

# Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

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Volume 2 *Volume 2 (2004)*

Article 4

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2004

## Foucault, Enlightenment and the Aesthetics of the Self

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### Recommended Citation

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## Foucault, Enlightenment and the Aesthetics of the Self

Anita Seppä

### Abstract

In his late writings, Michel Foucault submits Enlightenment rationality to critical re-appropriation. As my analysis will point out, Foucault finds support for his re-interpretation of Kant's Enlightenment thinking in the "low modernity" of Charles Baudelaire, notably in his writings on dandyism and modernity. Although it is a question of one more history, Foucault's interest is not restricted to the past. Rather, his analysis opens up the question of the limitations of personal freedom in the present, too, inviting those disadvantaged by it to develop critical aesthetic strategies to effect changes in their existential condition. This critical inquiry, as I will point out, parallels in many respects the current feminist debate on gender, sexuality, aesthetics of the self, and freedom.

### Key Words

Enlightenment, Kant, Baudelaire, modernity, aesthetics of the self, feminism

### 1. Introduction

This article discusses Michel Foucault's relation to modernity, especially his insights into Kant's notion of 'Enlightenment' and Charles Baudelaire's modern ideas of the 'aesthetics of the self' (dandyism). In my reading of Foucault's thinking, I will focus specifically on his late work on the aesthetics of the self - an issue that has received surprisingly little attention so far, even among aestheticians.<sup>[1]</sup>

The overriding emphasis of my investigation is on the question, How does Foucault's late theorizing on the aesthetics of the self interact with the focus in Kant's Enlightenment philosophy on the emancipation of the individual and with developments in modern aesthetics aimed at overcoming the isolation and alienation of the modern subject (urban, rational, productive) by turning his or her life into a work of art?

In my analysis of these issues, I attempt to identify some structural features at the core of Foucault's late aesthetic thinking. I will argue, for example, that his late writings on aesthetics do not simply reject Enlightenment values (as his early archaeological writings clearly do), but rather rework some of its central categories, such as the interrelated notions of the self, autonomy and emancipation.<sup>[2]</sup> Paying attention to the connections between Foucault's late aesthetics and Kant's thinking is also to re-assess the thesis often made of Foucault, that he is an anti-Enlightenment thinker.<sup>[3]</sup>

Moreover, I will propose that when analysed in the context of modernity, Foucault's late aesthetics offers a new version of Enlightenment rationality. This is largely so, I suggest, because Foucault's late aesthetic thinking is directed not only at Kant's "high" rational ideals but also at the "low modernity" of the French poet and aesthetician Charles Baudelaire. Like Kant, who claims that we must engage in a constant critique of the world around us and of ourselves if we are to reach a more mature stage of existence and individual autonomy, the Baudelairean modern aesthetics demands that individuals start to reflect critically on their own era and their individual selves. As I demonstrate, it is largely on the grounds of these specifically modern ideas that Foucault creates his own critical views on the aesthetic subject, the Enlightenment and the critical aesthetics of the self.

Towards the end of this article, I will also consider Foucault's late theorizing from the viewpoint of feminist inquiry. As I will show, his thought parallels contemporary feminist theory in its attempt to re-define and politicise the subject of the Enlightenment. Yet, it is also in this context that I will make some critical comments on Foucault's late work. Following the lines of contemporary feminist thought, I will focus my attention especially on the relation of gender performances and sexualising power, and try to find out its position in modern theories of the subject and aesthetics of the self, an issue that is somewhat problematic in Foucault's own account as well.

My primary aim is not to record some possible chauvinism in Foucault or in any other male thinker, however. Rather, I intend to point out where critical feminist re-visioning of the philosophical reconsideration of the notion of the aesthetics of the self is needed, and how this re-visioning is practised in the work of some contemporary feminist intellectuals.

## 2. Foucauldian enlightenment: the pluralization of reason

When Foucault's aesthetic theorizations are considered in the context of Enlightenment thought and Kant's philosophy, a set of counter-arguments immediately arises. Was it not exactly the unpleasant underside of Kantian Enlightenment that Foucault was dedicated to exposing in his early archaeological work, notably in his critique of Cartesian rationality and its exclusion of the 'other' from the history of the rational 'same'?

What about the subject who was described earlier by genealogical Foucault as primarily a product of discourse and knowledge-power relations, and who was not supposed to reach any autonomous or authentic stage, and not even to talk about the process of enlightenment? How can the same subject suddenly start to test the limits of himself, and even the world around him?

There are good reasons to pose these critical questions. For it is true that Foucault had fought with Kantian Enlightenment and humanist views on man since *The Order of Things* (1966), criticizing not only the credibility of rationality and progress but also the very idea of the autonomous and true subject who was to free her/himself from the domination of others and become mature.<sup>[5]</sup>

There was, however, at least one significant reason for him to turn towards the tradition of the Enlightenment in his late aesthetics. I suggest that this reason was linked to his attempt to construct a more developed view of the individual's possibilities to effect changes in his/her self as well as in his/her historical situation - a view for which the heritage of the Enlightenment offers many useful tools.

In a piece entitled "What is Enlightenment?," which took its cue and its title from an essay of Kant's published in November 1784 by the liberal *Berliner Monatschrift*, Foucault imagines that Kant's famous question, What is Enlightenment?, (*Was ist Aufklärung?*) is posed to him two centuries later. In his interpretation of Kant's text, Foucault gives special attention to Kant's way of defining enlightenment by the term *Ausgang*, a way out or an exit, which Foucault sees as presenting the birth of the modern subject.

Kant indicates that "the way out" characteristic of enlightenment is a process that releases us from a state of tutelage or immaturity (*Unmündigkeit*). By tutelage he means a state of mind that makes us accept someone else's authority. According to Kant, individuals usually remain in tutelage because they are idle and suffer from a lack of courage. With these critical notions in mind, Kant formulates his famous definition of Enlightenment:

"Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his reason without direction

from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* "Have courage to use your own reason!" - that is the motto of enlightenment."[\[6\]](#)

For Kant, it is only through the legitimate use of reason that the individual's autonomy can be assured. In this sense, as Foucault claims, the Enlightenment is the age of the *critique*.[\[7\]](#) With this idea in mind, in his late writings Foucault retains from Enlightenment thinking exactly the notion of the subject's rational autonomy and places it at the heart of his theory of the aesthetics of the self. Just like Kant, he considers this notion essential to the individual's ability to exercise critical judgement, free from dominant beliefs, norms and desires.

Yet, Foucault's position also differs in some important respects from that of Kant. First, he emphasizes that the criticism inherent in this critical work is no longer to be used in the search for formal (Kantian) structures with a universal value. Instead, he considered the task of Enlightenment thinking to be to make an historical investigation into those particular events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are thinking, doing and saying.

Second, unlike Kant, who sees the Enlightenment as *the* exit of man's self-imposed tutelage, Foucault stresses that we must acknowledge that the process of enlightenment is (and always was) just one more discursive paradigm, or one of those shifting orders of language or representation that make up the structural genealogy of Western reason.[\[8\]](#) Therefore, his own work does not orient the process of analysis toward "the essential kernel of rationality" that is assumed to be found during the process of enlightenment. On the contrary, critical thinking, in Foucault's view, must be directed toward the "contemporary limits of the necessary," that is, toward what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects.[\[9\]](#)

In Foucault's version of enlightenment, the individual subject's rational autonomy is not bound up with the idea of the unified rational subject. Far from it, for, as he saw it, *there exists multiple and historically specific forms of rationality*, due to which reason can never discover its essence or founding act, but only "different modifications in which rationalities engender one another, oppose and pursue one another."[\[10\]](#)

This plurality of reasons does not necessarily mean that individuals may not use their reason to criticize other rational practices in public. In other words, by pluralizing reason Foucault is not arguing that "anything goes." For him, the pluralization of reason and critique is rather a necessary moment in the formation of individual autonomy, but such critique cannot be grounded on universal common reason because this would ignore individual differences as well as the elements of rational disintegration within the subject itself and within reason. So conceived, the main problem of Enlightenment thought for Foucault is not so much in preserving the primacy of reason (as in Kant and the intellectualist communication theory of Jürgen Habermas, for example), or in the domination of nature (Schiller), but rather *in the attempt to react to one's historical situation in a critical and creative manner*.

