Aesthetically Critiquing Oppression

Anna-Bella Sicilia

Abstract: Faced with, say, a racist law or an instance of misogynistic street harassment, we usually expect victims of oppression to offer moral responses. We think they'll blame, resent, or attempt to punish. Instead, they sometimes offer *aesthetic critiques*, complaining about the clumsiness, ugliness, or downright boringness of some manifestation of oppression. It is tempting to dismiss these as criticizable failures to offer well-calibrated reactions to injustice. In this paper I offer a redemptive reading of aesthetic critiques. In cases where straightforward moral criticism would lack marks of successful agency (effectiveness and responsiveness), aesthetically critiquing oppression might enable one to perform broadly resistant actions with these features. Moreover, aesthetic critiques can help us appreciate some of what's bad about oppression. In calling patriarchy boring, aesthetic critics call attention to the ways ideology gives rise to *repetitive* patterns of injustice, rendering the shape of our collective human history less interesting than it otherwise might be.

Key words: Oppression, Resistance, Ethics, Agency, Feminist Philosophy, Aesthetics

Valerie Solanas, the radical feminist artist best known for her attempted murder of Andy Warhol in 1968, begins her *SCUM Manifesto* with the following plea: "Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex."[1] As the critic and writer Andrea Long Chu characterizes Solanas's complaint, "Life under male supremacy isn't oppressive, exploitative, or unjust: it's just fucking boring. For Solanas, an aspiring playwright, politics begins with an aesthetic judgment."[2] We may be charmed by Solanas's irreverent rhetoric. We may even find in it echoes of a supposed Platonic connection between ugliness and injustice, beauty and goodness. But surely Solanas has misidentified the proper source of feminist political motivation. It is precisely because the patriarchy is oppressive, exploitative,

[1] Solanas 1976, 3
[2] Chu 2018, 49

and unjust that we have reasons to resist its various manifestations. Serious politics, we think, begins with a decidedly moral judgment.[3]

And yet Solanas is not the only person tempted to offer an aesthetic judgment about some oppressive act, norm, expectation, or structure (henceforth simply an "aesthetic critique"). Imagine a woman, Becca, whose walk home is interrupted by a street harasser's command to "smile, baby". When she ignores him, he doubles down, insisting that she "turns her frown upside down". Becca recognizes that gendered street harassment is an ideological practice, one that she is now positioned to resist. But instead of pointing out that what he's done is wrong or unjust, she tells him that his comments are corny. Becca, along with many other victims of oppression, opts to complain of clumsiness, ugliness, grossness, or downright boringness instead of expressing moral outrage or pursuing attempts to punish. These critics conspicuously frame their complaint in aesthetic terms when talk of morality seems most relevant. Committed though we are to the simple idea that resistant politics begins with a moral judgment, some of our actual attempts to resist manifest in aesthetic ones.

Are these aesthetic critics simply *missing the point* in calling out the unattractiveness, rather than the wrongness, of their social worlds? In this paper I offer a redemptive reading of their actions. When they are embedded in particular interactive contexts (like that of Becca and her harasser), critics get something uniquely right in opting for aesthetic, rather than moral, criticism. I draw this out by first showing how oppression can threaten our agential success – in particular, the *effectiveness* and *responsiveness* of our attempts to resist (Section I).[4] Where

[3] We might even conclude, with Chu 2019, that *SCUM* is not appropriately labeled a "feminist" text, and perhaps that Solanas is not appropriately labeled a "feminist".

[4] My approach here draws on the strand of feminist thinking concerned with what might be called the *agential* dimensions of injustice. See discussion in Frye 1983; Bierria 2014; Calhoun 2015; Haslanger 2017; Haslanger 2018; Haslanger 2019; Webster 2021; Hirji 2021; Hirji 2024; Ward 2025; Sicilia forthcoming, among others. Feminist work on speech act theory (see Mason 2022 for an overview), problematic adaptive preferences (e.g., Khader 2011), and relational autonomy (see Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000 for an overview) also takes up these issues.

moral complaints would fail to function as resistance in a given interactive context, aesthetic criticisms can sometimes land. In these cases, critics' actions bear both marks of successful agency: they are effective, and they are responsive (Section II). Rather than attempting to escape morally demanding situations, some aesthetic critics cleverly overcome exactly what is objectionable about them.

