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The Role of Feminist Aesthetics in Feminist Theory

FEMINISM AS THEORY

“Isms” can be misleading. We tend to think of them as promotional, advancing the cause of or at least foregrounding the subject to which the suffix is attached. Thus nationalism and individualism, respectively, attribute special status to nations or individuals. Those who object to the special designation use the “ism” derogatorily and suggest that anyone who promotes the named cause does so with mindless ideological subservience. Racism is thus a form of advocacy, denoting an attitude, either of deprecation (racial inferiority) or of pride (racial supremacy), applied to persons exclusively on the basis of their race. Those who repudiate racism condemn all mass judgments made according to that stereotype. Whether negatively or positively intended, the terminal identification—the “ism”—bestows significance upon a category that may never have existed as a concept prior to the verbal appendage of its “ism.” “Feminism” is a word that expresses such semantic innovation.

Feminism creates new ways of thinking, new meanings and new categories of critical reflection; it is not merely an extension of old concepts to new domains. Obviously there were women before there was feminism, as well as individuals who loved and hated them both singularly and collectively. However we do not regard womanizers or misogynists as feminists because they love or hate women. The term “feminism” does not pertain to women as the objects of love or hatred, or even of social (in-)justice, but fixes upon the perspective that women bring to experience as subjects, a perspective whose existence has heretofore been ignored. This slight but novel twist in point of view is the source of qualitatively new ideas and values identified with women and which may be taken as exemplary. The word “feminism” has asso-

ciations favorable to women chiefly because it accords subject status to them, but to feminism’s detractors it implies only hostility to men. “Feminism” in their lexicon means favoritism that is undeserved and at the expense of men. Oddly, there is no commonly used corresponding word that denotes a converse advocacy.¹ I will use the term “masculinism” in that sense. Feminists claim that this alternative mode of thinking does exist and is in fact the nameless “default mode” of normal thought. It is so pervasive that we fail to recognize it and are oblivious to its influence upon all aspects of intellectual and social operation.

Masculinism is not a position that one “assumes” or can be converted to as one might be to feminism. One becomes a feminist by declaration—not by birth or chance or out of habit. To adopt a feminist attitude is to take an avowedly gendered point of view that is contingently oppositional.² Feminism as a way of thinking became a possibility only because gender had already been socially constituted as dual. Feminist scholars in America began seriously exploring the social construction of gender in the 1970s—at first angrily as if discovering a partner *in flagrante*, and then more coolly, observing it as a system of culture and of knowledge to be deconstructed.³ Feminists accepted gender, not as a metaphysical or biological reality, but as an analytic category like class or race, a tool for understanding complex relations.⁴ Initiated at the reputedly deviant pole, the Other, such gendered reflection presupposes a primary pole from which it differs asymmetrically, as other, and which it does not define. The primary pole requires the presence of the Other in order to become itself, although it claims both logical and ontological priority to the Other. It depends

for its being upon the negatively marked or gendered pole. Born of the Other and known by it, its own gender is invisible, conceptually nonexistent, except in relation to the pole whose opposition and dependency it claims.⁵ Feminist theory has made it clear that non-feminist thinking is also gendered and that we were mistaken in believing that the generic term “man” is gender-neutral. The change in that perception and the now widespread endeavor to replace “sexist” language with “inclusive” words is the result of feminist deconstruction.

One early form that the feminist “discovery” of gender took was the denial of a neutral or generic human being (that comes in two flavors).⁶ Some feminists hold that, although individual persons might be blurry in their actual identity, there are two irreducibly different modes of being, male and female. This position had, of course, always been endorsed by certain patriarchal men, many of whom found women sufficiently strange and incomprehensible (all but their wives and mothers) to warrant characterizing them as a biologically aberrant species. Some women, for their own reasons, were equally inclined to defend an essential dualism, and some still do—whether out of feminist or non-feminist conviction.⁷ But many feminists repudiated essentialism as both indemonstrable and politically regressive. The contemporary feminist theory that I mean to discuss rejects metaphysical essentialism, but it does not deny the situational differences that radically separate the lives of men and women and lead to their characteristically different forms of behavior.

Simone de Beauvoir, while remaining within the fold of humanism, is undoubtedly the progenitrix of the feminist theory of gender, having said that “One is not born a woman; one becomes one,” and then shown how woman has been constructed as Man’s Other.⁸ Significant articulators of this theory include other French feminists, (notably H  l  ne Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva) as well as British Socialist feminists, and many American philosophers, art historians, literary critics, social historians, theorists and philosophers of science. But, remarkably, one is hard pressed to think of towering heroines. Most ideas seem to be worked out in collaboration and critical communication with others, and certain recurrent themes emerge simultaneously and at many points.⁹ Critical

