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Essay Review of *Gender and Aesthetics*

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Introduction

Gender and Aesthetics by Carolyn Korsmeyer is a book with a twofold purpose: it aims both at providing an introduction to key concepts in aesthetics and at demonstrating how many of these concepts are biased from a gender perspective. Although gender does not refer only to the opposition feminine-masculine but can also denote differences like homosexual-heterosexual and black-white, the author restricts herself to an exclusively feminist viewpoint.

In the first two chapters Korsmeyer sets out to demonstrate that classic concepts like fine art, genius, beauty, sublime, taste, and disinterested aesthetic perception are gendered. The idea is that these concepts embody presuppositions about the desired qualities and social roles attributed to men and women. For instance, the idea of the genius is modelled on the male artist. 'Genius' connotes a superior mind and independence from tradition. These characteristics have traditionally been associated with men. Another example is the concept of beauty, which since the 18th century has been defined in terms of characteristics ascribed to the female body like smallness, softness, and gentleness in contour. And the seemingly neutral concept of 'disinterested aesthetic perception' has been unmasked by feminist theorists as the typical 'male gaze', exerting sexual and social power over the subject exposed, the most salient example being female nudes.

Korsmeyer argues that such gendered meanings of aesthetic concepts can be reduced to a number of fundamental oppositions like those between mind and body, rationality and feeling/imagination/intuition, and objectivity and subjectivity. Whereas the concepts of mind, rationality, and objectivity are stereotypically associated with men, body, feeling, imagination, intuition, and subjectivity have traditionally been related to women.

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Chapter Three analyses how concepts of art and artistic practice have influenced women's opportunities to enjoy professional education and to act as professional artists during the past centuries. She analyses the cases of music, literature and painting, showing that the barriers for women in literature were somewhat less tough in painting and music. Chapter Four, "Deep Gender," examines the status of taste and food in aesthetics. Korsmeyer argues that via the chains of body, subjectivity, lust and sex, there is a deep connection between taste and the feminine. She suggests that it is because of this connection that taste has held a subordinated position in aesthetics. But on the other hand she also insists that food, even in the case of haute cuisine, cannot count as a fine art.

In Chapter Five the author discusses how feminist artists have challenged the concept of art in and through their works. Although there are many types of feminist art and a common denominator cannot be identified, Korsmeyer discerns two major themes: the use on non-standard materials and the presentation of the body. The final chapter, "Difficult Pleasures," again takes up the issue of the sublime introduced in Chapter Two. It asks whether there is a 'feminine' sublime and then establishes a connection between the sublime and the disgusting. Both phenomena feature an initially negative response which is overruled by a positive one. Using the work of Julia Kristeva, Korsmeyer sets out to explain how the disgusting can give rise to a positive aesthetic response. In another part of this chapter the author discusses the work of Luce Irigaray, who argues that women should break away from ordinary, 'patriarchal' discourse and create new ways of writing, rooted in the specific characteristics of the female body.

Having presented a short overview of the book's main themes, I would like to concentrate on two issues. The first issue concerns the relevance of Korsmeyer's discussions for the aesthetics of music. I focus on questions about the representation of the body in music and the disgusting, also questioning the import of cultivating the disgusting in the arts. Second, I examine the scope of Korsmeyer's book and broaden this to a discussion of the status of feminist aesthetics.

Music, representation, the disgusting

Although Korsmeyer's book is a book on aesthetics in general, the majority of the examples in her book are taken from visual art. Music features prominently only in Chapter Three, which discusses the barriers female artists faced in the past centuries. The question arises to what extent the points Korsmeyer makes in relation to visual art, particularly in Chapters Five and Six, also apply to music. In Chapter Five, recall, Korsmeyer discusses feminist art on the basis of two major characteristics: the use of non-standard materials and presentation of the body. Although I do not know any music by gender-inspired composers using non-standard materials, I think that music easily lends itself for such a procedure. Since the middle of the 20th Century there have been all kinds of experiments with speech, cries, and a variety of other unfamiliar sounds and noises. One can imagine music incorporating non-standard materials associated with women such as screams of harassed women or sounds from the uterus that can be heard by the unborn child.

