

Albert von Keller, *Martyr*, 1894.

From *Idols of Perversity*, Bram Dijkstra, Oxford University Press, 1986.

MISOGYNIST MASQUERADE

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Over the past fifteen to twenty years, the complex and often contradictory status of subject matter within the discipline of art history has been further complicated by the assimilation – even if contested and deplored – of feminist perspectives or methodologies. Beginning with such ground-breaking texts as Thomas B. Hess's and Linda Nochlin's *Woman as Sex Object* (1972), the figurative tradition of western painting and sculpture has been subjected to an interrogation that departs in important ways from the methods, assumptions, and goals of iconographic analysis, formerly the primary recognized (and respectable) form of analyzing subject matter *as such*. Whereas iconography presents itself as a form of hermeneutics – a science of interpretation that seeks to disinter disguised or allegorical meanings embodied within the visible form of the painted or sculpted signifier – the meanings that feminism addresses need not be hidden at all. On the other hand, the secondary meanings revealed by the iconographer are, by definition, public and cultural ones; available to, and presumably apprehended by, what Stanley Fish has usefully designated “interpretive communities”. Feminist inquiry, however, must reckon as well with those levels of significations that are subsumed within the concept of ideology; meanings, therefore, which are not necessarily intentional, which may be subliminal, and are as fluid, contradictory, and dispersed as ideology itself. Herein lies a crucial distinction. As a positivist enterprise, iconography inevitably privileges meaning and significance over ideology, their structural inseparability rarely specified, much less elaborated. Not surprisingly, the failure of most art historians to acknowledge or attend to the working of ideology as it operates either in their own practices or within their disciplinary object frequently ensures that even the most brilliant of iconographic studies will repeat, or re-enact, the phallocentrism operating in both sites. Thus, for example, in Leo Steinburg's remarkable book *The Sexuality of Christ*, one repeatedly comes upon the equation of Christ's *humanity* – not manhood – with his genitals; an equivalence

insisted upon not simply in the textual sources Steinburg employs, but in Steinburg's own arguments.

What iconography occludes or elides, feminist art history therefore takes as its central concerns, even its *raison d'être*. Furthermore, where an iconographic analysis can be said in a certain sense to leave a culturally privileged object intact (mainstream art history is most often an implicitly celebratory discourse) feminist art history, as a critical and oppositional approach, is frequently concerned to demonstrate how and why (to paraphrase Walter Benjamin's famous formulation) every monument of civilization is also a token of barbarism. As a political project, feminist art history must perforce dispense with any claims to detachment, neutrality, or – philosopher's stone of academic discourse – objectivity. If feminist scholarship thereby cedes the high ground of an imaginary objectivity, it simultaneously profits from the theoretical sophistication that follows from its acknowledgment of the implication (from the Latin *implicare*, to be enfolded within) of both interlocutor and object. In so doing, it necessarily foregrounds issues of subjectivity and enunciation (including its own), addresses issues of reception, and additionally fosters the liberation of art history from the confines of connoisseurship, aestheticism, and auteurism.

In this global, but somewhat schematic sense, the methods and purposes of feminist art history may also be decisively distinguished from those of art historical revisionism. Nonetheless, there are parallel problems endemic to both enterprises which ultimately devolve on questions of how art history is to be defined, including such knotty issues as the place of aesthetic value and judgment within it. These problems become increasingly apparent with respect to the treatment of subject matter in figurative art, a central concern of feminist art history insofar as representations of the feminine have long been a privileged locus of feminist scholarship and critique. For in focusing on the subject matter of representational art, whether as denotation or connotation, there lies the risk of obscuring the important difference between reference and signification. Which is but another way of saying that meaning can never be located as a univocal attribute of the object (e.g. the subject of painting, the narrative of a film) but must instead be understood as a concatenation of various meaning effects. "Meaning," as Roland Barthes pointed out in a somewhat different context, "is not 'at the end' of the narrative, it runs across it; just as conspicuous as the purloined letter, meaning eludes all unilateral investigation." Such a recognition suggests that a theoretically rigorous investigation of representational forms of art must reckon equally with all its mechanisms of signification, including those of an object's formal vocabulary, its context, reception, and historical specificity.