ideas are as likely to arise out of political and social practice as from theory, and sometimes the same ideas emerge from both sources, becoming clarified as they converge.¹⁰ The feminist theory that is taking shape maintains with de Beauvoir that gender is socially constructed, but denies its universal overdetermination. Rather, gender must be viewed as a system of human relations that is deeply embedded in all other social relations. This means that one is not a woman *and* white, black, lesbian, heterosexual, Moslem, Jewish, rich, poor, urban, rural, etc., (as descriptive qualifiers), but that gender is complexly and interdependently entwined with all these other features of one’s identity. Gender must be thought of adverbially and not as a constant substrate. Women then, are doubly multiple—there is no single explanation of woman as such (no answer to “the woman question”) and individual women’s subjectivity is also multiple, positionally variable and contingent.¹¹ As a result of this plurality, if we are to apply theory to women at all, the traditional notion of theory as unifying principle must give way to something more fluid and multiple. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl proposes that theory become “a process, a constellation of ideas reconfigured and reconfiguring within a myriad of feminist practices.”¹²

Feminist theory derives its vitality from feminist practice and its credibility is tested in women’s experience. Characterized by a lack even of procedural specificity, it has been called a “musing on the circumference of experience.”¹³ This experiential reference links feminist theory fundamentally to the aesthetic. Since the aesthetic is the paradigmatic transformation of the immediate, multiple, and qualitatively diverse, even the most monolithic of classical aesthetic theories is obligated to come to terms with multiplicity and sometimes to leave it unreconciled.¹⁴ Given this proximity of feminist theory to the aesthetic, should we not expect of feminists the articulation of feminist aesthetic theory? Feminist aesthetics may well be the prologue of feminist theory understood more broadly. I will argue that this is the case and that, indeed, feminist theory is at present hindered by the lack of an adequate aesthetic theory. Current discussions of feminist aesthetics tend to be deconstructivist and piecemeal. We have barely begun to consider positively what the prominent features of feminist aesthetics—that is, an aesthetic theory

that is feminist—would be. The problem is intensified by its frequent confusion with the quest for a feminine aesthetic, a distinction that must be clarified before proceeding further.

THE RELATION BETWEEN FEMINIST
AESTHETICS, FEMINIST ART AND
FEMINIST THEORY

The call for feminist aesthetics relies upon a notion of aesthetics that has been randomly aggregated within the historic tradition of philosophies of beauty, the arts and sensory experience. Whether confined to the post-seventeenth century discipline for which the term was coined or inclusive of the value theory that precedes it, aesthetics has a place in the matrix of western philosophy that is consistent with its fundamental logic, metaphysics and epistemology and with its value commitments. Feminist aesthetics would challenge this entire network, recast and reconceptualize it from its own alternative perspective, much as a feminist focus has unsettled some of the foundations of traditional historiography.¹⁵ This enterprise is independent of and altogether different from the issue of a feminine aesthetic. An aesthetic refers to a distinctive style of production. The question whether or not there is a feminine aesthetic—gender characteristic elements, use of imagery (e.g., “central core” images) or other gender specific stylistic devices—has preoccupied art historians and critics as well as artists.¹⁶ It is a matter of controversy because an affirmative answer, especially one that links feminine expression with apparently biomorphic or introjective forms, seems to reinforce essentialistic dualism.¹⁷ The question of feminist aesthetics cannot be divorced entirely from the matter of a feminine aesthetic, but it is not my purpose here to explore their relationship or to enter upon the controversial question of a feminine aesthetic.¹⁸ The issue that concerns me is the place of feminist aesthetics in the articulation of feminist theory.

I have suggested that feminism is linked to the aesthetic because of its inherent pluralism and inseparability from experience. Feminist theory cannot arise *de novo* or out of abstract definition. It cannot have the axiomatic purity to which much of classical theorizing aspires. Since feminism presupposes the acknowledgment of gender as socially constituted, the theory that it

articulates must be contextualized even as it struggles to overcome the actual context that produces it. Necessarily encountered in context, feminism as doctrine is often challenged as anti-theoretical and as polemical, but this begs the very issue that feminists mean to hold up to question—the presumption that theory must be singular, totalizing and comprehensive. Feminism renounces this monolithic view of theory together with the phallographic roots from which it springs. Adhering to the view that experience is saturated with theory, feminists are led to the position that theory, likewise, must be saturated with experience.

An anti-feminist might happily agree with feminists that women’s identity, and therefore their experience, is situationally determined, declaring that women properly derive their being by reflected light and take up whatever coloration is imposed upon them by their particular real-world affiliations together with the prevailing theoretical view of human (i.e., masculine) nature. Defined by negation, or in opposition to the male norm, women are then a mystery, sheer potentiality, their being and desire inexpressible in patriarchal terms—and thereby all the more tantalizing. That very unthematized non-identity that comes into being as the space that the male leaves behind him upon entering the symbolic order is precisely the absence that defines the female. Jacques Derrida and some of his followers have appropriated and romanticized that negative identity as “feminine,” making of it a condition to which men might also aspire.

