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Patriarchy and The Female Sublime

Eva K. Pankenier

The sublime, according to the definition presented by Kant, is that which is pleasing because it is ruleless and inspires fear. The element of fear is what separates it from the beautiful, which inspires calmness and serenity, but these responses are not as strong as the sublime. According to Kant, the more powerful sublime is masculine, whereas the beautiful is attributed to feminine objects. However, on closer examination of the criteria that differentiate the sublime and the beautiful, it seems that patriarchal culture has inadvertently positioned the female in the realm of the sublime.

In the first of five sections I use observations made by Lynda Nead in her book *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* to show that the role of the female within the aesthetic tradition has been dualistic—regulated and controlled, the female nude is seen as beautiful, but without this containment, the female body has connotations with the unruly in nature. In the second section I describe Kant's explication of the sublime as "raw," "formless" and "unbounded" and compare these adjectives to those used by Nead in describing the non-beautiful female body. In the third section I discuss how it is that the patriarchal image of the female fits Kant's description of the sublime in his *Critique of Judgement*, but is inconsistent with his earlier *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. In the fourth section I attempt to explain the apparent inconsistency between Kant's earlier and later works, in terms of how he defines the sublime. His attempt to reformat his definition of the sublime in *Critique of Judgement* to effectively exclude not only the female, but in fact, every object of perception seems unjustified. Lastly, I propose the idea that the female body, because it is more difficult to contain than the more muscular male body, is in fact sublime, especially if we use the Kantian/patriarchal criteria for distinguishing the sublime from the beautiful.

Nead's Female Nude: Contained and Regulated

In *The Female Nude*, Linda Nead examines the prevalence of the female nude in art through history, arguing that "one of the principal goals of the female nude has been the containment and regulation of the female sexual body" (Female, p. 6). Ever since Aristotle defined ideals of beauty to be "order and symmetry and definiteness," it seems that art has been trying to create a female image that can live up to this standard (Female, p. 7). The difficulty in this attempt, at least according to Kantian thought, is in the act of containing and defining the female

body, in order to bring form and thereby beauty to something that is otherwise excessively voluptuous (Female, p. 9). Successful art, in other words, compensates for the inadequacies of the female body—namely its natural softness and indistinct boundaries—and by controlling its formlessness, create an object of beauty.

According to Nead, in the patriarchal view of aesthetics, “‘fat’ is excess, surplus matter. It is a false boundary, something that is additional to the true frame of the body and needs to be stripped away” (Female, p. 10). The role of the artist in this case is to mold that surplus into a representation of something beautiful. Taking this point a step further, Nead describes the case of Lisa Lyon, World Woman Bodybuilding Champion in 1979, who saw her own body as malleable and strove to harden and shape it by bodybuilding (Female, p. 10). By sculpturing the “raw material” of her body into something “hardened,” it has obtained “clear boundaries and definitions” (Female, 8-9). The essence of attempts like these, Nead says, is that of “controlling the potential waywardness of the unformalized female body and defining the limits of femininity” (Female, p. 9). Bodybuilding, in other words, is really a masculinization of the feminine by regulating the excess (i.e. fat) of the female body in order to let the muscle give it definition. And while it “blur[s] the conventional definitions of gendered identity,” Nead chastises bodybuilding for it “poses no threat to patriarchal systems of order” and merely obeys them (Female, p. 8-9). Having “reduced [her body] to the bare essentials,” Lisa Lyon has merely acknowledged that what was there before—an unworked female body—was, indeed excessive and unaesthetic (Female, 9). She seems to be buying into the belief that for woman to become “culture. . .the wanton matter of the female body and female sexuality [must] be contained” in the same way that the naturally more muscular male body is (Female, p. 11).