This critical "ontology of the present," as Foucault also terms it, has two separate but related components: it demands work on oneself (ontology of ourselves), and responding critically to one's time and surroundings (ontology of the present time).[\[11\]](#) I will describe shortly the main contents of this differentiation in the following section.

### 3. Ontology of the present and ourselves

In his presentation of the idea of the ontology of the present, Foucault mentions three axes, the specificity of and interconnections among which have to be analysed if we are to grasp something of the questions "Who are we?" and "What is our own era?" These are the axis of knowledge, the axis of power, and the axis of ethics. According to Foucault, the historical ontology of ourselves has to provide answers to an open series of questions. It has to make an indefinite number of inquiries, which might be specified and multiplied, but which will all, in one way or another, address the following important issues: How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise and submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions? [\[12\]](#)

Elsewhere, Foucault describes this sort of question as a diagnosis of "what today is." This diagnosis does not consist in some simple characterization of what we are, but rather demands us to follow "the lines of fragility in the present - in managing to grasp why and how that which is might no longer be that which is."[\[13\]](#) In more concrete terms, Foucault demands that all critical thinking analyze freedom as concrete and historically limited, that is, as a site of concretely possible transformation. This work could also be described as the microphysics of power, because it represents attempts to clarify what forms of rationality are involved in the process of domination and how knowledge is used as a technique of power.

The primary site of this sort of (positive) critical analysis and transformation in Foucault's later thinking is the individual self. For him, realizing one's freedom consists, first of all, in one's willingness to face the idea that action is not grounded in universal and ahistorical theories of the individual subject, any more than it is in the conditions of community and speaking, but that it demands active agency on the part of an individual.

For Kant, the Enlightenment and autonomy consisted, at least in part, in one's mature use of reason defined as the moment when humanity will "put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority," as Foucault comments.[\[14\]](#) Similarly, for Foucault, the notion of the mature, autonomous use of reason is used as the basis of the critique that is directed towards an investigation of the self, which he nevertheless takes as a historical and practical entity rather than as ontologically and transcendently given.

Yet, the aim of Foucauldian autonomy is not to achieve a state of impersonal moral transcendence, but rather to refuse to submit to the "government of individualization" by constantly questioning what seems to be natural and inevitable in one's own identity: an interrogation of the "contemporary limits of the necessary."[\[15\]](#) For him, the subject is autonomous in the sense that it is capable of critique, but this critique has no purely transcendental or ahistorical value because it is always historically situated and contextual. Therefore, as Foucault states, "The historical ontology of ourselves must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical," for we know from experience that "the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions".[\[16\]](#) So conceived, the ethos of the Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather "the permanent reactivation of an attitude - that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era."[\[17\]](#)

Yet, the critical question soon arises that if Foucault does not even attempt to provide universally valid norms for human action and

morality, how can we avoid the situation in which the subject who commits crimes, rapes or kills, for example, is merely considered to be realizing his/her freedom and creating a unique aesthetics of the self?[18] From where, in other words, can we seek moral criteria for action if the only critical basis we have is that individual autonomy tests the limits of the self and the present? This is not an easy question, as Foucault himself acknowledges in his essay on the Enlightenment. For if we limit ourselves to exclusively partial and local inquiry (such as studying the individual practices of the self), we seem to run the risk of letting ourselves be determined by some more general structures over which we have no control, and of which we may even not be conscious.[19]

Foucault offers two solutions to this dilemma. First, he suggests that we need to give up hope of acceding to a point of view that would give us access to complete and definitive knowledge of what may constitute our historical limits. In other words, Foucault suggests that we cannot grasp the *whole* of our historical time, but we can construct a valid perspective on our era, as well as on our selves.[20] Second, he emphasizes that this does not mean that we cannot do any work except in disorder and contingency, and that the work on our limits (practices of the self) also has a certain generality, systematicity and homogeneity.[21] Despite the engaged and historicist character of his thinking, Foucault retains some notion of transcendence in the sense that he sees us as being able to go beyond the limits that have been imposed on us historically.

In the light of these notions, Foucault concludes that it is better to prefer the very specific transformations that might, for example, concern our ways of being and thinking, our relations to authority, and the ways in which we usually perceive sexuality, insanity or illness. With this in mind, he characterizes the philosophical ethos that is appropriate to his critical ontology of ourselves as "a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings." [22]

As a concrete example of this sort of critical work on subjectivity and the present, he refers to Baudelaire's consciousness of modernity as "the ephemeral, the fleeting, and the contingent." [23] In Foucault's view, Baudelaire's modernity is both a form of relationship to the present and a mode of relationship that one has to establish with oneself. To be modern in the Baudelairean sense is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of passing moments. What it demands instead is a certain asceticism and active aesthetic self-shaping. As Foucault points out, it is this taking of oneself as an object of complex and difficult elaboration that Baudelaire, in the spirit of his day, called "dandyism."

#### **4. Dandyism**

Foucault's interest in bringing together the critical aspects of the Kantian Enlightenment and Baudelaire's notion of modernity might, at first sight, seem surprising. However, it should be noted that, just as the idea of the Enlightenment is not restricted by Kant to his own time, Baudelairean modernity should not be regarded as a mere periodizing label, despite its strong historical connections to late-19th-century European reality and aesthetics. What Baudelaire means by modernity is each present in its presentness, in other words, the present in its purely instantaneous quality (doomed to become antiquity in the future), which also contains an element of the eternal (or classical). In this sense, as Foucault bears out, Baudelaire's analysis of modernity contains elements that are applicable to various other historical phases of modernity as well, including our own time.

Foucault approves of Baudelaire's analysis of modernity for two reasons. First, he is interested in Baudelaire's way of defining it in

terms of the discontinuity of time. At this level, Baudelairean modernity represents for him a certain break with tradition, a feeling of novelty or vertigo in the face of the fleeting moment. However, as Foucault points out, these ephemeral, fleeting and contingent aspects of the present are also connected to another aspect of modernity in Baudelaire's work, namely, to the attempt to recapture something eternal in this very present. This eternity is not, in Foucault's (or in Baudelaire's) view, something that goes beyond the present time, however. Rather, it is to be found *within* the present instant.[24] In other words, I understand that Foucault means by this sort of eternity something like a fallen transcendence or some sort of historicized universal (as Sartre would call it).

Second, Foucault finds in Baudelaire's writings a model of the modern art of the self, and understands this model as a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself. He also refers to "the deliberate attitude of modernity" in Baudelaire's work, which is "tied to an indispensable asceticism." [25] The famous Baudelairean spokesperson for this sort of modern attitude is the dandy, or, almost synonymously with him, the *flâneur*/modern artist. What this partly fictive, partly real Baudelairean modern man aims at - and what interests Foucault in his character - is an individual attempt to cultivate the idea of modern beauty in his personality, to satisfy his passions, to feel, and to think.[26]

On this level, modernity for Baudelaire represents a new kind of existential "cult of oneself" (*culte de soi-même*), which is based on ideas of disinterestedness (dandyism as a manifestation of social inactivity and non-utilitarian liberty), and on attempts to constantly bring forth one's originality in relation to one's own historical era.[27] For the Baudelairean *flâneur*, the city streets function as transitory stages of modern life on which those who seek modernity can find living expressions of actual beauty, be this expressed in fashion, gestures or human faces, or just simply in the heterogeneity of the crowd.[28] This modern beauty is not conventional and pretty, however, but rather discontinuous, fleeting, bizarre and strange. In this sense, it could be seen as offering space for differences and ruptures, or perhaps more appropriately, ruptures and discontinuities are to be seen as its essential traits.