These general observations are of course far easier to formulate than to implement. They are put forth here, however, as a way of both framing and enlarging the problems raised by art historical studies which pivot on content analysis at the expense of all other mechanisms of signification in visual art. In this regard, I want to examine closely a fairly recent offering of the images-of-woman school of investigation as a way of demonstrating the inadequacy of this approach. In so doing, however, I want to also raise questions about what happens when feminist critiques of subject matter are attempted by academics who may or may not consider themselves feminists, but who are in any case wholly ignorant of feminist theory and scholarship. Lastly, even the most dissatisfying and deficient texts may help to elucidate, or in this instance, symptomatically express, newly perceived problems that run through an entire field. At issue here is the need to consider the theoretical and epistemological implications of the recognition that with respect to the imaging of the female body, both canonical *and* devalued cultural products may participate equally in operations of fetishism, voyeurism, sadism, objectification.

I must say at the outset that I feel a certain discomfort in orienting this discussion around Bram Dijkstra's extremely problematic *Idols of Perversity*. Academic protocols are such that normally if one has nothing good to say about a book, it is generally thought best to say nothing at all. However, there are compelling reasons to justify subjecting *Idols of Perversity* to a fairly detailed and severe critique. There is, for example, the question as to why a scholarly press as prestigious as the Oxford University Press saw fit to publish a book which, as I will attempt to demonstrate, conforms to no standard of scholarship, however loosely defined. This, as we shall see, is only one of *Idols'* shortcomings, but without anticipating my own arguments, I want to suggest here that the book be considered contextually; that is to say, as a specific cultural product brought into the world not merely by its author, but by the publisher (who gives it the *imprimatur* of "scholarship"), by the circulation of certain discourses (feminism, revisionism) which are given certain meanings (or deprived of them) in academia and academic publishing, and by the mechanisms of validation (e.g. the jacket plug supplied by Catherine Simpson: "A wonderfully compelling and lucid revelation of the labyrinth of modern sexuality and culture"). In other words, and like the book itself, the publication, marketing, and reception of the book demands a symptomatic reading. Thus, while my discussion necessarily concentrates on an individual text, it is equally important to reflect upon the institutional and discursive background which underwrites such a book's appearance in the first place.

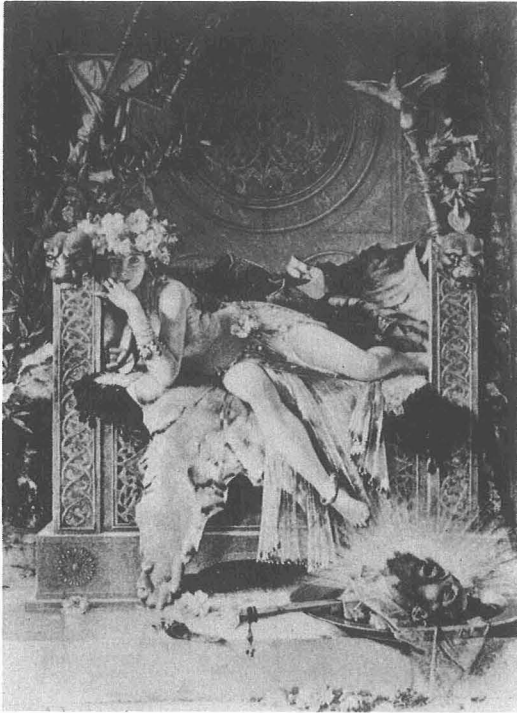
In terms of self-definition, *Idols of Perversity* proclaims itself to be animated by a critical, multi-disciplinary and feminist influenced revisionism. As it happens, *Idols* is not only

deficient in criticism (of any stripe), devoid of any conceptual or methodological apparatus whatsoever, it is also covertly and perniciously misogynous itself. In this respect, an attentiveness to Dijkstra's textual and discursive strategies illuminates exactly what is meant by the feminist (and Derridean) insistence on the implication of reader/writer/viewer and his or her object. Thus, whatever moral indignation Dijkstra professes about his objects of scholarly investigation ("bad" images of women) is belied by the very language he employs.

Furthermore, insofar as the book must also be understood as a revisionist bid for the re-evaluation of fin-de-siecle academic and salon painting, it reveals the philistinism and intellectual crudity that underwrites all reactionary forms of revisionism, while usefully illustrating the shortcomings of a simplistic content analysis. For all of these reasons, (and there are more) *Idols of Perversity* can best and most productively be approached as a kind of negative exemplary; a cautionary lesson in how not to write art history, revisionist art history, cultural history, or – heaven help us – feminist criticism. But insofar as it raises the problems of methodology, revisionism, and aesthetic value, a detailed analysis of its shortcomings may help to develop other more fruitful modes of investigation.

