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The Beautiful, the Disgusting, and the Sublime: An Essay Review of *Gender and Aesthetics: an Introduction*

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Carolyn Korsmeyer's book, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* is an indicator of the continuing relevance and importance of gender studies in universities. It is a welcome and timely addition to the growing list of books that have emerged in the last two or more decades in the fields of gender and aesthetics, and feminist aesthetics. But the appearance of a book like this is also unsettling, for despite the sustained efforts over more than three decades by scholars working in gender and feminist education to raise the profile of women's contribution to the arts and to elevate the value of their artistic creations, it would seem that this publication which, in some ways charts old territory, signals that there is still much work to be done. In the early chapters, where theories of the Enlightenment and beyond are reviewed, the book recycles an old theme with variations. In the last couple of chapters, however, a new theme is composed which, problems notwithstanding, has an original character.

Gender studies has had a chequered career in academia, being embraced by some disciplines or factions within disciplines and repelled by others. In fact, a critique I read a while ago on gender, feminism and musicology indicates ambivalence about work on gender in music. Its author, Suzanne Cusick, claims that such work has had negative impact on value judgements about women's music. Her argument is that attention to gender, which is central to the success of women but marginal to the success of men, has reinforced the marginalisation of women's experiences in music.¹ She says that gender occupies a very small space in musicological forums (from my own experience I tend to agree with her) and that a major stumbling block for raising the profile of the 'woman



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composer' is that the woman is compelled to tell two stories: one about her gender (which is marginal to being a composer) and the other about her music. This means that her story is not easily compared with his story (which is only a story about his music).

Although this particular point is missing from *Gender and Aesthetics*, it is one that, when coupled with the Korsmeyer's exemplary analysis of selected eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetic theories, many of which have currency today, depressingly demonstrates that the problem for women's art is that it has been judged on standards that are gendered male. These standards are presented as if they were gender-neutral. But, as many scholars have observed, including Korsmeyer, the so-called neutrality of these standards disguises a male bias. This leads to women's music and art in general being judged unfairly, which in turn inevitably results in their exclusion from the canon of 'great masterworks.' Korsmeyer also makes the point that "the artist is always gendered male unless called 'the woman artist.'" (34)

This has a very familiar ring to it for feminists working, as I have done, on women's music. Indeed, the label 'women's music' is a problematic one, for it immediately signals that it belongs elsewhere. In a similar vein to Cusick's narrative about the 'woman composer', it might be argued that 'women's music' presents an even more significant obstacle, for an assumption is often made that men's music is simply music, which would make women's music something else. As I have written elsewhere,² perhaps women's music is not understood as music at all?

Feminist music scholars have pointed out that throughout history women's music has been regarded as an anomaly, viewed either as sentimental and soppy, or as aggressive and therefore unbecoming a woman.³ Many have pointed to the obstacles that have hampered feminist work in musicology, including various failed rescue attempts to recover women and the idea of the 'feminine' from 'the music itself', and charges of essentialism against those making such attempts. In Cusick's view, because gender is only of concern to women, to draw attention to it in musicological forums is to commit a

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form of suicide, for she says that gender studies in music will never gain wide acceptance. It seems, then, that any discussion about aesthetics and women's music will be met with resistance, making it impossible for scholars in the field to be taken seriously.

Although it may be wishful thinking, Cusick concludes her essay on an optimistic note by saying that musicology as a whole has much to gain by opening its door to feminist musicologies, that they offer a “new vision of that complex phenomenon ‘music’ that can be revealed by the simple act of changing point of view.”⁴ Yet, the difficulties noted by Cusick (and others) about music are arguably overwhelming and exacerbated by observations from scholars in other disciplines who have claimed that during the twentieth century a paradigm shift has witnessed endings of all kinds, including the end of aesthetics, the end of feminism, the end of art, and the end of theory.