These arguments can vindicate the actions of those, like Becca, who are embedded in non-ideal interactive contexts that render moral criticism unavailable. What, then, should we make of Solanas's aesthetic critique, offered not "on the ground", but from a perspective of assessing the patriarchy as a whole? I close by raising some reasons for thinking that Solanas's critique may be apt, and may, moreover, help us appreciate some aspects of the badness of oppressive systems which go unnoticed when we focus exclusively on moral critiques. These systems give rise to objectionably repetitive ways of life, thus rendering the shape of human history less interesting than it might otherwise be (Section III). Though I don't advocate for a politics that starts with an aesthetic judgment, our politics may be enriched by taking seriously Solanas's plea for a more interesting – at least, less boring, less ugly – social world.

I. Oppressive constraints on moral resistance

Aesthetic critics forego moral responses for aesthetic ones. When targeted by transphobic jokes, they complain that the jokes are hacky and unfunny.[5] When restricted by a repressive law or policy, they point out its clumsy phrasing.[6] When instructed to smile by a street

[5] For examples of trans comics focusing on the "unfunny" and "hacky" aspects of transphobic jokes, see Lieberman 2021. See Anderson 2015; Smuts 2010 on the relationship between humor and morally bad features.
[6] Take, e.g., the response of a hypothetical instructor subject to Florida Statute 1007.25(c)(3), which reads that "General education core courses may not distort significant historical events or include a curriculum that teaches identity politics, […] or is based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent

harasser, they complain of corniness. Here, I will submit one charitable and philosophically interesting explanation for what (some) aesthetic critics are doing. The explanation both takes the distinctively *aesthetic* nature of aesthetic criticisms seriously, while also forcing us to reconsider the intuitive judgment that these critics are missing the point.

In what sense might we think such contributions "miss the point"? First, these critiques seem to generate the wrong *effects*. If the jokes, policy, and street harassment are indeed morally condemnable, we should act in ways that discourage or stop them. At best, the criticism doesn't present a strong enough impediment to continued bad behavior. At worst, the aesthetic critic seems to invite *better* (funnier, more creative, more interesting) forms of mistreatment. They therefore don't make the right kind of difference in the world. Second, leaving aside their consequences, aesthetic critiques just seem to be *unfitting responses* to critics' situations. These situations conspicuously manifest systems that degrade and disempower people in virtue of their social group membership. Surely the appropriately responding agent would react with some flavor of moral reproach. Instead, aesthetic critics react as if the offending agent has made an aesthetic contribution. And that's simply not the correct, fitting, or most relevant kind of response. These two complaints seem to stick even if we hold fixed that the aesthetic critics make well-calibrated aesthetic judgments. In other words, we can imagine that the jokes *are* hacky, the policy *is* poorly written, and the harassment *is* corny, and still worry that critics' responses are off base.

I'll focus on the charge that aesthetic critiques "miss the point" in these senses. This allows us to focus on *agential* aspects of these critiques. After all, effectiveness and responsiveness are plausible conditions for successful agency. In this section, I'll characterize the non-ideal

in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, and economic inequities". Among other structural problems, it is unclear what the phrase "and were created to maintain" describes. (It may refer to "institutions of the United States," "systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege," or even "theories".) Instead of calling this statute sinister, this instructor might describe its clumsy construction as grating.

agential circumstances of (some) oppressed agents. In Section II, I then argue that interactively embedded aesthetic critiques can succeed as manifestations of effective and responsive agency. In Section III, I turn to a tentative proposal for making sense of non-interactively embedded critiques like Solonas's.

My approach takes seriously the idea that agency is not only a matter of how we, ourselves, manipulate our bodies and minds, but (sometimes) constitutively involves interaction with our social worlds.[7] Feminists have emphasized that ideological and unjust practices can constrain and enable our agency in just this way. As Sally Haslanger has argued, our positioning in relationally defined nodes within structures often supplies a context inextricable from what we can do: the agential possibilities for *mothers of sons in family structures* are different from those of *bosses of employees in employment structures*.[8] I'm interested in how some contexts undermine the effectiveness and responsiveness of our attempts at *moral resistance*. For moral resistance is exactly how we typically expect those conspicuously targeted by manifestations of oppression to respond.