As we find in the writings of Baudelaire, on the formal level, modern artistic achievements depend upon individual innovation in language and in modes of representation. Modern art, so conceived, can speak to eternity only by freezing time and all its fleeting elements.[29] For Baudelaire, however, the historical, affective and transitory ("low") dimension of modernity was even more important than the eternal and immutable (high, classical) aspect of art, given his belief that eternal beauty exists only as an abstraction, or as a "general surface of diverse beauties." He also considered the particular and fleeting element of modern beauty more challenging in that it grows from our individual passions: in Baudelaire's view, it is due to the particular nature of our passions that we have our own specific conceptions of beauty.[30]

Being part of low rather than high (Kantian, rational) modernity, dandyism was for Baudelaire an example of the specifically modern attitude of making one's body, behavior, passions, and existence a work of art. As Foucault stresses, a dandy is nevertheless not a perfect being, nor does he have any specifically modern essence. He is rather an individual who is aware of the historical limits of himself and his situation, but who *tries to invent himself as a kind of transgression of these limits*. [31] Therefore, Baudelaire's modernity does not liberate man in his own being, but rather compels him to face the task of *producing* himself.[32] In other words, modern man is not going off to discover himself, his truth, and his hidden inner secrets, but he rather tries to *invent* himself through creating his personal aesthetics of the self.

What this also means, is that to be modern in the Baudelairean sense is to *choose* to be modern. It is, first of all, a question of a new attitude or sensuousness, manifested in one's critical relation to the present era. At the same time, I suggest that for Baudelaire (as well as for Foucault), the modern attitude represented a new form of existential heroism, because the path to modernity is difficult: it is full of uncertainties and risks. This uncertainty is largely due to the imaginative and contingent nature of modern man's creation: modernity or the "present in its presentness" is not a reality to be copied by the artist, but far more a work of his or her own imaginative creation by which he or she penetrates beyond the banality of observable appearances where eternity and ephemerality are one.

Moreover, what I wish to emphasize, by taking up Foucault's connections to the low modernity of Baudelaire, is that for Baudelaire the modern cult of the self was, first of all, a manifestation of the *culture of difference*. In other words, a true dandy does not follow any given rules, laws or norms, nor does he care for official values such as money, conformism, heterosexuality and marriage.<sup>[33]</sup> Despising the limits of common sense, and the typical or normal, the dandy creates his own aesthetics of the self, which is dedicated to useless passions and extreme leisure.

On this level, the dandy is a perfect example of individual alienation from society and official culture. His enchantment also expresses a certain revolt against bourgeois and capitalist values with their rationalized and utilitarian lifestyle ideals. Moreover, the dandy's aesthetic cultivation of the self is also politically and socially transgressive: it is meant to illuminate the limits that society places on individuals, and to test these limits by doing things differently - imaginatively and often without any other useful purpose than one's personal pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction.

### **5. The body as a site of artistic creation**

One more important aspect of Baudelaire's modern aesthetics of the self for the analysis at hand - an aspect that Foucault for some reason ignores in his reading of Baudelaire's writings - is that his modern reflexivity of the self pervasively affects not only one's psychic processes or gestures but also the experience of the body. Let me illustrate briefly what I mean by this statement.

In Baudelaire's texts on dandyism, the body could not function outside of the internally referential systems of modernity.<sup>[34]</sup> As Baudelaire's writings clearly evidence, the body of the dandy is itself reflexively mobilized: he conceives of it as some sort of raw aesthetic materiality that has to be cultivated into a work of art. What this also means is that, in the aestheticist culture of dandyism, the body becomes torn apart from all images of nature. This separation is well echoed in the writings of some other analysers of dandyism as well. To cite the words of Oscar Wilde: "The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible," hence his conclusion: "One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art."<sup>[35]</sup> Or, as Baudelaire puts it, asserting that because nature does not provide us with morality, "everything that is good is always a product of art/skills (*d'art*)."<sup>[36]</sup> Therefore, in Baudelaire's view, morality, just like beauty, should be grounded on the "order of the beautiful" rather than on nature.<sup>[36]</sup>

In Baudelaire's texts, the dandy serves both as the creator and the object of his art. The aesthetic cultivation he practices on his body is meant to transform his art into an art of living, and his style into a personal style of living.<sup>[37]</sup> The primal point of interest in the dandy's search for happiness is thus his own body, understood as an artificial work of art that is to take over the naturally beautiful. Much the same as in Greco-Roman cultures, this demands some aesthetic



moderation on the individual's part. Examples of this self-control are to be found, for example, in the 19th century dandy's admiration of slenderness and in his use of corsets, which squeezed the body so tightly that the famous dandy Barbey d'Aurevilly once blurted out to Baudelaire: "If I were to partake in Holy Communion, I'd blow up" ["Si je communiais, j'éclaterais"].[\[38\]](#)

These principles of nineteenth-century aestheticism might at first sight appear as a movement towards the narcissistic cultivation of one's bodily appearance. The question is not quite that simple, however. As Anthony Giddens points out, the modern interest in the aesthetic cultivation of one's personality and body could also be seen as the expression of a much more deeply-rooted concern to actively construct and control the body.[\[39\]](#) For here we can also see an integral connection between work on the body and lifestyle - manifest, for example, in the dieting and exhibitionist dressing of dandies.

Another typically modern example is the cultivation of the sexual characteristics of the body, also frequently referred to in Baudelaire's descriptions of the androgynous gender of dandies.[\[40\]](#) By cultivating the sexual body as a site of aesthetic re-creation, a dandy represents a culture of difference and differentiation. His aesthetics of the self, in this sense, becomes the basis, or, perhaps better, the essential means of testing the limits of the present and "ourselves" and at the same time manifesting not only an individual lifestyle, but also one's philosophical, moral and political attitudes toward present society.

Despite the fact that the dandy's critical action is grounded far more on individual passions and feelings than on reason, his critical project also seems to be, in some respects, close to the Kantian subject of enlightenment. For both Kant and Baudelaire seek the autonomy of the modern subject in the context of the present, attempting to free individuals from the normative and materialist chains of society, as well as from religion, moralism and tradition. Both of them also repeat another essential characteristic of enlightenment thought, namely the idea that nature must be overcome in order to become "mature." In the process of creating a modern aesthetics of the self, nature thus becomes a sort of negative other, a dark reverse side of the enlightenment process that an autonomous individual attempts to re-shape and control through various aesthetic practices. Yet, it is also crucial to note that the critical re-shaping of one's aesthetics of existence has come to mean somewhat different things for Baudelaire and Kant. I will discuss these differences in the following section in terms of two different interpretations of the term 'modernity': high and low.

## **6. The aesthetic subject: on the edges of high and low**

As was the case with Kant, Foucault does not merely repeat the views of Baudelaire, but rather attempts to create a new version of Enlightenment rationality on the grounds of Baudelaire's thinking. Actually, for Foucault, the "enlightened" aesthetics of the self includes both the rationalist high dimension of Kant's thinking and the low affective side of Baudelaire's aesthetics.

Thus considered, Foucault's late analysis of the aesthetic subject does not ignore the importance of reason for individual aesth/ethics and political autonomy, as Baudelaire does in some respects. Yet it acknowledges the importance of the body, affectiveness and the everyday life in critical thought and action - all aspects of subjectivity that are largely lacking in Kant's more rational account. In this respect, his late theorizations of the aesthetics of the self can be said to offer a new version of enlightenment rationality.

We could express the same idea by saying that, when coming to terms with rationality and Enlightenment thought, Foucault links

together two different aspects of modernity and enlightenment. Following Scott Lash's and Jonathan Friedman's analysis, I use the expression "high modernity" or "high modernist subjectivity" to refer to a version of identity that assigns extraordinary privilege to judgement and especially to cognition, and devalues, correspondingly, the aspects of the libidinal, affective, body, touch, and the faculty of perception, so that vision itself is, so to speak, "colonized by reason."[\[41\]](#)

In the face of this, the so-called "low modernist" alternatives stress instead experimental living, change and movement, as well as the bodily level of existence, including aspects of sexuality, desire and pleasure. Like high modernity, low modernity works toward an ethics, but as Lash and Friedman remark, "an ethics without blueprints." For its universalism is "one which fosters cosmopolitanism, but cosmopolitanism *without* emancipation."[\[42\]](#)

As these terminological differentiations concerning modernity already suggest, there are some crucial differences between Kant's and Baudelaire's critical insights - differences that I am convinced must be taken up in order to fully understand Foucault's position in this specifically modern network of ideas. I will emphasize three points in my analysis of these differences.

