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Response

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Response

Carolyn Korsmeyer,

Let me begin with thanks to Wayne Bowman for selecting *Gender and Aesthetics* for discussion in this forum, and to the five reviewers for their interesting perspectives and comments. In the spirit of continued dialogue, I would like to amplify several of the threads of discussion raised by these essays, some of which permit me to elaborate points that were treated only briefly in the book.

Pedagogy and Disciplinary Context

This conversation is taking place among academics from different backgrounds and with different theoretical allegiances, and as Charlene Morton rightly observes, both aesthetics and feminist scholarship invite exchanges across disciplines. Therefore, it seems appropriate to begin with some speculations about variant patterns of disciplinary and cross-disciplinary work on gender analysis, which has made strikingly uneven inroads across the arts, humanities and social sciences. A broad-spectrum approach is especially pertinent to aesthetics, which because of its reference to theoretical, critical, and creative research often looks beyond traditional disciplinary divisions.

As anyone who has recently taught any subject that mentions feminism knows, many in the present generation of students and younger scholars do not identify as feminists, even though they often subscribe to the ideas, principles, and politics that describe feminism.¹ Some think that those political battles are over and won, and therefore assume that this entails a reduced need for acquaintance with the theoretical issues that emerged from that social movement. Most students now, and in my experience this includes graduate students, are unfamiliar with even the basic works that are considered standard entries of feminist theory and gender analysis. What is more, many sophisticated academics do not believe that research labeled “feminist” represents fresh



and current perspectives any longer; they would rather see scholarly work proceed with feminist scholarship as part of its tradition, moving on to new projects and questions that have emerged from its contributions. Possibly this attitude is shared by those theorists and artists who prefer the designation “postfeminist.” I have considerable sympathy for this view, which is especially apt in fields such as literature and history where, colleagues assure me, perspectives that accommodate women, national minorities, outlaw identities, and so forth are now mainstreamed, for current scholarship in those disciplines roundly acknowledges and indeed embraces the advancement of research in these directions. Probably not all scholars in these fields would agree with this sanguine picture; but my intended contrast stands, for I doubt that anyone in philosophy would so characterize that discipline. Rather, philosophy is among the fields that continue to demand review of the foundations for gendered critical analysis.

Despite the fact that feminist perspectives are poorly integrated into the field, philosophy has produced large and strong bodies of scholarship from feminist perspectives. Within this work, the adjective “feminist” is sometimes an apt modifier for certain areas of study, such as ethics, where feminist approaches have given rise not only to critique of traditional schools of thought (such as utilitarianism and Kantianism) but also has generated a new type of moral theory often characterized as an “ethics of care.” Similarly in epistemology, feminists might endorse some variety of what is called standpoint epistemology. Naturally, not all feminists writing in these subdisciplines agree about the implications of their work and the theories that ensue; but at least for some areas, the term “feminist” can modify a body of theory that serves as an alternative to other theories.

To my mind, aesthetics stands in a somewhat different position, for whereas critiques of traditional concepts such as “disinterestedness” or “fine art” have become fairly influential, there is no alternative general aesthetic theory that can be rightly labeled “feminist aesthetics.” Rather, there is a set of critical alerts that stand guard against reassertion of traditional biases. My resistance to the term “feminist aesthetics” – which I myself try hard not to use – is relevant to Claire Detels’ and Constantijn

Koopman's concern that this book does not provide the reader with suggestions as to how an entire, consistent feminist aesthetic theory would be articulated. This is deliberate, for I doubt very much that there is any unproblematic way to systematize these matters or to cash out the promissory notes for new theories that were commonly issued in early feminist writings. I do not regard the perpetual need for reflection and critical attention as a merely negative conclusion, however.