Let us take the above case of corny street harassment. Imagine that Becca aims to respond to her harasser with an act of moral resistance. Here, the resisted force is the harasser and/or the oppressive norm that licenses his behavior. What would it mean to say that Becca resisted these forces in the wake of his comment? The phrase "in the wake of his comment" is significant, because it means Becca is now engaged in an interaction with the harasser. This context affects what she can do; it informs the descriptions under which her subsequent behavior comes. Some acts (like *replying* or *responding*) are only available to us after we've been addressed and essentially mean something in relation to the initial address. This is trivially true

[7] See discussion of these ideas in Vargas 2013; Vargas 2024; Timpe 2019; Wallace in preparation.
[8] Haslanger 2016. See addition citations in footnote 4. Walker 2008; Calhoun 2015 emphasize the connections with social practices and moral evaluation.

given features of those act-types: they are, we might say, essentially interactive acts. Less obvious, but also intuitive, is the fact that some act-types *paradigmatically* (though not essentially) take place within, and have certain functions within, interactions. To *win* is, paradigmatically, to win against others. To *forgive* is, paradigmatically, to forgive another person. Though there are fully private ways to *win* and *forgive*, the meanings of these actions are arguably parasitic on the meaning of interactively engaged winning and forgiving. And we can see this because interactive context shapes whether these acts can exhibit their characteristic responsiveness (was my forgiving a response to an apology?) and have their characteristic effects (did the action that caused me to win also cause my opponent to lose?).

My suggestion is that *resistance* is paradigmatically interactive in the same way. The most central cases of resistance function as moves embedded in conversations, power struggles, and competitions. Paradigmatic resistance functions as a response to some resisted force; usually, as a refusal to comply with it, or simply as a refusal to suffer any adverse effects it has on me. It might also have some effect on the resisted force: actively weakening or impeding it, or otherwise forcing it to change course. All else equal, then, a privileged answer to the question "Is Becca resisting?" concerns whether her behavior functions, in her interaction, as resistance in any of these ways.

Perhaps Becca attempts to resist by simply ignoring the harasser. She might intend this as a refusal to comply. In fact, she might explicitly refuse to comply with the directive to "smile". But if her harasser is in the grips of bad ideology, her lack of engagement functions as an assent to the treatment that he assumes she "deserves."[9] He demonstrates that he is socially empowered to yell things at female passers-by without sanction. This norm is not weakened if

[9] On the widespread idea that street harassment is deserved punishment, see Gardner 1995, 180–81; Henry 2017; Zietz and Das 2018.

it is not shown to be vulnerable to noncompliance, and the harasser is not weakened if he is not shown to be frustrated. Becca cannot resist her intended target(s) in the relevant sense if her behaviors function, in the context of her interaction, as compliance with the oppressive norm and acquiescence to her harasser's treatment.

Becca might try to resist more conspicuously, replying that he should leave her alone, be ashamed of himself, or fuck off. But these responses may be filtered through the stereotype that women are guided by emotion (contrasted with dispassionate reason), one with a long history in Western thought. Researchers of street harassment frequently understand it through the framework of a deliberate *intrusion*, so getting riled up is a way of registering this intrusion and thereby registering the harasser's success.[10] When attempts to morally protest are treated as the behaviors of a hysterical, confused, or out-of-line woman, they aren't resistant moves. Indeed, they may bolster the idea that harassment is appropriate or justified. As a result, instead of weakening the harasser or the oppressive norm, Becca's attempted resistance may unintentionally strengthen them.

Furthermore, her attempted resistance might be *un*responsive to her situation if we allow that "her situation" is partially determined by various oppressive norms. We can capture this by appeal to *social scripts:* street harassment is plausibly governed by a familiar model that tells socially competent members of society which sequence of actions to expect. Social scripts set the stage for certain contributions to count as normal, (un)intelligible, deviant, or sanctionable. Though one *can* "interrupt" a heteronormative sexual interaction before its expected culmination of male orgasm, doing so *counts as an interruption.* It signals a (abnormal, deviant, rude) shift in the proceedings, rather than functioning unremarkably as part of the usual

[10] Vera-Gray 2016; Baptist and Coburn 2019

proceedings.[11] In the same way, attempts to morally resist street harassment are ill-calibrated responses to previous moves within the sexist social script at play. As Julia Serano remarks about her own experiences attempting to resist street harassment, harassers "did not view their own behavior as out of order in any way, and they sincerely did believe that I was the 'bad actor' in the situation."[12] These beliefs come from widely shared models for how interactions of the relevant kind unfold. Since it plays no role as a "normal" contribution on the relevant model, there's an important sense in which moral resistance is a poorly calibrated response to the situation.[13] So, while confronting one's harasser would be responsive to an important feature of the situation – blame is an apt response to mistreatment – there may be no particular *way* to respond that is sensitive to what's going on, socially. It would (in many times and places) be odd, deviant, "out of nowhere", rude. Becca can recognize that someone is morally responsible, but she lacks a contextually sensitive way of *holding* them morally responsible.

