

feminine Sentences

ESSAYS ON WOMEN & CULTURE



JANET WOLFF

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Janet Wolff

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*For Veronica and Eleanor,
my sisters*

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Some of the essays included in the present volume have been slightly edited and amended, but they are all substantially the same as in their original place of publication.

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Prospects and Problems for a Postmodern Feminism: An Introduction

Three persistent concerns structure the essays in this book. The first is the commitment to the reinstatement of women in the sociology and the literature of modernity; related to this is the project of exploring women's relationship to modern and postmodern culture. The second is the defence of feminist cultural politics, including a politics of the body. And the third is a mission to challenge the continuing separation of sociological from textual analysis in cultural (including feminist) theory and enquiry.

The essays are founded on two major assumptions, nowhere spelled out or defended, but implicit throughout. In the first place, I have taken it as given that culture is central to gender formation. Art, literature, and film do not simply represent given gender identities, or reproduce already existing ideologies of femininity. Rather they participate in the very construction of those identities. Second (and consequently), culture is a crucial arena for the contestation of the social arrangements of gender. Cultural politics, then, is not an optional extra – a respectable engagement in one of the more pleasant sectors of political action. It is a vital enterprise, located at the heart of the complex order which (re)produces sexual divisions in society.

Some of the essays in this collection originally appeared as the statutory feminist contribution to a volume of essays on another theme. (Essays 3, 6 and 7 were published in this form). An important part of the rationale of publication of these essays now alongside one another is to offer resistance to what we might call the

'women and . . .' syndrome, whereby sympathetic and dutiful editors ensure that someone is invited to address the question of gender. This is the perennial problem of feminism (and of other oppositional and critical movements), of whether to intervene with the one-off lecture, the individual chapter or essay, the optional course in a traditional degree programme, thus risking dilution, incorporation, and the too-easy appeasement of others' consciences; or whether to work, teach, and publish separately, aiming for the comprehensive feminist text or women's studies programme. Marginalization or ghettoization. I take the rather pragmatic view that both are worth doing (and that each has its problems). In the present case, I have felt that there was a good deal to be gained by extracting each piece from its original context, and facilitating a reading which follows through these issues of gender and culture without interruption. In the next section I will discuss the rationale of the book, before going on to consider some of the main themes and problems dealt with in the essays which follow.

Modernity, Modernism, Postmodernism

I do not propose to add to the voluminous and constantly expanding literature on definition, characterization and periodization which addresses the terms modernity, modernism and postmodernism. In several of the essays in this collection I discuss and analyse some of the ways in which they have been employed, and identify my own usage. (See particularly 'Feminism and Modernism' and 'Postmodern Theory and Feminist Art Practice'.) Here I want to stress the importance of considering the categories in relation to one another. My discussion of postmodernism and feminism, for example, is approached by way of consideration of the earlier promise, and apparent failure, of modernism. Moreover, I attempt in my essay on postmodernism to suggest the continuities between the best postmodern practice and the project of modernism itself. This is one reason why the essays are arranged chronologically, in order of period under discussion, rather than in order of writing or publication. Thus I begin with questions of gender and culture in the mid-nineteenth century, go on in the next essay to discuss women and modernity at the turn of the century, and then, in the following essays, consider women in relation to the history of

modernism during this century, and in relation to the postmodern world and culture of the late twentieth century.

More important, the relationship between *modernity* and *modernism* is too often ignored (or sometimes assumed). As I argue in essays 3 and 4, these are not the same thing. Nor can we take it for granted that modernism in art is the representation of modernity (that is, the experience of the modern world). Raymond Williams has provided a tentative outline for examining the possible connections between these phenomena – between a mode of expression and a social experience – and this is discussed in essay 4.¹ And as I also show in that essay, women's apparent exclusion from modernism has been related by some commentators to their social exclusion from key experiences in the modern world, which have been taken to be central to the modernist canon (city life, the First World War, and so on). Whether or not this is so (and here I have agreed with those who have rejected the narrower definition of 'modernism' which automatically excludes women's work), the point is that *what* women write or paint is clearly related to their experiences. Those experiences, in the nineteenth century, early twentieth century and now, have been very different from those of men. The work of women modernists in art and literature, which is now being rediscovered and re-evaluated, is just as much an expression of and response to the 'modern' experience as the officially acclaimed work of male modernists.