On another disciplinary note: *Gender and Aesthetics* tries to ameliorate a family squabble that has flared up periodically in philosophy over the last century or more, and that presently threatens anew to become a serious rift. The predominant approach to philosophy in the United States (as well as in Britain, Australia, and parts of Europe) is the one called "analytic." It is rarely invoked outside of academic philosophy, and although it comprises an extremely broad and generous set of methodologies, outside of that perspective it is widely regarded as narrow and relatively technical in scope. In this respect, it is unfavorably contrasted to systematic approaches that are rooted in phenomenology and psychoanalysis and that are identified with their European origins by the term "continental". These approaches too often sort themselves into rival camps. To put the matter in somewhat extreme terms: people who identify with the phenomenological and psychoanalytic traditions of Europe tend to regard those in the analytic school as hankers after science whose perspectives fail to offer deep understanding into the human condition, including individual subjectivity and cultural embeddedness. And in turn, analytic philosophers tend to regard continental theorists, especially deconstructionists in the manner of Derrida, as windy purveyors of obscurantism, too careless of the need for precision and empirical verification to be taken seriously. Both views are, of course, huge distortions (and I have deliberately described them with a bit of dramatic exaggeration). But their tenacity is remarkable. At one point the gap between the two perspectives seemed sensibly to be shrinking; it is my impression that for a number of reasons it has widened again, and I designed the final chapters of *Gender and Aesthetics* to indicate how work in feminism and in aesthetics can bridge the gulf.

This disciplinary rift puts a special burden on someone seeking to introduce both aesthetics and gender analysis to a new audience. Aesthetics is by nature a field that looks in many directions at once, including the arts and the critical disciplines. But when a philosopher such as myself consults cognate work in other fields one almost never happens upon commentary that supplements or illuminates analytic philosophy. For instance, when scholars in the extensive fields of literature employ philosophical texts, as many now do, they tend to consult continental theorists. Therefore texts that are considered central benchmarks in philosophical aesthetics are not usually the ones referenced by writers from the cognate fields that have produced the most feminist scholarship on art, literature, and culture. The sheer amount of feminist-minded scholarship in those much more populous fields overshadows the work done by philosophers anyway. And their work does not always travel into the center of philosophical aesthetics as that field is typically taught. In short, the philosopher working in aesthetics has to exert double effort to bring together the important and illuminating analyses of gender from other fields into a coherent picture.

I do not believe that these methodological barriers are impermeable. Nor do I think they are false or meaningless. My own affinity is analytic (or more aptly postanalytic), which means that I endorse detailed investigation of topics broken down and analyzed in the clearest possible language and conclusions mindful of the need to consult the findings of empirical studies. I also appreciate the perspectives that have emerged from psychoanalysis, existentialism, and phenomenology, which have yielded provocative suggestions for understanding the development of positional subjectivities, including those inflected by gender and desire. In *Gender and Aesthetics* I set out to write a reasonably continuous narrative that would situate gender scholarship in aesthetics within a framework of both analytic philosophy – including the theories most commonly taught in US universities (Chapter 5) – and the theoretical scholarship on desire, subjectivity, and gender analysis that is rooted in European philosophy, which has been more broadly influential both in the development of feminist theory and in the theoretical

explorations discernible in feminist art (Chapter 6). Hence the choice for an extensive presentation of the context of mainstream and non-feminist theory that Detels deplors.

I myself have found feminist analyses to be most illuminating when they disclose gender within the conceptual frameworks of a field, which means within the very categories of philosophical thinking. Therefore, I structured this book around the earliest insights to emerge from feminist scholarship: the tenacious power of binary oppositions. For gender dualities are among the templates of theoretical reflection, making gender a rather more basic analytical category than social identities such as race or ethnicity or religion, and also lending it a different role than the multiple sexualities explored in queer theory. In other words, gender is systematic in philosophy in ways that other political and social categories are not. (I hope it is obvious that I am *not* claiming that gender is thereby more important to understand!) And of course, it is not the only salient binary. Elizabeth Keathley prefers using nature-culture, but philosophy is so dominated by the values of rationality that the reason/intellect vs. nonreason/emotion dualism has a particularly broad-based – if not universal – presence. However, there is no fundamental duality, but rather a set of paired concepts that operate together. Since the hierarchies implicit in binary thinking often appear natural and thus do not readily induce questioning, an indispensable starting point for feminist analysis is a general, systematic critique that reveals their pervasive operation and influence.

