Mary Edwards*

Aesthetics and the Feminine Conference Report

The first Society for Women In Philosophy Ireland (SWIPI) Summer Conference was held at University College Cork, Ireland, from the 17th – 18th July 2015. The aim of this conference was to provide a supportive, engaging environment for researchers working on the topic of the feminine in aesthetics or the thought/work of female aestheticians/artists as well as for artists concerned with gender issues, to present their work. Openness and cross-disciplinarity were the major ambitions of the conference organizers, Áine Mahon and I, and this was reflected by a generalist call for papers.

The keynote presenters were Stacie Friend (Birkbeck College and Vice President of the British Society of Aesthetics), Áine Mahon (University College Dublin & Marino Institute of Education), and EL Putnam (Dublin Institute of Technology & Mobius Alternative Artists Group). Stacie Friend's paper, 'Reality In Fiction,' defended the view that readers approach texts (both fiction and non-fiction) with the assumption that they are about the real world. This fed into lively discussions about the implications of this 'reality assumption' for feminist literary theory and the potential for 'resistant reading.' Áine Mahon's paper, 'Moral Education and Literature: On Cora Diamond and Eimear McBride,' built upon the work of the American Philosopher, Cora Diamond, and argued that the rich and subtle connections between moral philosophy and literature have

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important implications for broader educational debates and, specifically, debates regarding the value of the arts and humanities in a context of global economic collapse. EL Putnam presented 'Art at the Threshold of Life and Theory' and shared many original images from her latest project on motherhood. As both an artist and a theorist, she sought to dispel received myths about the distinction between 'art' and 'theory' by illuminating areas of intersection, mutual-influence, and co-dependence in her own work.

The rest of the conference was arranged in parallel sessions, grouped together under loose themes. In the first of these, on Friday afternoon, 'Feminine Myths' ran in parallel to '(Not-)Playing the Gender-Game.' The former was opened by Claire Katz (Texas A&M University), with a paper on 'Gender, Justice, and the Limits of Forgiveness: Figuring Rizpah within the Cycle of Revenge,' which brought together Christian and Jewish readings of Rizpah as a foundation for exploring the role of gender within philosophical accounts of justice and forgiveness. The next presentation, 'The Modern Pandora: Idealism and Sexual Difference in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*,' by Daniel Conway (Texas A&M University), argued that while Scott's (2012) film takes its name from the Titan Prometheus, it is more concerned with revisiting the story of Pandora, who (according to Hesiod), was given to humankind in retaliation for the trickery of Prometheus. Then, Ruud Thomas Burke (University College Cork) spoke on 'Knowing to Maintain the Female – Locating the Feminine in the *Daodejing* and the Will to Power' and exposed important, but often overlooked, similarities between the ontologies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Daoism. Though both ontologies subordinate the feminine, Burke offered suggestions for reconceiving them in ways that do not.

Meanwhile, across the hallway, '(Not-)Playing the Gender-Game' began with Sophia Pavlos's (Michigan State University) paper on 'The *Femme Fatale* Meets Wittgenstein: Subversive Sexuality or Heteropatriarchal Ideology?,' which employed Wittgenstein's theory of language to show how multiple, contradictory conceptualizations of the *femme fatale* can co-exist and argued that women can choose to play more liberatory language games that need not be completely distinct from the sexist ones they already participate in. After this, Wendy Mariel Bustamante (Texas A&M University) presented: 'Fantastical Female Forte: Approaches to the Construction of Female Utopia in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction,' which analyzed different approaches to constructing a female utopia in young adult fiction novels and highlighted the potential for young adult fiction to be

pedagogically valuable through promoting critical awareness of gendered experience. Elspeth Mitchell (University of Leeds) closed the session with a paper on 'Video art and feminine subjectivity: reviewing critical feminist art practices through Luce Irigaray's philosophies of *touch* in the visual field,' which brought together Luce Irigaray's notion of sexual difference and the video tapes of artist Sadie Benning as resources for thinking about the (im)possibilities of representing and speaking feminine desire and subjectivity.

