes to uncover “the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured [art].”⁸ In her introduction to *Visual Pleasure*, Mulvey asserts that “phallogocentrism... depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world”⁹, ‘phallogocentrism’ meaning the concept that the male sex organ is the central element in social organization. In this way, the androcentric order which empowers men within the text (or image) is formulated as a product of unconsciously recognising women as lacking the phallic object; Freud and Lacan recognised the oppression of women within the artwork as reactionary to castration anxiety. The reason characters played by Barbara Stanwyck or Marlene Dietrich defy assimilation into positions of powerlessness within their respective diegeses (such as Stanwyck’s iconic turn as the femme fatale in *Double Indemnity*) is because they reclaim narrative autonomy by influencing the events of the plot: they partake in the “narrative division of labour.”¹⁰ This causes anxiety in male spectators because the misrecognition of the female character’s possession of the phallic object (i.e., the misrecognition of their coded masculinity) which links to the fear of punishment for his Oedipal desire in “the signification of [the threat of their own] castration”¹¹ – the fear of that symbolic lack signified by femininity. Therefore, the narcissistic and scopophilic (pleasure in looking) aspects of male-gendered art in which the male-coded spectator self-identifies with his screen surrogate and imposes his sexual desires upon the female as an erotic object – Mulvey uses characters from *Vertigo* to exemplify the divide of looking/being looked at – are justified by a more complex system of signs which underpin unconscious aesthetic judgement and undermine women on an ideological level.

⁵It bears mentioning that the most recent (2022) *Sight and Sound* poll of the 100 ‘Greatest Films Ever Made’, chosen by critics, academics, and industry professionals, listed Chantal Akerman’s film *Jeanne Dielman* in the top spot. This signaled the first time a female director had featured in the top ten, never mind no. 1, and thus progress in the processes of curation and canonization (inc. the deconstruction of the ‘canon’).

⁶Ibid. p.342

⁷Berger, J. (1972) ‘Ways of Seeing’, *Penguin*. p.47

⁸Mulvey, L. (1989) ‘Visual and Other Pleasures’, *Macmillan*. p.14

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Mulvey. p.34

¹¹Lacan, J. (2002) ‘Écrits’, *W.W. Norton and Company*. p.576

Moreover, the severity of this unconscious process is revealed proper when we consider the instances in which art created by women (presumably from a ‘female’ gaze – I will return to this) showcases the same tendencies to cater towards the desires of the heterosexual male-coded spectator. In an essay called *Power to The Pussy: We don’t wannabe dicks in drag*, bell hooks takes the later career of Madonna as an example of the failure of radical feminism in the mass media. Having been stereotyped as a symbol of the female sexual revolution, the 32-year-old Madonna partook in a popular photoshoot for *Vanity Fair* in 1992 which styled her as a sex-kitten particular to the erotic fetishes of patriarchy. hooks locates the reason for this schismatic career move in “the thrill of gaining and holding onto the sustained mass patriarchal pornographic gaze” and remaining relevant a decade following her self-titled *Madonna*.¹² Another example might be the Flapper Films of the 1920s which featured ‘modern women’ protagonists – i.e., employed and sex-positive women characters. These films might seem emancipatory when one sees how many women were involved in production and post-production processes, but a closer look at a film like *It* starring Clara Bow will expose a failure to adequately autonomise female characters who, rather than pursue the objects of power made available to male protagonists, such as money or revenge, chase after handsome men in suits (higher in the corporate ladder than they are) and converse about little else. These films are failures of the Bechdel test twenty-four times per second.

Following Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis on culture, the “masculinisation of the spectator position”¹³ is reproduced with the mechanical reproduction of both aesthetic styles and standards of taste in the industry; these standards are heteronormative and masculine. Conversely, the so-called female gaze is less predicated on the gender of the artist than the politics and gender critique of the artwork. In the closing remarks of *Visual Pleasure*, Mulvey stresses the imminence of the avant-garde in rescuing female subjectivity: “[feminist avant-garde art] destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege”¹⁴ by self-consciously deconstructing the representation of women. Examples in postmodern art like Martha Rosler’s 1975 *Semiotics of the Kitchen* which satirically comments on female domesticity in their political and media representations, are images of women from the (gender conscious) perspectives of women emancipated from the influence of the male ego by revolutionary politics.

According to feminists, whether produced by patriarchy or an example of this radical feminist avant-garde, art is necessarily gendered. From here, I transition to the mainstays of neo-Kantian formalism and how formalist aesthetics – sometimes referred to as aestheticist approaches – is undermined by the feminist approach. There are explicit contentions between feminist and Kantian aesthetics, not least because feminist theory generally builds upon the post-idealist tradition of materialism as well as philosophies of praxis, whereas Kant’s aesthetics are predicated on his transcendental idealism. While I will not discuss transcendental idealism in toto, it is worth briefly mentioning Kant’s differentiation between appearance and reality. According to Kant, there is a difference between the realm of the appearances (‘phenomenal’) and how things are in themselves (‘noumenal realm’), and we can only know objects as they appear to us, as phenomena, through our cognitive faculties – i.e., we cannot ‘know’ objects, including artworks, noumenally outside our perception. Rather than distinguishing between these ‘realms’, the feminist approach argues that knowledge of an object in itself is possible through our mental processing of phenomena within the world. The world of “representations”¹⁵ which we perceive is the world in itself and can be comprehended: knowledge accrued from perception indicates knowledge of reality proper.

In Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, with specific focus on the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’, a series of aesthetic claims are made which appear to contest with the feminist point of view. For Kant, a judgement is aesthetic only if it is “not a cognitive judgement” and does not depend on any contextual or conceptual knowledge of the artwork or artist, even going as far as to maintain that it takes wholehearted “disinterest” in the given artwork to aesthetically appreciate it; in this context

¹²hooks. p.12

¹³Mulvey. p.31

¹⁴Ibid. p.27

¹⁵Kant, I. (2007) ‘Critique of Judgement’, *Oxford University Press*. p.36

‘disinterest’ means finding pleasure in something because we deem it beautiful rather than the other way around.¹⁶ Kant presents a distinction between his preferred ‘free beauty’ and that of ‘dependent beauty’. The latter involves the cognitive faculties and does not appreciate the artwork purely for its representational value (through ‘reflective judgement’), instead treating it as a source of knowledge (the noumenal): this broadly defines the feminist approach. For Kant, “taste in the beautiful may be said to be the one and only disinterested and free delight”¹⁷ - pleasure is the end of taste and even determines the subject’s aesthetic judgement.

First, we must question whether this purely formalist approach and conceptual indeterminacy is realistic. A feminist approach values contextual awareness, which entails conceptualisation and cognitive judgement of historical meta-narratives as well as the dialectic between art/artist and appreciator, over formalism, but there remains an appreciation of the form of the work despite its potentially problematic upbringing – e.g., the antisemitic portrayals of Jews in Richard Wagner’s librettos. Moreover, the concept of free beauty (where the cognitive faculties are totally waived) is arguably flawed. While feminists place emphasis on the unconscious, to appreciate an artwork with cognitive neutrality – to resist any manner of contextualisation and/or conceptualisation – is unlikely as far as aesthetic experience goes. In fact, the unconscious emphasis within feminist theory tends to incorporate the examination of unconscious biases to put into context, or conceptualise, the appreciator’s relationship to the artwork and artworld. Not only do we generally register art via the artist’s oeuvre, and thus in relation to the context of their peripheral works, but in the age of postmodernist art, we are encouraged to learn the histories and theories which underpin form and content to fully understand artistic intention and how it relates to other artworks. This accounts for the goblets of information typically displayed beside artworks in art galleries: Picasso’s groundbreaking style (Cubism) is understood as an attempt to inflect multiple perspectives upon a single canvas which, as the goblet informs us, directly transgressed preceding European art movements. We subsequently see Picasso as an innovator and a genius of his milieu. Knowledge of an artwork’s context is not only part of aesthetic appreciation for feminists, but also something apparently part of the artworld today, and an essential tool for political deconstruction of power structures – in this way, an artwork’s status as an object of knowledge can be considered an aspect of its beauty.

Furthermore, Kant’s second definition of the beautiful reads: “The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, pleases universally.”¹⁸ An aesthetic judgement is supposedly impartial because it is free of interest and cognition, and so the delight which arises from impartial appreciation of the beautiful is something universal since the experience (while subjective/feeling-based) is felt by all appreciators. There are multiple problems with Kantian ‘subjective universality’. The most obvious is cultural relativism in aesthetic appreciation. For example, a fundamental premise of aesthetic appreciation in Native American culture is ‘interestedness’. Japanese aesthetics places a similar emphasis on “functional objects” and everyday items, such as domestic ornaments like vases: it thus takes conceptualisation of the object’s function as well as its visual content to fully appreciate its beauty, which of course conflicts with Kantian disinterestedness.¹⁹

Another empirical observation which undermines universality in taste could even be the female form itself as sculpted by the patriarchal gaze which has undergone noticeable evolutions throughout the Western canon, not least in the 20th century. For example, a sex symbol like Marilyn Monroe would not have been as desired in the heroin chic 1990s (and vice versa) because the beauty standard, as imposed upon culture by the influence of powerful men, was different. The phallogocentric pleasure at observing the female body has sustained itself as a seemingly universal requisite by adapting the object of desire to changing standards of beauty: in this sense, the delight might be considered universal, but the object of interest (the artwork) is historically determined, relative, and constantly in flux. Mulvey’s conceptualisation of pleasure ultimately undermines its primacy in aesthetic appreciation, exposing its obfuscation of the cognitive and psychological

¹⁶Ibid. p.35

¹⁷Ibid. p.41

¹⁸Ibid. p.51

¹⁹Eaton, M.M. (1999) ‘Kantian and Contextual Beauty’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 57, no. 1. p.12

differences, and so the aesthetic judgements, between genders. Therefore, Kant’s “normative framing of universal claims”²⁰ is problematic because universality remains unjustified, as well as masking the privileges of the white male spectator who has historically represented all spectators in his aesthetic taste.

In conclusion, while offering “a messier conception of art”²¹ than traditional formalism, feminist aesthetics aligns more accurately with the contextualist experience of artistic appreciation in the contemporary artworld and offers sufficient critique of neo-Kantian limitations to critically undermine the approach, proving art to be typically, but not irreparably, gendered.

²⁰Chanter, T. (2017) ‘Historicizing Feminist Aesthetics’, *Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*. p.471

²¹Devereaux. p.345

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