(Re)presenting the body in music is a more complex issue, however. Using particular noises like noises from the uterus is, of course, a way of representing the female body. But representation becomes more interesting when one transcends mere reference to the body, making a statement about the ways we conceptualise it. Can music as a sound structure represent the body in such a way? The dominant view in the analytic philosophy of music is that music cannot do so. Roger Scruton denies that musical representation in the proper sense of the word is possible. In order to be representational a work of art should not merely pick out a subject but also characterize it; that is, the work of art should express thoughts about the subject. Whereas literature and (in some cases) painting have the potential to be representational in this sense, music does not (Scruton, 1983, 62-66). Peter Kivy's (1984, 2002) use of 'representation' in music, which has been criticized by Scruton (1994, 504-5), is much looser: a relation of 'sounding like', intentionally established by the composer, seems to be sufficient. Nevertheless, Kivy is also convinced that music cannot communicate thoughts, arguing that music lacks the linguistic resources necessary for doing so: syntax and semantics (2002, 150). He finds content analyses like

Susan McClary's reading of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony as a narrative about a homosexual man 'not plausible at all'.

Instead of merely presenting bold analyses, Lawrence Kramer (1995) has provided a novel account of musical representation. He argues that, with appropriate knowledge of the social, historical, ideological, psychical, and rhetorical context, we can identify 'tropes' in music, which not only possess but also develop representational content. A musical trope or metaphor 'condenses' the discursive field into the music but at the same time reinterprets the discourse by means of the music. In the process of musical development the tropes take on new meanings.

Kramer's analyses make a convincing case for the view that at least some music, like the opening of Haydn's *Creation*, can be situated within the context of particular views so clearly that it represents them, and even suggests potential variations among them. On the other hand, I agree with sceptics of representation that boundaries between justified claims about representation and mere speculation cannot be precisely drawn, and that sufficiently warranted claims about musical representation in the strict sense of communicating ideas are very hard to make.

Discussion about musical representation should not be exclusively focused on absolute music. There is little doubt that in combination with a text or when used in a film, a play or other such multimedial artworks, music can be a powerful force in amplifying a representational context. Moreover, musical *performance* may be the most direct way in which the body can be represented. Susan McClary (cited in Frith, 1996, 213) suggests that the female performer is in a delicate position: she has to keep control of herself on the stage while being patrolled by an objectifying sexual gaze conventionalized by hundreds of years of patriarchal command. One way of managing this balancing act is exemplified by Madonna, who appeals to this gaze and at the same time asserts her female power. It may be asked whether there are other, more relaxed ways of representing the body than this rather aggressive approach, which only seems to give more fuel to the battle between the sexes.

As indicated earlier, Korsmeyer gives special attention to disgust in Chapter Six of her book. Can music communicate the disgusting? There are certain parallels with the case

of representing the body. One can imagine performances in which the performer exposes himself or herself in a way so as to raise a response of disgust. It also seems to be possible to use music in multi-medial artworks to enhance an impression of disgust raised by text, visual images, smells, tastes. Whether such experiences can be called aesthetic is one question. Another question is whether the disgusting can be evoked merely through sound. In other words: can 'music alone' evoke the disgusting? There is a distinction to be made here between communicating *beliefs about* something, which dominates discussion about the presentation of the body, and directly implicating a feeling, an experience of disgust.

Again, the border line seems to be between *musique concrète*, music incorporating everyday sounds, and music that does not so. Music of the more abstract kind constitutes a world of its own in which the disgusting does not feature. How can the mere play of sounds amount to an experience of the disgusting? With music employing concrete sounds from normal life, however, it does not seem difficult to achieve an effect of disgust: combining screams with, sounds of chain saws, machine guns, or noises suggesting the mutilation of the human body could, for instance, do the job.