To feminists, however, the feminine negativity left in the wake of male presence is not an absence, but a possible—“what is left of her is unthinkable, unthought.” What remains for women is not emptiness, but “the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought.”¹⁹ The experience perceived to fill that space from a woman’s perspective necessarily differs from the pale obverse reflection of “significant” experience that men attribute to women.²⁰ Thus women are often irreverent toward the rules set by phallographic reasoning, discounting their intended exclusion as a by-product of a masculine self-confinement that leaves women free to write themselves out of the world that men have constructed and into another one. Not surprisingly, expressive discourse about that world, though employing the familiar vocabulary acquired in

the male centered world, relates only obliquely to that world and strives instead to articulate what is left unsaid.

This observation relates to the fact that feminist *art* often (but not always) concerns and depicts female oppression. Critics of feminism and of feminist art object that such overtly political representations have no place in art. They, however, are failing to grasp the charge implicit in the feminist art that “conventional” art is equally political, the politics being cast in that “neutral” or masculinist mode that appears invisible. Feminist artists face the dilemma that, having been acculturated in a male-dominated artworld, they have imbibed its traditions and values along with their artistic skills and aesthetic sensitivities. Rebelling against those values as women, they confront themselves as artists whose expressive tools remain those of the prevailing order. While striving to express their own perceptions and experience they cannot escape the effect of prior tempering upon those tools and even upon their own critical judgment. Indeed those tools have not in the past excluded the depiction of women. Far from it! Along with loving and caressive exploration of women in intimate detail, they have been used to represent considerable violence toward and abuse of women. The grand tradition is full of rapes, abductions, mutilations, and hateful degradation of women. But these have not been authentic from a woman’s perspective. By and large, they have been viewed through the lascivious, sentimental or punitive eye of a man. Feminist artists face the challenge of recasting these same experiences *as they are undergone by women*, so as to reveal an aspect of them that has been ignored. In doing so, they expose both the politics and the gender bias of traditional art and risk rejection of their own work on the ground that it is not art within that traditional definition. What is distinctive to feminist art, then, is not that it is “about” women, but that it is so in a way that is new, albeit using the same instruments as before.

Some artists seek to perfect new tools capable of shaping new structures, but here too they face the challenge of a conservative community. They may have recourse to new materials, such as fiber (or to other female associated objects such as buttons, dolls, and even sanitary napkins) or to new subject matter, such as women’s sexuality. Often they seek a new venue in which to

present their art. This may not be entirely a matter of choice, but a reaction to rejections and refusals by gallery owners to show work that is not within the prescribed canon. In their search for new methods and media, even where that is undertaken reluctantly, feminist artists nevertheless challenge the tradition of the mainstream. In this respect, feminist art blurs the distinctions between art and criticism, between art and politics, and between theory and practice. The production of such art is at once a theoretical statement and a confrontational act, literally an intervention in the socially produced gender system. It calls attention to that system, displays it in detail and renders it intelligible. Feminist art is thus a means to consciousness raising. When effective, it achieves aesthetically (i.e., with felt immediacy) the realization that other feminist theorists strive to convey indirectly and to analyze abstractly. “Art does not just make ideology explicit but can be used, at a particular historic juncture, to rework it.”²¹ At the same time, feminist art is critical, reflecting upon the artistic tradition that is its point of origin and that it undermines. In this, feminist art is not unlike other examples of modern art, which feed upon their history, borrowing, modifying, transforming and reversing themselves in order to create a new concept. However feminist reversals are distinguishable by their ideology. They are not produced simply to be innovative or for the sake of effect. They are more radical in intent and therefore shocking even to would-be innovators. Sometimes these feminist statements appear to violate basic good taste—a taste that feminists had no part in defining.

I have argued that feminist art merges with and commonly expresses a feminist aesthetics. I maintain, moreover that feminism by its nature depends upon an aesthetics of experience because feminist theory must revert to experience for its formulation. There is nowhere else to go, since theory in its masculinist mold is suspect. But experience is contingent and the language of theory, as we have seen, is inadequate to give expression to women’s perspective. If experience is to be more than the inscription of what is momentarily given and gone, it must be aesthetically embodied, i.e., given shape through imagery and symbolism. That is how we are carried from experience to reflection. However the reflection that is evoked by a feminist critique is

not universalizing. It does not flee from experience, but stays close to its source and “muses at its edges.”