Theoretical Omissions

In the course of pondering the consequences of gendered categories in philosophy, I was led several years ago to investigate a subject not considered “philosophical” at all: taste. Not aesthetic taste, but literal taste – the bodily sense used daily in the course of eating and drinking. Gender is not particularly prominent in that study, but being on the alert for the omissions of traditional theory—which stem in part from the hierarchies of gendered binaries—led me to reexamine the long-standing prejudice against this bodily sense and its objects.

The middle chapter of *Gender and Aesthetics* builds upon a thesis from this earlier book. Here I present a brief against food preparation and cuisine as a fine art. My point, I believe, is rather simple, but it is interesting how frequently it is misunderstood. Many readers (though none of the present reviewers) have assumed that because I defend taste as an aesthetic sense and food as a carrier of aesthetic properties, that I must also be defending food as an art form. Others (such as Keathley) object to the fact that after defending food for its aesthetic properties, I withhold the appellation “art” from cuisine. With the concept of fine art we face a certain ambiguity of terms: fine art referring to a particular type of art whose contrast is applied or practical, and whose chief value is pure aesthetic experience; and fine art meaning really good products that are worthy of attention. The first is the focus of my critique. Cuisine is certainly an art form if one sets aside the restrictive determinants of fine art. But given those restrictions, I can’t see why one would want to claim food as a fine art, a concept that does not do justice to the complexity of food practices and their significance.

What about fine art disqualifies it from use in thinking about food? To address this question, one must return to the advent of the concept, which does not have any clear birth-point but certainly was in place by the 18th century, when the newly-systematized concept of aesthetic pleasure took its place as the principal value to be obtained from works of art by consumers who exercised good (aesthetic) taste. At this point there was waged a small theoretical skirmish. On the one side were theorists who developed theories of the aesthetic by purging from pure aesthetic pleasure all the other kinds of pleasures that compete for attention, including sensuous or bodily pleasure. Some of these, such as Schopenhauer, actually derogated bodily pleasure in philosophies with their own gender valences; others merely noted that they were two different categories, only one of which (the aesthetic) had any philosophical currency. On the other side was a less-noticed body of gastronomical writers (now being explored by scholars such as Denise Gigante and Patricia Parkhurst Ferguson), many of whom argued for the inclusion of cuisine (especially French cuisine) among the ranks of the fine arts.² This is not the place to explore this debate, so I only observe that in order to qualify food as an art form,



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gastronomers focused on the sophisticated refinement of taste sensitivities in order to argue that flavors could be savored in the disinterested manner requisite for aesthetic attention. The result is a defense of haute cuisine that diminishes the importance of eating and tasting in the cultural venues where it gains its greatest significance: religious ritual, hospitality, ceremony, and the rhythms of domestic life. I would not call cuisine a fine art because too much is sacrificed for the gain of a label.

In response one might observe that the notion of fine art I have just outlined is outmoded. Few if any contemporary artists would subscribe to it, and many craft their own work in directions that defy the traditional concepts of fine art and aesthetic value. This is indeed true, but the category “fine art” as a classificatory term is still in place, although its traditional values are often deliberately defied. Ironically, this defiance often plays upon the very traditions that it seeks to escape, as may be seen in the prominence of disgust in contemporary art and the deliberate appropriation of the lowly objects of taste, smell and touch – the proximate, bodily senses in contrast to the “higher” aesthetic senses of vision and hearing – in gallery and performance.

