

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Autumn 2019 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857559926, DOI 10.7413/18258630065

FEMINIST AESTHETICS

By Gemma Argüello Manresa

(First published November 30, 2019)

It.: *Estetica femminista*; Fr.: *Esthétique féministe*; Germ.: *Feministische Ästhetik*; Span: *Estética feminista*.

Feminist aesthetics can be characterized as a critical conceptual framework for analyzing the gender assumptions Western aesthetics, philosophy of the arts and the arts have had and their implications in the categories they have historically employed. It emerged as a result the influence feminism had in the study of gender bias in the artistic production and its reception. Works like Nancy Nochlin's *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971) and Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) were fundamental for recognizing the exclusion of women from the history of the great visual artists and how the male gaze is a predominant kind of depiction that satisfies and is designed from a masculine and heterosexual point of view.

During the 1970s and 1980s it started the analysis of the male gaze in literature, film and visual arts, but also the women's artistic production demanding its recognition. However, it was not until the 1990s that philosophical feminist aesthetics was first addressed as an important and necessary area of study with the special issues *Feminism and aesthetics* (Hein, Korsmeyer 1990) in "Hypatia: a journal of Feminist Philosophy", and *Feminism and traditional aesthetics* (Brand, Korsmeyer 1990) in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism". And the first introductory book on the field, *Gender and aesthetics: an introduction* by Carolyn Korsmeyer (2004) was published during the first decade of the 2000s.

Although feminist aesthetics came later than feminist political philosophy, it appeared almost at the same time as feminist perspectives of other philosophical fields, such as epistemology and philosophy of science. Like other feminist approaches to different philosophical domains, there is not a unitary feminist perspective on aesthetics, however, despite the variety of approaches, all implicitly or explicitly demand the recognition of women in its sphere of influence, that is, philosophy and the arts. Nevertheless, contrary to other fields it does not only take contributions from analytic and continental feminism, but also from cultural theory, art history, comparative literature, film theory, psychoanalysis, just to name a

few disciplines and theories. Feminist aesthetics' literature covers a broad range of topics, but the most important are the feminist critique of philosophical aesthetics and the feminist philosophy and theory of the arts.

FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS

Feminist critique of philosophical aesthetics examines how Western aesthetics assumed a gender-neutral approach to aesthetic value, like beauty and the sublime, and evaluative aesthetic categories such as geniality and disinterestedness (Brand, Korsmeyer 1995; Hein, Korsmeyer 1993; Korsmeyer 2004; 2017). It includes a situated perspective that questions the universality of aesthetics' principles, the universal and prescriptive assumptions behind concepts like aesthetic judgment, aesthetic experience and artistic practice, and the standards of taste and artistic creation.

Feminist philosophers have identified gender assumptions in the patterns of thought behind the corpus of work of different philosophers. They noted there are gender assumptions and stereotypes that underlie the essentialist conceptualization of human nature in the 18th and 19th Century philosophy. However, during these periods the male and female sexual distinction did not only affect many moral and political categories used in Western philosophy and humanism, but also aesthetic categories and the search for a universal standard of taste and aesthetic judgment. In this regard, it has been analyzed how the notions of a feminine nature, associated with delicacy, weakness and quietness, and a masculine white nature are related to the features needed for aesthetic value, judgment and appreciation in the works of David Hume (Korsmeyer 1995), Edmund Burke (Mattick 1995; Korsmeyer 2004), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Mattick 1995), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (Korsmeyer 2004) and Immanuel Kant (Gould 1995; Battersby 1990; 1995). Distinctions between categories, such as arts and crafts, have been criticized by feminist aestheticians, but also specific aesthetic categories like the sublime (Gould 1995; Klinger 1995) and beauty. The last one, associated with feminine features, has been analyzed in relation to its influence in different modes of appreciation, representation and evaluation of artworks, bodies and nature (Brand 2013; 2000; Irvin 2016; Lintott 2010). Notions of aesthetic disinterestedness and aesthetic autonomy have been heavily criticized (Deepwell 2020) as universal assumptions "with an unacknowledged gender bias that infects purportedly impartial standards of evaluation and distorts judgments about which works of art and artists are significant" (Devereaux 1998). However, despite the fact that feminist critique of philosophical aesthetics challenges any prescriptivist approach to aesthetics that pursues universal principles, there are mixed positions. Some consider that it is necessary to find feminist frameworks that do not only revise, but also reformulate aesthetic categories (Battersby 1990; 1998). Instead of a philosophical feminist revisionism, others consider that a characterization of the feminine should not to be confused with a feminist approach to aesthetics (Felski 1989; 1995) or, like Ann Eaton (2005; 2006), propose a feminist standpoint theory that "recommends the use of perspectives from particular socially located points of view for understanding, appreciating, and judging art" (Eaton 2009: 274) that can include not only gender, but also racial, ethnic and class bias.