After a coffee break, Hollie MacKenzie (University of Kent) opened the session on 'Art, Morality, Reality', by presenting 'Labial Art-Politics: A Feminist Artistic Theory-Practice of Resistance' and defending the view that art is a potential site for experiencing the world differently and suggesting some ways in which a 'labial' art-politics might be able to both avoid and challenge traditional dogmatic ideas about 'woman.' Next, Jason Dockstader (University College Cork) presented 'Anti-realist Aesthetic Judgment of Moral Judgment' and argued that moral anti-realists are justified in committing to aesthetic anti-realism and can still make aesthetic judgments, in much the same way they can make moral judgments. However, he concluded that a moral and aesthetic anti-realist, if motivated by an aesthetic displeasure caused by uttering or observing moral/aesthetic judgments, ought to refrain from making them. This was followed by Diana Tietjens Meyers's (University of Connecticut) paper, 'Political Dissent in the 21ˢᵗ Century: Annette Messager's Installation Art,' which analyzed Annette Messager's recent shows and maintained that Amy Mullin's view – that artworks gain aesthetic value by fostering moral imagination – can account for the synthesis of aesthetic 'enchantment' and political seriousness discoverable in Messager's work.

In 'Society's Mirror: reflections of the Feminine in Social Consciousness,' Carla Milani Damião (Federal University of Goiás & University of Amsterdam) explored Benjamin's complex description of women and his idea of constellation in his early writings on eroticism and in undelivered letter to Annemarie Blaupot ten Cate, in 'Women as constellation in Walter Benjamin's Aesthetics.' This was followed with a joint presentation by Dominika Czakon and Natalia Anna Michna (Jagiellonian University, both), 'From muse to *femme fatale*: an analysis of changes in the depiction of femininity in art based on the example of the works of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz,' which built upon Carolyn Korsmeyer's analysis of the influence of the muse/object dyad within European culture upon artistic representations of femininity. Czakon and Michna argued that the Polish

artist Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy), whose heroines are usually 'demonic women,' broke from traditional ways of depicting women and questioned whether this change, observable in Witkacy's work, and that of other male artists in the early 20th century, reflected and contributed to evolving attitudes toward women. This parallel session was followed by EL Putnam's keynote presentation.

On Saturday morning, 'Girls on Film' ran in parallel with 'Feminine Possibilities'. Jyoti Atwal (Jawaharlal Nehru University) opened the former with a paper on 'Representing Motherhood in Indian Cinema', which responded to the question of how Hindi cinema sought to imagine a new independent India after 1947, by focusing on Mehboob Khan's (1957) film, *Mother India*, which, personifies the nation as a strong widow, immune to corruption. Next, John Thompson (University College Cork) asked what Debord's use of images of women in *Society of the Spectacle* (1973) tells us about the situationist understanding of gender and representation, in his talk on 'The Image of Woman in the Work of Guy Debord.' Thompson argued that the very image of the female may derail the situationist project of *détournemount* and that, perhaps, some images are better left unused. Meanwhile, in 'Feminine Possibilities', Charmaine Carvalho (Hong Kong Baptist University) questioned the 'low' status of the chick lit genre; considered the main arguments surrounding the aesthetic possibilities of the Western chick lit novel, in relation to distinctive creative expression in Indian chick lit novels; and argued that the answer to the question of chick lit's aesthetic value may be found in some of its global transformations, in 'Feminine Aesthetics in Indian chick lit: Possibilities and Challenges.'

After lunch and Áine Mahon's keynote presentation, Daisy Dixon (University of Cambridge) and James Kirkpatrick (University of Oxford), opened the first of two sessions on 'Overexposure' with their joint presentation, 'Make-Up Sex?: the Fictional character of Pornography.' Dixon and Kirkpatrick argued that the fictional character of much pornography does not insulate it from having pernicious effects on the societies that consume it. This was followed by Laura O'Connor's (Ulster University) examination of self-produced images of femininity displayed on social network sites and feminist art practices that respond to this, in 'Methods of Subverting Femininities Online through Feminist Art Practices.' O'Connor concluded by considering the implications of using the 'pornified' internet as a platform for subversion and for new 'becomings' of female subjectivity.