But can such experiences of disgust in music be raised to an emphatically aesthetic experience of the kind Korsmeyer has in mind? Korsmeyer sees the disgusting as today's pendant of the notion of the sublime, which was very much discussed in the 18th century. With both the disgusting and the sublime, she argues, we are faced with the unbounded, the formless, the threatening, and in either case a negative response is transformed into a positive one. Korsmeyer agrees with William Ian Miller that with the visceral and the disgusting "a world of meaning explodes" (145). The attraction of the disgusting lies, according to her, in the unconscious attraction of the death of the subject, of relaxing back into the maternal plenitude that precedes our lives as individuals with separate identities. "It is fascinating, mesmerizing, revolting, horrifying" (151).

With the aesthetically disgusting as presented by Korsmeyer, we gain a strong kind of satisfaction which overcomes the initial repulsion we feel when confronting the disgusting object or process. I very much doubt whether music can achieve this at all. Music of the absolute variety certainly cannot, but I doubt whether even music of the most concrete type could do this. In fact, I am sceptical about Korsmeyer's alleged parallel

between the disgusting and the sublime. With the sublime, as presented by Kant, we have an experience of moral elevation. We feel that the universe extends far beyond our powers of imagination but yet we realize that we are free, that we have the ability to transcend the causal forces that govern nature. With the disgusting, however, the sensational seems to prevail. Exploring the disgusting opens up a new range of experience and this fits very well into the modern (and postmodern) project of pushing back frontiers and of breaking taboos. But what do we arrive at if we open up one world of strong sensations after another, eventually removing all taboos? We end up blunt, I suggest. Once we have discovered a new field of 'meanings', we want to go on and explore ever new domains of thrilling experiences. The result is that we are exhausting the resources of the arts and of human culture in general. Continuous explosions of meaning eventually result in the total loss of meaning. This pertains particularly to the moral and the spiritual: When every taboo has been broken we will also have lost any sense of deep value. We will live in a world where there is no room for the sacred any more: All places where it might have hidden will have been destroyed by the bulldozers of deconstructive art.

In spite of Korsmeyer's reference to the disgusting as a positive experience in art, the moral and spiritual significance of the disgusting may very well point in a direction opposite to what Kant was aiming at. If we cultivate the disgusting in art, we may be likely to contribute to the loss of profound values. Such art has a dehumanizing effect, whereas with the sublime Kant was asserting the strength of the human condition.

Korsmeyer's scope and the character of feminist aesthetics

The strengths of Korsmeyer's book are its accessibility and the broad view it gives the reader of the many gender issues with respect to aesthetics. Korsmeyer's prose is very clear and there is ample repetition of the main points, so that the book should be comprehensible to any student of philosophy or the arts. The other side of the coin is that some important issues do not get the attention they seem to deserve. For instance, when Korsmeyer presents the critique of the male gaze, we learn that there are many modes of looking (56), but we do not learn what a feminist way of looking might be like. In her

discussion of the sublime, the author introduces the concept of the female sublime (82), but we have to content ourselves with a rather obscure quote, which does not provide us with insight into the actual potential of this concept. In connection with the relationships between gender and performance, Korsmeyer characterises the approach of three feminist theorists in no more than one sentence each (127). We are left only with suggestive concepts like 'sexuality as performance' and with references to the sources where we can find these explained.

In defence it might be said that in an introduction to the field, there are many issues the author can only hint at. But my point is that it is often precisely where a positive account of feminist aesthetics begins to appear that she cuts off the discussion and we are relegated to footnotes. As a result Korsmeyer's book is heavily dominated by a negative approach: it deals largely with criticizing traditional concepts of aesthetics and with pointing out how women have been victimised by dominant conceptions of art and artistic practices. Such a negative approach is respectable but if it is not balanced by positive contributions it is a bit too easy. The real challenge for feminist aesthetics, I suggest, is to come up with concepts of the arts and artistic practice that provide robust alternatives to traditional ones. Korsmeyer's survey of the field does not allow one to conclude to what extent feminist aesthetics has already achieved this.