First, the critical task in the Baudelairean (and Foucauldian) aesthetics of the self is not to construct universally valid structures of reason. What Baudelaire was aiming at, I suggest, was to recognize the modern individual as a non-determined subject who has the power to test the limits that society and others place on the self (the requirement to be rational, to marry, to produce, to rationalize relations between work and leisure, art and life, for example). What Foucault finds valuable in this account is that this critical quest leads Baudelaire to stress the importance of autonomous self-government and aesthetic self-creation rather than universal structures of reason.

Second, unlike Kant, who guides the modern subject to follow the "high" lines of reason, the Baudelairean modern subject tends to turn toward the aesthetic cultivation of the "low," that is, the body, passions and sexuality. This low interest in human life reasserts itself against the high modernist cult of reasoning and civilizing by different means. It emphasizes the importance of aestheticist perception and the aesthetic stylisation of the self against the modernist colonialization of perception by our logical faculties[\[43\]](#), it turns toward tactile and passionate alternatives to cognitivist assumptions of high modernity, and it produces a template for the modern unconscious that tends to reassert itself against the high modernist civilization process.[\[44\]](#) I suggest that, in this respect Foucault is on much the same lines as Baudelaire, notably when coming to terms with the experimental body, limit-attitudes and the aesthetics of the self.

The third difference between Baudelaire's and Kant's critical modernities is in their different viewpoints on historical progress. What connects Kant's essay on the Enlightenment with Baudelaire's dandyism is, in Foucault's view, the fact that the *promesse de bonheur* (promise of reconciliation or happiness) of both thinkers is embedded in the promise of critique. Yet, I contend that, at the same time, there are some significant differences between the two, which are worth taking up here so that we may better understand the specific character of Foucault's own interpretation of the terms 'modernity' and 'Enlightenment'. What I particularly have in mind here is that, unlike in Kant, the promise of reconciliation in Baudelaire's modern aesthetics is not rooted in the individual's public usage of reason. Instead, the possibility of redemption or reconciliation is actualised in the aesthetic constitution of what he simply calls 'modernity' or 'modern subjectivity.'

Altogether, for both Kant and Baudelaire modernity represents an individually chosen attitude and *ethos* that arises out of and is at the same time an attempt to respond critically to one's own historical situation. What has changed on the road from German idealism to Baudelaire's mid-nineteenth-century aesthetics is the spirit of rational optimism inherent in Kant's thought. Whereas Kant's essay on the Enlightenment still promotes reliance on rational reasoning and universally valid statements, Baudelaire's modern aesthetics of the self has turned passionate, tragic, historically embedded and sad. Neither do his modern heroes manifest the same belief in progress and *promesse de bonheur* as Kant's modern heroes, scholars and academically trained men of genius do. Rather, he concentrates on searching for fleeting experiences of modernity. In Baudelaire's texts, such experiences are more often found on the dirty faces of rag-and-bone men, beggar-girls and prostitutes than on the scrubbed faces of well-educated upper class scholars, the Kantian spokespersons of the Enlightenment. In this respect, I suggest that Baudelaire's position, like Foucault's, is far more low, popular and avant-garde than the high aesthetics of Kant and his followers.

The same lack of reconciliation is also to be found in Baudelaire's and Foucault's notions of modern art. While in the late 18th century writings of Kant the aesthetic subject might still experience reconciliation and wholeness by referring to the organic character of an artwork, the application of reason and the universal validity of aesthetic judgement, the low modern subjectivity of Baudelaire and Foucault remains without reconciliation despite the modern subject's constant attempts to find "a way out" of or "an exit" from the limitations imposed on one's existence.

As Baudelaire suggests, the more remote from everyday life modern art becomes, the more it withdraws into complete aesthetic autonomy and the more painfully the lack of reconciliation is brought to conscious awareness. The same pain is reflected in the endless *ennui* of the Baudelairean outsider (a dandy) who identifies himself with Parisian rag-and-bone men, beggar girls and prostitutes. Like Foucault in his analysis of madmen and homosexuals, Baudelaire sees in these figures examples of modern heroism, which nevertheless does not lead to reconciliation or happiness.[\[45\]](#)

Unlike Kant, Foucault and Baudelaire thus doubt the success of the process of enlightenment. As Foucault remarks, "I do not know whether we will ever reach mature adulthood."[\[46\]](#) This belief is also echoed in his argument that, despite the possibility to create a critical aesthetics of the self and to effect changes in social conditions, we can never become totally free because freedom is not a fixed state of being. For Foucault, freedom is far more a name that can be ascribed to our possibilities to create ourselves and transgress the limits imposed on us by society and others, not in the sense of overcoming these limits, but as illuminating and critically testing them.

Foucault is also well aware of the fact that everyone's personal aesthetics of the self necessarily includes being moulded by various outside forces and attempting to fashion others. Thus, despite one's efforts to create an individual or "free" aesthetics of the self, one remains tied to control mechanisms and outside forces. In Foucault's view, this should not make us passive, however, for to abandon self-creating is to abandon the craving for freedom, and to let go of the hold upon one's self, even if it is a self based on fiction, is to die.[\[47\]](#)

There is thus a need for techniques of aesthetic self-empowerment, because they support individual freedom and might help individuals to become freer from domination by the other.[\[48\]](#) Because of their critical function, aesthetic practices of the self are not confined to aesthetics, but are also essentially part of one's personal ethics, politics and freedom.

## 7. Contemporary politics of the self: sexuality and identity

Despite the fact that Foucault terms his inquiries "histories," his work on the aesthetic practices of the self deals with our contemporary reality in many different ways. As he demonstrates in *The Use of Pleasures* (1984), the normalizing society (in which we all undoubtedly live) is the historical outcome of technologies of power that are centred on life. Hence, we should not let the idealistic formulations of various constitutions and codes (claims on freedom, fraternity and equality, for example) deceive us, nor should we believe that the laws - which operate more and more as norms that rule our lives - simply protect us, because it is exactly these juridical forms that have made an essentially normalizing bio-power acceptable.[49] Foucault's judgment of modern bio-power is, in a sense, negative: He believes that we have entered a phase of juridical regression in comparison with some earlier European societies we know of (notably those preceding the 17th-century).

In the context of contemporary reality, Foucault's scepticism seems to be well-founded. Despite the fact that one would think that women, for example, have gained more freedom of control over their lives and bodies, modern bio-power manifests itself in many cases in which women's juridical rights over their own bodies are still a painful subject of political struggle, be this struggle linked to abortion, prostitution, sexual abuse, violence or non-heterosexual motherhood.

On another level, it seems that very many women turn their selves into what Foucault has called "docile bodies," which manifest obedience to the normalizing power, even at the cost of getting seriously ill or dying. The contemporary success of plastic surgery, personal training programs and extreme dieting could be used as concrete examples of what Foucault means. In modern Western cultures, individual docility often appears to be manifested through *aestheticized* practices of the self, in other words, through aesthetic practices of appearance that are meant to shape the individual's body to better meet stereotypical gender ideals. As Susan Bordo observes, we live in a culture in which "self-starvation, addictive bingeing and purging, exercise compulsions, and a multi-million dollar industry in corrective surgery are flourishing." Moreover, it is also a culture that "inclines us away from systemic and historical understanding of these practices and the forms of normalization they serve. Instead, exercise, diet and plastic surgery are continually mystified in commercial constructions of body alteration as self-determination and creative self-fashioning."[\[50\]](#)

In other words, there is a huge business in the contemporary West used for the process of subjection and individualism, but this process is easily commercialized and aestheticized, and it does not lead to true individuality but rather to the active *self-normalization* of the individual, which Foucault also describes as docility. New modes of female docility are apparently often linked to the illusion in the form of commodities and advertisements that provide people with aesthetic sign language through which to interpret their "unique" existence in the world. In many cases, this aspect also covers individual manifestations of sexuality: Many people make use of the possibility to express their sexual urges, advertising themselves with the help of commodity aesthetics as individual sexual beings. It is, however, highly questionable, whether this sort of aesthetic creation of one's subjectivity and body is anything other than an expression of cultural docility, or at least quite often this seems to be the case.