SOME AESTHETIC MODELS FOR FEMINIST THEORY

Feminism is nothing if not complex. Myra Jehlen speaks of the “fruitful complication” of feminist theory and welcomes contradiction not for its irrationality, but in order to tap its energy.²² Sandra Harding recommends that we abandon the faith that coherent theory is desirable and instead declare our fidelity to “parameters of dissonance within and between assumptions of patriarchal discourses,” a route that will enable the creative contribution of a consciousness that is “valuably alienated, bifurcated and oppositional,” and whose psychic, intellectual and political discomfort we should cherish. The offspring of such convoluted consciousness is not a simplifying theory framed from super-Archimedean heights that reduces the world from *this* to *all* in a few neat abstractions. What feminist scholarship should salvage from women’s experience and through women’s texts is not “issues to be resolved” but “better problems than those with which we started.” By expanding the questions instead of reducing the answers, by cultivating instead of suppressing instability, we may find new ways of theorizing that depend less on political repression.²³

To explore the wealth of women’s experience it is necessary to resist the temptation of “privilege-preserving categories.” Elizabeth Spelman points out that middle-class white women, who have done much of the talking that is officially preserved, have had little to say about the variety of women’s experience simply because they are ignorant of it. “There are no short cuts through women’s lives,” she says, and if we are to theorize about women, we must know them in all their particularity.²⁴ This is why the astonishing florescence of literature by and about women all over the world and the explosion of women’s production of visual, dramatic, musical and other art forms is not only illuminating, but vital to theorizing. Only through these works can we come to know ourselves and one another.

There is no lack of works of art to serve as data, and we are not confined to those self-identified as feminist. Feminist critics and theo-

rists often revert to classical works of art, by men as well as women, and to works that have been discarded and neglected in order to find in them insights that will yield new interpretations.²⁵ They are following the path delineated by Harding for philosophers of science, seeking understanding by probing the interstices and the relations between situations, asking the questions that are not asked and wondering why they were not. This is not simply “busy work” on the part of feminists. They are struggling to engender a new theory that will not be simply a successor drawn in the same mold as the masculinist theories that it replaces. Feminist theory will not be a complement to fill out gaps in the theoretical panoply; neither will it be the *coup de grâce* that supercedes all other theory in a long line of approximations to truth. Feminist theory is a new approach to theory.

Feminists have found that theorizing is also a gratifying aesthetic experience. Not the first to discover that fact, feminists nonetheless pronounce their pleasure differently from that of male aesthetes for whom the pleasure of theorizing, like that of most things, is a form of “jouissance,” a self-contained entertainment. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, applauds Derrida’s examination of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, as a “skewered” reading in which the treatise is treated as a work of art to be approached disinterestedly, for pure pleasure that is irreducible to pursuit of the profit of distinction. By dramatizing or making a spectacle of the “act” of stating the philosophy, Bourdieu says, the *Critique* draws attention to itself as philosophical gesture. The work itself, as well as the meta-level critique of it are thus bubbles in space, purely playful illustrations of Kant’s own analysis—purposive entities without a purpose. Bourdieu goes on to acknowledge that “even in its purest form, when it seems most free of ‘worldly’ interest, this game is always a ‘society’ game based ... on a ‘freemasonry of customs and a heritage of traditions’.” In other words there are rules, and they are meant to be exclusive. The pleasure of philosophizing is not for everyone.²⁶

Feminists find an altogether different pleasure in theorizing, and it lies precisely in the possibilities that it opens, rather than in those that it seals off. Not at all disinterested, feminist theorists do not divorce themselves from the object of their discourse and have a commitment to

drawing it out so that its voices may be heard. Since they treat instability as a fact of life and not as an obstacle to be overcome, feminists do not have the same commitment as masculinist theoreticians to voluntarism, or to the will represented as shaping its environment. Thus, the very features that account for the gender distinctive pleasure of theorizing reveal the need for a feminist theory of pleasure and with it a feminist aesthetics.

A feminist aesthetics would not resemble the familiar complex of Greek theory of the arts combined with eighteenth century theory of taste that forms the backbone of academic aesthetics today. Feminist theory regards the dualism defended by classical theories as dogmatic reification and does not consider that authority by one pole of a fantasied reality over another is an issue that merits extensive analysis. Correlatively, feminist theory does not take seriously the claim that manipulation of a medium is a means of self-assertion or a demonstration of power. (Perhaps this is because women have a poorly developed sense of ego-boundaries, or perhaps because the transformation of matter into form is the normal business of motherhood and housekeeping.) If asked, feminists will not hesitate to take a stand on these issues. On the whole, however, neither feminist aestheticians nor feminists more generally have been preoccupied with the subversion of such claims. They simply do not find them interesting.

Seeking to define the area of feminist aesthetics we have found neither a body of truths nor a central dogma, but an instrument for reframing questions. Some classic questions are ignored or discarded in that process, not because the problems have been solved or because feminist theoreticians are ignorant of the history of attempts to solve them, but because they are not problems within a feminist framework. The list of abandoned problems includes the characterization of aesthetic "disinterest," the distinction between various art forms, as well as differences between craft and art, high art and popular art, useful and decorative arts, the sublime and the beautiful, originality, and many puzzles that have to do with the cognitive versus the affective nature of aesthetic experience.