Sublimity and Disgust

The reviewers have advanced some interesting disagreements regarding my speculations about the use of disgust in feminist and postfeminist art, and the connections that I draw between the disgusting and the sublime. First, let me elaborate on some matters that I believe I did not pursue with sufficient sharpness in the book regarding the location of gender in these emotive and aesthetic categories.

The attachment of gender categories to the experience of the sublime, a familiar exercise to anyone who investigates this aesthetic domain, has to sort out at least four foci of analysis: theories about the experiencing subject; theories of the objects of the sublime; identification of creators of sublime artworks; and characterization of the sublime encounter. This turns out to be a particularly complex aesthetic concept to analyze in terms of gender valence.

Explicit in some of the theories of the sublime that were formulated in the eighteenth century is the presumption, sometimes even the stipulation, that only a male mind is attuned to the profound and disturbing occurrences that trigger apprehension of the sublime. In this respect, the “masculinity” associated with sublimity refers literally to males. That only males experience(d) the sublime is not only contested but highly dubious, of course, but the attachment of them to this aesthetic category is fairly consistent with standard descriptions of sublime objects, whose aesthetic properties are distinguished from their “opposite” beautiful properties.

Typical descriptors of sublimity, such as those that Burke lists, include immensity, boundlessness, jaggedness, dark color, and especially power. These are “masculine” traits if they are contrasted with (again Burke) curviness and delicacy, small size, lightness, and limits, such that the entire object of beauty could be both perceived and comprehended. Putting these first two gendered elements of theory together, one arrives at the common if facile presumption that the male mind is more attuned to these so-called masculine characteristics, although there is a bit of inconsistency there, as those same minds were supposed to be mainly attracted to feminine traits, given the underlying eroticism of the gendered characteristics of aesthetic objects. But that aside, the aesthetic traits that make an object sublime are “masculine” only in a restricted sense, for they are also features arrogated to the fearsome side of another mythic “feminine.” The very qualities that describe sublime objects in nature – chaotic, formless, boundless, ferocious – also refer to the principles of untamed nature that reach their extreme theorization in Nietzsche’s Dionysian aesthetic impulse or in the psychoanalytic concept of the terrible mother. Therefore, the objects of the sublime are only partially cast in terms of masculine language. (And if one follows Kant, the object of the sublime is one’s own mental powers anyhow, a claim that genders the object in yet another way.)


A third dimension where one can locate gender concerns the products of artists who create art that qualifies as sublime. Here again, history has recognized more artists of the sublime variety who are male than female. To large degree this can be explained with reference to the training and subject-matter variously available for males and females.

But apart from sociological factors, it is still the case that just as women's creations have been understood, more or less a priori, as relatively limited in scope and style, so their efforts have been shunted away from the dynamism and power and significance of the sublime. Of course there is ongoing debate about the ability of art to be sublime at all. If a determining characteristic of sublime objects is their boundlessness, and if art has to have boundaries (visual or temporal), it might follow that true sublimity is to be found only in nature or mathematics. But neither philosophers nor artists have observed a strict either-or situation with this aesthetic category, and surely some art works are more sublime than others. And here, indeed, some of the best candidates for sublimity may be found in music, with its stirring, near ineffable emotional arousal. It is my impression that the type of music most frequently described as sublime is symphonic, and as many have noted, symphonic music has historically been the most difficult precinct for women to enter on equal footing.


Finally, and most problematically for assignment of gender categories, there is the central defining feature of the sublime: the quality of the experience itself. It is traditionally theorized as an experience founded on terror, but a terror transcended and transformed into awe, an aesthetic recognition of might and magnificence. This is the centerpiece of all theories of the sublime, and I see no cogent way to argue that it is aptly characterized as a "masculine" sort of experience at all. (Unless one focuses, as indeed some feminists do, exclusively on Kant, for whom the proper object of the sublime is one's own mind.³ In fact it can be argued that the sublime experience requires submission and receptivity – stereotypically "feminine" attitudes.⁴ The notion of a feminine sublime – a concept I reported but do not endorse myself – would appear to read the sublime as an experience of might and mastery, not the apprehension of might and mastery from a position of powerlessness. But it is the latter that more aptly characterizes the traditional concept of the sublime. Insofar as a feminine sublime is supposed to be a version of the sublime that accepts and does not attempt to master, then it seems that it does not describe a separate concept of sublimity but rather recognizes that inherent in the encounter with the sublime is the impossibility of mastery of its objects.