At this point, Nead makes a distinction between the naked and the nude. The female body in its unaffected state is merely naked, but in the process of being depicted as art (assuming this attempt is successful), a “sublimation” occurs, in which the female naked becomes a socially acceptable female nude (Female, p. 14). This “transformation. . .[is] a shift from the actual to the ideal—the move from a perception of unformed, corporeal matter to the recognition of unity and constraint, the regulated economy of art” (Female, p. 14). The artistic process, then, can be seen as an attempt to conform the female body to societal (i.e. patriarchal) standards of beauty. These societal standards furthermore, have, through most of history been dictated by men—the establishment referred to as patriarchy. The inherently sexual female body must be regulated in order for the (male) experience of judging the finished art-work to be truly “disinterested” in the Kantian sense of being objective and free of sexual attraction (Female, p. 13).

Furthermore, Nead asserts that the polarity between the naked and the nude—the raw material and the finished product—is only one of several pairs of traditional gendered opposites:

This basic dualism is associated with a number of other oppositional pairings such as culture and nature, reason and passion, subject and object, with the mind related to culture, reason and the subject, and the body associated with nature, passion and objecthood (Female, p. 14).

Not surprisingly, in patriarchy, “the positive values of the mind are associated with masculine attributes, whereas the negative values of the body are related to femininity” (Female, p. 14).

The apparent differences between male and female subjects imply that the depiction of the male and female nude pose very different challenges. In fact, through an examination of several classical works of art, Nead concludes that “there are clearly two distinct sets of criteria at work, depending on whether the body represented is male or female” (Female, p. 17). The prevailing image of the male nude is of a body, “powerful and in, as well as under control” (Female, p. 17). In contrast to the hardness and muscle definition of the male ideal, the “body of woman. . . is soft, fluid and undifferentiated” (Female, p. 17). What is more, with just a hint of psychoanalysis, Nead proclaims that there is evidence of a “deep-seated fear and disgust of the female body and of femininity within patriarchal culture” (Female, p. 18). This fear, it seems fair to conclude, indicates that in the male as well as in the female nude, “the threat of flesh must be remorselessly disciplined” (Female, p. 18). Inherent in the ideal of the male nude, in other words, is “a dread that the male body might itself revert to what it is feared may secretly be its own ‘female’ formlessness” (Female, p. 18). Still, in spite of the fact that the male ideal as well as the female demands the regulation of that excess that is feminine, it is in the female nude that this challenge is supreme.

Here, finally, Nead is able to offer an explanation for why there is such a prevalence of the female nude in art and why it is represented so much more frequently than the male nude: “If art is defined as the conversion of matter into form, imagine how much greater the triumph for art if it is the female body that is thus transformed—pure nature transmuted, through the forms of art, into pure culture” (Female, p. 18). In fact, “the female body is naturally predisposed to the contours of art; it seems simply to await the act of artistic regulation” (Female, p. 20). By being so wild and unruly, the female body apparently invites attempts to tame it. It is when the “ideals of the nude—structure, geometry, harmony” are satisfied that the excess and formlessness of the female body are successfully contained, and the result is aesthetically pleasing (Female, p. 22). Nead provides as an example the “Cycladic marble doll.” She cites Kenneth Clark, in his book entitled *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art*, who writes that in the Cycladic figure, the “unruly human body has undergone a geometrical discipline” (Female, p. 19). The result is a figure that is ordered and controlled, with its arms hugged close to its body.

If the artist fails to control the female body, and it is left unregulated, as it is in

Rouault's series of prostitutes, then the effect can be something entirely different from the beautiful. Nead describes Rouault's representation of the female nude as "swollen. . .unformed. . .[having] broken out of its framing contours" (Female, p. 22). She states, "if the ideal female nude, the beautiful, is conceived of in terms of unity and harmonious completeness, then the image created by Rouault belongs to a different category altogether, a category that invokes awe and fear through the recognition of something beyond limitation and control" (Female, p. 22). Rouault's image exemplifies the unaffected female body before is transformation into the nude. As such, it cannot be considered to be beautiful according to patriarchal criteria.

