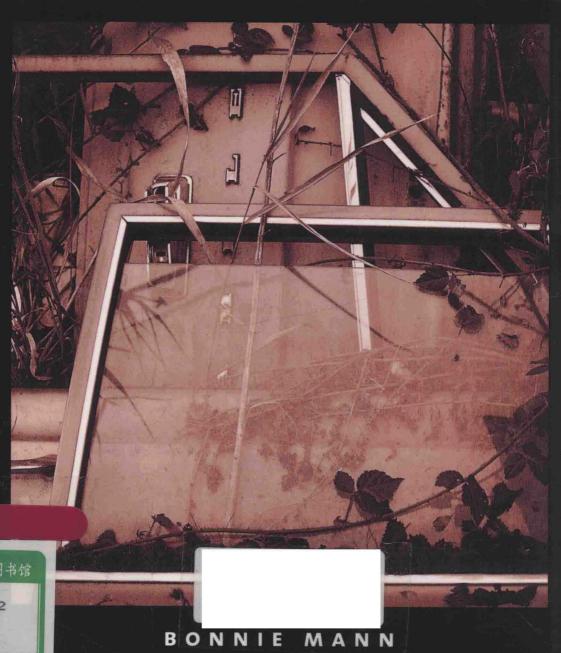
Studies in Feminist Philosophy

Women's Liberation and the Sublime

FEMINISM, POSTMODERNISM, ENVIRONMENT



WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND THE SUBLIME

Feminism, Postmodernism, Environment

Bonnie Mann



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Women's Liberation and the Sublime: Feminism, Postmodernism, Environment Bonnic Mann

To my mother, Donna, and my father, Arel, both of whom died too soon.

Preface

Modern men were not thrown back upon the world but upon themselves. One of the most persistent trends of modern philosophy since Descartes...has been an exclusive concern with the self, as distinguished from the soul or person or man in general, an attempt to reduce all experiences with the world as well as with other human beings to experiences between man and himself.

-Hannah Arendt

Postmodern hyperspace... has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment... can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.

Fredric Jameson

If the modern predicament stems in large part from the egocentrism that underlies humanocentrism—often disguised in the unquestioned meliorism of a technological existence—the form of a possible solution may well be ecocentric in character.

-Edward S. Casey

If I were to try to say in a word what motivates me to write a feminist book on the sublime, I would have to say it's a certain kind of terror. This is not the kind of terror

that is generally associated with that noble aesthetic notion, however. It's a more pedestrian emotion: the mundane, daily fear that grips a woman dependent on her planet for survival, yet unable to stop either her own or anyone else's participation in its destruction. We are, as a species, in the midst of a suicide that neither feminists nor the broader global environmental movements seem able to stop. And when I say "as a species" I ought to note of course that it is those who control the power and the resources who "act"-while the rest of us are condemned, it seems, to "act with" them. In what we call the developed world our lives are structured into such action, our food encased in plastic, our daily routines requiring automobiles, our most human needs, such as bathing and defecating, connected to earth-defiling technologies. Certainly any intelligent extraterrestrial looking in on earth would have to conclude that the humans have lost their minds. Those humans here who belong to cultures where dependence on the earth is a recognized and sacred fact of human existence have long since come to the same conclusion about the rest of us. And those of us who are environmentalists in globally dominant countries have come to that conclusion about the folks who control infinitely more money and power globally than we do. Feminists have noted that those people are almost exclusively men.

In 1958, Hannah Arendt wrote already of "the advent of a new and yet unknown age," marked by an experience she called "world-alienation," characterized by a "twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self" (Arendt 1958, 6). Now, the unknown age has a name. Postmodernity is the kind of time and space that we live in, structured by a vast disarray of material and social circumstances, extremes of impoverishment and wealth that defy comprehension, environmental destruction that threatens all of us (but not equally), and the instantaneous networks of communication that are the taken-for-granted backdrop to some lives, while others die of malnutrition and dirty water. In this age, the outer reaches of the universe and the tiniest components of the human genome become increasingly accessible to those who control the machines and the science, while the immediate environment that sustains all of us both socially and physically becomes alien and threatening.