The two essays which follow this introduction are thus concerned with the situation of women in society, first in mid-nineteenth-century England during the development and consolidation of the culture and ideology of 'separate spheres' (though, as I also point out, this process was far from uniform or complete), and secondly in the modern city, from the mid-nineteenth century (when Baudelaire first addressed the question of city life) to the early twentieth century. The confinement of women to the domestic sphere, the problematic nature of their appearance in the public arena, and the consequent irrelevance of most of the literature of modernity (sociological as well as literary) to women's experience need to be spelled out before we can go on to consider contemporary forms of cultural expression and their relationship to social experience. The discussion of women's art in the following essay (essay 4) can then be better understood, in relation to a different conception of what constitutes 'the modern'. It is not, to emphasize this point again, that the art of the modern period is

necessarily modernist; this is a matter of formal innovation, as well as of content. But we can begin to see that women innovators (that is, modernists) were also producing important work, whose invisibility in the history of the arts is explained by a male-centred definition of the features of the modern.

Textual, Sexual, Social Critique

The tendency to separate questions of modernity from questions of modernism (or – another version of the same mistake – to assume their identity) is part of the more general limitation of much work in cultural analysis, including feminist analysis. This is the third of my concerns listed at the beginning of this introduction, namely the separation of sociological from textual analysis. This issue is spelled out in detail in the penultimate essay ('Texts and Institutions: Problems of Feminist Criticism'), but the inhibiting dichotomy it attacks underlies many of the obstacles confronted by feminists, which are identified in the other essays. As I have argued, the exclusion of women and their experience from accounts of life in the modern city, discussed in the essay 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity', is largely the product of an extremely partial sociology of modern life, which perceives and describes the world of men, while ignoring totally the real social and experiential situation of women at the turn of the century. But it is equally true that we cannot *resolve* questions of women's relation to modernism purely at the level of representation. In 'Feminism and Modernism' I consider the paintings of Mary Cassatt and Gwen John, for example, suggesting ways in which these might be read as expressions of women's specific experience of the modern world. An adequate exploration of this issue, however, would need to be based on a social-historical exploration of women's actual participation in the social arrangements, institutions, and processes of city life, matters which are only touched on in the context of that essay.

The fact is that a good deal of feminist cultural analysis is essentially textual analysis. Novels and other texts are reread by feminists as the complex expression of women's lives (or, if they are by men, of men's distortions of those lives). Artistic practices and cultural works by women artists and writers are assessed for their subversive, critical, or mobilizing potential, but this assessment is in

purely textual terms. The assumption appears to be that the identification of politically correct features of a work would be enough to guarantee its effectivity (whether the features proposed are celebratory, critical, or deconstructive – see essays 6 and 8 for a discussion of these alternatives). We may certainly point out the potential advantages, limitations, or dangers of such textual politics, but in the end we cannot legislate about effectivity without reference to the specific circumstances of readers and viewers.² Annette Kuhn, contrasting the strengths and weaknesses of feminist work on film melodrama and feminist analysis of television soap operas, concludes by urging the combination of the textual analysis characteristic of the former with the sociological study of viewers of the latter.³ Whatever the potential readings of a text and the implied readers or spectators detected in the work, only a sociology of audiences, readers, and viewers will tell us what a work will *actually* mean at its reception. (And only a social-historical approach to production will enable us to develop an account of the possible or probable meanings of a work in relation to its moment of origin.) Again, in those essays in which I deal with cultural politics (mainly essays 6 and 8), this dimension is so far inadequately examined. A systematic exploration of feminist art practice and of body politics would necessarily involve a serious attempt to relate textual strategies to practices of reading and viewing, and to the contexts and institutions of reception.

A similar argument about the ultimate failure of a feminist aesthetics based solely on textual analysis has been made in a recent book by Rita Felski. With regard to literature, and to feminist literary theory, she demonstrates the misguided nature of any attempts to define a feminist aesthetic or feminist cultural politics in abstract, general, or textual terms, arguing that 'the political value of literary texts from the standpoint of feminism can be determined only by an investigation of their social functions and effects in relation to the interests of women in a particular historical context'.⁴ In other words, sexual and textual politics cannot be separated from social analysis. The central topic of the later essays in this collection – cultural politics – should be addressed, just as much as the earlier concerns of women and modernity/modernism, in terms of sociological as well as textual categories.

Questions of Cultural Politics

It is with this caution in mind that we should approach the issue of feminist cultural politics. Varieties of cultural practice have been claimed as appropriate for women's voice and for a feminist intervention in culture, modernism and postmodernism amongst them. As the essays in this book attempt to show, the promise for women of new forms of expression has invariably appeared to be cancelled out by the inevitable exclusion of women from what becomes a predominantly male canon. Thus women are more or less invisible in mainstream histories of modernism. Already the prominent names in postmodern art and literature are mainly those of men. The institutions of cultural production (including the practices of criticism and of academic disciplines) continue their age-old habit of writing women out of the account. Despite this, some feminists have insisted on the availability, and potential, for women of both modernist and postmodern strategies, and I have endorsed particular versions of this claim in the essays that follow.

