

CHOICE, GAZE, AND DANGER: WENDY STEINER'S NEW BOOK PROVIDES A FRESH PERSPECTIVE FOR AESTHETICS

WENDY STEINER

THE BEAUTY OF CHOICE: ON WOMEN, ART, AND FREEDOM

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Wendy Steiner's latest book, *The Beauty of Choice: On Women, Art, and Freedom* (2024), is a rather unique work. On the one hand, its approach can be summarized with the term *applied aesthetics*. It applies philosophical aesthetics in a very practical way to politics, human rights, sexuality, and everyday life. On the other hand, through various examples, the book invites readers to consider that aesthetics may be more important to all human culture than we have realized. In both directions, the book works in a highly fragmentary manner. However, it is not a literary essay, although the essayistic style can be considered a stylistic device of the book. If one wanted to place *The Beauty of Choice* in a category, it would be tempting to call it Italian or French philosophy—though its clarity and down-to-earth argumentation distinguish it somewhat from the latter. Alternatively, it could be described as extended aesthetics, or even polemical aesthetics.

Generating new thinking through provocation has always been Steiner's strength. Especially *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism* (1996) and *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th-Century Art* (2001) challenged many to rethink pleasure and beauty.

In the American war of words between cultural studies and aesthetics—which was at its strongest at the turn of the 2000s—Steiner was often thought of as a representative of cultural studies criticizing aesthetics. But most of the world’s art philosophers have a critical stance against the cluster of neo-Kantianism, Eurocentric canon, and purist analytic philosophy that dominated American philosophy of art at the time (and, to some extent, still does). In this book as well, for example, Immanuel Kant’s ideas about disinterestedness and aesthetics as non-sexual are subjected to criticism. One might, of course, ask why still struggle against Kant when there is pragmatism, Foucault, and French feminist philosophy available. But Steiner must perhaps be read through her local scene. It must also be taken into account that her area of expertise is English literature.

The strength of *The Beauty of Choice* lies in its surprising perspectives. The role of the female gaze in pairing, in observing mating behavior (courtship display), and even in avoiding potentially dangerous suitors grants women a form of agency that we are not accustomed to considering from an aesthetic perspective. In the light of the book, women’s sexual choices also appear to be a matter of taste. In this way, the book tempts its readers to rethink the gaze.

The book’s reflections on the meaning of memorials erected to rape victims, along with the role rape has played in old plays and novels, turn war crimes and domestic violence into subjects of political aesthetics. The nude is one of the central topics of the book, explored in various ways. Steiner reflects on how, on the one hand, the West has sought to expose women under burkinis, and on the other, has guided people to feel shame in front of nude images. “Female flesh on the beach” (111) comes to represent freedom and democracy, while the history of nudity in art remains deeply complex. As xenophobic feminist groups like Nemesis strengthen their foothold in public discourse, philosophizing these contradictions may be more important than ever.

From #MeToo to culture wars, from decency debates to Richard O. Prum’s evolutionary theories, and from Geoffrey Chaucer to the contemporary art of Marlene Dumas and Barbara MacCallum, this book is a good example of how dialogic aesthetic thinking can benefit research across many different topics. It offers more game openings than advanced analysis—but it is still more than the sum of its parts. Despite its fragmentary nature, it reads as a holistic, almost programmatic thought experiment on difficult topics. If it does not offer deep

analyses, it offers an abundance of new perspectives. That is where its value lies. The book left me pondering many lines of thought and my own research questions regarding literature and visual culture. I would recommend it without hesitation to anyone interested in feminism, the relationship between culture and biology, the gaze, or the possibilities of aesthetics. However, it would have benefited from engaging more deeply with global debates. For example, Katya Mandoki has written extensively on courtship displays, and the problem of American Neo-Kantianism looks very much regional from this side of the Atlantic. The book went a long way in creating new thinking—but perhaps it could have gone even further had it reached more beyond the English-speaking world. Politically, this was achieved through the consideration of monuments in the Balkan countries and a few Japanese examples. And one can hope that Steiner still has many more surprising books ahead of her.

Max Ryynänen