So far, feminist aesthetic theory has devoted disproportionate attention to deconstruction and critique of phallographic practice. Theory is in-

voked in a partial, piecemeal fashion, and only when the context of experience or aesthetic discourse allows it. There is no single, totalizing feminist aesthetic theory and none is sought. Nonetheless, I believe that, rudimentary as it is, feminist aesthetic theory serves both as a model and a point of departure for feminist theory more broadly understood. Clearly addressed to the works of art and phenomena that are its data, there is no question that feminist aesthetic theory is experientially grounded. And open to the new data that are constantly proposed to it, feminist aesthetic theory has no alternative but to be a "musing on the circumference." With the help of a feminist aesthetics we are able to appreciate old things in new ways and to assimilate new things that would be excluded by traditional aesthetic theory. Solely that it makes the world more fascinating would suffice as reason enough to find merit in feminist aesthetic theory. I believe, however, that feminist aesthetic theorizing also promises to yield positive and practical consequences in non-aesthetic dimensions because it illuminates and *corrects* certain imagery that has exerted a powerful influence upon our conventional understanding of the world. I will conclude with two examples that illustrate how feminist aesthetic theory can affect ordinary thought about non-aesthetic matters.

FEMINIST RECONSTRUCTIONS OF VISION AND CREATION

In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Laura Mulvey makes her own theoretical objective very clear. The point of theory is not to understand the world, but to change it:

The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked. Not in favor of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, nor of intellectualized unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film. The alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire.²⁷

Possibly with excessive help from psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey examines the "magic"

of mainstream Hollywood films and exposes their exploitation of women by gratifying unconscious male scopophilia. The eye of the camera, the eye of the actor-protagonist and the eye of the audience—all are male, and it is with the erotic pleasure of that eye that any viewer of the film, regardless of gender, must identify. In the world that the film creates, the image of woman is as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of men, and the voyeuristic conventions of cinema determine the conditions of its pleasure.²⁸ Mulvey intends her deconstruction of this practice as a political assault, and she notes that radical film makers, especially women, are already developing a new film language. But the implications of Mulvey's attack go beyond the critique of film to a reflection upon the concept of theory in general.²⁹ For theory, like film, is specular.

Since Plato's glorification of the "eye of the mind" vision has been regarded as the noblest and most theoretical of the senses, and indeed the propaedeutic to the highest form of "seeing," which is non-physical. Because vision is mediated by light and therefore does not have the direct intimacy of touch or taste or smell, it is less primitive than they are and more philosophical. Thus legitimized by distance, vision is epistemologically privileged. It is lawfully permitted where other forms of perception are not, even though it may be injurious to the object seen. (You can look, but don't touch!)³⁰ Especially where the theatrics of distance and indirection are enhanced (as in a medical examination) there are virtually no constraints on intrusiveness. In the area of aesthetics, Stanley Cavell problematizes the alienation of the absent filmviewer, but at the same time indulges him with the ultimate voyeuristic triumph:

How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen. This is not a wish for power over creation (as Pygmalion's was), but a wish not to need power, not to have to bear its burdens.³¹

The theorist, likewise, sits comfortably, anonymous and invisible, and fiddles with his machine.

Mulvey exposes this glorification of vision and points to the injury that it does to women. Of greater theoretical interest is her observation

that the presumption of truth borne by the image of distance is a non-sequitur. We do not know a subject better as a result of mediation; and there is no reason to believe that distance (any more than proximity), whether physical or psychic is conducive to greater objectivity or better understanding. Why should one suppose that a distant observer would be less partisan than a close one? The mythology remains, and Mulvey analyzes its persistence in terms of psychoanalytic theory (male castration anxiety). Whatever its origin, it is undoubtedly reinforced by a genderized social history, transubstantiated in art and culture. Invariably, a (masculinized) seer is glorified at the expense of a (feminized) seen. In science as in art the prize is possession, and it is awarded to the strangely inactive interventionist who causes the entrapment of the ever-enticing, yet elusive object. This, in turn, manages somehow to be both self-exposing and passive.

Using the critique of an aesthetic genre as her point of entry, Mulvey obliquely indicts an entire epistemological structure. By no means alone in her attack on subject/object dualism or on the conquest model of knowledge, she nevertheless expresses it in a manner that emphasizes the concrete consequences of these apparent abstractions.³² She makes the gendered object intuitively accessible, so that it is seen as both object and gendered.³³ Her contribution to aesthetic theory is thus as well a contribution to feminist theory.

A second example of an aesthetic act of feminist protest casts light upon another prominent misperception. Susan Stanford Friedman has examined the use of the "childbirth metaphor" to yoke artistic creativity and human procreancy, and she reveals some gross distortions.³⁴ She deconstructs the model of creativity that the metaphor of giving birth represents to both male and female interpreters, highlighting the fact that different concepts of creativity are encoded into the metaphor depending upon the gender of both readers and writers of a text. Friedman discovers in the literature a sustained and "subversive" inscription of women's (pro)creativity that has existed for centuries. However, the dominant representations of both childbirth and creativity have not been rendered by women, but by men. Ironically, the language of procreation, commonly used to describe the activity of the artist, has been used in a manner that excludes

