From Virginia Woolf to the Post-Moderns: Developments in a Feminist Aesthetic

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Contemporary feminist art theory and practice has, by and large, turned away from a modernist affirmation of the autonomy of art from life towards a post-modern problematisation of the specific category of the aesthetic. The modernist assertion of the freedom of the autonomous work is held to be inconsistent with feminism's requirements for a committed art responsive to the needs of a determinate public. To a contemporary feminism concerned to establish the specificity, the legitimate difference, of the feminine, a post-modern ethos which repudiates any hierarchisation of world-views and endorses a democratic pluralism as the only defensible value appears as the more attractive option. The following paper interrogates the supposition of the radical inappropriateness of a modernist aesthetic to the critical requirements of a feminist perspective and challenges the supposed appropriateness of a post-modern standpoint to these needs. Part One of the paper considers a specific case of modernism's relevance to a feminist art practice. I examine the, admittedly not unambiguous, support Woolf's feminism finds in her allegiance to a modernist aesthetic developed by the Bloomsbury group. The second part of the paper considers the unacceptable consequences of a radical, indiscriminate jettisoning of the main aspirations of modernist art theory for a feminist aesthetic. Several attempts at constructing a post-modern feminist art are critically evaluated and the fundamental inadequacy of these enterprises is traced to an underlying incoherence in the objectives of a post-modern feminism.

I

WOOLF'S FEMINISM AND A MODERNISTIC AESTHETIC

Leading feminist interpreters of Virginia Woolf's aesthetics have identified two seemingly incompatible perspectives in her work. Woolf's feminism is, they argue, a product of a penetrating sociological analysis of the material and psychological constraints which have traditionally worked to inhibit women's capacity to produce great art. On one level, then, Woolf disavows any romantic, idealist convictions, fully acknowledging that works of art are not '... webs spun in mid air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings and are attached to grossly material things like health and money and the houses we live in' [1]. For Michelle Barrett and Simon Watney [2], Woolf's feminist recognition of the politics of art production and reception cannot be reconciled with her equally solid allegiance to the modernist aesthetics of Roger Fry and Clive Bell which unequivocally repudiates any conception of the political character of art. Woolf's commitment to an aesthetic purity and 'freedom of mind' represents a seeming romantic disregard for the sociological reality of the class and gender specific influences which condition all creative and receptive activities. On this point of view, Woolf's feminism appears to leave off where her 'materialist critique of the social position of the writer in the prevailing conditions of literary production' ends and her modernist picture of the freedom and purity of the aesthetic begins [3].

Whilst by no means attempting a full defence of the unambiguous appropriateness of modernist art theory to a feminist aesthetic, my aim here is to contest the idea that there is a radical incompatibility between Woolf's feminism and her allegiance to a modernist aesthetic. In place of the idea of a fundamental rift between Woolf's feminism on the one hand and her modernism on the other, I argue for the existence of conflicting possibilities and tendencies within the aims and methods of modernism upon which a discriminating account of its essential relevance for a feminist aesthetic can be based.

In the present context it is not possible to embark on a comprehensive account of the main characteristics of modernist art theory and practice. Accordingly, I merely propose to examine the relevance of aspects of the specific modernist aesthetic elaborated by Woolf's Bloomsbury colleagues, Bell and Fry, to the construction of her feminist perspective. I suggest that elements of the aims and techniques formulated by Bloomsbury art theory are essential to the articulation of this perspective, rather than an obstruction to its expression.

The Modernism of Bloomsbury Aesthetics

Barrett and Watney's influential critiques of Woolf's modernism rest, I suggest, on the failure to distinguish between two conflicting implications which attend the conception of the radical autonomy of the aesthetic proposed by modernist art theory. Although Marcuse's seminal essay on 'The Affirmative Character of Culture' is specifically concerned with the twofold implications of a humanist-realist tradition in autonomous art, we can, I hope to show, usefully employ the most general outlines of his analysis to assess the several possibilities and significances of a modernist art practice [4]. Baldly stated, this analysis holds that an art practice which asserts the autonomy of the work from life can both sustain an elitist and conservative withdrawal from the 'bad' reality of the everyday while at the same time retaining an emancipatory significance by virtue of its critical distance from an oppressive present.

The essential conservative spirit of a modernist disavowal of all human concerns and interests as

fundamentally irrelevant to the purity of the aesthetic is nowhere more apparent than in the cultural aristocratism of Ortega y Gasset's dehumanisation thesis [5]. To Ortega, the dehumanised focus of modernist art offers a means for arresting the degenerate, levelling cultural egalitarianism of modern society. Because the appreciation of modern art requires a sophisticated audience capable of raising itself above the merely narrow, sectarian philistine interests of contemporary society, the aesthetic becomes the arena in which the cultural aristocrats of the modern era posit their own positive social identity. In the works of the moderns: 'We have ... an art which can be comprehended only by people possessed of the peculiar gift of artistic sensibility - an art for artists and not for the masses, for 'quality' and not for the hoi-polloi' [6].