In essays 6 and 8, I review some of the issues involved in the confrontation between celebratory (humanist) cultural politics and postmodern (deconstructive) strategies, identifying the problems involved in the uncritical presentation of images (albeit positive ones) of women on the one hand and the limitations of an abstruse textual practice on the other. Although I have argued in favour of the destabilizing and critical methods of certain postmodern techniques, my acknowledgement there of the strategic value of celebratory art, which works to create new and positive images of women, should be seen in relation to the insistence on the link between the textual and the social. It is a matter of audience and of potential readings, and not solely a matter of aesthetic orthodoxy. In other words, although it is only those critical and deconstructive practices which can expose the logic of patriarchal systems of representation in order to clear a space for a feminist politics of culture, it may well be that the more direct approach of a celebratory aesthetic engages with particular viewers or readers in specific situations and at specific moments. Such strategies of representation leave untouched the problematic category of 'woman' and avoid the task of analysing its construction (in social relations, ideology, and in representation itself), thereby taking the risk of subscribing to the essentialism of belief in the inherently

'female' or 'feminine'. But they may have their own logic of dislocation, enabling a particular kind of alienation effect which is the result of substituting new and unfamiliar images for those available in the dominant culture. As more direct aids to the mobilization of consciousness, too, clearly this cultural politics is often most effective. Again, the sociology of reception makes absolutely clear the illegitimacy of insisting on a 'correct' textual practice for feminism.

The politics of the body, discussed in the final essay in this collection, raises very directly many of the issues at stake in the question of feminist cultural politics. In that essay I consider the dangers for feminism of engaging in a simple celebration of the female body – dangers of appropriation, misreading, and essentialism. With particular reference to transformations in dance, from the classical ballet through modern to postmodern dance, I suggest that the most effective body politics is one which incorporates its own acknowledgement of the materiality of the body, and whose project, amongst other things, is to address and deconstruct the (idea of the) body in contemporary culture. In this particular area postmodern practices manifest a greater degree of this self-reflexivity than modern dance. But, as I say in my essay on postmodernism, it often strikes me that the characteristics of modernism can sound almost identical to those of postmodernism: self-reflexivity, irony, juxtaposition, alienation effects, laying bare the device (making clear the nature of the medium and of representation itself). Inasmuch as the key difference is sometimes said to consist in postmodernism's rejection of theory, or 'grand narratives', then this raises problems, not least for feminism.

The Problem of Theory and the Problem of 'Women'

Feminism has an important investment in the critique of theory. The exposure of theory and philosophy as the limited vision of white, western, middle-class male thought (discussed in essays 5 and 6) renders it a priority for feminists, and other excluded groups, to challenge this discourse. This is why post-structuralist theory, deconstructionism, and postmodernism have been thought to be so valuable for feminist politics. They enable the destabilization of patriarchal thought, and the political critique of ideologies of science and 'objectivity'. But the total abandonment of theory poses

problems for feminism. In general, the commitment to radical relativism is necessarily disingenuous – there can be no ‘view from nowhere’.⁵ And for feminists, the refusal of a theoretical position or a fundamental model of analysis (such as the structures of gender inequality in society) would obviously undercut our project and our politics.

The desire to deconstruct is not just the product of the critique of androcentric thought. It has also emerged from the important recognition that feminism itself has been a partial, and excluding, discourse, representing the experience of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Some women have therefore argued that differences among women can only be acknowledged by a feminism which refuses to ‘totalize’, and which eschews the stable categories of theory in favour of the ceaseless play of signifiers. But here the same problems arise. Susan Bordo argues that such radical deconstructive strategies have the ironic effect of colluding with patriarchy, since a feminist politics requires the positing of, and commitment to, a unified feminist consciousness. As she shows, the search for an adequate account of the diversities among women is an impossible one (since such diversities are potentially infinite). Recognition of the limits of specific theories and analyses does not entail abandoning these, and insistence on the commonalities of women’s experience (and oppression) is both valid and crucial for feminist critique.⁶

What this means is that we have to retain a commitment to theory, while recognizing its provisional nature. Other feminists have opted for the more fragmentary methods of a postmodernism which has broken any lingering attachments to the rational project of modernism.⁷ Others attempt to find a middle way, retaining the ambivalence of developing theory while, as Sandra Harding puts it, ‘embracing the instability of the analytic categories’.⁸ While the debate about feminism and postmodernism continues in numerous journals and collections of essays, here I reiterate my own position, spelled out in relation to the visual arts in essay 6 – namely that an entirely dispersed and fragmented politics is both misconceived and impossible, and that any postmodernism of value inherits both the rational project and the critical self-reflexivity of the best of modernist thought.

The question of ‘woman’ is related to the problem of theory, for post-structuralist theories have exposed the essentialism of humanist thought. This critique applies equally to humanist