

Postwar American Avant-Garde (AE 117)
<http://eclass.uoa.gr/courses/ENL325/>

Feminism and the (en)gendering of postmodernism: power, difference, and the politics of meaning

FROM Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 1922

A woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine.

FROM Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949

The female is a female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities', said Aristotle; 'we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.' And St Thomas for his part pronounced women to be an 'imperfect' man, an 'incidental' being. This is symbolised in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called 'a supernumerary bone' of Adam [...]

Thus humanity is male and man defined women not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being [...] Man [...] is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.

From Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision' (1971)

An important insight of the radical women's movement has been how divisive and how ultimately destructive is this myth of the special woman, which is also the token woman. Every one of us here in this room has had great luck – we are teachers, writers, academics; our own gifts could not have been enough, for we all know women whose gifts are buried or aborted. Our struggles can have meaning and our privileges – however precarious under patriarchy – can be justified only if they can help to change the lives of women whose gifts – and whose very being – continue to be thwarted and silenced [...]

I know that my style was formed by male poets: by the men I was reading as an undergraduate – Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden, Mac Niece, Stevens, Yeats. What I chiefly learned from them was craft. [...]

Trying to look back and understand that time [*a conflict between creativity and domesticity*] I have tried to analyze the real nature of the conflict. Most, if not all, human lives are full of fantasy – passive day-dreamings which need not be acted on. But to write poetry or fiction, or even to think well is not to fantasize, or to put fantasies on paper. For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed – freedom to press on, to enter the current of your thought like a glider pilot, knowing that your motion can be sustained, that the buoyancy of your attention will not be suddenly snatched away. Moreover, if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming. [...]

The fifties and early sixties were years of rapid revelations: the sit-ins and marches in the South, The Bay of Pigs, the early antiwar movement, raised large questions – question for which the masculine world of the academy around me seemed to have expert and fluent answers. But I needed to think for myself – about pacifism and dissent and violence, about poetry and society, and about my own relationship to all these things. For about ten years I was reading in fierce snatches, scribbling in on the books, writing poetry in fragments; I was looking desperately for clues, because if there were no clues then I thought I might be insane, I wrote in a notebook about this time:

Paralyzed by the sense that there exists a mesh of relationships – e.g., between my anger at the children, my sensual life, pacifism, sex (I mean sex in its broadest significance, not merely sexual desire) – an interconnectedness which, if I could see it, make it valid, would give me back myself, make it possible to function lucidly and passionately. Yet I grope in and out among these dark webs. I think I began at this point to feel that politics was not something 'out there' but something 'in here' and of the essence of my condition.

FROM Hélène Cixous, *Sorties* [originally published as *La Jeune Née* (The Newly Born Woman) in 1975]

Where is she?

Activity/ Passivity,

Sun /Moon,

Culture/Nature,

Day / Night,

Father / Mother,

Head/ heart,

Intelligible / sensitive,

Logos/Pathos.

Form, convex, step, advance, seed, progress.

Matter, concave, ground – which supports the step, receptacle.

Man

Woman

Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it transports us, in all of its forms, wherever a discourse is organised. The same thread, or double tress leads us, whether we are reading or speaking, through literature philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation, of reflection.

Thought has always worked by opposition,

Speech/ Writing

High/Low

By dual, *hierarchised* oppositions. Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. Wherever an ordering intervenes, a law organizes the thinkable by (dual, irreconcilable; or mitigable, dialectical) oppositions. And all the couples of oppositions are *couples*. Does this mean anything? Is the fact that logocentrism subjects thought – all of the concepts, the codes, the values – to a two-term system, related to ‘the’ couple man/woman?

Nature /History,

Nature/Art,

Nature/Mind,

Passion/Action.

Theory of culture, theory of society, the ensemble of symbolic systems [*social relations*] – art, religion, family, language, - everything elaborates the same systems, And the movement by which each opposition is set up to produce meaning is the movement by which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time a war breaks out. Death is always at work.

Father/Son Relationships of authority, of privilege, of force.

Logos/Writing Relationships: opposition, conflict, relied, reversion.

Master/Slave Violence. Repression.

FROM Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* 1993

Social relations are inflected by sexual difference; sexual difference is a social structure: ‘Difference is not essential but understood as a social structure which positions male and female people asymmetrically in relation to language, to social and economic power and to meaning.