Whilst lacking the radicalism of Ortega's formulations, a similar cultural elitism is apparent in the Bloomsbury group's attempted justification of modernist art. For Fry and Bell also, the ability adequately to appreciate post-impressionist art distinguishes a cultural elite from the irredeemably philistine masses. Any discussion of content, the politics of reception and conditions of cultural production is, to them, irrelevant to the aesthetic, which appears only as 'significant form' [7]. The art work does not, they maintain, properly concern itself with any reality which exists outside it but constitutes its own hermetically sealed self-referring 'world'. Watney rightly points to the romantic and elitist conception of the ideal audience which underlies this aesthetic doctrine [8]. On his view, Bloomsbury aesthetics appears as an idealist attempt to reduce the appropriately equipped viewer to a mere aesthetic sensibility from whom all determinate sociological characteristics have been effectively effaced. Moreover, their advocacy of the radical disengagement of the work from all human commitments and social interests seemingly involves Bell and Fry in an elitist appeal to an audience which considers taste and its cultivation an absolute end in itself. Watney suggests that for all Fry's strictures against Victorian culture, Bloomsbury art theory with its proposed radical separation between art and life does not leave behind the middle-class values of snobbery and social conventionalism. In Bloomsbury aesthetics, the capacity to appreciate the 'right' pictures appears as the supreme social arbiter [9]. At this stage in the discussion it would appear that the conception of the radical autonomy of the aesthetic formulated by Bell and Fry is entirely unsuited to the requirements of a feminist art theory, which inevitably proposes an explicitly ideologically committed aesthetic and expresses a profound interest in the character of the relations between art work and a determinate life experience. Yet at another level, it would appear that modernist art theory does not serve in any total, unambiguous sense a fundamentally conservative and elitist politics. In a provocative essay entitled 'Modernity - An Incomplete Project', Habermas points to the survival of vestiges of the essential emancipatory aspirations of Enlightenment thinking within the temper of modernism [10]. According to Habermas, a modernist consciousness has inherited aspects of the Enlightenment's interrogation of the controlling impact of tradition and the authority of the merely conventional. Modernity, he comments, 'revolts against the normalising functions of tradition: modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative' [11].

This rebellious spirit, this aspiration towards a new, free subjectivity not constrained by the crushing, levelling norms of social convention, is arguably evident also in Bloomsbury art theory. Alasdair MacIntyre - who is a strong supporter of this reading of the significance of Bloomsbury aesthetics - suggests that Bell and Fry developed a critical dimension implicit in the moral philosophy of their associate, G. E. Moore [12]. A central proposal of the Principia Ethica is that the 'good' be viewed as a simple, indefinable property and propositions declaring something to be good as aesthetical 'intuitions' incapable of proof or disproof. MacIntyre argues that Bloomsbury absorbed the radical aspect of this ethical system which, by making the 'good' a natural, unanalysable property discernible by the 'sensitive individual', appeared to offer a release from the oppressive moral conformism of the earlier generation [13].

A balanced picture of the spirit of Bloomsbury would emphasise the twofold, conflicting implications of the attempt to construct an account of the disengaged purity of the aesthetic. Hence the persuasive force of Watney's suggestion that the radical autonomy thesis simply establishes a new basis upon which a cultural elite is able to recognise and affirm the quality of its judgement and taste against the philistinism of the uncomprehending masses. Yet this conception of the radical autonomy of the aesthetic also seemingly expresses a revolt against the normalising function of tradition, and articulates an aspiration towards the construction of an aesthetic consciousness liberated from the shackles of entrenched social convention. On this account, the modernist thesis of the purity of the aesthetic is able to sustain an essentially critical perspective on the present, for it is precisely this disengagement of the work from the interests, commitments and norms of the everyday which enables the autonomous work of art to articulate an alternative, critical reality. I suggest that, in this latter aspect, the modernists enter into essentially sympathetic relations with a feminist interrogation (itself rooted in Enlightenment thinking) of the apparent inevitability of established tradition and the merely received social norm. The modernist no less than the feminist aims to break with the repressive function of the traditionally sanctioned norm. Like the feminist, the modernist refuses to credit the merely traditional with the authority of a 'second nature'. Both, in their various capacities, offer a provocative challenge to the supposedly self-evident certainties of an unquestioned existence.

It is in the light of the twofold conflicting implications fundamental to a modernist aesthetic identified above, that the complex character of Woolf's feminism can best be understood.

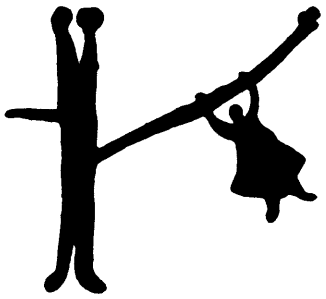
The Modernism/Feminism Connection in Virginia Woolf

In her major study of Woolf's feminism, Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision, Nancy Topping Bazin argues that Woolf's protest against existing forms of appropriate feminine subjectivity is informed by a vision of an androgynous subjectivity which, to her, corresponds to the real possibilities of the self [14]. This vision of a transcendent androgynous self is conceived as a mediated unity in which presently constituted norms of masculinity and femininity are fundamentally transformed. Neither existing masculinity nor traditional femininity is, to Woolf, appropriate to her vision of ideal subjectivity which can only be realised in the freedom of the aesthetic sphere.