Briefly stated, Dijkstra's thesis goes like something like this. Once upon a time, say, the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, men and women – husbands and wives – had good, egalitarian relationships. (This claim is predicated on cursory and anecdotal description of two paintings; Fran Hals' *The Painter and his Wife* and William Hogarth's *Garrick and his Wife*, and the evidence of Daniel Defoe's *Roxanna* and *Moll Flanders*). Then came capitalism, industrialism, the rise of the middle class, market society. (It doesn't matter which, or when, or where or even what these things are, because they are used interchangeably in the book). These in turn create new social relationships (never specified), which "led to the establishment of a fundamentally new, massively institutionalized, ritual-symbolic perception of the role of women in society which was . . . a principal source of the pervasive antifeminist mood of the late nineteenth century" (5-6). Having thus established his historical *schema* in two or three pages, Dijkstra then dilates *for nearly four hundred pages* on the various modalities of iconic and textual misogyny, as though, moreover, its virulent manifestations were limited to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In order to prove, so to speak, that the pope is catholic, Dijkstra's text quotes copiously (and entirely randomly) from a miscellany of literary sources such as Michelet and Zola (principally one short story, *The Sin of Father Mouret*, which like Michelet's *La Femme*, surfaces like the Loch Ness monster from one chapter to the next), turn-of-the-century reformers, romantic poets, symbolist writers, sexologists, crackpots, criminologists, *belles-lettriste* scribblers, art



Edouard Toudouze, *Salome Triumphant*, 1886.
From *Idols of Perversity*,
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critics, scientists, and journalists. No discursive specificity is acknowledged, any more than Yeats' great *Leda and the Swan* is distinguished from a prurient excerpt from Theodore Sylvestre's *Le Nu au Salon*; as far as Dijkstra is concerned, both citations are "about" women having sex with animals. No contemporary theorists, historians, sociologists, or art historians are cited in the text. Despite the fact that *Idols* is purportedly concerned with "an intense forty-year pogrom against women" (118), no sociological, feminist, or psychoanalytic theory is drawn upon. Despite the book's preoccupation with ideologies of sexuality, Michel Foucault does not even appear in the bibliography. Important recent work on the social construction of sexuality – Stephen Heath, Jeffrey Weeks – is nowhere acknowledged; work on sexuality and culture in Dijkstra's period – Peter Gay, Stephen Marcus, Sandor Gilman – is also conspicuously absent.

Neither contextualized nor analyzed (merely feverishly paraphrased or described), Dijkstra's textual citations are extracted willy-nilly not only from different discourses, but from different historical periods, different continents and countries, different milieux. In the

absence of any specificity, the reader would never know that Edward Carpenter was a progressive socialist reformer who fought for the rights of homosexuals and female suffrage. Nor would he or she imagine that the Freud here caricatured put in question the absolutism of psychological difference between the sexes. In the absence of any context whatsoever – temporal, national, political, or stylistic, there seems little perceptible difference between Freud and Lombroso, Havelock Ellis and Bernard S. Talmey, Carpenter and Otto Weininger, and – particularly significant – there is little attention given to the contestation (by men and women) of misogynist attitudes, laws, and practices. To demonstrate the ubiquity of misogyny, whether for the *fin-de-siecle* or any other period, is hardly a demanding task; moreover, such a demonstration functions to effectively substitute the question for the answer.

A sample of Dijkstra's chapter titles provides the gist of what, like the book itself, is essentially a descriptive and rhetorically lurid list: "The Collapsing Woman; Solitary Vice and Restful Tumescence", "Poison Flowers; Maenads of the Decadence and the Torrid Wail of Sirens", "Gyanders and Genetics: Connoisseurs of Bestiality; Leda, Circe, and the Cold Caresses of the Sphinx", and so forth and so on. Nowhere does Dijkstra address the issue of what the prevalence of mythological and religious figuration in academic or salon art might mean within the framework of fully urbanized, industrialized and secular cultures, or class determinations of salon and academic painting which provides the bulk of his visual documentation. Nowhere does he examine the specificity of a particular audience or social formation ("intellectuals" and "middle class" are as specific as he gets; needless to say, a male spectator/reader is always presumed).