FROM Elaine Showalter, *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, 1981

I began by recalling that a few years ago feminist critics thought we were on a pilgrimage to the promised land in which gender would lose its power, in which all texts would be sexless and equal, like angels. But the more precisely we understand the specificity of women’s writing not a transient by-product of sexism but as fundamental and continually determining reality, the more clearly we realize that we have misperceived our destination. We may never reached the promised land at all; for when feminist critics see our task as the study of women’s writing, we realize that the land promised to us is not the serenely undifferentiated universality of texts but the tumultuous and intriguing wilderness of difference itself.

From Cora Kaplan, 'Speaking/ Writing /Feminism: On Gender and Writing' (1983)

In the early stages of thinking about women and writing I had, in common with other feminists, talked mostly about the ways in which women were denied access to something I have called 'full' subjectivity. [...]

I now think that this way of posing the question of writing/speaking and subjectivity is misleading. It assumes, for instance, that *men* write from a realised and realisable autonomy in which they are, in fact, not fantasy the conscious, constant and triumphant sources of the meanings they produce. [...] [Wordsworth's] poet has a universalised access to experience of all kinds, feels things more deeply, and expresses those feelings 'recollected in tranquillity' for all men. [...] How far was [this] an ideological fiction? In what sense could any writing or writer – widen the thing defined, the romantics did - *any actor* in history *be* that romantic subject? [...]

Rather than approach women's difficulty in positioning themselves as writers as a question of barred access to some durable psychic state to which all humans should and can aspire, we might instead see their experience as foregrounding the inherently unstable and split character of all human subjectivity. [...]

I would rather see subjectivity as always in process and contradiction, even female subjectivity, structured, divided and denigrated through the matrices of sexual difference. I see this understanding as part of a more optimistic political scenario than the ones I have been part of, one that can and ought to lead to a politics which will no longer overvalue control, rationality and individual power, and which, instead, tries to understand human desire, struggle and agency as they are mobilised through a more complicated, less finished and less heroic, psychic schema.

On Identity Politics, visit The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu>

At this historical juncture, then, asking whether one is for or against identity politics is to ask an impossible question. Wherever they line up in the debates, thinkers agree that the notion of identity has become indispensable to contemporary political discourse, at the same time as they concur that it has troubling implications for models of the self, political inclusiveness, and our possibilities for solidarity and resistance.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics/>

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FROM Chris Weedon, 'Postmodernism' in Jaggar M. Allison and Iris Marion Young (eds.) (1998) *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2000)

The subject of the Western philosophical tradition has been a "disembodied" abstract individual governed by conscious rational thought. Moreover, common sense views of subjectivity in the West tend to reiterate humanist assumptions that we are unique, rational individuals, born with a human potential which, given the right environment, we can realize through education and personal development. We learn about the world through experience and this experience is expressed in language. This transparent relationship between the individual, experience and language allows little scope for theorizing contradictions either in our sense of ourselves or in the meanings of our experience. Postmodern feminism has sought to deconstruct the hegemonic assumption that we are whole and coherent subjects with a unified sense of identity. [...]

Feminist advocates of postmodern theory argue that its questioning of universals and the possibility of objectivity, and its focus on the very criteria by which claims to knowledge are legitimized, provide for theory which can avoid generalizing from the experiences of Western, white, heterosexual, middle-class women. By questioning all essences and relativizing truth claims, postmodern feminisms create a space for political perspectives and interests that have hitherto been marginalized. They also help guard against creating alternative generalizing theories.

Nancy Hartsock, cited by Chris Weedon in 'Postmodernism'

Somehow it seems suspicious that it is at the precise moment when so many groups have been engaged in "nationalisms" which involve redefinitions of the marginalised Others that suspicions emerge about the nature of the "subject", about the possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, about historical "progress". Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subject rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be theorized. Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society become dubious and suspect.

FROM Lynne Tirrell, 'Language and Power' in Jaggar M. Allison and Is... Marion Young (eds.) (1998) *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2000)

Language matters to feminists because language is a structure of significances that governs our lives. It contains and conveys the categories through which we understand ourselves and others, and through which we become who and what we are. Our linguistic practices are constituted largely by inferences which in turn constitute or contribute to our understanding of the connections (causal and otherwise) between things. [...]