This critical perspective on the norms of appropriate femininity and masculinity is powerfully developed by Woolf both in her fiction and in her essays and letters. A well-known piece entitled 'Professions For Women' usefully summarises her discoveries about the condition of psychic and emotional subordination required by modern conventions of the feminine [15]. Woolf stresses that women are continually haunted by a debilitating image of an ideal feminine type: an ideal she expresses in the motif 'The Angel in the House'. 'The Angel in the House' requires women to sacrifice their own judgements and desires, enforcing their adoption of a totally empathetic perspective which subordinates itself to the desires and wishes of others. To Woolf, this emotional enslavement must be unequivocally repudiated if women are ever to

attain the 'freedom of mind' necessary to the elevation of the aesthetic atitude. While lacking the independence of mind necessary to the freedom of the aesthetic consciousness, the fundamentally egoless, empathetic feminine consciousness provides an essential counterpoint to an equally debilitated, unfree masculine self-absorption. Whereas feminine subjectivity finds itself overwhelmed by and incorporated into the point of view of the other, the masculine ego must attempt to dominate and absorb the perspective of the other. Woolf's ironic attitude towards the foibles of masculine self-preoccupation is clearly evident in the following passage from The Years where Peggy is talking to a male writer at a party:

> Her attention wandered. She had heard it all before, I, I, I, - he went on. It was like a vulture's beak pecking, or a vacuum-cleaner sucking, or a telephone bell ringing. I. I. I. But he could not help it... He could not free himself. 'I'm tired', she apologised. 'I've been up all night,' she explained. 'I'm a doctor' - The fire went out of his face when she said 'I'. That's done it - now he'll go, she thought. He can't be 'you' - he must be 'I'. She smiled. For up he got and off he went [16].



To Woolf, neither presently constituted femininity nor traditional masculinity represent forms of consciousness suited to the purity and freedom of the transcendent aesthetic attitude. Woolf's fiction suggests, however, that the unconstrained aesthetic consciousness represents not so much a negation of the feminine and masculine attitudes but rather a synthetic unity of aspects of both. As Bazin points out, Lily Briscoe's efforts in To The Lighthouse to produce an aesthetically satisfying painting are represented by Woolf as a struggle to reconcile the feminine with the masculine attitude [17]. To Lily, Mrs Ramsay appears in the inhibiting guise of the ideal feminine; as 'The Angel in the House'. Yet Lily's final liberation involves more than the negation of this oppressive ideal of an empathetic, subordinate, self-denying femininity: it is not to be sought in a conversion to the aggressive domineering male egoism of Mr Ramsay. Woolf holds that the androgynous aesthetic consciousness combines the principle of the feminine, an anonymous, self-forgetful world typified by a generalising, abstract consciousness, with a characteristically masculine orientation towards the world of immediate, particular appearances. The authentic, complete awareness of 'reality' requires a pattern of perception which synthesises a peculiar 'feminine' sense of the harmonious generality, with a typically masculine attention to the ceaseless passing of the specific details of immediacy. Only when Lily is able to respond positively to both modes of perception can she complete her painting with an aesthetically satisfying design. Lily's painting finally draws together the solid triangular shape which represents the figure of Mrs Ramsay with the taut, linear distinct form expressive of the masculinity of Mr Ramsay.

Woolf's search for an elusive, ideal androgynous self which transcends the traditional, gender-differentiated experience of the everyday draws upon a modernist aesthetic which posits a transcendent sphere of aesthetic purity and freedom. For Woolf, the emphasis of modernist art theory on the radical autonomy of the aesthetic from the everyday, gives expression to her feminist call for a new form of self-awareness which does not simply articulate but radically transcends presently constituted gender-specific forms of subjectivity. Woolf's repudiation of realism - her turn from narrative and from naturalistic characterisation towards a highly contrived, self-reflexive structure - appears, then, as a search for an artistic form adequate to her vision of a transcendent, androgynous aesthetic consciousness. Woolf's modernist experimentations in style and form are, I suggest, subordinated to, rather than obstructive of, her feminist objectives. In her interpretative piece on Woolf's fiction entitled 'Thinking Back Through Our Mothers', Marcus points out that: 'What some readers have seen as her incapacity to create character is not an incapacity at all but a feminist attack on the ego as male false consciousness. She will not supply us with characters with whom we may egoistically identify' [18]. Woolf's refusal of an egocentric idea of character, the hated I, I, I of masculine subjectivity, rests, in the first instance, on a belief in the transcendent truth of an androgynous consciousness which totalises a feminine awareness of the general and eternal with a supposed typically masculine consciousness of the empirical, of the immediate particularities of surface appearances. The transcendent, autonomous realm of the aesthetic which permits the suspension of naturalistic representation and characterisation apparently offers Woolf the 'freedom of mind' necessary to her experimental vision of an androgynous subjectivity. It appears, then, that we require a more balanced assessment than that proposed by Barrett and Watney of the relevance of Woolf's modernist allegiances to her feminist objectives. Just as the modernist conception of the transcendent, autonomous character of the aesthetic permits expression to Woolf's critical vision of an ideal, androgynous consciousness, so the modernist experimentations in literary technique prove, as Marcus suggests, highly appropriate to Woolf's specifically feminist critique of established conventions of characterisation.