At some points Korsmeyer seems to suggest that the status of such an alternative feminist discourse might be very precarious. When discussing the work of Luce Irigaray, she addresses the problem of dealing with the 'masculine/neutral' discourse that dominates the patriarchal order and in which the feminine disappears (141). Women's writing reacting to this presents a paradox: it is a writing that evades the symbolic order and seeks to represent the unrepresentable. Korsmeyer argues that the world of the feminine, which is "beyond" stable, univocal representation, may yet be presented through accumulated singular aesthetic experiences of art (142-3). This suggests that the arts may be more apt to embody the feminine than language, but it casts doubt on the nature of feminist aesthetics. Can feminist aesthetics proceed in a lucid analytic manner or can it only proceed in an elusive, almost poetic way, trying to capture things that cannot be stated in straight prose?

Although Korsmeyer does not elaborate on this question she does not seem to consistently follow Irigaray's approach in her book. She engages in discussing the disgusting in a way that is not elusive at all, emphasizing the continuity between traditional aesthetics and current feminist aesthetics. In a similar way, she explains that projects of feminists like challenging the concept of art fit into more general tendencies in the art world. What is even more remarkable, Korsmeyer seems to develop the very gender differences she criticizes elsewhere. This happens in Chapter Four where she argues that taste and food are connected to the feminine. The relationships she uncovers are not derived, as elsewhere, from the writings of classical authors, nor are they clearly implied in the way we use the concepts of food and taste. Rather, the gender connotations are actively construed by the author.

In summary, Korsmeyer's book testifies to at least four approaches to traditional aesthetics, which remain largely implicit and range from affirmation to complete rejection:

(1) analyzing aesthetic concepts in accordance with the gendered meanings implicit in traditional aesthetics (cf. Korsmeyer's analysis of taste and food);
(2) accepting analyses of traditional concepts and using them as reference points (cf. Korsmeyer's comparison between the sublime and the disgusting as well as her argument that food does not count as a fine art);
(3) criticizing traditional aesthetic concepts (the major approach in the book); and
(4) completely rejecting aesthetic discourse as patriarchal and searching for alternative ways of capturing the feminine (cf. Korsmeyer's discussion of Irigaray).

This leaves one wondering what, according to Korsmeyer, a consistent conception of feminist aesthetics might look like, the more so because the author does not merely present contributions embodying these four approaches but also seems to identify herself with each of them at some stage.

My conclusion is that Korsmeyer offers her readers many topics and standpoints in feminist aesthetics but that she does not provide them with a consistent view of how feminist aesthetics is to be conceived. As far as the negative approach (the critique of classical concepts) is concerned, the way of proceeding seems to be evident. But when it comes to the positive business of (re)formulating concepts and carrying out new analyses from a feminist perspective we are left with an unclear situation. Can feminist aesthetics employ insights from traditional (or mainstream) aesthetics, or should it break away

radically from 'patriarchal' conceptualisations, building a new type of discourse from scratch? If it can draw on traditional aesthetics, how is this possible given the fact that classical concepts are flawed at root because of gender biases?

The position of feminist aesthetics—at least as elaborated by Korsmeyer in this volume—does not seem to be very comfortable. If the discipline links up with traditional aesthetics, it risks betraying its own basic assumption that traditional aesthetics is corrupt at root, thereby becoming self-contradictory. However, if it takes a radical stance and tries to create a new, feminine language for doing aesthetics it is doomed to marginalize itself: Not only will men be excluded from participating in such aesthetics from the outset but many women will also prefer a different kind of discourse in which they can be in dialogue with both male and female discussants. The future will show whether feminist aesthetics can find a way out of these apparent dilemmas and participate in open debate while holding to its basic assumptions.

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