Peg Brand. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65:2: 244-246

Book Review:

Harrison, Charles. *Painting the Difference: Sex and Spectator in Modern Art*. University of Chicago Press, 2005, xiii + 291pp., 50 color + 130 b&w illus., $65.00 cloth.

Are Degas' representations of women—for example, dancers and nude bathers—abusive and degrading to women? Or are they simply well-executed studies of human female beauty? Consider yet a third option: Are they ingeniously created ironic references to the already established genre of depicted female nudity?

One's answer naturally depends on the process of interpretation brought to bear on the marks of pastel or paint on the page or canvas before one's field of vision. But does it also depend on contextual information in which the artwork is embedded, for instance, the limited social role of women within French society in the late nineteenth century? Is it relevant that only prostitutes and paid models, and not "respectable" women, would have posed for such artistic picturing—and yet these likenesses became stereotypes for the general concept of "femininity"? What is the role of the imagined spectator—typically male and located outside the picture plane—as he participates in a sexualized relationship with the woman on display? Finally, if the artist or viewer is female, does this make a difference in the painting and its reception?

British art historian Charles Harrison poses these questions in a highly analytic and detailed way that opens the door to needed additional study. It must be noted at the outset that Harrison presumes the existence of a patriarchal world with power in the hands of men who dominate the representation of women and femininity. He applauds the ground-breaking work of feminists such as Jacqueline Rose, Linda Nochlin, Linda Mulvey, Griselda Pollock, and Carol Duncan who have questioned this imbalance of power since the 1970s. He stops short, however, of accepting their claims that *all* women have been represented by male artists as images of "utter passivity" (p. 4), routinely reduced by the male gaze to the status of exploited sexual objects, or that women's subjectivity is eroded by the visual treatment they receive at the hands of male artists such as Manet and Picasso. He wants to show that what is depicted in the picture plane by the (typically male) artist and enjoyed by the (typically male) spectator is more nuanced than just a simple privileged understanding between two men. He adds a third (and possibly fourth or more) party to the mix when he significantly redefines and expands our concept of the gaze: "A gaze may also be conceived of as a function of a painting's represented content" (p. 9). In other words, a gaze may be "addressed outward by a represented figure," and regardless of who and where, "the assumption conveyed by the term ['gaze'] is that some differential and usually asymmetrical relation will be at stake in any exchange between one who directs the gaze and another at whom it is directed. In fact, it is just this difference—in age, in sex, in class, in interest, in power—that the operation of the gaze tends to mark" (p. 9). Referring to a woman depicted within the picture plane, he asks us to consider, "What does it feel like to look like this?" (p. 21) in order to entertain our many emotional responses and interpretations. When he adds, "What does it feel like *to whom*?" the sexual difference of the spectator also clearly comes into play.

Beginning with the infamous 1863 portrait of Victorine Meurend (or Meurent) as Manet's Olympia, Harrison sketches its historical backdrop: the established tradition of the Greek goddess painted nude that was begun in the sixteenth century by Titian and Georgione. This genre, in which any ordinary woman could pose as Olympia, Diana, or Venus, grew increasingly popular as it used a classical guise as a pretext for erotica on display while simultaneously generating "a high degree of reflexive consciousness in the spectator" (p. 25). Especially when the classical pretext is shockingly dropped, as in the picnic scene of clothed men and naked women in *Le dejeuner sur l'herbe* (also 1863, Manet), a specific intentionality is attributed to Manet, as well as to later artists— Renoir, Cezanne, Degas, Picasso, Matisse, Bonnard, and, more recently, Gerhard Richter. The attribution of this complex notion of intentionality spares male artists from the charge of misogyny and positions their stylistic changes as revolutionary progress toward modernism in art.

The author suggests that these artists craft a complex interaction among (1) "that elusive construct the picture plane" that might include within it its own exchange of glances, (2) the depicted subject who now brazenly—not passively—gazes out at us, and (3) the imagined spectator complete with underlying anxieties about women's emerging autonomy within society and his resultant "self-conscious response" to the body on display before him (p. xii). This self-conscious, "self-critical exchange" (p. xii) (Are these really equivalent?) is cast as an intriguing "psycho-logical transaction between a solitary spectator and a representational image" (p.153): one in which gazes (nonliterally) go both ways.

Consider, for instance, Manet's *Olympia*: "If Victorine is *like* an 'Olympia'—a representation of a prostitute—she is also striking an attitude, the effect of which is to mock the very genre she is represented in" (p. 50). Gone is the seriousness of, say, a Cabanel depiction of a nude Venus (of the same date), portrayed in all earnestness for an eager male voyeur. Replacing the sentimentality of past classicism (where sentimentality is defined as the lack of reflexive consciousness and a failure of imagination) is a more complex relationship, one in which (1) the imagined male client gazes at the sex of the body on display, which (2) self-consciously gazes out at the potential buyer/viewer, while (3) we as viewers cannot forget that we are gazing upon a picture plane composed of marks (or brushstrokes) deliberately placed on a surface by an artist to manipulate our gaze(s). In this exchange, sexual difference is paramount; woman unabashedly challenges male buyers, mocks male artists of the past, and assumes an active role by exercising power over the gazer's anxieties. Manet's intended use of irony saves him from the charge of misogyny. His creativity functions on another level as well.