Yet, whilst acknowledging the relevance of a modernist aesthetic to the feminist purposes of Woolf's fiction, we should not overlook the real obstacles also presented by a radical autonomy thesis to the construction of a fully plausible feminist aesthetic. As previously noted, there is, following Marcuse's profound analysis in 'The Affirmative Character of Culture', a twofold significance to the assertion of the autonomy of the work of art. On the one hand, autonomous art, with its conception of the radical separation between art and life, allows expression to the desire for a better life: for a life which transcends the oppressive, unfree conditions of the everyday. Woolf aims in her fiction to construct a vision of reality from whose vantage point we may understand both what is oppressive about the present, and how it should be changed. Yet, as previously indicated, there is a reverse construction to be put upon this aspiration towards a transcendent reality preserved within the autonomous work. Given that the modernist's autonomy thesis involves the radical severing of art from life, the progressive, emancipatory desire for a better, a freere life is rendered in merely abstract, ideal terms. It could, on this point of view, be argued that in Woolf's fiction a real, concrete dissatisfaction with a repressive, patriarchal life experience receives only an abstract, aestheticised and, hence, inadequate response. Locked within the autonomy of the pure work of art, Woolf's proposal for a new form of human subjectivity can appear only as the striving after a new, alternative androgynous mode of perception. The concrete desire for a better, freer life is rendered abstract. In the language of Marcuse, it appears only as the desire for an enriched soul. For Woolf, the ideal androgynous subjectivity appears merely as a pure, complete aesthetic sensibility. It does not articulate any

real prospects for the fundamentally altered life experience of the emancipated personality.

The merely aesthetical, abstract character of the ideal, androgynous consciousness to which Woolf's fiction aspires is nowhere more evident than in her biographical fantasy Orlando. Orlando appears in the form of a pure transcendent subjectivity unconstrained by history, time or determinate personality. Woolf introduces Orlando as a 16-year-old male living in the 16th century and leaves the character a 36-year-old female located in the 20th century. Orlando's main task, the realisation of his/her true, complete, androgynous self, is conceived in purely psychological terms. Woolf here presents the aspiration towards the completed, emancipated personality not as the concrete demand for a transformed, enriched life experience but as the psychic journey of the self towards a new, authentic, unified state of consciousness; a quest which occurs essentially outside history and quite independently of any determinate life experience.

It is necessary to stress at this point that, as a major study on the specific character of art in modernity, Marcuse's essay on 'The Affirmative Character of Culture' primarily concerns itself not merely with a content analysis of particular genres but also with an investigation of the structural relations instituted between recipient and autonomous work. On this analysis, the great realist tradition of autonomous art no less than the anti-realism of a modernist art practice appears as a merely aestheticised portrait of an alternative life experience [19]. Marcuse's critique of the ambiguous ideological significance of art in modernity is, therefore, on no account to be confused with a Lukacsian defence of realism in the face of the aestheticist, abstract perspective presented in the specifically modernist work. Marcuse's analysis would not allow us to attempt to overcome the twofold conflicting implications of Woolf's adherence to a modernist aesthetic by simply advocating a turn by feminist aesthetics to a realist art practice. According to Marcuse, the aesthetic transfiguration of the radical demand for a new, emancipated, life experience into a merely consoling, affirmative portrait of an alternative, ideal state of mind or condition of the soul, hangs on the dynamics specific to the tradition of autonomous art itself. Accordingly, the great realist works are considered by Marcuse to be firmly implicated in the affirmative character of art in modernity [20].

Although Woolf's commitment to the main spirit and doctrines of a modernist aesthetic is by no means wholly inconsistent with her feminism, it seems that serious obstacles confront any attempt uncritically to adopt her work as the model for an appropriate contemporary feminist aesthetic. As already noted, the radical autonomy thesis she adopts means that, in Woolf's hands, all feminist aspirations towards a radically reconstructed life experience become merely aestheticised. They are rendered into the abstract demand for a new sensibility or way of looking at the world. There appears, then, good reason to look well beyond the limits of a modernist art theory to locate the main lines of an adequate contemporary feminist aesthetic.

As already noted, the turn today in feminist art theory is, in the main, away from a modernist affirmation of the autonomy of art from life towards a post-modernist problematisation of a distinct category of the aesthetic. For the remainder of the discussion I propose critically to consider some of the leading characteristics of this post-modernist turn in contemporary feminist art theory and practice. In particular, I suggest that the adequacy of this trend towards a post-modern feminist aesthetic depends on its ability to negotiate an important and challenging task. From the preceding discussion of the import of Woolf's commitment to a modernist aesthetic for her feminist objectives, it seems that the main index to the adequacy of a feminist post-modern alternative to a modernist art theory rests on its ability at once to preserve the critical stance available to modernism's confrontationist separation between art and life while at the same time overcoming the merely abstract, aestheticist character of Woolf's representation of an alternative life experience.

II

TRENDS IN A POST-MODERN FEMINIST AESTHETIC

Despite the fact that there is, as yet, no fully established body of theoretical literature on the issue of a post-modern feminist aesthetic, it appears that the ethos of a post-modern perspective has permeated many important currents in contemporary feminist art theory and practice. I propose to begin the discussion with a very general outline of the main tenets of a post-modern perspective. I then consider ways in which the general spirit of a post-modern viewpoint has influenced, in more or less explicit terms, a variety of recent experimentations in feminist art practice. Finally, I consider the ways in which the various problematic aspects of these experimentations reflect upon the viability and coherency of the underlying project and philosophy of a post-modern feminist aesthetic.