We now have a picture of Becca's non-ideal circumstances. Her actions are contextualized in an interaction that affords her little possibility for effective, responsive resistance. Of course, there is an important political project in changing what *makes sense* in street harassment interactions – or perhaps undermining the social salience of such interactions in the first place. Rejecting, reforming, or replacing the sexist scripts, practices, and expectations would preclude strangers on the street from engaging her in interactions where her attempts at moral resistance will be ineffective and unresponsive. But such messy and ambitious projects are undertaken by collectives.[14] As an individual agent, her best hope is to help herself to some

[11] Dougherty 2025 argues that heteronormative sexual scripts are objectionable and worth replacing on precisely this basis.
[12] Serano 2022, chap. 3
[13] See Hesni 2024 for helpful citations and discussion of bad social scripts. Though I am focused on the relationship between aesthetic critiques and agential success (not scripts *per se*), many aesthetic critiques might be fruitfully analyzed as what Hesni calls "cooperative disruptions" of scripts.
[14] Fortunately, in many social milieus, they are well underway.

other socially available practice in which a kind of resistance is on the table. In what follows, I will examine aesthetic critiques as one way to do this. If the resulting picture is compelling, we can make sense of some aesthetic critiques as rational and savvy responses to bad circumstances.

II. Interactive aesthetic critique as *effective* and *responsive* action

I will start with the first dimension of agential success available via aesthetic critiques: they are often uniquely *effective*. The idea that action is an instrument for the production of certain effects has a long and influential history.[15] Acts are what they are, in part, because of the difference they make, the states of affairs they give rise to. The person who systematically fails to make a causal difference is a paradigmatically defective agent. One might be a defective causal agent by failing to affect the material world, other people, or even oneself.

We've seen that Becca is unable to make the right kind of difference in her social world with straightforward moral critique. By trying to resist in her interaction, she can't affect others in anything like the intended way. But just because she can't effectively *morally* push back doesn't mean she can't do so aesthetically. After all, it might be that harassing women in general is socially permitted, but that harassing women *in that particular way* (by instructing them to "turn that frown upside down") is undeniably corny. Becca may, then, critique, condemn, malign, knock down, and lambaste successfully. These are broadly resistant act-types that make sense in her interaction. And if others should "play along with" these contributions in the relevant

[15] Darwall 1995; Schapiro 2001 trace this "instrumental conception of agency" to Cumberland.

ways, she is better able to affect them.[16] I describe these acts as "broadly resistant" to reflect how many of their functions overlap with moral resistance. Becca doesn't allow the harasser's contribution to stand. What she says correctly marks it as defective. This presents him with two kinds of options: he can supply an aesthetically superior (less corny) contribution, or he can back down (retracting, defending, feeling ashamed). Both involve a reversal of the power dynamics, putting Becca in a position of laying out *her* reasonable expectations of *him*. This plausibly weakens him, albeit *qua* aesthetic contributor (not *qua* sexist or *qua* person-following-oppressive-norm).[17] And these are all the sorts of effects I described as characteristic of paradigmatic, interactive resistance. So, against the idea that aesthetic criticisms miss the point because they generate the wrong kind of effects, we can see that they are sometimes a critic's best bet at securing the *right* effects of a more general kind: redirecting, shaming, weakening.[18]

But this raises a challenge. Perhaps there is no deep difference between aesthetic critiques and the kind of moral critique with which I've contrasted them. After all, I've said that many of their functions overlap. And some aesthetic critics are motivated to react in broadly resistant ways to what they recognize as a moral slight, attempting to approximate what *would* be a morally calibrated response. Once we see this, we might worry that aesthetic critiques *just are* expressions of moral blame or contempt. Relatedly, they might think that these speech acts

[16] It may be true that the more an oppressive norm is normalized within conventional morality, the more immune to aesthetic critique it becomes. I am assuming the existence of *some* cases in which aesthetic critique is effective while moral critique is not. Thanks to Matt DuPree for me pressing to clarify.

[17] While I am focusing on an individual's capacity to perform a particular type of action here, instances of aesthetic resistance play a role in constituting and sustaining aesthetics of resistance (understood as practices or movements); see Taylor 2017.