But what is Dijkstra's book a listing of? Dijkstra's exhaustive typologies of images of feminine victimization or evil are variations of a few basic types. A category such as "the Nymph with the Broken Back" – which elicits great clots of feverish narrative exegesis, including a chapter of its own – is essentially a supine nude whose arched spine throws hip and pelvis into relief. Dijkstra credits Alexandre Cabanel with its invention ("Cabanel had broken stylistic ground – as well as his model's back, to be sure" 106). The sadistic fantasy of a broken and mutilated body projected onto a conventional type of pin-up lubricity is possibly Dijkstra's own. And although it is true that all interpretations of images and texts are to a greater or lesser extent subjective constructions, Dijkstra's readings are frequently quite as delirious and hysterical as the artifacts that provoke them. In fact, the very first lines of the first chapter, a gloss on of Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* augurs ill for what is to come:

Her eyes are glazed with the terror of understanding. The pallor of sudden knowledge has settled on her face. A paralyzing consciousness of her entrapment has turned her body into a wedge of fear. Wracked

by dark foreboding, she pits the force of newborn moral responsibility against the soul-destructive lure of the senses. The eternal battle between God and the devil finds agonized expression in the struggle of her tensing limbs against the importunate arms of her illicit lover, arms which form a playful chain around her trembling loins. (3)

Now as I read this picture – and every other commentator, for that matter – the woman’s expression, far from suggesting terror, fear, and dark foreboding, seems intended to convey the salutary effects of the subject’s awakening conscience. Surely, in his prosy and tendentious way, Hunt was attempting an expression of beatitude, the light of grace suffusing the soul of the sinner? And from whence comes this reference to tensing limbs and trembling loins? One of the man’s arms is on the piano keys, the other closer to the woman’s knees than her loins. But never mind these quibbles. Let us instead, and with dark foreboding, look at Dijkstra’s rhetorical tropes and strategies and ask the question: “Who is speaking here?”

In this respect, a close reading of the text reveals a constant and symptomatic slippage between the objects it addresses and its own utterance, a slippage, moreover, in which the boundaries between the representations which are its subject and Dijkstra’s commentaries on them, are alarmingly permeable. This is manifest, for example, in Dijkstra’s stylistic tics, excruciating locutions, and presiding tone of jocular sneering and witless sarcasm. To adopt a position of superiority to one’s chosen material is especially risky if all the evidence suggests that one is profoundly invested in it. Thus, the women who figure in the images under discussion are routinely described as “young ladies”, “ubiquitously unclad lasses”, “delectable ladies”, “luscious lady”, “a very modern young lady”, “three lusty ladies of the woods”, “prostrate lovelies”, “some very ordinary young ladies”, “an enticingly uncovered young woman in tip-top physical shape”, and so on. Like the viewer’s experience of a pornographic photograph, Dijkstra’s very language implies that it is an actual woman, not the image itself and its maker, that provokes the gaze, be it a gaze of pleasure or self-righteous condemnation. And because Dijkstra’s language consistently bespeaks its own obsessions, there is a way in which the fascination and fear of the feminine, to which these images and texts attest, are doubled in Dijkstra’s own enunciation. Certain key words – for example, “tumescence” (as in “desperate tumescence” or “tumescent masterpiece”) or even better, “viraginous” (an adjective that does not trip lightly off most people’s tongues), reappear with hypnotic frequency: “viraginous women”, “their viraginity”, “infamously viraginous”, “viraginous sensuality”, “viraginous tendencies”, “viraginous hunger”, a “viraginous mother” *ad infinitum*). Although it is often unclear what Dijkstra means the word to convey, especially since his use of the word is frequently sexualized, its root – *virago* – refers in its primary meaning to women’s speech (“A loud,

overbearing woman" – Webster's) and its secondary meaning is positive ("A woman of great stature, strength and courage").

The issue of authorial subjectivity has, of course, much broader ramifications within *Idols of Perversity*. It includes not only the form of Dijkstra's language but his equally disturbing acceptance *as empirical fact* of those very ideologies he professes to disdain. For example, early in the book, Dijkstra introduces that aspect of bourgeois Victorian ideology exemplified by Coventry Patmore's *Angel of the House*. In anchoring this wish-fulfilling fantasy to a larger constellation of discourses – medical, psychological, literary, criminological – that insisted on (bourgeois) female frigidity, Dijkstra produces an all-purpose distillation of mid-nineteenth century femininity, snappily labelled by him the "household nun". As the book progresses, this mythic Galatea congeals into a flesh and blood reality, regularly invoked as the historical truth of the nineteenth century wife and mother (e.g.: "... the generation of men who had been brought up by household nuns", 197; "... the children of the household nuns of the 1850's," 331; "... the masculine substitute for the all-suffering household nun of their fathers ..." 272) Ideology, in other words, is taken to be factually descriptive, rather than productive of social reality. This trope, in which the various forms of masculine projection or fantasy acquire material reality, is a recurring feature of *Idols*. Here, for example, is Dijkstra on

Arthur Hacker, *Circe*, 1893.