The Spirit of the Post-Modern

In an influential work entitled Theory of the Avant-Garde, Peter Buerger makes a useful distinction between main aspects of modernism, the avant-garde and post-modernism [21]. We saw earlier that a leading dimension of a modernist aesthetic concerns the attempt to create an hermetically sealed autonomous sphere of the work of art. The modernist characteristically refuses to accept contents given outside his/her art from social tradition but aims at constructing a wholly self-referential world of the work of art. From the outset, modernism regarded itself as a very radical movement which aimed to dispense with all merely conventional perceptions and to construct a 'pure' art not bound by the normalising function of the merely traditional. As Buerger reads it, there is a significant difference between the main lines of a modernist aesthetic and the phenomenon of the avant-garde. Whereas modernism with its characteristic self reflexivity represented the culmination of the historical development of the notion of the autonomy of art, the avant-gardists saw themselves as mounting a provocative challenge to the whole conception of the specificity of the aesthetic. They protested against the apparent uselessness of an art which regarded itself as an end in itself; as having a value separate from the concerns and interests of everyday life. As Jochen Shulte-Sasse puts it: 'The historical avant-garde of the twenties was the first movement in art history that turned against the institution "art" and the mode in which autonomy functions. In this it is different from all previous art movements whose mode of existence was determined precisely by an acceptance of autonomy' [22]. Yet there remains a sense in which the avant-gardists carried on the essential spirit of a modernist aesthetic. Even though they repudiated the core modernist concept of the autonomy of the art work, the

avant-garde shared with the early modernists a rebellious repudiation of the merely traditional and an affirmation of the untried, the experimental, the new.

Only with the appearance in the 1950s and 1960s of the post-modern phenomenon has a serious challenge to the central values and principles of modernism as a totality been mounted. Unlike the avant-gardists, the post-moderns do not share the modernist's conception of the new and unconventional as primary values. Against 'high' modernism, the post-modern's claim is that it is simply not possible to shake off all merely conventional, traditional perceptions and perspectives in the attempt to create a 'pure' work of art.

Contemporary theorists of this school point to the inadequate a-historicism of a modernist project which aims, in the name of the experimental and the new, to transcend the normative conventions of all particular, historically specific, culturally circumscribed world-views. For the post-modernists, to recognize such historical character is to acknowledge that any attempt at radical transcendence of the norms and perspectives given by historical circumstance is implausible [23]. They characteristically refuse any attempted privileging of world-views and endorse a democratic pluralism as the only possible value. Post-modernism holds that the standardisation of any particular perspective or value is to be definitely avoided. It affirms a pluralism of values and outlooks which are considered reducible to a mere plurality of styles and genres. As we shall see, it is this easy acceptance of a relativist outlook and the suspension of the search for any perspective from which the present can be evaluated, which is strongly contested by Habermas and the other leftist critics of the post-modern standpoint.

Its characteristic refusal to elevate any one specific value, perspective or mode of representation to the level of a normative standard makes the post-modern ethos immediately attractive to several leading trends in contemporary feminist art practice. Although, as already indicated, the theorisation of the relevance of post-modernism to a feminist aesthetic remains largely undeveloped, the influence of the post-modern spirit is nevertheless evident in many contemporary feminist experiments in the arts. Attracted by the relativisation of all social experiences, by the absence of normative standards and by the affirmation of a non-hierarchical ordering of differences, a number of otherwise very distinct forms of feminist art practice appear to have been powerfully influenced by the general ethos of the post-modern.

The Post-Modern and Feminist Art

Laura Mulvey's often cited paper entitled 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' represents a seminal contribution to the development of a contemporary feminist aesthetic [24]. Perhaps more than any other work in the field, this piece marks the turn from a conception of the appropriateness of the universalising aspirations of a modernist aesthetic to feminist art theory and practice. Mulvey appears as one of the precursors of the so-called feminism of difference which has in recent years become very dominant in many areas of women's studies. To Mulvey, a feminist aesthetic must proceed from a fundamental awareness of the gender-specific character of all human subjectivity in a patriarchal society. Its most important and challenging task is, she intimates, systematically to refuse all attempts to represent as universal the specific interests, perceptions and desires of a patriarchially socialised masculinity. According to Mulvey, a feminist aesthetics is faced with the hitherto largely unrecognised necessity of constructing a qualitatively new experience of pleasure which does not merely reflect the scopophilic nature of masculine desire. In a certain loose sense, then, Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' articulates central features of a post-modern outlook. Mulvey limits the appropriate task of a feminist aesthetic to the construction of a mode of representation which corresponds to the specific difference of the experience of femininity in a patriarchal society. In keeping with the spirit of post-modernism she is content to define the project of a feminist aesthetic as the attempt to eradicate the universalising standardisation of a specifically masculine social experience and mode of perception.

There is, I suggest, a fundamentally problematic aspect to the whole project of a post-modern feminist aesthetic as formulated by Mulvey and others. A post-modern feminism has conflicting allegiances which render its aspirations incoherent and self-defeating. As an historically determinate phenomenon, feminism articulates, in the name of an Enlightenment evocation of the possibility of an emancipated, rational social life, a protest at the unfreedom, at the psychic and material constraints which ensure a subordinated femininity. Historically, feminism appears as a protesting consciousness made possible by a critical humanist interrogation of a repressive ideology which strives to attribute a natural status to all socially constituted phenomena. The critical consciousness of Enlightenment thinking is, it seems, a precondition of the historical appearance of a feminist repudiation of the traditional tasks and psychologies attributed to women. Yet, whilst a feminist protest has its roots in Enlightenment thinking, the relationship of the post-moderns to an Enlightenment aspiration towards the free, rational construction of

Judy Chicago, Female Rejection Drawing.

social life is, as Habermas stresses, an equivocal one [28].