In the centers of global power we are faced with "a growing aestheticization of everyday life in the mass dissemination of signs and images" (Felski 2000, 195). This aestheticization seems to push certain university professors and other intellectuals to take Arendt's twofold flight one step further than she foresaw: both the universe and the self are folded into discourse. World-alienation has taken the form of the self-enclosed universe of the text. Having lost our belief in the referentiality of language, we sacrifice our faith in any relation between words and things. We find ourselves in a world of signs that refer only to other signs, which is our particular predicament and challenge. Now more than ever, thinking our relationship to other persons and to the earth is a matter of survival. Yet, philosophers in the globally dominant United States, feminist philosophers included, seem less capable of thinking these relationships than ever. Anything we might say about the earth or other persons is, we've discovered, already in language. To speak of an "earth" or "nature" that exceeds discourse is to find oneself locked, even so, within discourse. Since the earth, like everything else, has turned into a text, when we try

to think our relationship to it, we end up merely rethinking our relationship to ourselves.

Our very real physical and phenomenological experience of world-alienation finds here its theoretical form. We give in to placelessness. As Edward S. Casey writes:

To say "I have no place to go" is to admit to a desperate circumstance. Yet we witness daily the disturbing spectacle of people with no place to go: refugees from natural catastrophes or strife-torn countries, the homeless on the streets of modern cities, not to mention "stray" animals. In fearing that "the earth is becoming uninhabitable"—a virtual universal lament—we are fearing that the earth will no longer provide adequate places in which to live. The incessant motion of postmodern life in late-capitalist societies at once echoes and exacerbates this fear. (Casey 1993, xiii)

Intellectually, we also find ourselves in desperate circumstances, trapped as we are inside a language that can refer only to itself. Our self-enclosed discursive universe becomes a kind of no place, a world-alienated space without place, and thinking is set adrift from the physical places and intersubjective relationships that give thinkers their moment-by-moment sustenance.

Yet the terror that accompanies our desperation is paired with a kind of frenetic exhilaration and celebrated in the contemporary notion of the "sublime." Sublime experience names precisely that melting away of the real (in both its social and natural forms) that so marks our displacement into the magical world of the text. It takes the place of the old "goods" philosophers pursued and was, beginning in the late 1980s, imported into some versions of feminist theory as a new "ought," in service to which the feminist political project tended to be displaced. I felt compelled to write a book on the notion of the sublime, not because it has been systematically taken up as an explicit rallying point by feminist thinkers of what is somewhat problematically called the postmodern tradition; it hasn't. It is, however, the aesthetic experience of terror/exhilaration that emerges unnamed in important theoretical texts to provide the silent justification for doing away with practically everything else. And it is, I think, a way of naming and describing what it feels like to live dependent on a world we are in the process of destroying; the terror comes from the destruction, and the exhilaration from our power to destroy.

I will argue that the experience of the sublime can and does take different forms, but in its dominant contemporary expression, the sublime is an extreme kind of compensatory experience. In our celebration of it, we too often capitulate to a twofold incapacity to articulate our relationship to the world we inhabit. In the realm of *the political*, we are set adrift from the very structural conditions of our daily lives, unable to comprehend or name the vast global networks of technologies, powers, and players that have changed how we live down to our most intimate experiences of space, time, and meaning; and that link us to other persons and places in egregious ways. In the realm of *necessity*, we are set adrift from the earth itself and become so profoundly forgetful of our moment-by-moment dependence on the planet for sustenance, for breath, water, and food; we actually believe ourselves to be produced by texts. Our sojourn in the world of signs is so paradigmatic

of "the postmodern condition," that asking the question of our relationship to other persons across the globe or to the physical planet we inhabit seems naive and nostalgic.