In my view, Foucault's late writings on the aesthetics of the self attempted to develop a critical alternative for this sort of "aestheticization" of the subject by looking more intensively at possible forms of active resistance that could strengthen individual autonomy and also effect changes in social conditions. What he offers, I suggest, is in some respects a more positive account of the

subject, who might also transgress the limits of bio-power through the search for alternatives to modern self-subjugation.[51]

Seen in this light, one of the central critical goals of the Foucauldian aesthetics of the self is to support and strengthen the existential possibilities of various excluded groups (women and sexual minorities, for example) to sound out on their own. In this respect, his aesthetic theorizations have an explicitly political character: They work to re-define identity as a site for cultural resistance and individual autonomy that might pave the way for alternative styles of living and identification.

In a late interview, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity" (1984), Foucault explicates the importance of the aesthetic practices of the self for contemporary reality by referring to the homosexual movement, which is, in his view, much more in need of the art of existence than of scientific knowledge of sexuality.

"[W]hat the gay movement needs now is much more the art of life than a science or scientific knowledge (or pseudoscientific knowledge) of what sexuality is. [. . . ] Sexuality is something that we ourselves create - it is our creation, and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire. We have to understand that with our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality: it's a possibility for creative life."[52]

By defining sexuality in terms of the possibility to live a creative life, Foucault associates one's sexual practices of the self with creating an artwork. He suggests that the creative work on one's sexual self should be part of individual basic rights. In his view, the rights everyone has in choosing her/his sexuality are not respected enough in the West, even if the situation improved after the 1960s (the changes in the medical and juridical definitions of homosexuality, for example). What still remains to be done is to *affirm* actively different sexual choices and forces through creative practices of the self, which are not created in the mere *defense* of homosexuals' right to exist.

For Foucault, practices of the self are an important part of sexual politics of the self, because they work to free sexuality and pleasure from the chains and restrictions that society and its juridical forms impose on the individual's constitution of their selves and of sex.[53] In his view, the liberation of pleasure concerns not only homosexuals, but also heterosexuals, who are not, in practice, much more free in the realization of their individual sexual desires.

According to Foucault, concentration on the creative action of each individual is even much more important than the emphasizing of one's fixed (homosexual, or any other) identity.[54] This is due to the fact that practices of the self are creative strategies that can create a new culture, but this culture cannot be based on the idea of fixed *identity* - notably if we, along with Foucault, accept the claim that there is no essential identity, but only a moving grip of power relations in and through which individuals continually constitute themselves. Seen in this way, acts of affirming alternative identities are significant because they are forms of expression of our critical work on the limits imposed on individuals/us. In other words, they enforce individual style in terms of freedom rather than fixed identities, and thus advocate also social change in the direction of freedom.

For Foucault, alternative practices of the self, such as homosexuality, thus represent one form of active resistance. In his late work, Foucault interprets this sort of resistance as even prior to cultural domination. As he notes, the moment one ceases to do what one is expected to do, or transgresses the definitions and limits addressed to one, one starts to utilize power relations. So conceived, *resistance*

comes first and superior to all other forces inherent in the struggle for power, for it is resistance that forces power relations to change. [55] Seen in this way, the aesthetic practices of the self and practical politics of the self are inseparable.

In the following, I intend to show how Foucault's ideas can be applied to feminist thinking, on the one hand, and how, on the other hand, his work requires critique and reformulation when brought together with feminist insights. Because my intention is not to be simply for or against Foucault, I have chosen a method of analysis that addresses the strengths and weaknesses of his thinking at the same time, and tries to provide some tools for moving beyond him when needed. In my view, it is only through this sort of "unorthodox" reading of Foucault, or "moving beyond Foucault," that we might discover the positive implications of his aesthetics for actual critical theorizations and practices, and maximize the benefits of his insights for contemporary critical thought.

### **8. The advantages of Foucault's late aesthetics for feminism**

There are four main points in my analysis of the advantages of Foucault's late aesthetics for feminist theorizations. First, I maintain that his idea of the subject's active self-creation, based on the problematization of straightforward causal connections between individual practices and either social or natural determinants, brings his insights closer to the non-reductive analysis of women's status and identities proposed in recent feminist theory. This emphasis is important and also practically useful for feminist ends, I suggest, because it implies that, although there are structures of domination, notably constructions of gender, that ensure the overall subordinate position of women in society, in their daily lives many women do not find themselves simply oppressed, but rather experience that they exercise an amount of power and influence over other individuals and themselves. [56] This viewpoint has an effect not only on feminist political strategies, but also on how women's possibilities for empowerment and active agency are understood. [57]

The second advantage of Foucault's late aesthetics for feminism partly overlaps the above notions. It is embedded in his vision that the individual constitution of identity might be considered as critical strategy and a way of affirming alternative lifestyles. To put it in Foucauldian terms, through the formation of a critical ontology of the self, and through the affirmation of one's personal stylistics of the self, it becomes possible to formulate an alternative political standpoint from which individuals, male and female alike, can actively resist normalizing power and its government of individualization. At the level of feminist theorization, this idea has produced new key words, such as contestation, intervention and subversion. Susan Bordo terms this shift in feminist theory the "postmodern position":

"Postmodern feminism ... criticizes the 'old' discourse ...for

over-emphasizing ... control, for failing to adequately acknowledge the creative and resistant responses that continually challenge and disrupt it. From this post-modern perspective, both the earlier emphasis on 'social conditioning' and the later move to 'normalization' underestimate the unstable nature of subjectivity and the creative agency of individuals."

[58]

As Bordo suggests, it is exactly this active "post-modern" agency of the subject that might confuse dominant discourse and ideology by creating "gaps" in that discourse. In much the same spirit, Judith Butler emphasizes in her *Gender Trouble* (1990) the discursive and performative character of gender. According to Butler, the internal core or substance of one's self- and gender is not originally given but

is produced and reproduced through a series of acts, gestures and desires that project the self on the surface of the body. However, the body, or its aesthetic sign language, cannot fully incorporate one's self. Rather, the self is aesthetically performed through the body, that is, "through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause."[\[59\]](#) Butler explains her view in the following words:

"In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; 'agency,' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation of that repetition. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible."[\[60\]](#)

A crucial notion for the analysis at hand is that if gender is seen as a cultural/aesthetic performance and not as a natural fact, it can also be criticized, transgressed and altered. In Foucault's terms, it can be re-made, given that we know how it was made.[\[61\]](#) As Butler shows, this is well evidenced in all of the parodic cases in which gender identity is turned into explicit imitation and gender performance, such as in the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing and the aesthetic stylisation of butch/femme sexual identities.

This sort of gender parody is also a common phenomenon in contemporary subversive art, which often plays with the parodic representation of gender identity, womanhood, manhood, heterosexuality, queer practices, and so forth (I'm thinking here of artists such as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Carolee Schneemann, Jenny Holzer, Hannah Wilke, Heli Rekula and Aurora Reinhard, for example). The interesting aspect of these representational gender parodies is, in my view, that they show how parodic uses of identity can function as occasions for subversive laughter, and this reveals that normality or sexual naturality are actually mere copies, ideals that no one can totally embody. What they also show, is that parodic repetitions of gender might function as active *political* practices of resistance by which aesthetic performers may try to challenge the existing norms and stereotypes addressed to women or men.



Aurora Reinhard *She's so Feminine* 1999, type c-print. Used by permission of the artist.

By showing that gender is nothing but a series of acts that demands repetition, the whole notion is opened up to self-parody, break-up, self-criticism, and "those hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural' that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status," as Butler comments.<sup>[62]</sup>

Individual style, in this context, comes to represent a name for what individuals seek to enhance, nurture or shelter even when they attack sexual regimes. To cite the words of the Foucauldian feminist Ladelle McWhorter: "The work of style is the artistry with which we live our lives. We can't just say no to sexual regimes; if we want to undermine the regimes of power and knowledge that oppress and threaten to dominate us, we have to cultivate a new way of life that stands counter to them and eventually that is just other to them. And that is a matter of the deliberate cultivation of style."<sup>[63]</sup>

The third advantage of Foucault's late aesthetics for feminism is that, by emphasizing the individual character of each aesthetics of the self, it pluralizes aesthetic resistance and individual "stylistics" of (sexual) desire, thereby offering space to consider the differences among feminisms as a resource rather than a weakness or a threat. Differently expressed, in Foucault's terms, there need not be a coherent subject of sexual politics (universal 'Woman'), nor need there be any essential connection between an individual's sexual practices and one's gender identity (or its aesthetic performing). Sexual identity and the self can rather be understood in terms of the diversity and multiplicity of sexual experiences and individual styles.