To the post-moderns, the Enlightenment's hopes for the emancipatory power of reason involve the attempted universalisation of a cultural and gender-specific construct: man conceived as a free, reasoning consciousness. On this point of view, the attempt to project conscious self-determination as humanity's main historical task appears to rest on a culturally constituted and ultimately implausible conception of a fundamental opposition between the constrained, unfree world of social tradition and the unconstrained realm of a constitutive rational faculty. This sphere of a valorised rationality is, as Lloyd and other contemporary feminists point out, characteristically equated with the masculine while the constrained world of the uninterrogated passions is typically tied to the feminine [25].

The point of the present argument is not to attempt to marshall support for the ideal of androgyny against the assertion of the positive difference of the feminine, for there is, as the so-called feminists of difference point out, every reason to suppose that androgyny only appears as an ideal objective from a specifically patriarchal standpoint according to which the feminine appears as, in the words of

Aristotle, 'a certain lack of qualities'. The positing of an androgynous subjectivity as an ideal suggests an assessment of the feminine as an incomplete subjectivity to be augmented by valorised, alien 'masculine' attributes. Contemporary feminism's insistance on the necessary assertion of the legitimacy of the feminine as a positively different subjectivity emerges, then, as a significant advance in the development of feminist thought. Yet there remains an ever-present danger here that, rather than positing this positive difference as the goal of a conscious, practical, collective struggle, a feminism of difference will be tempted to assert the legitimate difference of a presently constituted, patriarchally circumscribed femininity. This temptation cannot be resisted, I suggest, by a feminism which uncritically allies itself with the relativism of a post-modern outlook. To the extent that the post-moderns consider the critique of the universalistic character of its formulation grounds for a repudiation in toto of the Enlightenment's aspiration towards the construction of a feee, rational, social life, it appears unable to posit the emancipated personality as the task of progressive social movements. To a post-modern feminism the affirmation of the positive specificity of the feminine characteristically appears not as the task of a movement determined to make a specific identity for women through collective social action, but rather as an assumption of the identity which has been made for women by a patriarchal cultural tradition. This lack of any substantive critical orientation towards the terms of a received patriarchal social identity, which I am claiming to be typical of post-modern feminism, will be illustrated shortly by a brief discussion of several contemporary experimentations in a feminist art practice.

A critical feminist consciousness cannot, it seems, adopt a simple one-sided orientation towards the aspirations articulated by Enlightenment thinking. While the universalistic claims made on behalf of a cultural and gender-specific conception of reason must be interrogated, the dependence of feminism as an historical phenomenon on the Enlightenment's hopes for a free, rational social life must also be acknowledged if feminism's character as a protest against the received norms of a patriarchal femininity is to be retained. Against the various post-modern feminisms, I suggest, therefore, that the Enlightenment project which looks to the constitution of the emancipated personality as humanity's main historical task must be embraced and reformulated by feminism. Without the critical assumption of this project, feminism is, as already indicated, left with no perspective from which a present, repressively constructed femininity could be challenged. My aim here is to show that any attempt to affirm the positive difference of the feminine which considers this difference, not in the light of a task to be achieved but as an already arrived at specificity, can only offer a conservative collaboration with a patriarchal construction of the feminine.

Experiments in a Post-Modern Feminist Art Practice: An Assessment

From amongst the wide range of recent experimentations in a feminist art practice, three stand out as the more typical bearers of a post-modern spirit. All of these apparently very diverse trends in women's art see the attempt to find a mode of representation able to express a feminine specificity or difference while undercutting the traditionally negative positioning of such representations as the primary task of a feminist aesthetic.

One formulation of this enterprise which has its significant advocates both in the fine arts and in feminist literary theory suggests that a non-subordinated image of the feminine requires the development of new, experimental forms of representations. Some of the work of the important American feminist Judy Chicago exemplifies this attempt to construct a specifically feminist visual form. In their well known text entitled Old Mistresses: Women Art and Ideology, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock critically evaluate Chicago's Female Rejection Drawing in the light of her professed attempt to find an abstract form appropriate to the expression of a non-subordinated, specific experience of female sexuality [26]. In this particular work, Chicago endeavours to produce in an abstract form reminiscent of a flower an image of the distinctive character of women's desire as a decentred, multiple, diverse pleasure of the body. Chicago says of this picture: 'I couldn't express my own sexuality by objectifying it onto the projected image of a man but only by inventing an image that embodied it. This is basically a feminist posture but I don't think it was possible before the development of abstract form' [27].

As Parker and Pollock point out, however, Chicago's strategy of using abstract form in an attempt to produce a new, positive image of feminine sexuality, an image not regulated by patriarchal representations, is necessarily a failure. Chicago's work is inevitably inserted into a system of established representations about the sexuality of women. Her evocation of a flower-like image as a graphic illustration of women's sexuality is readily received and accommodated by a pre-existing set of oppressive, negative images of the alluring, dangerous character of women's desire. Parker and Pollock formulate their objection as follows: 'Within male-dominated culture, its language and its code of representation, it is not possible to produce in any simple way an alternative, positive management of the image of women. The image of women is the spectacle onto which they project their narcissistic fantasies' [28]. The attempts made by Chicago in the fine arts and by Helene Cixous and others in literature to identify new modes of representation adequate to the expression of the positive specificity of the feminine appear as an inadequate realisation of a critical feminist outlook in the arts. Limiting their objectives to the construction of an image of the non-subordinated difference of the feminine, these art workers inevitably find their work inserted into and given significance by a system of patriarchal representations.