Kant's Sublime: Crude and Boundless

According to Immanuel Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime," in the *Critique of Judgment*, we enjoy the beautiful and the sublime for some of the same reasons. For instance, our judgements of both depend upon a disinterestedness, without which sensual and moral attractiveness interfere with our ability to make an objective value judgement. Also, both seem to possess certain "indeterminate. . .concepts" which give the appearance of a rule-system that is just beyond our grasp, but nevertheless intrigues us (Critique, p. 97):

When we judge the beautiful, imagination and *understanding* give rise to a subjective purposiveness of the mental powers by their *accordance*, so do imagination and reason [in the case of the sublime] give rise to such a purposiveness by their *conflict* (Critique, p. 115-116).

Lastly, whereas "the beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in [the object's] being bounded,. . .the sublime can also be found in a *formless* object. . .[in] *unboundedness*" (Italics mine; Critique, p. 99). In fact, Kant goes on to say that it is "in its *chaos* that nature most arouses our ideas of the sublime, or in its *wildest* and most *ruleless disarray* and *devastation*" (Italics mine; Critique, p. 99).

Having defined the differences between the sublime and the beautiful, Kant attempts to distinguish between their effects on us as well. Specifically, "while taste for the beautiful presupposes and sustains the mind in *restful* contemplation, the feeling of the sublime carries with it, as its character, a mental *agitation* connected with our judging of the object" (Critique, p. 101). But this is not surprising: The beautiful, because it is "bounded" and "form[ed]," will, by its nature, inspire peace and tranquility. The sublime, on the other hand, by being "excessive for the imagination" will cause excitement (Critique, p. 115).

According to Kant, we find the sublime "not in products of art,. . .where both the form and the magnitude are determined by a human purpose. . .but rather in *crude nature*" (Critique, p. 109). The cruder the better, apparently, because our

judgement of something as sublime is contingent upon its capability of "arousing fear" in us (Critique, p. 119). Consequently, our sublime appreciation of, for example, "overhanging and. . .threatening rocks, thunderclouds. . .accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, [and] hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind. . ." depends on the fact that we are somewhat fearful of them even when we are in no actual danger ourselves (Critique, p. 120). About fear, Kant elaborates, "whatever we strive to resist is an evil, and it is an object of fear if we find that our ability [to resist it] is no match for it" (Critique, p. 119). Fear, therefore is a necessary component of sublime pleasure in the sense that we perceive something to be sublime if we are powerless in the face of it.

The Sublime Ought to Be Linked to the Feminine:

It would appear that Lynda Nead's analysis of the attitude of patriarchy to the female body, as evidenced in art, coincides with Kant's definition of the sublime. In fact, most of their word choices are similar in meaning if not exactly so. Where Kant uses words like "formless," "unbounded," "ruleless," and "crude" to describe the sublime, Nead uses "unformed," "uncontained," "wayward," and "raw," in reference to the female body. The female body in this case is not to be confused with the female nude, which is the body transformed by art. Interestingly, Nead's entire argument around the patriarchal culture's "fear and disgust of the female body," and "the threat of flesh" echoes Kant's definition of fear as the realization of one's inability to resist an evil. In this case, the fatty excess of the female body can be seen as an evil that poses a threat to the image of the ideal male body.

Of course, as seemingly obvious as these parallels are, patriarchy in general, and Kant in particular, can not allow the female to hold such an important role in the scheme of aesthetic theory as that of the sublime. Instead, Kant goes to great pains to define, by gender, the beautiful and the sublime. This is most evident in his earlier work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, which amounts to one long list of assumptions that define the female as beautiful and the male as sublime. The stereotypes he establishes are entirely consistent with those identified by Lynda Nead as the pattern of judgement of patriarchal culture. In Kant's summation of the criteria which define the ideal in the "fair" and "noble" sexes, he writes, "all the other merits of a woman should unite solely to enhance the character of the beautiful. . .and among the masculine qualities the sublime clearly stands out as the criterion of his kind" (Observations, p. 76-77). This declaration made, he supplies endless rationalizations to support it:

"Understanding is sublime, wit is beautiful. Courage is sublime and great, artfulness is little but beautiful. . .Veracity and honesty are simple and noble; jest and pleasant flattery are delicate and beautiful. . .Unselfish zeal to serve is noble; refinement (*politesse*) and courtesy are beautiful. Sublime

attributes stimulate esteem, but beautiful ones, love" (Observations, p. 51).