women from that activity. Insemination, fertilization, conception, gestation, incubation, pregnancy, parturition—all parts of the birth process—are invoked to denote an activity that is also theologized as the paradigmatic male act of will, the imposition of form upon inchoate matter. Yet women, whose experience provides the source for all this linguistic speculation, have historically been found unfit for the creative act.³⁵ The actual birthing of infants has been conceptually demoted to a form of natural secretion, while the willful production of art has been reserved for the male. Friedman points out the contradiction between vehicle (procreation) and tenor (creation) of the metaphor, leading to the characterization of artistic creation as an archetypically paradoxical and therefore heroic act. Men create by overcoming the impossible—that which women are by nature fitted to do. Thus women, designed to follow the natural course, are precluded from the acrobatics of transcendence. Confined to procreation, they cannot create. But seen through women's eyes, procreation has an altogether different quality, one which is not posed in opposition to creativity.

Babies are never reduced to books, nor books to babies. Women do not lose sight of the literal falsity of the metaphor, but the incongruity of its terms is worked through, yielding a range of complex fusions and integrations that differently affect how women understand their own creativity. One suggested application of the experience of motherhood, extended not alone to the creation of art, but to social engagement and specifically to maintaining the peace, comes from Sarah Ruddick.³⁶ Ruddick borrows a notion from Iris Murdoch (*The Sovereignty of Good*), which is taken in turn from Simone Weil, who advocates a particular form of “attention” that is loving and careful as well as acute. Indeed works of art are no more “dropped” than babies. Nor are they launched into space and disowned. The author is not released with the pain of birth (a “plop” and then it's over) but is unalterably affected by and connected with the fate of her offspring, albeit that does not remain entirely under her control. Friedman speaks of a “female metaphor” that expresses a “defiant reunion of what patriarchal culture has kept mutually exclusive—‘this unwearying maternal love, this habit of creation’.”

Unlike Mulvey, Friedman is not interested in

psychoanalytic explorations of men's reasons for appropriating the childbirth metaphor. Her avowed purpose is to display how gender “informs and complicates the reading and writing of texts,” and she takes the childbirth metaphor for creativity as illustration. She finds that male use of the metaphor intensifies “difference and collision,” while females tend to “enhance sameness and collusion.”³⁷ I am taking her analysis one step further to observe that the male representations of both creativity and procreativity have been normative. Just as the feminist deconstruction of vision by Mulvey took an aesthetic form as a wedge into a larger theoretical issue (effectively an assault on traditional theory), so does Friedman's examination of the birth metaphor unearth some fundamental inadequacies of “mainstream” metaphysics. Essentially it reveals a primitive understanding of creation as a wilful and incoherent act, often an act of violence—the author drops his load and moves irresponsibly on to new territory.³⁸ Is it any wonder that we are beset with monumental ethical and social problems of pollution, overpopulation and environmental destruction?

These two cases illustrate how aesthetic analysis is a tool for feminist theory. Concentrating upon the deconstruction of a deceptively minor detail, such criticism serves as an entry into a thicket of unexamined philosophical presumptions. As layer upon layer of error and incongruity is revealed cleansed of its cover of familiarity, we are compelled—by fascination as well as need—to push on to greater understanding. Perhaps there is also a sense of embarrassment that we have stood by for so long, allowing our lives to be dictated in such a bungling fashion and for such unworthy ends. Whatever the reasons, there seems now to be some hope of recovery.

CONCLUSION

Feminist theory is still in its infancy, and feminist aesthetic theory is only beginning to find itself. I am suggesting that aesthetic theorizing provides a key to the development of feminist theory because of its intrinsic adherence to the immediate and the experiential on the one hand and its dedication to the communion of form on the other. That combination does not guarantee success, but it allows us to proceed bit by bit,

checking along the way that neither content nor order are sacrificed, and that we remain close to our base in experience even as we reframe our ways of thinking about it. Since feminist theory abjures the all-consuming totalizing format that is our patriarchal heritage, it must devise new modes of theorizing that will permit sustained attention to the minutiae of difference without loss of intelligibility. Failing that, we fall back on anecdote and trivia that quickly lose both aesthetic and intellectual interest.

Another caveat is that feminists must avoid disingenuous pluralism. The pronouncement that if we are not infallible there can be no truth is not a genuine acknowledgment of difference, but only a grudging sacrifice of sameness. Feminists should find it easier than traditional philosophers to live without overarching truths or ultimate legitimization because we have always been contingent. This is not a case of making virtue out of necessity, but rather a recognition that what was seen as a mark of deviancy is in fact the norm. We are not in search of a soul, nor of a leader, and the absence of both would be no tragedy. Feminists must define themselves and their own world without succumbing to the arrogant presumption that they are choosing for all, yet being prepared to undertake the responsibility that they are choosing for some. It is possible to opt for pluralism without abandoning either rationality or idealism and certainly without giving in to despair. As I hope to have shown, the pleasure of theorizing should spare us from that. I have argued that feminist theory is radically innovative in its philosophical approach and that aesthetics is at its center. Traditionally, western philosophy places aesthetics at its periphery, where it recapitulates the paradoxes of metaphysics and epistemology. In reversing that pattern, feminist theory discovers new areas for exploration. Asking new questions, forging a new language, meeting new counterparts likewise drawn in from the margins, we meet ourselves with new faces, and that is surely enlivening.³⁹