Yet these are precisely the questions that a feminist account of sublime experience will foreground. There are modes of the sublime, I will argue, that emerge in contemporary life and that powerfully expose our relations to other persons and to the natural world. These experiences disrupt masculinist fantasies of independent, sovereign subjects in control of themselves, other people, and the planet. They disrupt the equally masculinist fantasies of subjects produced in a world of signs. They throw us into relation with one another and with the places that we live, and not only that, they *orient us* in the context of those relations. In other words, unlike the modes of the sublime that are implicitly celebrated in key feminist postmodernist texts, these are aesthetic experiences that have a normative force (which is different from claiming that they provide clear-cut prescriptions for action). It is time that feminists take back the experience of the sublime.

If feminists need the experience of the sublime now, it is because the conditions of postmodern life have made a profound disorientation in our relations to others and to the natural world the common experience of everyday life, at least in dominant countries. Fredric Jameson describes our displacement in relation to others when he argues that under the conditions of what we now call globalization, there is a disjunct between phenomenological experience and material conditions. We experience "a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience" (Jameson 1991, 410). The gap between our experience and its structural truth is a key feature of postmodern life.

The phenomenological experience of the individual subject... becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people. (Jameson 1991, 411)

We are caught in a world where the real workings of systems that are part of our everyday lives, such as this computer I type on now with its Internet capacity and near instant responses to my commands, are experienced as hopelessly incomprehensible by most of us. Of course ultimately, the "structural coordinates" of our experience worry us only because they determine in large part the place occupied by other persons in the systems of relations that make up the truth of our daily lives. It disturbs us that our daily experience is cut off from the structural truths that link us to others because when the phenomenological experience of a person is so constrained, then the world that person is open to will be constrained as well. It will be a "my world" in which others are functionalized, in which some worker,

somewhere, made this computer for me, and thus is "present" to me in the form of an invisible functioning, though she has no life or presence in my world as a person.

This kind of fragmentation, or in Jameson's more (updated) Marxist terms, "reification," serves a capitalist world order where it is important to create an insurmountable distance between consumers and the process of production responsible for creating their object world. The "indispensable precondition" for a culture of consumerism is precisely the "effacement of the traces of production" from the commodity.

Indeed, the point of having your own object world and walls and muffled distance or relative silence all around you, is to forget about all those innumerable others for a while; you don't want to have to think about Third World women every time you pull yourself up to your word processor, or all the other lower-class people with their lower-class lives when you decide to use or consume your other luxury products; it would be like having voices inside your head. (Jameson 1991, 315)

Our forgetfulness of these "others" is structured into the very pace and complexity of postmodern life.

And this forgetfulness is built upon another, symptomatized by our inability to think the earth itself as "the quintessence of the human condition" (Arendt 1958, 2). We live more or less blithely in a suicide/homicide of the species (our own and others), entertained by escape fantasies. As space scientists seriously discuss "terraforming" other planets to make them inhabitable for humans, our own planet is rendered uninhabitable. Such escape fantasies have been one of the defining characteristics of the age of science, as Arendt points out, an age that inaugurated and secularized at its inception the modernist belief that the earth is our prison. Our dependence on the earth was taken to be a kind of curse that could be broken through scientific discovery and technological innovation. Or alternately, it was a kind of developmental stage that the human race was just on the verge of outgrowing. The exhilaration that accompanied the belief in this impending emancipation was only occasionally challenged by the rather understated fear that we would destroy the earth long before we managed to outgrow our dependence on it.

Postmodernity is characterized by the co-existence of this essentially modernist good cheer with a more realistic shrug-your-shoulders nihilism expressed in the often stated belief that since the environment will be destroyed in any case, and no one can stop it, we might as well enjoy the process. If this is a terrifying thought, it is exhilarating as well, a bit like bungee jumping or skydiving.

What we turn away from in both cases is the good sense "to think what we are doing" (Arendt 1958, 5). And though the fantasy of utter emancipation from the earth now seems rather less likely to come true than it did in the wave of scientific optimism that accompanied Arendt's writing in 1958—the Mir space station plummeted into the sea instead of providing the first tourist accommodations in space after all—we seem no more capable of thinking the important political and philosophical questions at the turn of the century than others did nearly fifty years ago. To think these questions, we would need what Arendt called "common sense," that sixth sense that fits our five senses into a common world. In the current environmental crisis, Arendt's insistence on the recognition of a world held in

common with others takes on a literalness and an urgency she could not have predicted fifty years ago, even while it seems naively idealistic.