The beautiful is suited to be "ornamented" and "adorned," whereas the sublime is best represented by the "simple" and classic (Observations, p. 48).

In terms of intellect, Kant claims that females are in possession of "*a beautiful understanding*," whereas [that of males] should be a *deep understanding*, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime" (Observations, p. 78). Unlike a man, a woman will shy away from anything serious or difficult to resolve, "her philosophy is not to reason, but to sense" (Observations, p. 79). Not surprisingly, it turns out that although women may exhibit "good-heartedness and compassion," (Observations, p. 77) they are inherently amoral, leading Kant to proclaim, "Women will avoid the wicked not because it is unright, but because it is ugly; and virtuous actions mean to them such as are morally beautiful. Nothing of duty, nothing of compulsion, nothing of obligation!" (Observations, p. 81). Unlike a man, who is inherently moral and therefore sublime, any "sublimity of her soul shows itself only in that she knows how to treasure these noble qualities as far as they are found in him" (Observations, p. 94).

Kant's Anxiety About the Sublime:

What are the implications of Kant's misogyny in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*? Aside from the blatant sexism he espouses there, there is a confusing inconsistency between how well Kant's definition of the sublime fits the patriarchal attitudes toward the female body and the way *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* flat-out contradicts this assumption. Since *Critique of Judgement* is the later work, it is necessary to delve a little deeper to investigate what limits Kant places on the sublime in that work. Hopefully, it will be possible to see if that definition of the sublime really does accommodate the patriarchal view of the female body as it seemed to at first.

On closer examination of *Critique of Judgement*, the following statement takes on an added relevance: "We express ourselves entirely incorrectly when we call this or that *object of nature* sublime. . . Instead, all we are entitled to say is that the object is suitable for exhibiting a sublimity that can be found in the mind" (Critique, p. 99). In short, Kant has so narrowed the definition of what constitutes the sublime that "even the vast ocean heaved up by storms cannot be called sublime" (Critique, p. 99). How can Kant justify this break from the traditional concept of the sublime? His definition is so radical as to throw out all the usual images of the sublime, even those of his predecessor, Edmund Burke, who defined the sublime as those things which inspire "a certain tranquility mingled with terror," because objects are not sublime (Burke cited in Critique, p. 138).

Kant's explication of the new meaning of sublime rests on the premise that "that is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small" (Critique, p. 105). In apprehending something indeterminate, "the imagination fruitlessly ap-

plies its entire ability to comprehend," but reason is inadequate to fathom its "entirety" (Critique, p. 112). Still, "to be able even to think the infinite as a *whole* indicates a mental power surpassing any standard of sense" (Critique, p. 106). Hence Kant's assertion that "sublimity is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us, and thereby also to nature outside us" (Critique, p. 123).

The sublime, therefore depends on a scenario in which the mind encounters something "excessive for the imagination (and the imagination is driven to [such excess] as it apprehends [the thing] in intuition)" (Critique, p. 115). As a consequence of this much more narrow definition of the sublime, the "terrifying sublime"—which would have included the unregulated female excess—turns out not to be sublime at all. Evidently, objects are never sublime, they only act as catalysts to make us realize how sublime the human mind is.

Conveniently, Kant's reformulated idea of the sublime effectively eliminates the female's hopes of being considered sublime. On the other hand, though, Kant could be wrong in defining the sublime as the mind alone. After all, his definition is a radical change from past (and conventional) perceptions of what constitutes the sublime in aesthetics. He could very well be taking too much liberty in changing the meaning of the sublime from a word used in the context of describing objects to a word that describes the state of the mind as it apprehends those objects. The question is whether we have any reason to believe his justifications for altering the meaning of the word "sublime." Two considerations need to be addressed.