[18] A reviewer asks: Why think these kinds of "redirecting, shaming, weakening" are of any political significance? After all, Becca could have weakened her harasser by giving him the flu, and this would not have seemed politically significant in the way landing a verbal criticism does. I am inclined to think this significance has something to do with the fact that aesthetic critics do not just causally affect the targets of their criticisms; they do so in a way that in turn elicits (or makes fitting) *agential responses* from those targets. Getting one's target to *seal his lips*, *become ashamed*, *retract his remark*, or *try again* is significant in a way that getting him to sneeze and run a fever is not. When she elicits the former responses, the critic is functioning as a full participant in a genuinely interactive exchange, not merely influencing the causal order of which other agents happen to be a part. (This distinction roughly tracks Oksala 2017's distinction between "power-over" and "power-to", though I am not assuming that power-over must involve domination in a thickly negative sense.)

communicate moral complaints as implicatures of semantically aesthetic judgments (e.g., "that's so ugly," implying "that's wrong"). If this were so, aesthetic critiques would not be trading on aesthetic normativity at all. Aesthetic critics would not appear to "miss the point" in the sense that motivates my inquiry here. The challenge: what is "aesthetic" about aesthetic critiques?[19]

In what follows, I'll insist that the choice to communicate in genuinely aesthetic terms is exactly what allows critics to make a causal difference with their actions. If all aesthetic critiques were just successful communications of moral judgments, they would not be effective in the interactional contexts I've described.[20] I will focus here on two ways that communicating genuinely aesthetic critiques allows one to act effectively. The first involves successfully affecting *others;* the second involves successfully affecting *oneself.*

First, genuinely aesthetic critique can achieve other-directed effects, relieving pressure on hearers to offer moral engagement when it's in the critic's interest to do so. Aesthetic and moral judgments, after all, call on others to make different conversational contributions. While some theorists defend the practical import of aesthetic judgments,[21] many hold that they are less closely tied to practical motivation than moral judgments.[22] It is common to deny the existence of aesthetic obligations,[23] to insist that they are weaker than moral ones, or to insist that they are likely to be conditional (whereas moral obligations are paradigmatically categorical).[24] Moral phenomenology is associated with inescapable authority,[25] whereas we typically think that such phenomenological experiences are rarer (if possible) in aesthetics. In

[19] Thanks to Jacob Blitz, Matt DuPree, and an anonymous reviewer of this journal for pressing me on this.
[20] To be clear, I don't wish to deny that some (even, many) aesthetic criticisms of manifestations of oppression we encounter in the wild are superficially disguised deployments of straightforward moral criticisms. These are not my focus, since they need no defense against the charge that they are "missing the point" in the sense sketched in the introduction. We don't think people are "missing the point" just because they communicate through implicature.
[21] E.g., Cross 2017; King 2018
[22] Strandberg 2011, 52–53; Song 2023, 190; Robson and Wallbank 2024
[23] For a recent defense see, Dyck 2021.
[24] Song 2023, 190; Kubala 2020, 2–3; Whiting 2021, 411–12; Railton 2003, 100; McGonigal 2018, 913
[25] See Horgan and Timmons 2018a; Horgan and Timmons 2018b, especially 123.

short, aesthetic and moral critiques have some overlapping, and some distinct interactive functions. With some evidence about one's audience, one can comfortably deploy an aesthetic criticism without inviting the intense forms of interaction involved in moral disagreement. And this is sometimes precisely what allows someone to recover the ability to push back. If it doesn't make sense (in Becca's society) for women to morally critique their harassers, it might nonetheless make sense for her to invite various aesthetically flavored responses. She can't demand that he stop, but she can pressure him to re-orient.

Second, an aesthetic critique can function as resistance by allowing Becca to achieve self-directed effects that change what happens in her interaction, and to thereby *refuse to suffer adverse effects* that would otherwise be imposed by a resisted force. She can refuse to suffer bad consequences of two kinds: those imposed through retaliative verbal/physical mistreatment, and those imposed through the diminution of her own self-respect. To achieve this, Becca must give herself a certain kind of evidence. As Bernard Boxill argues, shoring up her self-respect may not require evidence of her worth (about which she is assured), but, rather, "evidence of [her] *faith in* [her] worth."[26] Becca does not need to show her harasser that she is resisting, but she does need to show *herself* that she is doing so. She must do something intelligible as resistance by her *own* lights.