This notion fits well with Jana Sawicki's suggestion that Foucault's remarks concerning the plurality of resistances and struggles, both within and between subjects, could be used to account for the struggles over the differences that exist within feminism.<sup>[64]</sup> To cite Sawicki, "Difference can be a resource insofar as it enables us to multiply the sources of resistance to the many relations of domination that circulate through the social field." For, as she continues, if there is no single locus of power, "then neither is there a central locus of resistance. Moreover, if we redefine our differences, discover new ways of understanding ourselves and each other, then our differences are less likely to be used against us."<sup>[65]</sup>

With similar thoughts in mind, many contemporary feminist analysts have taken up not only the oppression of women as a large group of people, but also the different forms of active self-government that women might employ as individuals and as specific groups. This stressing of individuality of resistance is extremely important, I maintain, because without the concrete study of the specificity of each case, women's activities as autonomous social subjects cannot be properly understood, nor can we present (or respect) differences among feminists.

Quite naturally, this sort of pluralist standpoint has paved the way for new visions of feminist politics, too. Unlike the foundationalist theories of the subject, which assume that common identity ('woman') precedes the elaboration of political interests, many current gender theorizations view identity and the self as variable cultural constructions, which can be practised without any stable identity. What this also means is that female subjectivity and the self are understood as sites of political contestation and individual acts, which might create space for multiple transgressive practices of "womanhood" and hence support new models of living and alternative forms of subjection. In other words, female subjectivity is perceived as a complexity and a site of differences, which demand active re-creation and repetition, and therefore remain open to change.

So conceived, the female subject is allowed to have a unique relation not only to feminist politics but also to the body, pleasure and



sexuality. As a result, many feminists have ceased searching for universally valid feminine aesthetics and emphasize instead the multiple possibilities embedded in one's being a woman - or, perhaps better, in the aesthetic creating of each female self and sexuality. Instead of speaking of specific feminine sexuality and aesthetics, a discourse through which thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have tried to effect changes in power relations, many contemporary feminist intellectuals offer a plurality of pleasures that often transgress the supposition in the "heterosexual matrix" that female desire is grounded on the biological woman's desire for the opposite sex (man), and vice versa. In the words of Judith Halberstam:

"[P]leasure might be sex with a woman who looks like a boy; pleasure might be a woman going in disguise as a man to a gay bar in order to pick up a gay man. Pleasure might be two naked women; pleasure might be masturbation watched by a stranger; pleasure might be a man and a woman; but pleasure seems to be precise [. . .] Wanting a man with a vagina or wanting to be a woman transformed into a man having sex with other men are fairly precise and readable desires - precise and yet not at all represented by the categories for sexual identity we have settled for."[\[66\]](#)

Seen in this way, individual identity, or one's being male or female, or feminine or masculine, is not grounded on any innate or natural self but becomes constantly produced and re-produced in and through different strategic cultural/aesthetic models and discursive practices that vary historically. For Foucault, these aesthetic practices and strategies represent power relations, which are intimately connected to political power. At the same time, however, it is exactly these models and aesthetic practices that may be used to disturb the existing limits and norms imposed on individuals, assuming that they are used creatively and in unexpected ways.

In my view, this sort of pluralism offers an interesting basis on which to develop a feminist politics of difference, as well as a critical feminist aesthetics of the self. The active aesthetic disturbance of the stereotypical ways of representing and reproducing women is not, of course, valuable only for its own sake. In the contemporary West, it could rather be seen as one effective means of creating representational space for different kinds of women, many of whom do not fit the stereotypical picture. In other words, disturbing representations of women are part of their cultural idealization and are, in this respect, also effective political tools, because they have the power to challenge the look of the perceiver and show things otherwise. With this in mind, Kaja Silverman notes, "Visual texts are important because they have the power to re-educate the look."[\[67\]](#)

Last but not least, in the context of feminist philosophical aesthetics, I maintain that Foucault's late aesthetics strengthens those counter-tendencies in philosophical aesthetics that have sought to overcome the earlier limitations of "high" (Kantian) aesthetics by including in the notion of aesthetic subjectivity the "lower" dimensions of human existence such as sexuality, affectiveness, desire, and the body. Because of the fact that it is exactly these aspects of subjectivity that have been excluded from philosophical mainstream definitions of aesthetic subjectivity (as "feminine" or "female" characteristics, in contrast to the idealization of "disinterested" male rationality), it is, in an important sense, these very aspects that are also of great use in attempts to deconstruct the theoretical tools and methods of aesthetic research to better meet the challenges of contemporary critical thinking and art.

## **9. *Culte de moi* and the question of gender**

Despite the importance of Foucault's ideas in reconsidering notions of the self, identity and sexuality, his late writings on the aesthetics of

the self have also been the subject of heated debate, not least among feminist intellectuals. One major line of criticism that has been levelled at Foucault's work is that he ignores the gendered nature of the philosophical tradition of the aesthetics of the self, and that this has resulted in certain gender blindness in his theory. As various feminist critiques have pointed out, in his inquiries Foucault re-creates a model of self-mastery that depends on a struggle to subordinate the feminine characteristic of immoderation to the male body and self and that (unlike the female body and self) also becomes a locus of artistic creation. This seems to be true not only of his late work on the ancient Greco-Roman aesthetics of the self, presented in the two last parts of his *History of Sexuality (The Use of Pleasure)* 1985/1984 and *The Care of the Self*, 1986/1984), but also of his essay on the Enlightenment, in which he connects the ancient theme of the aesthetics of the self to Kant's and Baudelaire's notions of modernity.

As I have shown, Baudelaire came to represent for Foucault some sort of idealized aesthetic male icon - an icon representing modern attitudes and the active individual (dandy) who attempts to turn his life into a site of art. In brief, Foucault considers dandyism an example of a specifically modern attitude (*culte de moi*), which is characterized by the willingness to make one's body, behavior, passions and existence a work of art. Like his earlier interest in avant-garde literature, in which Foucault turned toward mad male thinkers and mad male artists, his late interest in arts of living was also restricted to transgressive male figures and their sexual liberation.

The lack of female examples is not the most serious problem in Foucault's interpretation of the modern aesthetics of the self, however. I contend that what is even more problematic is the fact that he misses - or actively ignores - the fact that for Baudelaire and many other "modern" male thinkers *a dandy is by definition the opposite of a woman*. In other words, just as in ancient theories of the self, in which femininity and self-government are largely taken as opposite conceptions, in Baudelaire there is a deep structural opposition between women and dandies, and the two cannot be brought together within his theoretical order.[\[68\]](#)

This is well evidenced in Baudelaire's early definition of a dandy, which places a strict opposition between the terms 'dandy' (artificial, pure beauty) and 'woman' (something natural and sexually uncontrolled). In his own words:

"A woman is the opposite of dandy. Therefore, she is horrible. A woman is hungry and she wants to eat, she's thirsty and wants to drink. She is in heat and wants to be fucked. [ . . . ] A woman is natural, that is, she is disgusting [ *abominable*]. Therefore, she is always vulgar. . ."[\[69\]](#)

For Baudelaire, women's sexuality represented something questionable and even horrifying, which he, just like the Greek male thinkers read by Foucault, rather associated with immoderation and the drive for instant pleasure than with individual self-government. Moreover, Baudelaire differentiated the aesthetic enjoyment men might feel when observing women from what they feel when the observing the aesthetic appearance of dandies. In his view, the female body is aesthetically imperfect by nature and thus it cannot, cause pure aesthetic enjoyment, as perfect male bodies do.[\[70\]](#) In short, for Baudelaire, the word 'dandy' implied beauty and high intelligence at the same time, while female beauty was fragile, decorative and part of a whole that is "stupide peut-être" (possibly stupid).[\[71\]](#)

Furthermore, what Baudelaire's texts show is that it is *his text itself* that constructs the notion of woman across the fictive map of urban

spaces, in other words, the spaces of modernity.[72] As a result of this productive imagining of the sign 'woman,' women are excluded from the category of active aesthetic subjects and are suppressed by the logic of the same (male rationality). In other words, female otherness, not to mention alternative forms of women's lives and loves, is not appreciated or even recognized as a positive value in Baudelaire's male-centred modernity. Perhaps partly due to this, Baudelaire does not appreciate at all the androgynous character of dandies as characteristic of women. Quite the contrary: he refers to the well-dressed female dandies of Parisian cafés as manifestations of "narcissism and stupidity," despising their modern aesthetic appearance.[73]

The strict structural opposition between a woman and a dandy is also manifest in his statement that female dandies do not exist because women who dress and act like dandies "do not think," nor do they contemplate the crowds and city streets in the ways in which a "true *flâneur*" does. This is, in fact, all he has to say about the transgressive aesthetics of the self of his female contemporaries!