Once we realize that our linguistic categories reflect and are reflected by our social categories, and once we see that our discursive practices are normative, it is a short step to see language as an arena of political struggle. Feminism, is, at the very least, a struggle to end sexist oppression by eradicating both the means by which oppression is carried out and the ideology that seeks that it be carried out. [...]

The real promise of philosophy of language for feminists is an understanding of articulated normativity; [...] Language is normative in its production and reproduction of social norms by way of its content, by way of its forms, and most especially by way of its constitutive discursive practices. Once we understand how women are paradoxically constituted by and yet erased from discourse, we may use what we know of these processes of articulation and legitimation to effect and explain our reconstitution as a whole.

FROM Linda Nochlin 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? 1971

Why have there been no great women artists?" The question tolls reproachfully in the background of most discussions of the so-called woman problem. But like so many other so-called questions involved in the feminist "controversy," it falsifies the nature of the issue at the same time that it insidiously supplies its own answer: "There have been no great women artists because women are incapable of greatness." [...]

The problem lies not so much with some feminists' concept of what femininity is, but rather with their misconception--shared with the public at large--of what art is: with the naive idea that art is direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience, a translation of personal life into visual terms. Art is almost never that, great art never is. The making of art involves a self-consistent language of form, more or less dependent upon, or free from, given temporally defined conventions, schemata, or systems of notation, which have to be learned or worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation. The language of art is, more materially, embodied in paint and line on canvas or paper, in stone or clay or plastic or metal--it is neither a sob story nor a confidential whisper. [...]

What is important is that women face up to the reality of their history and of their present situation, without making excuses or puffing mediocrity. Disadvantage may indeed be an excuse; it is not, however, an intellectual position. Rather, using as a vantage point their situation as underdogs in the realm of grandeur, and outsiders in that ideology, women can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses in general, and at the same time that they destroy false consciousness, take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought--and true greatness--are challenges open to anyone, man or woman, courageous enough to take the necessary risk, the leap into the unknown.

It is when one really starts thinking about the implications of "Why have there been no great women artists?" that one begins to realize to what extent our consciousness of how things are in the world has been conditioned--and often falsified--by the way the most important questions are posed. We tend to take it for granted that there really is an East Asian Problem, a Poverty Problem, a Black Problem--and a Woman Problem. But first we must ask ourselves who is formulating these "questions," and then, what purposes such formulations may serve. (We may, of course, refresh our memories with the connotations of the Nazis' "Jewish Problem.") Indeed, in our time of instant communication, "problems" are rapidly formulated to rationalize the bad conscience of those with power: thus, the problem posed by Americans in Vietnam and Cambodia is referred to by Americans as the "East Asian Problem," whereas East Asians may view it, more realistically, as the "American Problem"; the so-called Poverty Problem might more directly be viewed as the "Wealth Problem" by denizens of urban ghettos or rural wastelands; the same irony twists the White Problem into its opposite, a Black Problem; and the same inverse logic turns up in the formulation of our present state of affairs as the "Woman Problem. "

FROM 'Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth-Century' in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.) *The Power of Feminist Art: the American Movement of the 1970s* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1994)

Feminist art and history helped to initiate postmodernism in America. We owe to the feminist breakthrough some of the most basic tenets of postmodernism: the understanding that gender is socially and not naturally constructed; the widespread validation of non-"high-art" forms such as craft, video, and performance art; the questioning of the cult of "genius" and "greatness" in Western art history; the awareness that behind the claim of "universality" lies an aggregate of particular standpoints and biases, leading in turn to an emphasis upon pluralist variety rather than totalizing unity. [...]

Women artists of the feminist generation differed from the women artists of the fifties and sixties most of all in their deliberate grounding of their art in their socialized experience as women and – the corollary of that position – in their acceptance of women's experience as different from men's but equally valid. In exposing for open consideration what had previously been hidden or ignored, they connected – for the first time, in a conscious way – the agendas of social politics and art. The key principle was consciousness-raising, defined by women's movement theorists as a "method of using one's own experience as the most valid way of formulating political analysis. [...]"

Feminist art critics asserted a new position for "woman" in art, as subject rather than object, active speaker and not passive theme.