In this view, work on gender and on ‘woman’ (and her cognates ‘feminine’ and ‘feminist’) may well be irrelevant, joining a succession of dead ‘subjects’ now consigned to philosophical and cultural theory graveyards. To add to this injurious notion, I have also thought that the ever-increasing emphasis on pop culture coupled with the sense that ‘value’ seems to have become a relative term—all values are equal, in turn, suggesting that all music and art is to be valued equally—may make it futile to pursue an interest in aesthetics of any stripe. In the wake of political correctness, the dominant cultural-theoretical discourses about music, especially those from popular music studies, tend to avoid discussions about ‘beauty’ for fear of being branded elitist.⁵

By way of answering some of these problems—and this is where I believe *Gender and Aesthetics* offers some original insights—Korsmeyer announces that in the twenty-first century notions of ‘the ugly’ (or ‘the disgusting’) may have displaced ‘the beautiful’, in turn rendering the ugly beautiful. One of the messages in Korsmeyer’s final chapter, ‘Difficult Pleasures’, is that the disgusting, shunned in eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetic theory because of its association with the body, may have usurped, in the

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twenty-first century, the role of the beautiful in its connection with the sublime. For me this is as startlingly innovative an idea as it is a disturbing one.

Korsmeyer builds up to this argument, supported by reworkings of Irigaray's theory of *l'écriture féminine*, 'writing (from) the body', and Kristeva's theory of 'disgust and abjection', by uncovering the ways traditional philosophical theories about art, drawn mainly from the Enlightenment thinkers (Hume, Hutcheson, Burke and Kant), organise culture to favour the work of men. Her tool of analysis, which she calls 'deep gender', illustrates the way in which binary relationships between male and female, masculine and feminine, mind and body, rational and emotional, and so on, favour attributes associated with the male.

According to Korsmeyer, 'deep gender' is implicated in notions of aesthetic judgement, aesthetic pleasure, aesthetic value, and constructions of the genius. Kant's influential theory of aesthetics, recounted by Korsmeyer, is founded on the idea that the work of art is autonomous, being separated from its external utilities. Its appreciation is enabled only by mind's pure contemplation. This leads to the view that sensual pleasures associated with the body have nothing to do with aesthetics and aesthetic experience, and in turn spawns the idea that the beautiful and the sublime in art can only ever be experienced through the sense modalities of sight and hearing. Kant himself considers sight superior to hearing, assigning music a low place in the classification of the arts because it is ephemeral. Since Korsmeyer has a particular interest in the modalities of taste and smell, she suggests that Kant's theory works in subtle ways to exclude pleasures such as cooking and eating from aesthetic considerations because of their bodily associations.

In Enlightenment thinking, which spilled over into the twentieth century, experiences of the sublime were evocations of terror, awe and fear. In this view, the sublime rises above human understanding, enabling its transcendence. In Korsmeyer's reading of Burke, for example, the sublime is founded on pain. Under certain conditions the "profound emotional pain of terror... can be converted into 'delight'" (42). On the

other hand, Korsmeyer continues, Kant's argument for *disinterested* attention, emphasising as it does the mind of the aesthete rather than the aesthetic object ("true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person"), redirects attention "from the external object that initially provokes fear and awe to the autonomous self, 'the mind of the judging person'" (136). "In so doing, terror is diminished and the sovereignty of the human mind is sustained. The sublime is an experience of paradoxical mastery," she concludes (136).

Mastery and domination are crucial in this account of the sublime, Korsmeyer maintains. The sublime, a feminine principle, must be harnessed and tamed, and above all rescued by mind. As Korsmeyer shows, in its alignment with the mind, the sublime in eighteenth and nineteenth century thinking is ultimately rendered masculine: its feminine unruliness must eventually yield to masculine order. This has parallels with Christine Battersby's observations about how the 'genius' is viewed in nineteenth century aesthetic theories. According to these theories, says Battersby, the originality necessary for the production of great art can only ever be produced by a male who is replete with a feminine brain. The feminine brain coupled with a male body (femininity plus maleness) are the necessary ingredients of the genius. In this view, when the 'feminine' brain is utilised by the female artist (femininity plus femaleness), the resultant work will be inferior, and will often be characterised by sentimentality and sopiness.⁶

In an earlier chapter of her book, 'Aesthetic Pleasures', Korsmeyer remarks that the legacy of the Enlightenment is "powerful and tenacious, formulating a number of developments in aesthetics that are still in use today": specifically, emphasis on the mind in the aesthetic experience legitimates the bias of the male point of view under the guise of universality (57). Since Kant views aesthetic judgements, judgements of taste, as instances of cognitive activity (albeit, distinctive cognitive activity), and since it is men who have cognitive capacities in abundance—in contrast to women who lack these qualities—then aesthetic discernment, even of the sublime, is attributed to men. The ideal

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aesthetic adjudicator is male, then, because he is equipped with mental faculties that women lack—the mental faculties that enable appreciation of complex and profound art. This ideology is then used to justify the focus of attention on men’s art and on art that has since been considered elitist in the high/popular culture debate. While none of these thoughts is particularly new in gender and feminist spheres, Korsmeyer manages to distill them into a very clear and digestible form in this introductory book.