However, it is important to notice that feminist critique to philosophical aesthetics has provided an important basis for a critical review of the Western philosophical tradition and for an examination of the assumed division between different areas of philosophy, at least regarding the distinction between aesthetics, ethics and political philosophy. In this respect, Hilde Hein points out that "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" (Hein 1995: 460). These areas have been possible because feminist philosophers have analyzed how aesthetic concepts are what Carolyn Korsmeyer called gender concepts, that is, concepts that despite they are "lacking any obvious reference to males or females, or to masculinity or femininity, nevertheless are formulated in such a way that their neutral quality and universal applicability are questionable" (Korsmeyer 1995: 49).

FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY AND THEORY OF THE ARTS

Feminist philosophy and theory of the arts explores and criticizes the social and political implications of the supposed gender-neutral culture of artistic production, evaluation, interpretation and reception in the arts (however, most of the literature focuses on visual arts, literature and film). Despite it is intimately related to the feminist critique of philosophical aesthetics, feminist philosophy and theory of the arts specifically brings together diverse analytic and continental philosophical and situated perspectives that show the social, ideological and institutional conditions by which artistic canons have been established and how they have affected the inclusion of women artists in the art world.

These feminist perspectives of the arts explore many of the problems that have produced the exclusion of women from the art world, i.e., the consequences of the opposition between the male public and the female private has into the inclusion of women into the arts (Pollock 1988); the way the genesis and institutionalization of the concepts of geniality and aesthetic disinterestedness prevented women from participating and being recognized as great artists (Battersby 1990); the way women's achievements have been overlooked (Chadwick 1990; Nochlin 1971); and how historically gender and racial and ethnic stereotypes lie behind the constraints women have had on what they could or could not produce (i.e., crafts and fabrics, but not fine arts).

Cornelia Klinger (2000) sustains that the feminist engagement with arts and aesthetics is concerned with two issues: women's exclusion from participation in the sphere of activity of the arts and the lack recognition of women's achievements because they have been overlooked, forgotten, denied or overtly suppressed. One of the most important contributions of these feminist philosophical and theoretical perspectives is the analysis of the establishment of artistic canons and how the women's socio-historical conditions in a patriarchal society have prevented them from having recognition and having access to the canonical artistic production. However, in this regard there are at least two positions: one that defends a feminist approach to the canons and another one that defends the inclusion of women in the existent canons. Both denounce the lack of women participation in the art world, but they have important differences. The first one is the result of the influence of essentialist feminism in aesthetics and it is a gynocentric perspective that defends a separate conceptual and critical framework for women's

productions (Cox 1990; Battersby 1990; French 1990), whereas the second do not necessarily reject the canons, neither aesthetic categories important for the arts, such as artistic autonomy and aesthetic disinterestedness, but instead it defends the idea that these categories can fit the feminist ideals (Eaton 2008; Ziarek 2012). Finally, there is also a corpus of works by artists, philosophers, cultural theorists, art historians and feminist scholars that specifically analyzes feminist art (Brand, Korsmeyer 1995; Korsmeyer 2004).