As Griselda Pollock points out, Baudelaire's texts on dandyism are marked by an opposition between the home and the outside space of freedom in which there is liberty to look without being watched or even recognized in the act of looking. This space is the imagined freedom of the voyeur, of the *flâneur* /dandy/modern artist.[74] However, as Janet Wolff argues, it is clearly reserved for male agents. Hence, there is no female equivalent of the masculine figure of the *flâneur* /dandy - or, perhaps better, there is not and *could not* be a female *flâneuse*. [75]

Throughout his writings, Baudelaire also repeats a common presupposition of his era concerning the oppositional nature of women and intelligence. As Frédéric Monneyron comments, mid nineteenth-century aesthetic misogyny in France reflected in this respect the conceptions of women developed by eighteenth century philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke.[76]

Reduced to the roles of mothers, wives, mistresses and passive aesthetic objects, women found that their only available tasks were to please the male eye, to love men and to take care of their children. Being introduced as belonging to the uncontrolled nature that modern enlightened men are to overcome, women remain victims of the dualism of enlightenment thinking. In other words, they are not included in the program of individual liberation, but are positioned on the reverse side of the process of enlightenment.

Sigfried Weigel crystallizes this problem in her *Body- and Image-Space* in the following passage, which is worth citing in full:

"[W]hen it comes to [...] women's desire for a subject position, and to a speaking position located as it were on the reverse side of enlightenment, it soon becomes tangible how the dialectic is then set into motion in such a way that it is not easy to gain a secure foothold. For women cannot simply be turned into, or declared to be, the obverse. Any attempt to make up lost ground in terms of the self-realization hitherto denied her or to reduce the male subject's head start in the process of enlightenment would have far more serious consequences for women than the detrimental effects of progress as attested by and for man. Whereas for man the process and practices of laying claim and subjugating Nature were largely carried out on the material and the images of the other, and above all of the other sex, for women this work on the process of civilization would affect what is her own: *mater-materia*, the mastering and rationalization of which is the prime goal of the preservation of selfhood; the woman's body as the *skandalon* of a rationally oriented history. The sacrificial structure of the history of the enlightenment

not only repeats itself more corporeally and closer to the bone, as it were, in the female subject, but women at the same time also have a share in both the reverse and the observe sides."[\[77\]](#)

As a result of this repressive logic, the *female* variant of the dialectic of enlightenment (in addition to Reason and Other) introduces what might be described as a *third position*. This position is highly unstable, however, due to the fact that it must maintain relations with both sides of the dialectic, that is, with both reason and the Other (nature).

The position of the female subject is thus far more complicated than that of the male. It also introduces a *doubly-reversed* perspective in the sense that the perception and speech of the second sex wish to occupy the position of the first but cannot simply shake off its provenance from the dark reverse side. The complexity of this constellation also seems to constantly elude conceptual articulation.[\[78\]](#) In this respect, as Weigel further observes, what the tradition of enlightenment seems to be in need of is the introduction of a *polyperspectival* and *topographical* dimension to dialectical thinking.

Given the above notions, Foucault's choice of Baudelaire and, to some degree, Kant as the spokespersons of the experience of modernity is problematic in that this experience is clearly gendered. Following the traditional lines of white male aesthetics of the self, Foucault, just like most of his male predecessors, comes to ignore the question of the female other.

In my view, one of the most serious ethical and political problems in his aesthetics of the self derives from this fact. In other words, despite his stress on multiplicity, difference and discontinuity, Foucault takes it for granted that his reading of the history of the aesthetics of the self is primarily from the free-white-male perspective. Moreover, he never practices self-interrogation or offers a critique of the racial, class and gender biases in his own theorizing, and consequently various other others also remain largely invisible to his thinking. Because of these problems, it seems justifiable to say that Foucault's theorizations of the modern aesthetics of the self clearly remain in the tradition of white-male-centred thinking.

Consequently, Foucault never properly considers the question of what not-male-centred versions of aesthetics of the self might be like. Furthermore, he also ignores the fact that women's problems have been very different in questions concerning aesthetic self-creation, as well as in their experiences of individual sexual selves and pleasures. Perhaps partly as a result of this, he excludes from consideration all those alternative texts that present women's viewpoints on erotic relations and "styles of loving," such as the one presented by Sappho, the ancient Greek poet.[\[79\]](#)

In sum, the critical comments I have presented above are important because they imply that not *all* philosophically valid aesthetic practices of the self are simply exercises in freedom or critical politics, as Foucault seems to suggest. Some might also support the maintenance of gender hierarchies and even political practices of exclusion. Therefore, we should not be content with the theoretical celebration of an individual aesthetics of the self and freedom, but should give special attention to various *practical* limitations individuals might face, depending on their gender, ethnicity, class and sexual identity. In my view, it is specifically here that we must interrupt and disturb Foucault's theorizations and add to his agenda at least some traits of the historical female voices that are kept silent in his inquiries.

## 10. Conclusion

As I have suggested in this article, in the context of modernity,

Foucault's aesthetics of the self is a specific theoretical constellation. Preoccupied with the same urge for historicism and engagement as both Kant and Baudelaire, but working at the same time in the context of ancient theories of the aesthetics of the self, he repeats the same question that Kant and Baudelaire both posed in ways that were typical of their own eras: What is our own time and how are we to constitute ourselves as subjects in its conditions?

Yet, the suggestions Foucault offers do not repeat the views of Kant or Baudelaire but rather present a new version of enlightenment rationality and modernity. Moreover, with respect to Kant, I propose that, to the degree that Baudelaire and Foucault both attempt to turn the life and body of an individual into a transgressive site of a living artwork, they do not merely continue the tradition of Kant's philosophical Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), they also turn it into a program of exceeding (*Aufhebung*), that is, of exceeding the limits of the autonomous spheres of aesthetics, ethics and politics, as well as those between the high (rational, universal) and the low (passionate, bodily, historically engaged).

What remains of the project of enlightenment in Foucault's late aesthetics is a critical "ontology of ourselves," which has to be considered not as a theory, a doctrine, or a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating, but far more as an *ethos* and an attitude - a philosophical life in which "the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them," as Foucault suggests.<sup>[80]</sup> So conceived, the reconsideration of the subject in the context of Enlightenment thought also provides some interesting tools for feminist attempts to rethink the subject in terms of autonomous self-government, multiplicity and active resistance.

Yet, as I have demonstrated, when these "Foucauldian" ideas are considered in the context of feminist thought, it is crucial to pose the critical question: *Whose* body and self is it that is free to change its aesthetic appearance at will and to affect others through this self-creation? Alternatively, *whose* aesthetics of the self is taken in each theory as presenting an ideal case? Is this self gendered? Does it belong to some specific class and ethnicity? This sort of pluralizing and politicising of the theory of aesthetics of the self is crucial, I maintain, because without it we are in danger of romanticizing our ideals of the aesthetics of the self, and of ignoring its potentially oppressive aspects.