At the same time, we are not surprised that humans have learned to do almost everything. In fact, our common sense seems to be lost to us in direct proportion to the extension of our faith in the technical capacities that augment our own. Now, "we are actually doing what all ages before ours thought to be the exclusive prerogative of divine action" (Arendt 1958, 269). Arendt notes that it is a limited kind of knowledge, or "know-how," that drives these developments. "It could be that we, who are earth-bound creatures and have begun to act as though we were dwellers of the universe, will forever be unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which we are nevertheless able to do," she writes. Knowhow and thought have "parted company," leaving us "the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is" (1958, 3). We know how to do, without knowing how to stop doing, even if our doing is killing us. Of course, to be accurate we must admit that most of us no more pretend to comprehend the science that can splice the genes of a jellyfish into a moth or send electronic messages around the globe in an instant than we do the mind of god but living with these technologies gives rise to a strange faith. We don't pretend to understand how it is that everything from the proteins of human DNA to a meteor billions of miles away can now be reached by human-made machines. Yet we do have enormous confidence that as "the real" that resists human intervention gives way, "the real" made by human intervention takes its place. In my view the relationship we construct and reconstruct to the natural world in these practices cuts across and thus unites what we distinguish as "modern" and "postmodern" sensibilities.

The melting away of a real that exceeds human making is characteristic of sublime experience in both its modern and postmodern expressions. While the modern posture was to be at least somewhat troubled by our apparent lack of access to the real, in postmodernity we tend to flee into an exuberant affirmation of the irreality of any real that exceeds our creations. Jameson suggests that the sublime experience of the melting away of the real, which predominates in globally dominant countries, is descriptively captured in postmodern philosophies, "where to call for the shedding of any illusion about psychic identity or the centered subject, for the ethical ideal of good molecular 'schizophrenic' living, and for the ruthless abandonment of the mirage of presence may turn out to be a description of the way we live now rather than its rebuke or subversion" (1991, 339). His suggestion that we read our postmodern convictions as descriptive of how we live, rather than as a revolutionary break from the status quo, is remarkably simple, yet evocative. Indeed, it seems to me that in our urgency to explain how the hegemonic West got it all wrong by mistaking its own experiences for universal ontological truths, we tend to unwittingly affirm the habit, continuing to read the subjective experiences of certain folks in certain places as ontological conditions of the world itself. This may seem to be a strange claim in an age when we are taught to read everything as a product of social or textual construction. Yet we mistake our incomprehension in the face of the real that exceeds the text, our incapacity in

regard to this excess, for the actual ontological status of anything that surpasses or resists human making. We see a lack of reality as the one remaining real, even essential, property of the real itself. The Kantian claim that we can't know the "thing in itself" is here reversed so that we do indeed know all there is to know about the thing-in-itself; we know that it masks its lack of being in appearances, behind the appearances is an abyss of absence.

Jameson calls for "cognitive mapping," a process of mapping our phenomenological experience onto the structural realities of a postmodern world. His suggestion affirms the need for both a phenomenology of experience and an account of the material conditions of that experience. This is one important feature of a still-emerging tradition of critical engagement with postmodern theory (Jameson 1991; Eagleton 1996; Harvey 1990). I share a central belief with this emergent tradition: that postmodernism has material conditions. Such notions as "textuality" and "difference" are interpreted in part as "symptoms" (or simply phenomenological descriptions) of experience under conditions of extreme reification. In other words, "postmodernists" are not wrong; we really do experience ourselves as set adrift in the sign-world of the text or caught up in an endless play of difference, but these experiences themselves are symptomatic of the material conditions that they seem to deny.