The attempt to formulate a mode of representation adequate to the positive specificity of the feminine is an ambition shared also by the feminist advocates of women's traditional creative practices. In her essay entitled 'Is There A Feminist Aesthetic?' Silvia Bovenschen critically assesses a trend within contemporary feminist art towards the assertion of craft works: embroidery, weaving, sewing and so on, as not merely artistically inferior to the so-called 'high' fine arts but as different, as specific, kinds of creativity which have been grossly devalued in a patriarchally arranged ranking of creative achievements [29]. This strategy of asserting women's traditional craft skills as of value equal to the so-called 'high' arts quite evidently participates in the anti-universalising spirit of the post-modern ethos. This feminist project has, moreover, assimilated the post-modern's refusal of the historical separation between the arts and crafts essential to the modernist's assertion of the autonomy of the pure art work.

It is, however, not at all clear that the attempt to re-evaluate the worth of the so-called feminine crafts contributes to the construction of a feminist consciousness critical of a patriarchally ascribed femininity. One should not, as Bovenschen points out, 'foster the false illusion that our sewing teachers indeed pointed in the right direction' [30]. In a patriarchally organised modern society, the traditional feminine skills of embroidery, weaving and sewing have been the mark of the subordinated, domesticated, privatised experience considered appropriate to women. To attempt merely to assert these activities as positively different, as specific creative practices rather than negatively different from valorised masculine achievements in the 'pure' arts, is to

surrender the real sense of a feminist protest at the constrained, restricted nature of the experience and opportunities available to women in a modern patriarchy. Not only is the scope of this ambition extremely limited; its specifically critical feminist character is very doubtful also. Without the demand for the radical abolition of gender-specific limits to 'appropriate' creative activity, the repressive ideology of a gender-based 'natural' suitability of the various creative enterprises remains secure and ineffectively contested. Whilst on the one hand admitting the cultural, merely traditional, character of the construction of feminine attributes and skills, the feminist celebration of these achievements seemingly attributes to them the status of a peculiarly feminine property. The proposed re-evaluation of traditional feminine creativity does not, in any practical sense, disturb the convictions of a repressive, essentialist ideology of the feminine.

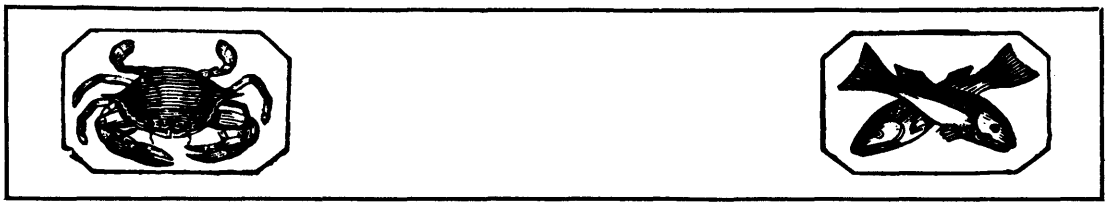
Finally, I turn to a brief consideration of a trend within contemporary feminist aesthetics which has, more explicitly than the options considered so far, adopted a post-modern perspective. This trend towards a theorised use of post-modern ideas is described by Craig Owens in an essay entitled 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and the Post-Modern' [31]. According to Owens, a feminist post-modern strategy in the fine arts strives at once to embrace or affirm the image of the feminine as different, as specific, and to resist the domination or control of this image by the voyeuristic, normative gaze of the masculine spectator. The photographic exhibitions of Cindy Sherman are presented as one of the main examples of this explicit post-modern feminist strategy in the arts. These photographs, which typically depict Sherman herself as a 1950s film star, attempt to impede and subvert the voyeuristic look characteristically courted by this genre. Sherman's own obvious, underscored awareness of the predatory nature of the look from which she seeks to shield herself is seemingly designed to compel the spectator to become conscious of the voyeuristic character of their reception of the feminine. An unproblematic relation between image and receiver is impeded. Sherman presents a highly conventional image of modern feminine subjectivity while refusing to permit the easy regulation of this image in accordance with patriarchal norms and standards. Sherman, the '50s beauty, refuses to exist for the benefit of the normative masculine gaze. The exaggeratedly conventional image of the feminine strives to emancipate itself from the normative gaze of any other merely culturally constituted mode or style of human subjectivity. According to Owens, Sherman's photographs underline and parody the conventionality of the traditional norms of the regulation feminine 'type' in modern Western society. In this sense her work affirms the anti-essentialism which marks the post-modern outlook.

For Sherman, as for the post-modern feminists in general, emancipation apparently means only a liberation from the normative privileging of any specific, culturally constructed mode or 'style' of human subjectivity. All that is proposed is an affirmation of the particularity of gender-based norms and the refusal of a repressive universalisation of the standards of a peculiarly masculine, culturally constituted subjectivity.