Running parallel to 'Overexposure I' was 'Symbolism and the Feminine', opened by Barbara Jenkins (Wilfrid Laurier University) with 'Channeling the Feminine,' a presentation that drew upon numerous references to a transpersonal, collective force consistently referred to as 'feminine' to explore the possibilities for understanding this force as a libidinal energy, layered by sexual difference. Next up was Jane Connell (University of Melbourne), who spoke on 'Representations of the Theban Sphinx: From the monstrous, *feminine* uncanny to advocate for equity, justice and the verbal resolution of conflict' and illustrated how the Theban Sphinx retains considerable influence as a representative woman in philosophical, psychoanalytical and aesthetic thought and within popular culture. Objectified, renowned as malevolently maternal, erotically dangerous, and a puzzle in herself, she is marginalised as a speaking subject and thus presents a site for investigating resistances to an open-minded and comprehensive representation of the 'feminine' subject.

Sarah Manya (Concordia University) opened the 'Overexposure II,' with: 'Owning the image: Overexposure in the Performance work of Ann Liv Young', which discussed the work of Ann Liv Young, who takes methods of performance art to a new levels of exposure and overexposure. Manya elucidated how Young's unique tactics affect her audience and might even move them towards a kind of cathartic experience. Next, Katherine Nolan (MART Visual Arts Organization) presented: 'The Camera and the Selfie: Narcissism, Self-regulation and Feminist Performance Art practice' and discussed a prevalent Western concept of femininity as narcissistic and exhibitionist and considered how this affects the perception of feminist performance art practices. Nolan proposed that, though such practices may be compromised by the preponderance of self-imaging, they might offer strategies of critique and resistance to the normalizing function of an endless stream of 'selfies.'

'Feminine Embodiment' ran in parallel to the above session. First up was Laura Jiménez Izquierdo's (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía), who questioned some normative practices in aesthetics and suggested new possibilities in relation to the non-normative and disabled body, in her paper, 'The Disabled Venus: Reinterpretations of the *Venus de Milo.*' Then Fumina Hamasaki (Lancaster University) followed with 'Milking Blood: The Feminine *Subject* in Menstrual Art / Philosophical Discourse,' which explored how the interchangeable imagery of menstrual blood and breast milk can be deployed in both philosophical texts and visual texts and how such texts can establish the feminine 'menstruating' subjectivity in opposition to 'phallogocentric' ontological being.

This final parallel session was followed by Stacie Friend's keynote presentation, after which delegates were invited to a wine reception at 20:20 Fine Art Gallery in Cork City Centre, where the main exhibition displayed art inspired by the landscape of Cork City and County and featured the work of: Nora Buttimer, Donagh Carey, Laura Cull, Sharon Dipity, Joe Healy, Eadaoin Harding Kemp, Anne Marie McInerney, Jenny Monks, Lily Reilly, and Maura Whelan. This beautiful venue, along with the high proportion of female artists on display, provided the ideal setting for drawing 'Aesthetics and the Feminine' to a close. Both speakers and audiences came from a diverse range of disciplines (including philosophy, art theory, politics, gender studies, performance art, and history). Time was assigned for questions and discussion after each presentation, which allowed audiences to provide comments, feedback, and pursue more detailed discussions with speakers. The overall atmosphere was inclusive, informal and lively, as there were good numbers in attendance, approximately between 50–60, for keynote (plenary) presentations and 10–30, for the presentations in the parallel sessions. The organizers are most grateful to SWIPI, The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, University College Cork Philosophy and Politics Departments, and 20:20 Fine Art Gallery for supporting this event.