Picking up the threads of this discussion in her final chapter, Korsmeyer shows that Enlightenment aesthetic theory, and Kant’s in particular, is gendered like the artist. Earlier in the book she baulks, as have many other scholars, at the idea of a ‘feminine aesthetic’ (5), a point I pursue below. It seems to me, however, that in this final chapter, while not necessarily making it explicit, her discussion of the disgusting is strongly suggestive of a feminine or feminist aesthetic.

With the aid of Kristeva’s theory of abjection (associated with disgust, eroticism, and horror) and Irigaray’s ‘writing the body’, Korsmeyer launches her theory of the ‘feminine sublime’ by recalling the traditional idea of the sublime’s transcendence. Art that attempts sublimity, says Korsmeyer citing Lyotard, attempts to “present the unrepresentable” (137). Art that flaunts the body as the site of pleasure—and there is much of it these days—similarly attempts presentation of the unrepresentable: it is art preoccupied with the flesh and with the material enveloping the flesh; but, as Korsmeyer also says, it is art focussed on the disgusting.

Examples of this kind of art are, in Korsmeyer’s view, abundant: she cites performance art, art that makes use of food in disgusting ways, body-painting, body-piercing, tattooing, the use of grotesque prostheses, the presentation of X-ray images of animal and human organs, the brazen display of bodily fluids like urine and menstrual blood, their use as artistic media, and so on. Instead of provoking a reaction that terrifies, filling the viewer with intense awe, wonder, and fear (the sublime as conceptualised in Enlightenment theories), art trained on the body in these ways triggers reactions of disgust, even revulsion. Korsmeyer argues that the twenty-first century concept of the

sublime is therefore feminine. This is suggestive, in my view, of a feminist or feminine aesthetic. In drawing this conclusion, she implies that ‘disgust and revulsion’ are analogues of ‘fear and awe’.

This is an original idea, but it seems to me that it has its problems. The first concerns Lyotard’s assertion that postmodern art attempts the sublime. By most dictionary definitions, the sublime is ‘exalted’, ‘elevated’, ‘grand’ or ‘noble in character.’ Such work strives for a ‘high intellectual, moral or spiritual level’ and will often be described as ‘outstandingly supreme’ (see, for instance, *The New Short Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2). Postmodernism generally rejects such notions of sublimity, instead celebrating the superficial: absence of depth is the ultimate formal feature of postmodernist work. In this view, postmodern art is a parade of surfaces floating free from their original depths; and it is for this reason that much postmodern art parodies work originating in other sources. While the original is distinguished by its interiority, a sense of depth called to the surface thus unleashing the sublime, postmodern art deliberately rejects depth and profundity—which would seem to negate its potential linkage with the sublime.

The second difficulty I see is lack of correspondence between ‘fear and terror’ and ‘disgust and revulsion.’ The latter occupy an entirely different emotional sphere from the former. While I concede that all these are states involving overpowering feelings, the sense of dread provoked by terror is strikingly different from disgust, which has more to do with loathing and repugnance. Traditional aesthetic discourses tend to distinguish between the actual experience of emotions like fear and terror and their appreciation in art contexts, where such emotions contain elements of both displeasure and pleasure. Korsmeyer notes that the sublime is “grounded in the profound emotional pain of terror” (134). She goes on to say that Burke “surmises that a measure of protective distance is required for the terrifying to convert to the delight of the sublime, for no one enjoys being in the real grip of fear.” In Burke, the sublime “thrusts the perceiver to the imagined edge of danger and even death.” Thus, death is the ultimate object of the sublime, a position

that leads Burke to suggest that it offers “a glimpse of God—an experience of transcendence that terrifies, thrills, and awes” (134).

In contrast to this, art that evokes disgust and revulsion does not thrust the perceiver into an imagined danger zone and it certainly does not confront viewers with a sense of their mortality. Instead, I would suggest, art that portrays the disgusting in its extreme is an evocation of evil, thus countering the dominant ‘masculine’ notion of the sublime which offers “a glimpse of God.” To pursue this line of thought, it could be argued that such art offers an encounter with the devil, grounded by and embodied in human reality. In this view, disgust is constrained by the human reality to which it is tied, thus disabling the quest for and experience of the sublime. For these reasons, though I admire the creativity and originality of Korsmeyer’s argument, I see it as flawed.