Conclusion

It appears that contemporary feminist aesthetics confronts a significant dilemma. On the one hand, as the discussion of Woolf's feminism has suggested, there are serious obstacles to feminism's wholesale adoption of the aims and methods of a modernist aesthetic. On the positive side, a modernist aesthetic which articulates a conception of the radical disjunction between art and life is very appropriate to Woolf's vision of a transcendent, androgynous 'real' self which empowers her fiction with a profound critical perspective on the oppressive, inauthentic character of existing gendered subjectivity. Drawing on the modernist conception of the transcendent nature of the aesthetic, Woolf's work articulates a conception of the ideal, emancipated self which presents a critical alternative to the oppressive, restricted experience of femininity encountered in everyday life. At the same time, however, and again a feature of Woolf's commitment to a radical autonomy thesis, her vision of an emancipated, androgynous self is conceived in terms of a mere aesthetic sensibility. Locked within the autonomy of the work of art, Woolf's proposal for a new form of human subjectivity appears as a mere striving for a new androgynous perspective. Androgyny is for her most aptly described not in terms of its concrete realisation in a new emancipated personality but as a mode of perception most fittingly evoked in the form of the abstract, visual representation. Thus Lily's final authentic vision in To The Lighthouse culminates not in a changed practical orientation towards life but in a mere aesthetic satisfaction at the momentary realisation of her more complete, androgynous mode of perception in a fitting visual design. Hence, although the ideal subjectivity posited by Woolf empowers her fiction with a strongly critical standpoint, the merely aesthetical character of this ideal means that her critique ultimately fails to project a practical imperative. As already suggested, the alternative vision proposed in her art functions as a compensatory, substitute gratification which siphons off and renders harmless the radical need for changed gender relations to which her works, in their passionate critique of existing relations between the sexes, also give expression.

Whilst Woolf's critique of the truncated character of given gendered subjectivity finally appears as a call not for a changed life but as only the demand for a new mode of perception, at least her art does preserve the protest at an unfree, subordinated femininity essential to a feminist outlook. This critical impulse is, as we have seen, sacrificed in the relativist perspective assimilated by a post-modern feminist aesthetic. Its characteristic repudiation of the Enlightenment project which looks upon the emancipated personality as the task of historical activity, means that, for a post-modern feminism, the attempt to construct a conception of the positive specificity of the feminine cannot appear as the practical goal of a social movement. Rather, the attempt to identify the positive difference of the feminine appears as the mere attempt to assert the specific, positive identity of an already ascribed femininity. To a post-modern feminism, the 'feminine' appears as merely one 'style' of subjectivity amongst others which must be protected from the normative encroachments of other 'styles' of subjectivity. Any radical dissatisfaction with the repressive conventions of a patriarchal femininity is, to all intents and purposes, lost to a pluralistic 'recognition' of the legitimate specificity of the various modes of a gendered social existence.



Notes

[1] Woolf, V., A Room of One's Own, cited in M. Barrett (ed.), Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York and London, 1979, p. 5.
[2] See Barrett, M., ibid. and Watney, S. 'The Connoisseur as Gourmet' in Formulations of Pleasure, Bennett et al (eds.), Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983.
[3] Watney, S., 'The Connosseur as Gourmet', op. cit., p. 79.
[4] See Marcuse, H., 'The Affirmative Character of Culture', Negations, Penguin University Books, London, 1972.
[5] See Ortega y Gasset, J., The Dehumanisation of Art, Princeton University Press, 1968.
[6] Ibid., p. 7.
[7] See Bell, C., Art and Fry, R., Vision and Design.
[8] See Watney, S., 'The Connoisseur as Gourmet', op. cit., p. 77.
[9] Ibid., p. 77.
[10] See Habermas, J., 'Modernity - An Incomplete Project", The Anti-Aesthetic Essays on Post-Modern Culture, Foster (ed.), Bay Press, USA, 1983.
[11] Ibid., p. 5.
[12] MacIntyre, A., After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Duckworth, 1981.
[13] Ibid., p. 16.
[14] See Bazin, N., Virginia Woolf and The Androgynous Vision, Rutgers, 1973.
[15] Woolf, V., 'Professions for Women' in Barrett (ed.), Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing, op. cit., p. 58.
[16] Woolf, V., The Years, quoted in Barrett (ed.), Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing, op. cit., p. 21.
[17] See Bazin, N., Virginia Woolf and The Androgynous Vision, op. cit. for a discussion of the feminist politics of To The Lighthouse.
[18] Marcus, J., 'Thinking Back Through Our Mothers', in Marcus, J. (ed.), New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf, University of Nebraska Press, 1981.
[19] Marcuse does not specifically refer to a modernist tradition and my usage of his analysis involves an adaption of only the most general outlines of his diagnosis of the conflicting implications of autonomous art.
[20] Indeed it is the implications of a tradition of an autonomous realist art with which Marcuse is particularly concerned.
[21] Buerger, P., Theory of the Avant-Garde, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
[22] Schulte-Sasse, J., 'Forward' to Buerger, op. cit., p. xiv.
[23] See Lyotard, J. F. 'What is Post-Modernism?' in The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Bennington and Massumi (trans.), University of Minnesota Press, 1984; and Jameson, F., 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', The Anti-Aesthetic, Foster, H. (ed.).
[24] Mulvey, L., 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Screen, 16:3, 1975.
[25] See Lloyd, G., The Man of Reason 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy, Methuen, 1984.
[26] Parker, R. and Pollock, G., Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.
[27] Ibid., p. 130.
[28] Ibid., p. 130.
[29] See Bovenschen, S., 'Is there a Feminist Aesthetic?' in Weckmueller (trans.), Feminist Aesthetics, Ecker (ed.), The Women's Press, 1985.
[30] Ibid., p. 47.
[31] Owens, C., 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Post-modernism', in The Anti-Aesthetic, Foster (ed.), op. cit.