Moreover, along with Susan Bordo, I suggest that true resistance to the normalizing directives demands nothing less than personal risk-taking in terms of making one's self different in practice and not just in being radical or subversive in textual play.<sup>[81]</sup> In other words, the subversions of dominant cultural practices happen much more easily on the textual level than in the world of true everyday human interaction, in which the repression is real.<sup>[82]</sup> What this means, finally, is that subversive aesthetic practices of the self are possible, although not easy or safe.

## Endnotes

<sup>[1]</sup> There are, to be sure, some inspiring comments on Foucault's aesthetics, but none of them, as far as I know, situate his insights explicitly within the canon of philosophical aesthetics. On the existing commentaries, see Lois McNay's book *Foucault and Feminism* (Cambridge and Oxford (UK): Polity Press, 1992) and her *Foucault. A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994), which study Foucault's late aesthetics of the self from the feminist perspective; and John Rajhman's *Michel Foucault. The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), which addresses Foucault's connections with modernism. On Foucault's last

lectures on aesthetics, which have not yet been published, see Alexander Nehamas's excellent book *The Art of Living. Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (University of California Press: London, 1998) and Thomas Flynn's article "Foucault as Parrhesiast: His Last Course at the Collège de France," in *The Final Foucault*, eds. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1994).

[2] McNay 1992, p. 5.

[3] J. G. Merquior, *Foucault* (London: Fontana Press/ Collins, 1985), p. 159; I. Wright, "The Suicide of the Intellectuals," *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 24 October, (1986), p. 16.

[4] Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 11.

[5] Christopher Norris, "What is Enlightenment?": Kant and Foucault," in *Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995/1994), p. 166; Nehamas 1998, 174.

[6] Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and translated by Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 7. Translation has been altered.

[7] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" (1984), translated by Catherine Porter from an unpublished French original, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 38.

[8] Norris 1995, p. 168.

[9] *Ibid.*, 43.

[10] Michel Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-structuralism" (1983), in *Michel Foucault. Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, vol. 2, ed. James Faubion, translated by R. Hurley and others (UK: The Penguin Press. 1998/1994), p. 443.

[11] Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, "What is Maturity? Habermas and Foucault on 'What is Enlightenment?'" in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. D. C. Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell 1999/1986), p.112.

[12] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," pp. 48-49.

[13] Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-structuralism," pp. 449-450.

[14] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," p. 38.

[15] *Ibid.*, 43.

[16] *Ibid.*, 46.

[17] *Ibid.*, 42.

[18] McNay 1992, p. 45; and Monique Plaza, "Our Costs and Their Benefits," *m/f*, 4 (1980), p. 31.

[19] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" p. 47.

[20] With this in mind, I maintain that Foucault's position is, primarily, perspectivist (in the Nietzschean sense of the term) and not relativistic.

[21] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" p. 47.

[22] *Ibid.*, 46-47.

[23] *Ibid.*, 39.

[24] *Loc. cit.*

[25] *Ibid.*, 41.

[26] Charles Baudelaire, *écrits sur l'art*, ed. by Francis Moulinat (Le Livre de Poche, 1999), p. 535.

[27] *Ibid.* 536-537.

[28] *Ibid.*, 517.

[29] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 21.

[30] Baudelaire 1999, 237. In Baudelaire's view, on the other hand, the experience of the present demands both the archive that the past offers to us, and the actual experience of the present, for without this dialectic there is no such thing as an experience of the *living* present or, alternatively, of modernity.

[31] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment," pp. 40-42.

[32] *Ibid.*, 42.

[33] Jean-Pierre Sidaïah, "Le dandysme: Continuité et rupture," in Alain Montandon (ed.) *L'Honnête homme et le dandy* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1993), p. 141.

[34] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 7.

[35] Oscar Wilde, "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," in *Strangeness and Beauty: An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism 1840-1910. Vol 2*, eds. Eric Warner and Graham Hough (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983/1894), pp. 156-157.

[36] Baudelaire 1999, p. 542.

[37] Sidaïah 1993, p. 145.

[38] Marie-Christine Natta (ed.), *Du Dandysme & de George Brummel, par Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Éditions Plein Chant, 1989), p. 12, translation mine.

[39] Giddens 1991, p. 7.

[40] Frédéric Monneyron, "Le Dandy fin de siècle: Entre l'androgynisme et le misogynisme," in *L'Honnête homme et le dandy*, ed. Alain Montandon (Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1993), pp. 199-200. See also Emilien Carassus, *Le Mythe du Dandy* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1971).

[41] Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (eds.), *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992/1987), p. 5.

[42] *Ibid.*, 3.

[43] Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, "Identity and Reality: The End of the Philosophical Immigration Officer," in *Modernity and Identity*.

[44] Lash and Friedman 1992, pp. 5-6.

[45] Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus*, Hrsg. von Rolf Tiedeman, 6. Aufl. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), p. 96. See also Harvey 1989, p. 26.

[46] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment," p. 49.

[47] Jon Simons, *Foucault and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 76; Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 257.

[48] Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom" (1984), in *The Final Foucault*, eds. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1988), pp. 2-3; Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure, The History of Sexuality, Vol 2*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985/1984), pp. 72-7.

[49] Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 144.

[50] Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body," in *Reconstructing Foucault. Essays in the Wake of the 80s*, eds. Richardo Miguel-Alfonso and Silvia Caporale-Bizzini, *Postmodern Studies* 10, (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1994), p. 239.

[51] See also James Bernauer, *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Toward an Ethic for Thought* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1990), p. 9.

[52] Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity" (1982), in *Michel Foucault. Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press 1997/1984), p. 163.

[53] Foucault, "The Ethics of Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," p. 3.

[54] "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," pp. 164-165.

[55] "Une esthétique de l'existence" (1984), in *Dits et écrits 1954-1988, IV 1980-1988*, eds. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1984/1994), pp. 740-741.

[56] McNay 1992, pp. 66-67; Bordo 1994, p. 233.

[57] Caroline Ramazanoglu (ed.), *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.17.

[58] Bordo 1994, p. 235.

[59] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, London: Routledge, 1990), p. 136.

[60] *Ibid.*, 145.

[61] Michel Foucault, "How Much Does It Cost for Reason to Tell the Truth?" (1983), in *Foucault Live*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer, translated by John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), p. 252.

[62] Butler 1990, 146-147.

[63] Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, USA, 1999), p. 190.

[64] Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p.10.

[65] *Ibid.*, 45.

[66] Judith Halberstam, "F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity," in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 127.

[67] Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 5.

[68] See also Janet Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneuse; Women and the Literature of Modernity," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2 (3), 1985; and Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism and*



*Histories of Art* (Routledge: London and New York, 1990/1988), pp. 70-71.

[69] Baudelaire, cit. in Roger Kempf, *Dandies. Baudelaire et Cie* (Éditions du Seuil, 1977), p. 69, translation mine.

[70] Baudelaire 1999, p. 540.

[71] *Ibid.*, 513, 539.

[72] Pollock 1990, p. 72.

[73] See Baudelaire's famous essay "Le Peintre de la vie moderne" ("The Painter of Modern Life,") Baudelaire 1999, 546.

[74] Pollock 1990, pp. 70-71.

[75] Wolff, 1985.

[76] Frédéric Monneyron, "Le Dandy fin de siècle: Entre l'androgynisme et le misogynisme," in *L'Honnête homme et le dandy*, ed. Alain Montandon (Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1993), p. 200.

[77] Sigfried Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin*. Warwick Studies in European Philosophy (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 67-68.

[78] *Ibid.*, 68.

[79] Given the fact that Sappho's poetry has been preserved and appreciated within the Western literary tradition up to our present era, it is indeed curious that Foucault omits any mention of her in his discussion of ancient Greek erotic and homosexual aesthetic practices of the self. As a result, women's perspectives on the aesthetic subjectivity are excluded from Foucault's discussion of limit-attitudes and aesthetics of the self, and the female voices are kept strictly a little beneath his histories. On this issue, see Ellen Greene, "Sappho, Foucault, and Women's Erotics," in *Arethusa* 29 (John Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Amy Richlin, "Zeus and Metis: Foucault, Feminism, Classics," *Helios* 18, 1991.

[80] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment," p. 50.

[81] Bordo 1994, p. 243.

[82] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston Mass.: South End Press, 1990), p. 22.

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