In my own attempt to recover the notion of a ‘feminist’ or ‘feminine aesthetic’ of music,⁷ I have veered away from music that deliberately champions women’s issues by being associated with various factions of the feminist movement. One of my primary questions has been to ask whether a feminist or feminine aesthetic is present in women’s ‘classical’ music composed in the twentieth century irrespective of the political position taken up by the composer, and whether this music as a consequence offers a different conception of the beautiful that is yet to be fully appreciated.

At the outset of this essay I signalled, as Korsmeyer herself does, that work on retrieving a feminist aesthetic in art is fraught with problems, not least because of the essentialist implications of such work. Essentialism entails the view that women’s music, regardless of the differences between or among women, is to be regarded as the same. Yet, it might also be argued that discussions of men’s music (simply called ‘music’ but nonetheless created by men) could be criticised for the same reasons. Music has constantly been categorised according to styles, formal structures, genres, and so on. All of this work has an essentialist edge to it. Furthermore, textbooks on music make generalised observations about music as a matter of course and, unless otherwise

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qualified by the label ‘woman composer’, these are, in fact, observations about men’s music. Sometimes, I think, feminist (and postmodern) theorists are so anxious about not being caught out as ‘essentialist’ that they go to absurd lengths to cover their tracks, even to the point of suggesting the word ‘music’ itself is an essentialist term.

That said, it is common practice to generalise findings for ‘music’ (that is, ‘men’s music’) while not for ‘women’s music.’ It seems that the category ‘woman’ is considered to be ‘complex’ in academic discussions—complicated by numerous social factors such as class, religion, nationality, race, ethnicity, and so on—while the label ‘music’, disguising its association with men, is regarded as relatively straightforward. It seems to me that the only time identity issues are considered important is when they are applied to minority groups. This would seem to be inconsistent and illogical.

As one who has invested considerable energy in finding out what constitutes a feminist aesthetic in music, I do not underestimate the significance of any work that attempts the same. Work that demonstrates how music operates according to cultural norms that value the masculine perspective has much to teach us. But another part of this project is to show that women’s music is not inferior simply because it operates according to criteria that differ from the ‘masculine’ norm. As my own work suggests, such music has its own inner logic and beauty. My argument is that the feminist aesthetic is located in the space between male and female (or masculine and feminine), envisaged not as an opposite to male but as something characterised by both genders. While Korsmeyer says that the difficulty with this kind of work is that it does not take into account the diversity of art produced by women or recognise the diversity among women themselves (5), I would argue that in *Gender and Aesthetics* she herself attempts to retrieve a ‘feminine sublime’ which, in turn, can be construed as a ‘feminine’ or ‘feminist aesthetic.’

I imagine that work of this kind will continue to be difficult for some time yet to come. In writing this introductory book, however, Korsmeyer has provided much food for thought. Some of the issues she canvases have already been debated, usually

inconclusively, while others are new. Her discussions of music, however, are confined mostly to considerations of access and education, and the ways music by women is regarded as amateur when compared to the ‘masterworks’ of her counterpart, professional, and sometimes ‘genius’ composers. Given Korsmeyer’s obvious interest in the fine arts, and in the pleasures associated with food and taste, these restrictions are understandable.

Gender and Aesthetics serves as an excellent introduction to the topic. The book is a valuable teaching tool and serves the important purpose of keeping debates alive about the thorny issues it explores.

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¹ See Suzanne Cusick, “Gender, Musicology, and Feminism” in Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 471-98. See, in particular, 473-477.

² Sally Macarthur, *Feminist Aesthetics in Music* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 2.

³ See, for example, Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 18-19.

⁴ Cusick, 497.

⁵ I say this with some hesitation, acknowledging that popular music theorists such as Simon Frith, for example, have pursued questions to do with aesthetics. However, in so

doing, they have had a tendency to avoid tackling the issues around aesthetics head on, basing their conclusions about musical worth on data collected from interviews and surveys from those who listen to the music. This kind of research suggests that music has value if the particular subjects agree that it does; the research does not conduct independent assessments of the value of the music using rigorous analytical models that have been developed, for example, in the sub-disciplines of musicology, music analysis and music theory. See Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁶ Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

⁷ Macarthur, *Feminist Aesthetics in Music*.