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But what sort of connection can be drawn between the eighteenth-century sublime and contemporary deployment of disgust? Several contributors comment upon the prominence I grant to the arousal of disgust by contemporary artists, especially performance artists and others whose precedents are the visual arts traditions. Koopman is correct that this emotion is not particularly suitable for music, but I chose to explore it for several reasons.⁵



Firstly, disgust is unavoidable in contemporary gallery art, video, and movies. Its sheer ubiquity alone demands attention. Secondly, as I argue in the book, disgust has a particular resonance when it is aroused by women's bodies – indeed, a certain psychoanalytic slant would argue that disgust always alludes to the interior of female bodies. Hence it is one of those features of present-day aesthetic life that, while employed by male and female artists alike, cannot avoid aesthetic effects redolent of gender just because of its links to states of body – including to sexuality, for disgust is also widely employed by artists presenting desire, sexuality, and embodiment. Though disgust is often employed merely for shock value, many works transcend the gross-out, and the arousal of disgust becomes a deliberate and positive constituent of aesthetic understanding.




Third, the arousal of disgust is important in certain art works throughout history, but recognition of this within aesthetic theory is a contemporary phenomenon. Disgust was unique among the emotions excluded from the register of artistically exploitable emotions in the influential Enlightenment theories.⁶ Finally, the use of disgust among feminist and postfeminist artists is often theoretically self-conscious, deliberately evoking or even flaunting the association of disgust with female sexuality (thus sometimes putting it perilously close to pornography, as Keathley notes). Therefore their work repays theoretical analysis.

To what degree is artistic arousal of disgust akin to the sublime? Several commentators raise questions about the parallel I suggest, and since this is a theoretically knotty and complex issue I'd like to revisit it now. On reflection, I believe that my choice of the term “parallel” is not apt, for the two aesthetic experiences lead in different

directions, and “parallel” suggests two paths proceeding side by side. What I intended by “parallel” is that these two most basic aversions provide routes to aesthetic insights of a similarly profound sort. The two aesthetic impulses are distinct, but I believe they share more in common than may at first appear.

First of all, disgust and fear are emotional aversions, and hence their arousal by art raises a version of the classic paradox of tragedy: why does one seek out and “enjoy” in art such difficult experiences? But more to the point, both fear and disgust may be conceived as portals to encounters with objects that exceed our imaginative capacities fully to understand. This is the source of the transcendence of the sublime and its resonance with the noumenal or the divine. Disgust does not lead in the same direction, but it shares a trajectory towards territory that exceeds complete comprehension, namely towards physical mortality and inescapable vulnerability – ideas one of course knows about intellectually, but which are delivered with singular insight in art. Sally Macarthur doubts that disgust points towards death and mortality and interprets the emotion as a signal of evil. Both philosophical and scientific researchers, however, have argued persuasively that if there is an underlying significance to the objects of this emotion, it is the fact that disgusting objects – decaying, putrefying, stinking – confront us with the loss of bodily integrity and the extermination of individuality.⁷ These themes may certainly be deployed in the evocation of evil, but they have other resonances as well.



The prominence of disgust in my final chapter was intended to serve several purposes. First of all, it permitted me to link a school of thought that has inspired philosophers and artists alike with the standard history of aesthetics: namely, psychoanalytic theories of gender and subjectivity (often labeled “feminist,” a term that doesn’t cross the Atlantic very comfortably) with Enlightenment and romantic theories of the sublime. Secondly, it was a means of locating themes in feminist and postfeminist art that are also important features of contemporary art in general, both gallery and popular. Third, it located in artworks the attempt to play out ideas from feminist academics that have often remained postponed promises: calls for new ways of conceiving duality, embodiment, and so forth.