Despite feminist aesthetics has been crucial to denounce gender bias and discrimination against women in art history and the Western philosophical tradition, it falls into the same problems some feminisms have. Most of the discussion homogenizes women, as if there were no differences between women having different ages and coming from different social, racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds. While some efforts have been already made on the analysis of non-Western aesthetics and the intersections between feminist perspectives and black aesthetics or the aesthetics of different ethnic backgrounds (Brand, Devereaux 2003; Brand 2013; Edmonson 1992; Desmond 2011; Hooks 1995; Irvin 2016; Pollock 1999), the greater part of the work in this regard has still to be done.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- C. Battersby, *Gender and genius: towards a feminist aesthetics*, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1990.
- *Situating the aesthetic: a feminist defense*, in E. Dayton (ed.), *Art and interpretation. An anthology of readings in aesthetics and the philosophy of art*, Canada, Broad View Press, 1998: 213-220.
- *Stages on Kant's way: aesthetics, morality, and the gendered sublime*, in P. Z. Brand, C. Korsmeyer, *Feminism and tradition in Aesthetics*, University Park (PA), Pennsylvania University Press, 1995: 88-114.
- P. Z. Brand (ed.), *Beauty unlimited*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2013.
- (ed.), *Beauty matters*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000.
- *Feminism and aesthetics*, in L. M. Alcoff, E. F. Kittay (eds.), *The Blackwell guide to feminist philosophy*, Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2007: 266-282.
- P. Z. Brand, C. Korsmeyer (eds.), *Feminism and tradition in aesthetics*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 48/4 (1990).
- *Feminism and tradition in Aesthetics*, University Park (PA), Pennsylvania University Press, 1995.
- P. Z. Brand, M. Devereaux (eds), *Special issue: Women, art, and aesthetics*, "Hypatia", 18/4 (2003).
- W. Chadwick, *Women, art and society*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1990.
- R. Cox, *A gynecentric aesthetic*, "Hypatia", 5/2 (1990): 43-62.
- K. Deepwell, *Beauty and its shadow: a feminist critique of disinterestedness*, in L. R. Musgrave (ed.), *Feminist aesthetics and philosophy of art: the power of critical visions and creative engagement*, New York, Springer, 2020.

- M. Devereaux, *Oppressive texts, resisting readers, and the gendered spectator: the "new" aesthetics*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 48/4 (1990): 337-347.
- *Autonomy and its feminist critics*, in M. Kelly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of aesthetics*, Vol. 1, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998: 178-182.
- K. K. Desmond, *Ideas about art*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- A. W. Eaton, *Standpoint aesthetics*, in S. Davies et al. (eds.), *A companion to aesthetics*, Malden, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009: 272-275.
- *Feminist aesthetics and criticism*, in D. M. Borchert (ed.), *Encyclopedia of philosophy*, Michigan, Thomson Gale, 2006: 571-574.
- *Feminist philosophy of art*, "Philosophy Compass", 3/5 (2008): 873-893.
- *Feminist aesthetics and criticism*, "Encyclopedia of philosophy", 2005, accessed October 15 2018, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/feminist-aesthetics-and-criticism>.
- B. Edmonson, *Black aesthetics, feminist aesthetics, and the problems of oppositional discourse*, "Cultural Critique", 22 (1992): 75-98.
- R. Felski, *Beyond feminist aesthetics*, London, Hutchinson Radius, 1989.
- *Why feminism doesn't need an aesthetic (And Why It Can't Ignore Aesthetics)*, in P. Z. Brand, C. Korsmeyer, *Feminism and tradition in aesthetics*, University Park (PA), Pennsylvania University Press, 1995: 431-445.
- M. French, *Is there a feminist aesthetic?* "Hypatia," Vol. 5, No. 2 (1990): 33-42.
- T. Gould, *Intensity and its audiences: toward a feminist perspective on the Kantian sublime*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 48/4 (1990): 305-315.
- H. Hein, *The role of feminist aesthetics in feminist theory*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 48/4 (1990): 281-291.
- H. Hein, C. Korsmeyer (eds.), *Special issue: feminism and aesthetics*, "Hypatia", 5/2 (1990).
- (eds.), *Aesthetics in feminist perspective*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993.
- S. Irvin (ed.), *Body aesthetics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.
- B. Hooks, *The oppositional gaze: black female spectators*, in P. Z. Brand, C. Korsmeyer, *Feminism and tradition in aesthetics*, University Park (PA), Pennsylvania University Press, 1995: 142-159.
- C. Klinger, *Aesthetics*, in A. M. Jaggar, I. M. Young, *A companion to feminist philosophy*, Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2000: 343-352.
- *The concepts of the sublime and the beautiful in Kant and Lyotard*, "Constellations", 2/2 (1995): 207-223.
- C. Korsmeyer, *Gender aesthetics. An introduction*, London, Routledge, 2004.