First, Kant's reasoning is evidence of a very rational personality. As such, it would be only natural that he dislike the relatively vague and inexact concept of the sublime. His conception of the sublime is, after all, what strives to explain the indeterminateness of "boundless" and "disarrayed" phenomena. Instead, Kant has tried to impose rigid criteria to aesthetic judgement in which only the human mind qualifies as sublime. Presumably, rather than confront the implication that the unruly female might be more sublime than the male, Kant reformulated his definition of the sublime as a quality of the mind—the mind being masculine of course. In this scenario, Kant himself was aware of the inconsistency in his gendering of the sublime as masculine. Instead of bringing it into the open and confronting it, however, he goes back to the beginning and reformulates his conception of the sublime to make it conform to his gendering.

A second factor to consider is the evidence from *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* of Kant's undisguised misogyny. Kant's forceful and uncompromising definition of the sublime can be seen as an attempt to deflect attention from a hypothesis about which he may actually have been quite insecure. He seems obsessed with trying to show that the mind and reason—male-gendered concepts—are superior to nature, which is female-gendered, because that is what he clearly wants to be true.

The Female Sublime

Like Kant's clear-cut gendering of the beautiful and the sublime, many of the value oppositions in patriarchal tradition, outlined by Lynda Nead in *The Female Nude*, seem forced. "For Plato and Aristotle, and throughout the Middle Ages, the natural world had been conceptualized as female, as 'mother.' With his celebration of the scientific mind, Descartes effectively recasts knowledge and reason as masculine attributes" (Female, p. 23). Since that time, patriarchal culture has established a long tradition of polarized categories:

The term 'male' is associated with the higher faculties of creativity and rational mental processes, while the 'female' is demoted to the role of passive nature and associated with the biological mechanisms of reproduction. Thus in western metaphysics, form (the male) is preferred over matter (the female); mind and spirit are privileged over body and substance (Female, p. 23).

Into this tradition, Kant's version of aesthetic theory as explicated first in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* and thirty years later in the *Critique of Judgement*, fits neatly. In addition, Kant adds to the list of gendered opposites, by contributing the gendering of the sublime versus the beautiful.

Another of Kant's important contributions to aesthetic theory is the idea of "disinterested" contemplation—which he says is necessary to making a pure aesthetic judgement (Female, p. 24). As Nead interprets Kant, "the beautiful is characterized by the finitude of formal contours, as a unity contained, limited, by its borders. The sublime, on the contrary, is presented in terms of excess, of the infinite" (Female, p. 26). Similarly, Derrida believes that the place of judgement is "not at the centre of the category where differences are most emphatic, but at the very limit, at the framing edge of the category, where the surplus or secondary term most nearly belongs to the main subject" (Cited in Female, p. 25). What Derrida is saying, is that it is at the contours of a body that we judge it to be excessive or not—where it interacts most with the surrounding environment. When the surplus or excess of the female body can be regulated, it becomes art, "and whilst the female nude can behave well, it involves a risk and threatens to destabilize the very foundations of our sense of order" (Female, 25).

It is precisely the disorder in Rouault's series of prostitutes mentioned earlier, that induces Kenneth Clark to conclude: "Rouault's female nude has broken out of its female contours; the body is swollen, it is in excess of art. But. . . it inspires us with awe and fear; it is apparently sublime" (Female, p. 22). Finally we see the goal of Nead's questioning of male- and female-gendered opposites. It seems that Kant's and patriarchal culture's worst nightmare has come true in that the role reserved only for the most moving of aesthetic experiences—the sublime—accommodates the patriarchal image of the female body so well. If the sublime is

that which titillates us with its frightening aspect, then the female body—unruly and with a contour that is difficult to control—is sublime.

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