I did not, however, mean to interpret disgust as the twenty-first century sublime, nor as particularly “feminine,” even though I think one could argue that our own time has relinquished the terrifying and exalting in favor of the disturbing and disgusting. Insofar as feminist and postfeminist artists employ exemplars of the disgusting in their work, they have an opportunity to explore or bring to awareness the contentious associations of female bodies and sexuality with that which disgusts and allures at once – themes that can certainly venture into troublesome and unsettling territory. But it is the riskiness of this undertaking that also makes it inviting and provocative to explore artistically.

Interdisciplinary Scholarship: Shared and Divergent Concerns

The founding writers on aesthetics of the early modern period may have been on to something. They didn't try to theorize about everything that we now classify as “arts.” Painting and poetry comprised the main subjects of the critical literature that blended in with early aesthetics. But with the advent of the concept of fine arts and the later conflation of aesthetics with “philosophy of art,” attention has been spread more generally to encompass painting, poetry (or “literature”), music, sculpture, and architecture – the five core fine arts of the nineteenth century – extending to other art forms and eventually accommodating technologies such as photography, movies, and video.

Among theories that attempt to treat all of this, visual paradigms frequently dominate the formulation of general theories. To a limited degree, this is the result of an ambiguity in several languages, including English: the term “art” can refer generically to all the arts, fine and applied; and it is also used to refer to the form of art that has painting as its center.

How crucial is this visual dominance for aesthetic theory? Certainly there are questions that traverse art forms, such as those involving the nature of art and the value of fine art. Others fare less well in the generic inquiry and demand attention not only to specific art forms but to particular examples within them. Several contributors here

remark upon the dominance of visual arts in the aesthetic theories I review, noting that music is less relevant to the issues I treat in the latter chapters of this book. One could add to the list of difficulties that *any* general approach to aesthetics is bound to encounter when applied across the spectrum of art forms. I am frequently taken aback at the prevalence of studies of sense perception in general aesthetic theory, for example, as if the appreciation of works of literature can be folded into perceptual models.

This returns us to the opening subject. Calls for cooperation across disciplines are frequently heard throughout the academy at present, and I'm sure that contributors to this forum would agree that they are as often facile as they are fruitful. At the same time, we learn much from seeing the paths that others take to subjects of mutual interest: discovering what questions we ask in common, what methodologies do not travel well across fields, and what gaps remain when we try to combine the work of scholars in different areas. Therefore, I end with a second to Morton's recommendation for further interdisciplinary dialogue, contentious and irresolvable as it is bound to be.

Notes

¹ See "Teaching Feminist Aesthetics: Three Perspectives" in the *Newsletter* of the American Society for Aesthetics, Summer 2005. On-line version accessible at <http://www.aesthetics-online.org>.

² Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). Patricia Parkhurst Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

³ See *Critique of Judgment*, section 26.

⁴ Timothy Gould, "Intensity and Its Audiences: Towards a Feminist Perspective on the Kantian Sublime," in *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, ed. Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer (University Park PA: Penn State Press, 1995).

⁵ There is an empirical basis for the marginality of music to this subject. Researchers on disgust agree that, while this emotion has a singular sensuous dimension and can be stimulated by objects of taste, smell, touch, and sight, few objects of hearing are likely to arouse disgust. See citations in note 7.

⁶ A provocative analysis of disgust in eighteenth century theory is provided by Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: History and Theory of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

⁷ This is the conclusion of psychologist Paul Rozin in a number of studies, including J. Haidt, C. McCauley, and P. Rozin, "Individual Differences in Sensitivity to Disgust," *Personality and Individual Differences* 16:5 (1994) pp. 701-13. See also William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust* [1929], ed. Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Chicago: Open Court, 2004).