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1. Iris Marion Young uses the word "masculinism" or "masculinist" in her essay "Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, special issue of *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 8 (1985): 173–183. She uses it in polar correspondence with "gynocentrism," a form of feminism that focuses on gender differences in values and language and brings the distinctively feminine critique to the masculinist values and language that are dominant in the world. A more commonly used word introduced by French feminists influenced by the psychoanalytic reflections of Jacques Lacan and the philosophy of Jacques Derrida is "phallogratic" or "phallogocratic." However these terms, in their etymology, refer more restrictively to the issue of power and political dominance. The more ambiguous word "masculinist" is gender specific while leaving open the issue of power distribution.

2. Contrary to a commonly held belief, feminism comes no more naturally to women than to men. Women are normally socialized to experience the world in accordance with male determined categories. Knowing themselves to be female, they nevertheless understand what that means in male terms, unless they explicitly take an oppositional stand and declare their right to self-determination. This is why feminism entails the forging of a new vocabulary and new conceptual framework.

3. See Micheline R. Malson, Jean F. O'Barr, Sarah Westphal-Wihl and Mary Wyer, eds. *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

4. Some feminists do believe in the metaphysical or biological reality of gender and in the absolute distinctness of the sexes. I will not dispute the feminism of that position. However, since it can be maintained equally plausibly by non-feminists and anti-feminists, it is not a distinctively feminist position. I am arguing that feminism entails the deliberate adoption of a gendered-feminine perspective as a critical stance. This may be done compatibly with both essentialism and its denial.

5. As early as the Pythagorean Table of Opposites and perhaps even earlier the same paradox of knowledge and ontology affirms that the engendered has epistemic priority over the engendering principle. Darkness begat light, but is known only in relation to it. The same is true of the infinite and the bounded, the female and the male. That which is born defines itself in opposition to and knows the other only by negation.

6. Humanistic or Liberal feminism does claim the generic unicity of human being. Perhaps the earliest expression of feminism, dating back at least to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and classically defended by John Stuart Mill in "The Subjection of Women," this philosophical doctrine is primarily political in purpose. It declares that the obstacles to women's equality are external to their nature as human and calls for the removal of all those impediments that interfere with women's full self-realization as human. Libertarian feminism can be radical in its solutions. Proponents have advocated the replacement of natural childbirth with extra-uterine fertilization and gestation (see Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* [New York: Bantam Books, 1970]) and various forms of androgyny (see Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Towards the Promise of Androgyny* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973].) See also Mary Vetterling-Braggin, ed., "Femininity," "Masculinity" and "Androgyny" (Totawa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982).

The theory of liberal feminism is essentially that of liberalism with special attention to the equality of women.

7. An outstanding proponent of gender dualism is Mary Daly, author of *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978). In her view the essential woman is in transformative process, coming to be—"sparking" and "spinning" and en-spiriting herself. Susan Griffin in *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) likewise affirms the essence of women in contradistinction to male-determined culture.

8. With this phrase Beauvoir opens Book II of *The Second Sex*. See Discussion in Young, "Humanism, Gynocentrism," p. 174.

9. Collaboration itself has been defended as a characteristically feminist mode of interaction, but it is not without its difficulties. Women have been forced to acknowledge among themselves the presence of once tabooed competition. This issue is explored in an (ironically) co-authored and co-edited text, *Competition: A Feminist Taboo*, eds. Valerie Miner and Helen E. Longino (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987).

10. An example of such convergence would be the current celebration of the idea of *difference*. Early in the second wave of the North American women's movement (i.e., in the 1970s) working-class women and women of color repeatedly reminded white middle-class women that they were no more entitled to define the norm of women's identity than men were entitled to represent the human norm. Thus chastened, white women did begin listening to their sisters, hearing with difficulty and not without conflicts (see Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center* [Boston: South End Press, 1984].) Dialogue did occur, and with it some movement toward mutual understanding and respect for diversity. Similar rapprochements took place in political environments between lesbian women and heterosexuals, between young and aging women, and between intellectuals and others. At the same time, within academe, postmodernist theory has glorified multiplicity, diversity and profusion. Where difference had been suppressed in the interest of unity, it now became fashionable to find opportunity in difference. It remains to be seen whether this is a genuine convergence that will be productive either theoretically or practically, but it has led to the breaking down of cultural myths and conventional hierarchies so that already it is possible to experience the world in new ways.

11. While men are also contextually gendered, their gender is the paradigm and thus is not contingent upon that of women. Relatively speaking, their identity is more uniform.

12. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, "The Education of Women as Philosophers" in *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*, pp. 35-49.

13. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young, eds. *The Thinking Muse* (Indiana University Press, 1989), introduction.

14. Theories that elaborate unity in diversity, organic unity and especially those that focus upon "open texture" in aesthetic theory are seeking ways to accommodate real and potential variety. Though wedded to synthesis, aestheticians perhaps beyond all other theoreticians, must affirm the unprecedented and original and cannot deny their infinite variety. Thus aesthetic theory is closer in spirit to feminist theory than any other model of theory.

15. Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1984).

16. The confusion is compounded by misleading titles, such as *Feminist Aesthetics*, ed. Gisela Ecker (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986). This book begins with an essay by Silvia Bovenschen, "Is there a Feminine Aesthetic?" which is followed by a series of affirmative and negative answers given by women interested in the distinctively feminine contribution that women have made in a number of fields of artistic endeavor. See also Teresa de Lauretis, "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory" in *Technologies of Gender* (Indiana University Press, 1987).

17. Authors responding to a call for papers on Feminism and Aesthetics for *Hypatia* 5 (1990) were preeminently concerned with the issue of a feminine aesthetic. Disagreeing among themselves regarding its fixity or necessary gender specificity, they were, by and large, in agreement that style and gender correlates are contingently real.

18. Note the difference between the adjective "feminine" and the word "feminist," which may be a noun, adjective or adverb. The former purports to describe behavior by females and carries the covert, if not explicit implication that such behavior is certainly proper and probably natural to females. The latter term refers to the political conviction that advocates the assumption of the woman's perspective. Feminists are not always feminine, although they may be, and feminine behavior may or may not be compatible with feminism.

19. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, "Sorties" in *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), cited in Rosemary Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), pp. 224, 225.

20. Space, including absence and negativity have generally played an important part in defining the female. A famous statement by Erik Erikson is in "The Inner and the Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood," *Daedalus* 93 (1964): 582-606. Reasoning by anatomical analogy, Erikson concludes that woman experiences an "emptiness" that is fulfilled by motherhood. Feminists are inclined to take a larger view of the negativities of their role. They concentrate upon women as potentiators, creators of time and space—as they are frequently called upon to do in their personal and social relations. See R. Perry and M. Watson Brownley, eds., *Mothering the Mind* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1987). A crucial element of the contemporary women's movement has been the creation of spaces by women for themselves—refuges for battered women, workplaces, centers for study, alternative arts spaces, crisis referral places, and health resources.

21. Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists Since 1970" in *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985* (New York: Pandora Press, 1987), p. 273.

22. "Literary criticism especially, because it addresses the best this thinking has produced, exposes this paradox in all its painful complexity—while also revealing the extraordinary possibility of our seeing the old world from a genuinely new perspective." Myra Jehlen, "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism" in *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender and Scholarship*, eds. Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (University of Chicago Press, 1981).

23. Sandra Harding, "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory" in *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*, pp. 19, 20.

24. Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of*

Exclusion in Feminist Thought (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), pp. 161, 162, 187.

25. See *Hypatia* 5 (1990), especially the essays by French, Barwell, Schrage and Robinson and Ross.

26. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 496.

27. In Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 59.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

29. Mulvey explicitly appropriates Freudian psychoanalytic theory as a political weapon to unmask the working of the "magic" of cinema. While she does not give explicit acknowledgment to Sartre's elaboration of the (male) gaze, his discussion in pt. III of *Being and Nothingness* (trans. Hazel Barnes [New York: Philosophical Library, 1956]) is an exemplary account of a perceptual reduction of ontology. The perceived object, aware of herself perceived, finds herself coerced to self-awareness as through the eyes of another, thus ceasing to be for herself.

30. Technologies of surveillance have given a new dimension to this privilege and complicated its legality, but generally the principle holds that indirection confers immunity.

31. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), ch. 6.

32. See for example Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (Yale University Press, 1985) or such pre-feminist critiques as William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature* (New York: George Braziller, 1972).

33. Admittedly one must wade through her ponderous prose style to get there, but once arrived, one cannot help but

see films with an altered awareness, much like that induced by John Berger's influential pictorial essay on Women in *Ways of Seeing* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973).

34. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse" *Feminist Studies* 13 (1987): 49–82.

35. From Aristotle's *Generation of Animals* to De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, procreation has been viewed as an essentially passive process, something that happens to the individual, rather than a project that she undertakes. Only recently, thanks to both feminist awareness and the possibility of control, has there been serious exploration of the extent to which reproduction is a spiritual as well as physical activity.

36. Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking" and "Preservative Love and Military Destruction: Some Reflections on Mothering and Peace" in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Tribilcot, (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allenheld, 1983).

37. Friedman, "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor," p. 75.

38. Feminist authors frequently and incredulously call attention to the insulting use of reproductive metaphors in the context of militarism. "Oppenheimer's baby" to refer to the atom bomb is only the most obvious. See Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals" in *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*.

39. In using this figure of speech, I have inadvertently adapted the title of Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984) and also agreed with its thesis.