Harrison claims a causal effect between the viewer's self-conscious/self-critical examination of the woman's sex (naked body) and the actual unfolding of the development of painting as a medium. These paintings, in effect, do double duty. Because the artist deliberately imagines a male viewer (like himself) and places a high demand on the spectator to understand and ponder the relationship between the literal surface (the picture plane) and the figurative depth (the illusory image), the emergence of a specifically *modern* art develops due to shared intentions that are deliberately (1) anti-bourgeois and (2) anti-establishment (that go against the established pictorial repertoire, for example, nudes like those of Georgione). Abandoning sentimentality, these paintings aspire toward a greater role for imagination, as it eventually comes to operate in the work of Picasso and later artists. This ultimately results in the abstraction, and then the complete elimination, of the human figure. For instance, in his 1950s paintings of stacked rectangles, Mark Rothko claimed he could no longer use the mutilated human figure in seeking to create "a consummated experience between picture and onlooker," a "companionship"

between equals (p. 225). Having destabilized the traditional picture plane and its function, Rothko sought to show “that to look assiduously at a painting is to entertain emotions we have not produced, whether or not the painting contains any pictured figures to whom the relevant emotions might be attributed” (p. 229). Harrison considers this a remarkable achievement, a fulfillment of one aim of modernist painting, namely, “the task of generating critical self-consciousness in the spectator” (p. 230).

This brief overview suggests much food for thought for both philosophers and feminists. Aestheticians easily recognize standard themes of philosophical inquiry: parameters of interpretation, nature of perception, scope of aesthetic versus non- aesthetic properties, role of emotions in aesthetic experience, legitimacy of artistic intentions, force of imagination (versus its inferior counterpart, [sexual] fantasy), criteria for aesthetic merit, and challenges to the long-standing concept of the disinterested observer. At times, the author makes reference to the writings of Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Richard Wollheim, Mary Warnock (*Imagination*), Arthur C. Danto, and George Dickie. However, the brevity of these references serves to frustrate the reader who seeks deeper philosophical probing into the function of viewers’ imagination, emotions, and pleasure, particularly since aesthetic pleasure is routinely cast as distinct from carnal/sexual pleasure, and it is the latter that functions so importantly in the uniquely gendered response of a male viewer.

Feminists, too, will be left wanting additional and fuller references. Moreover, they will surely accuse Harrison of constructing a “straw feminist” to attack—one who lacks subtlety and substance. More importantly, his suggestion that Victorine’s self- consciousness and bold stare directed at her imaginary male viewer is evidence of her agency and autonomy is surely perplexing when one is reminded that this “self-critical exchange” is taking place between two *real* men and one *nonreal* woman. Victorine-as-Olympia may not be displaying “utter passivity” but she is still created by and subject to the power men have over her depiction and their opportunity to experience pleasure and gratify desires in a real world. Plus, Olympia is a fiction—both as a goddess in 1863 and as a pictured female whose real name is Victorine; the so-called relationship that provides an experience of introspection takes place only within two (or more) real men who are viewing the picture. This woman may *appear* to be in control as the initiator of an outward gaze, but is she really?

Or is she more like a slave during the Civil War, who lifts her head to stare at her oppressor while still trapped in an oppressive situation in which she lacks true agency, that is, the ability to act on her desires to escape, flee, or retaliate? (Note how this analogy also raises the problematic erasure of the black woman pictured to the right of Victorine.) Even the successful female artists cited by Harrison, such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, do not provide adequate relief from this male-dominated psychological model of exchange. (Only twenty of the total 180 representations in the text are works by women artists.) Harrison minimizes the originality, subtlety, and subversive nature of their unique domestic scenes of mothers and children—where the imagined spectator is clearly female—by citing the influence of their friends Manet, Degas, and Renoir, and by suggesting that even if their paintings are not intended for male audiences, the possibility is not precluded. But what about the special relationship and the role of irony—Does it function here or not? What about other artists, particularly contemporary women (other than the cited 1980s work of Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger), especially the numerous women who painted self-portraits? What about other writers? Complex notions of agency have been explored by philosopher Diana Tietjens Meyers (*Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women’s Agency* [Oxford University Press, 2002]), art theorist Griselda Pollock (*Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* [Rout ledge, 1999]), and, more

to the point, art historian Eunice Lipton (*Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desire* [Cornell University Press, 1992]), who is mentioned only in a footnote.

On the positive side, it can be pure joy to read an abundantly illustrated text that focuses on artists' intentions, the predominance of images of women in the history of art, and numerous art-historical and theoretical writings such as those of Clement Greenberg, T. J. Clark, and Michael Fried. Harrison is the author of *Essays on Art and Language* (MIT Press, [1991] 2001) and *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language* (MIT Press, 2001), and the co-editor of two volumes entitled *Art in Theory*, one chronicling 1815–1900, the other 1900–2000 (Blackwell, published in 1998 and 2003, respectively). He brings a wealth of art-related information to bear on his version of the history of modern painting. Sometimes, however, artists are taken out of chronological order and, surprisingly, he brings the enumeration of art examples to an abrupt halt in the year 1993 (and, oddly enough, with the artwork of a British group called Art and Language). Does it not seem odd for a book published in 2005 to ignore twelve years of contemporary art—particularly an abundance of postmodern works employing irony, many by women?

In spite of its shortcomings, I recommend this book for its exploration of art's perceptual and cognitive puzzles that undeniably raise issues of gender, class, and privilege. This is subject matter that philosophers can enjoy, engage with, and challenge, especially if they are interested in the cross-fertilization of philosophy with art criticism, theory, history, feminism, and cultural criticism. Reexamining the role of imagination, the gaze, and the canon can only enhance our discourse and facilitate dialogue. In *Painting the Difference*, Harrison hopes "to contribute something to thought about the grounds on which canonical status may have been, and perhaps ought to be, earned" (p. xii). Such grounds are the foundation of philosophical aesthetics; we are all, in effect, engaged in the same enterprise.

PEG BRAND

Department of Philosophy

Women's Studies Program, Indiana University