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the subject of middle-class women (no nationality specified) post household nun:

Inwardly she has bristled at her broken wings, at the loss of freedom imposed by “moral” man upon that previously happily incautious sparrow, her mind. Forced to babble like a child, prevented from earning her own income, she had taken her husband’s money and spent it – often doing so while vindictively acting out the child’s role assigned to her, determined to have no greater concern for moderation than a child And as she did what she was told, her spotlessly monogamous, almost virginal body indeed often acquired the mercantile mind of the dreaded whore. (354)

Who is speaking here? This elision of representation and reality with the lived social and sexual relations inevitably obscures the crucial fact that ideology – sexual or otherwise – is never seamless, hegemonic, nor uncontested. While dominant ideologies of gender may appear tautologically to confirm worldly arrangements, although they may function proscriptively and prescriptively, they are nonetheless variously negotiated by different classes, sexes, subcultures, religious, and racial groups. Frequently, they are subjected to transformatory readings; sometimes they are passively, sometimes actively resisted. It is, moreover, precisely the perceived gap between dominant ideologies and lived experience that enables contestation and opposition, whether in their avatar of specifically political struggles, as for the suffrage, or more far-reaching ones, as in feminism itself. Dijkstra’s unnuanced and numbing litany of misogyny, like his undifferentiated hodgepodge of cultures and contexts, produces a monolith that itself suggests the mechanisms of projection and wish-fulfilment. Indeed, this aspect of *Idols* is altogether consistent with its unabashed theoretical innocence, evidenced in its unstated, but constantly demonstrated belief that representation refers to a prior reality which dominant ideologies then reflect and describe. Recall here that Dijkstra’s elegy for the paradise lost of sexual equality in the seventeenth century Europe was based on the visual “evidence” of two paintings:

Frans Hals’ man and woman – married or not – are friends. It is evident that they tease each other, argue, have opinions, are companions. They are equals – and the fact does not bother them a bit. One can be very sure that this young woman has her say in the couple’s business decisions too. Nor could one possibly imagine her to be prudish about sex. She is not afraid of this man’s body (and the casual position of her hand on his shoulder clearly shows that he is hers). The man, in turn, is equally unafraid of this woman’s presence. (6)

Confronted with Dijkstra’s inability to differentiate between the conventions of Dutch portraiture, historical fact, and the projective mechanisms of spectatorship, the reader may well come to feel a certain nostalgia for the bad old days of formalist hegemony when reference to external reality was considered the province of historians and photographers.

Dijkstra's conflation of aesthetic signifier with worldly referent accounts not only for the naivety that underwrites his endless descriptions and paraphrases, but defines as well his *modus operandi* for staking his revisionist claim. What does it mean to conflate an aesthetic signifier with an external referent? For starters, it means that those who have not thought it worth their while to dip into fifteen years of feminist work on representation, like Dijkstra, will find themselves in the cul-de-sac of tabulating the varieties and numbers of "bad" images of women. And what does Dijkstra suppose constitutes a "good" image of women? The Sistine *Madonna*? Botticelli's *Venus*? The *Demoiselles d'Avignon*? In fact, Dijkstra does propose a few images of women which warrant his approval, (two, to be exact) and it is in these instances where one can observe the convergence of the poverty of his proposed revisionism and the theoretical inadequacy of an images-of-women content analysis approach to figurative painting and sculpture.

Dijkstra's revisionist agenda, although it frequently sinks from sight in his text, is stated in his preface:

This book has its origins in my interest in the still neglected academic schools of painting in the late nineteenth century. The wholesale dismissal, during the past sixty years, of the work of thousands of highly accomplished artists who chose not to paint impressionist concoctions for a clientele whose main claim to discernment in matters of art was that they had grown tired of looking at the slick concoctions Bouguereau once used to produce for them, has created in our own time a peculiarly skewed conception of the parameters of cultural production. (viii)

Skewed how? Although this is never answered, the implication seems to be that our conception is skewed, because incomplete. Fair enough. But a few lines down, we get inklings of the hidden agenda that accompanies the manifest one:

Whenever possible, I also sought out the (usually moldering and now terminally obscure) shrines which after their death were established by a devoted public in the homes or studios of artists who had once lived like kings upon the fruits of an extraordinary adoration bestowed upon them by their contemporaries – an adoration which was not unlike that currently bestowed on the great gods of the minimal modernist gesture. (viii)

Although I would scarcely hazard a guess as to the identities of those invoked as the "great gods of the minimal modernist gesture", what cumulatively emerges is a kind of *ressentiment* against the duly consecrated avant-garde, from Manet through the minimal modernists, who Dijkstra feels have unfairly obscured "the work of thousands of highly accomplished artists":

The fundamental shift in the art public's interest from strict representational styles to more modern tendencies has served to hide the work dealt with in this book from historical scrutiny. As a result, the

often brilliant but, due to its current obscurity, less accessible work of these turn-of-the-century artists still remains largely ignored by the general public. (viii)

The problem with the “often brilliant” claim advanced by Dijkstra is that when push comes to shove, he is unwilling or unable to demonstrate it or even argue for it. No doubt such a move on his part is obstructed by the terms of his parallel argument as to the undeniable nastiness of the content of these images. Nonetheless, I am reminded here of Henri Zerner and Charles Rosen’s trenchant and witty critique of the revival of nineteenth century French official and pompier art. One of the principal arguments in their polemic hinged on the bad faith and evasiveness evidenced by revisionists, who while decrying the domination of modernism and the historic avant-garde, tend to be quite circumspect in making competing claims for their resurrected masters. In this respect, Dijkstra’s rectitude is quite typical. His assertions of aesthetic value run along the lines of “a striking, indeed, a genuinely moving image” (John Alexander’s *Memories*, 79); “A beautifully executed example of the genre” (Robert Reid’s *Goldfish*, 182); “Andrea Carlo Lucchesi’s supremely sensuous and superbly modelled and composed sculpture” (*The Myrtle’s Altar*, 251). It is not until page 390 that Dijkstra comes up with a painting he can really get behind; it is Ella Ferris Pell’s *Salome* of 1890, and it is reproduced in colour on the dust jacket of the book.

For Dijkstra, Pell’s *Salome* “whether consciously intended or not (constitutes) a truly revolutionary feminist statement for its period” (392). It is, moreover, “considerably more daring than the stylistically advanced but ideologically timid work of such a painter as Mary Cassatt” (393). I will return to this formulation of “stylistically advanced but ideologically timid” further on, but for now I want to explore a little further the thinking that elevates an entirely unremarkable piece of salon fodder into a “brilliantly executed, tonally exquisite” (390) “revolutionary statement”. Preeminently, this turns out to be premised on *Salome*’s “indomitable reality” (392). Unlike Dijkstra’s previously discussed specimens of the *Salome* genre (this is all contained in a chapter entitled “Judith and Salome: Priestesses of Man’s Severed Head”) this particular young lady,

does not glare at us with a look of crazed sexual hunger; she does not have the wan, vampire features of the serpentine dancer; nor does she show herself to be a tubercular adolescent. Instead she is a woman of flesh and blood . . . She may be young, but she is healthy and strong. A woman of the people . . . her features have none of the artificial refinement so prized among women of the ruling class, nor any of the signs of “bestial degeneration” favoured by the symbolists. She is as “white and plump” and “big hipped” as Nana, but she has none of the perverse qualities which made that figment of Zola’s imagination “a disturbing women [*sic*] with all the impulsive madness of her sex, opening the gates of the

unknown world of desire," a creature "with the deadly smile of a . . . bitch in heat" (44-46) . . . Instead, Pell's *Salome* makes a revolutionary statement simply by being nothing but the realistic portrait of a young, strong, and radiantly self-possessed woman who looks upon the world around her with confidence, with a touch of arrogance, even – but without any transcendent viciousness. Superhuman evil the men of the turn-of-the-century would have been able to handle; a woman with "a neck on which her reddish hair looked like an animal's fleece," would have sent shivers of masochistic pleasure up the spines of male viewers . . . But Pell's *Salome*, a real life-woman [*sic*], independent, confident, and assertive, was far more threatening . . . than any of the celebrated viragoes and vampires created by the turn-of-the-century intellectuals could have been . . . Her indomitable reality was this feminist

Salome's most formidable weapon, far more dangerous than any imaginary decapitating sword. (392)