- *Feminist aesthetics*, in E. N. Zalta (ed.), "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy", 2017, accessed October 15 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/feminism-aesthetics/>.
- *Gendered concepts and Hume's Standard of Taste*, in P. Z. Brand, C. Korsmeyer, *Feminism and tradition in aesthetics*, University Park (PA), Pennsylvania University Press, 1995: 49-65.
- S. Lintott, *Feminist aesthetics and the neglect of natural beauty*, "Environmental Values", (2010): 315-335.
- P. Mattick Jr., *Beautiful and sublime: "Gender Totemism" in the constitution of art*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 48/4 (1990): 293-303.
- L. Mulvey, *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*, "Screen", 16/3 (1975): 6-18.
- L. Nochlin, *Why have there been no great women artists?*, in V. Gornick, B. Moran (eds.), *Woman in sexist society: studies in power and powerlessness*, New York, Basic Books, 1971.
- G. Pollock, *Differencing the canon. Feminist desire and the writing of art's histories*, New York, Routledge, 1999.
- *Vision and difference. Feminism, felinity and the histories of art*, New York, Routledge, 1988.
- E. P. Ziarek, *Feminist aesthetics and the politics of Modernism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

G. Argüello Manresa, *Feminist Aesthetics*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Autumn 2019 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2019/autumn/FeministAesthetics.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630065.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAE's* archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the second volume of *ILAE's* printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects *ILAE's* Spring and the Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

G. Argüello Manresa, *Feminist Aesthetics*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 2, Milano, Mimesis, 2019.

International Lexicon of Aesthetics. Senses of Cinema. Slought. Canadian Society for Aesthetics. Euro-Asian International Aesthetics Association Contact: aesthetics@yandex.com. European Society for Aesthetics. Finnish Society for Aesthetics (Suomen Estetiikan Seura). French Society of Aesthetics (Société Française d'Esthétique). German Society of Aesthetics (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ästhetik). Hellenic Society for Aesthetics. Israeli Society for Aesthetics (Ha'aguda Hayisraelit Le'aesthetica). Italian Society for Aesthetics (Società Italiana d'Estetica). Japanese Society for Aesthetics (Bigaku-Kai). Korean Society of Aesthetics Contact Resource information. Key-title: International lexicon of aesthetics. Key-title: International lexicon of aesthetics. Title proper: International lexicon of aesthetics. Country: Italy. Record information. Last modification date: 06/02/2020. Type of record: Confirmed. ISSN Center responsible of the record: Centro Nazionale ISSN. Links. URL: lexicon.mimesis <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/index.php>. URL: lexicon.mimesis <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/index.php>. URL: lexicon.mimesis <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/index.php>. URL: lexicon.mimesis <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/index.php>. URL: lexicon.mimesis <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/index.php>. Feminist aesthetics first emerged in the 1970s and refers not to a particular aesthetic or style but to perspectives that question assumptions in art and aesthetics concerning gender-role stereotypes, or gender. Feminist aesthetics has a relationship to philosophy. The historical philosophical views of what beauty, the arts, and sensory experiences are, relate to the idea of aesthetics. Aesthetics looks at styles of production. In particular, feminists argue that despite seeming neutral or inclusive