These convictions locate this project in the space between phenomenological and materialist philosophies of contemporary life. I necessarily move between these two kinds of description because I understand our phenomenological experience to be situated, neither reducible to nor extractable from the material conditions that shape our daily lives—even though it is most certainly alienated from these conditions—that is, material conditions are as often hidden within as simply expressed in our lived experience.

It often takes a good deal of work to even begin to understand these connections. If, for example, postmodern theory is what the double world-alienation we live in looks like in language, then the sense that such theory gives to our lives will not often be on the surface, available for a simple reading. In the realm of the political, we will have to insist on an "outside" to discourse that relocates discourse "inside" a historical time period and its social and political materialities. In the realm of necessity, the task will be to map phenomenological experience onto the reality of our relation to the earth. Our forgetfulness of these relations is extreme and has been deeply sedimented into the ways that we think. Just as our relations to other persons globally structure the daily object worlds we inhabit, our relation to the earth sustains us moment by moment. Yet most of us could not say, on any given day, what forces have altered the air that we are breathing, how our water has been treated and what chemicals it contains, or what happens, even, to the contents of our toilets when we flush them.

That this dual displacement, in the realm of politics and in the realm of necessity, should also find its expression in feminist theory should come as no surprise. Feminists live in postmodern time and inhabit the world we have built no less than other thinkers. In feminist postmodernism, our displacement in the realm of the political is expressed in our *forgetfulness of women*. Our displacement in the realm of necessity is expressed in our *forgetfulness of nature*. As we will see in some

detail later, a concern with the deconstruction of metanarratives replaces our concern for women, and the melting away of "women's nature" acts in part as a repressed expression of the melting away of any nature whatsoever. In both cases, we exchange our implacement in the political and natural worlds both through sublime experience and for sublime experience.

This is to say that the feminist alliance with "postmodernism" has given feminist thinkers important ways to talk about the very real experiences that characterize postmodern life, but this talk has often been uncritical. This is a bold claim: what is more critical, after all, than the postmodern drive to deconstruct and disrupt? My point is that, disconnected from concrete projects of social struggle, their relation to the material conditions of postmodernity insufficiently understood, these critical exercises have tended to remain mere technical enterprises. This is to say we have tended to fetishize our technical capacities to deconstruct and disrupt, without sufficient attention to the connection between these experiences and the conditions of postmodern life. Our thinking has consequently become too often alienated from the liberatory projects that are the very heart of feminism.

Because the very conditions of postmodern life are deeply aestheticized, I find that turning our attention to the notion of the sublime can provide some insight into key paradoxes of feminist thinking about epistemology and politics. If the sublime bears a heavily gendered heritage, if it is an experience that negatively characterizes postmodern life and finds uncritical expression in "postmodern" texts, this is not to say that feminists must read it as a monodimensional and unequivocally bad aesthetic category. Instead, a committed feminist engagement with the sublime can help us work our way out of some of the places that feminism (which must always name both a social movement and the intellectual tradition motivated by and connected to it) has been stuck. Not only this, we can reclaim certain experiences of the sublime in the process.

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which appeared in *Recognition*, *Responsibility and Rights*, edited by Bobin Fiore and Hilde Lindemann Nelson in 2003; a revised version is included here as chapter 6. "Dependency on Place, Dependency in Place" appeared in *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*, edited by Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen Feder in 2002; a revised version is included here as chapter 7.

Abbreviations

Works by Judith Butler

ES Excitable Speech

BTM Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" PL Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence

PLP The Psychic Life of Power

All shorter works by Judith Butler and all coauthored works are cited according to the author-date system.

Works by Immanuel Kant

A Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View

CJ Critique of Judgement CPR Critique of Pure Reason

MAR "Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Rechtslehre" (the first part of

Metaphysik der Sitten)

OFBS Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime

Works by Jean-Francois Lyotard

D The Differend: Phrases in Dispute
IE "Das Interesse des Erhabene"

LAS Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgement

LR The Lyotard Reader

PC The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge

Works by Maurice Merleau-Ponty

PhP The Phenomenology of Perception V/I The Visible and the Invisible