There is in this excerpt, as in virtually every page of this book, a heavy-breathing salaciousness signalled, for example, by the entirely gratuitous quotations from *Nana* which additionally mystify the source of enunciation (who is speaking?). But more important here is the explicit revelation of Dijkstra's criteria of aesthetic judgement. To evaluate images in terms of their putative truth or falsity to 'nature' is not only to parrot a critical mode that expired from natural causes well over a hundred years ago, it is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of visual art, realist or otherwise. And what propels Dijkstra's assertion from the purview of naivety to that of grotesquerie, is that it is prompted by an image of a bare-breasted *Salome*; that is to say, a subject by definition belonging to the realm of biblical fiction. It was, of course, precisely the point of the historical movements called realism and impressionism to reject myth, fantasy, and religion as appropriate subject matter for the modern world. For a man who has no interest in any aspect of a painting *other* than its subject matter, it is therefore rather significant that Dijkstra never examines one of the striking attributes of the vast majority of the paintings he reproduces; namely, their collective refusal to represent any aspect of modernity, be it urban, sartorial, or recreational. Succeeded as it is by an endless procession of mermaids, Ophelias, Ladies of Shalott, vampires, bacchantes and nymphs, Holman Hunt's *Awakening Conscience* starts looking in retrospect like a monument of uncompromising modernity and daring formal bravura.

Given that what the bulk of these paintings *do* image – the fetishized female body (usually nude) – we might well ask whether there is some connection to be drawn between a wholesale disavowal of modernity and an iconographic refuge in myths of the eternal feminine, however construed. In this regard too, it is important to reject Dijkstra's babble about "intellectuals" and reckon with the fact that most of the kitsch here reproduced (and it has all been reproduced from mass-circulation journals, 1880-1920; Dijkstra makes an unintelligible

point about this being a part of his methodology) was purveyed to and for a bourgeois audience with little cultural capital (to use Bourdieu's term) but with aspirations to high culture. It is difficult to imagine Marcel Proust, Henry James, Thomas Mann, or George Bernard Shaw lingering long over Pell's halftone *Salome*.

Returning to Dijkstra's dismissal of Cassatt as "stylistically advanced but ideologically timid" inevitably raises the question as to what Dijkstra would consider to be ideologically courageous within art practice, and, *faute de mieux*, we are left with Pell's "feminist" *Salome*. Because Dijkstra appears entirely ignorant about both form and style, he has no vocabulary – no framework, even – to consider the ways in which form, style, and subject matter are indivisibly meshed in any cultural artifact. Thus in various places in the book, a modernist masterpiece (but not a minimal masterpiece) will pop up only to be disparaged by Dijkstra for having the same subject matter as the trash he is exhuming. Once form and style are dispensed with as a kind of supplemental frosting on the cake of subject matter, then of course there is no significant difference between Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* and George Rochegrosse's *The Death of Babylon*, or Matisse's *The Dance* and Francesco Gioli's *Ring Dance on the Tyrrhenian*. Without in any way denying the kinds of fantasies in which *The Death of Sardanapalus* traffics, it is ludicrous to reduce it to those fantasies, and even more to the point, to fail to see that everything from its scale, to its spatial organization, positioning of the viewer, colour and brushwork can in no way be detached from its subject. These elements are, needless to say, what constitute its difference from Rochegrosse and produce its complexity – misogynist or not. Not to belabour the point, Dijkstra doesn't have a clue as to what is *meant* by the term "stylistic innovation", a term he brandishes as an all-purpose descriptive label for any artwork in the modernist tradition. Here, for example, is Dijkstra on Cezanne:

They [Cezanne's bacchanalia] cannot compete with his breathtaking visual reformulation of our perception [*sic*] of landscape in his depictions of Mont St. Victoire and the Bibemus quarries – paintings which have forever altered and deepened our understanding of the colours, textures, and shapes of rock and soil. (257)

Do we really look at rocks differently because of Cezanne? Or is it not rather that we look at *paintings* differently because of Cezanne? Dijkstra's inability to distinguish a picture of something – a viraginous woman or a rock – from an external referent in the physical world amounts to a kind of conceptual handicap; it prevents him from attending to the complexity and density of artistic expression.

I have left for the last, mention of one of the most disturbing aspects of *Idols* and that is its

stated intent “to show that the intellectual assumptions which underlay the turn of the century’s cultural war on woman also permitted the implementation of the genocidal race theories of Nazi Germany” (vii). With such an ambitious mission, one has reason to expect a fully historical, specific, contextualized and theorized account of the relations between theories of feminine inferiority, eugenics, racialism, and anti-Semitism. It is, moreover, hardly self-evident that misogyny necessarily *has* anything to do with either anti-Semitism or racialism; Jewish men are not less misogynist than any others; anti-Semites need not necessarily be misogynists, and – to state the obvious – misogyny knows no borders but only Germany produced the Final Solution. While it is reasonable to argue that within patriarchal culture, femininity is constructed as the primary model of ‘otherness’, this does not mean that misogyny is the same as racism or anti-Semitism. Late nineteenth and early twentieth European and American culture may have indeed been especially misogynous – although there are many times and places that might well compete for this distinction – but to throw genocide and misogyny into textual contiguity is not the same as establishing a connection. It will probably then come as no great shock to the reader who has stuck it out so far to learn that after his prefatory announcement, Dijkstra thereafter makes only two or three incidental references to this weighty problem. I quote:

It can be said without exaggeration that the psychological “gynecide” advocated by the turn-of-the-century male intellectual avant-garde was a first manifestation of the forces which would make the actual genocidal policies of Nazi Germany not only culturally acceptable to the German populace but a logical historical outcome of the extravagant false science of general turn-of-the-century culture. (209)

And then, the closing paragraph of the book:

The images of the viraginous woman and the effeminate Jew – both equally eager to depredate the gold, the pure seed of the Aryan male [who is speaking?] – began to merge. The deadly racist and sexist evolutionary dreams of turn-of-the-century culture fed the masochistic middle-class fantasy in which the godlike Greek, the Fuhrer, the lordly executioner, leader of men, symbol of masculine. . . would kill the vampire, set his trusty servant free, and bring on the millennium of pure blood, evolving genes, and men who were men. If it was difficult to execute one’s wife – not to say inconvenient – there was always the effeminate Jew. Fantasies of gynecide thus opened the door to the realities of genocide. (401)

Coincidentally, Dijkstra’s last line describes the subject of inquiry pursued in a quite different book; I refer here to Klaus Theweleit’s ambitious, methodical, disturbing *Male Fantasies*. Anyone interested in the connections to be made between gynophobia and fascism is well advised to consult it. Unlike Dijkstra’s gaseous and heterogeneous potpourri, Theweleit’s

study is organized around a close textual and analytic reading of the journals, letters, autobiographies and novels of Freikorps officers. And it is, moreover, precisely his insistence on specificity – of the men whose writings he examines, of their culture and formation, the context of revolution and its repression – that provides its seriousness and authority.

It would hardly have been worth the critical equivalent of a meat axe, if I did not consider it to emblemize problems which exist within a broader purview. *Idols'* implicit misogyny masquerading as indignation reminds us that the force of feminist analyses can be used to legitimize non-feminist, or even anti-feminist enterprises. Feminist art historians have good reason to fear the consequences of books such as these which attempt (and evidently manage) to pass themselves off as feminist-inspired revisionism. The risk here is not so much one of cooptation as one of colonization. Writers such as Dijkstra neutralize and domesticate the force of genuine feminist scholarship, even while remaining arrogantly ignorant of all that feminist theorists and scholars have produced. It is, after all, over ten years since Griselda Pollock argued that the crucial area to explore was not images-of-women, but woman as image, a distinction whose various implications have served to virtually remap the field of cultural representation.

As a negative exemplar, *Idols of Perversity* has, therefore, a certain pedagogical utility. Even were its substance uncompromised by its own inculcating enunciation, it would still fail to do the work it promises. But among its many negative lessons, it teaches us, importantly, that one ignores the analytic tools of formalism at one's peril. In his classic critique of a too-reductive formalism, Leo Steinberg remarked that one of its principal shortcomings lay in its "indifference to that part of artistic utterance which its tools do not measure." Clearly, however, the reverse is equally true. From the current perspective of a post-formalist, post-modernist *and* feminist art history, the task might be described as one of appropriating the strengths and insights of formalist analysis in order to integrate it within a greatly expanded and critical definition of the discipline. The task for a feminist revisionism accordingly involves a repositioning of the object of inquiry in that new space opening up between an art history discursively organized for the elucidation of discrete masterpieces and oeuvres, and the contrasting imperatives of a new discursive terrain of cultural history – a terrain whose "new object" (as signalled by the critical journal of that name) is that of representation itself.

I would like to acknowledge the generous advice and counsel of Robert Simon in the writing of this essay.