Refusing the suffer these adverse effects is a way of interactively resisting. And it is a way of resisting that affords Becca considerably more flexibility than *refusing to comply with* the resisted force. But it is still not entirely up to her what will count as evidence for her self-directed beliefs. If she responded to her harasser by giving him the prettiest smile possible, thanking him for the compliment, and feeling a wave of depressed resignation, it would be hard for her to view herself as resisting. Even if Becca tries to tell herself, "by thanking him, I'm

[26] Boxill 1976, 66 (italics added)

secretly protesting", she is likely to find such attempts at self-manipulation unsuccessful. As much as I might want it to, I can't simply decide that intentionally failing the test will give me evidence that I'm clever, or that intentionally pushing away a loved one will give me evidence that I'm, in fact, showing great compassion. For Becca, the "perfect imitation of servility" cannot provide her evidence of her faith in her own worth. It will not permit her to "know [her]self as self-respecting."[27]

In some cases, perfect silence might enable a person to preserve their self-respect. Such a refusal to engage can register a lack of faith in another person as a moral interlocuter. As instances of shunning and exclusion show, it is sometimes precisely by refusing to make a moral complaint against someone that we register the strength of our complaint. When we find someone criticizable enough, we sometimes decline to treat them as a moral peer by maintaining a principled moral silence.[28]

While such an interpretation of one's own silence is *possible*, it is unlikely under many circumstances. It is particularly unlikely in gendered interactions wherein a woman's silence is more readily understood as feminine passivity than masculine stoicism. Who among us will retain confident knowledge that our behavior is principled, resistant moral silence when, by all accounts, it resembles docile acquiescence? While we *may* be able to overcome this tempting interpretation, we just as well may not; as Boxill writes, "only consummate artistry can permit a person continuously and elaborately to pretend servility and still know that [she] is self-respecting."[29] Some people need to speak up to provide themselves with the requisite self-knowledge.

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[27] Boxill 1976, 68, 59. Hirji 2024, 4–5 makes use of Boxill's point to explore how failures to resist one's oppression might betray a lack of self-respect that precludes morally worthy action. My focus here is on our ability to describe one's action as *resistance* at all, not on their moral status (though the potential interactions between these points are worth exploring).

[28] Thanks to Henry Krahn for this way of putting the point and to Andrew Lichter for helpful discussion.

[29] Boxill 1976, 68

By enacting an aesthetic critique, Becca ensures that her behavior doesn't resemble acquiescence in this self-respect-threatening way. She causally affects *herself*, preventing or reversing the damaging effects that the resisted force would otherwise impose. It is precisely pulling off a covertly resistant action that allows Becca to prevent or reverse the damaging effects the harassment would otherwise have on her self-conception, while at the same time avoiding retaliation. If refusing to suffer at the hands of the resisted force *just is* a way of interactively resisting, Becca's choice to aesthetically (rather than morally) push back is what allows her to do this. It cannot be truly said of the interaction that it damaged her self-respect.[30]

Of course, the effectiveness of aesthetic critiques is limited. Sometimes the potential object of critique happens to be aesthetically appealing. And aesthetic criticisms risk many of the same social sanctions as straightforward moral critique; the street harasser will not always respond well to being told his comment is corny. Furthermore, the fact that aesthetic critiques do not invite moral responses from their hearers is both what enables their effectiveness and what introduces the risk of moral cowardice. Some aesthetic critics assume the objectionable status quo is fixed and thus miss important opportunities for straightforward moral resistance. Nonetheless, between successfully weakening her harasser and buoying her own self-respect, Becca can be effective in other- and self-directed ways. And her ability to make these differences is made possible by her choice to cast her complaint in aesthetic terms.[31] Not all cases of

[30] A reviewer wonders whether to classify this as "public" or "private" resistance. Whether resistance is *interactive* need not map neatly onto this distinction. Even if the harasser is unaware that Becca has preserved her self-respect, this preservation is essentially interactive, since she has preserved her self-respect *in the wake of – and as a response to – his respect-threatening comments.* (Consider that we can *win* or *lose* a competitive interaction despite not noticing the precise strategies that our opponent used in their attempts against us. A true description of the interaction can refer to interactive moves undertaken by each participant, though these moves might not be entirely transparent to both participants.)

[31] This discussion describes aesthetic critiques as encouraging (or discouraging) some relational dynamic that might, in turn, serve one's moral/ prudential ends. This means moral value is mediated by some other (interpersonal) value rather than directly depending on aesthetic value (see Rothfeld 2023, 347–48). I won't

aesthetic critique can be easily understood as moral blame, nor moral implicature. Some aesthetic critiques work – they are effective – precisely because they are genuinely aesthetic communications.

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I have thus far focused on the ways interactively embedded aesthetic critiques can enable *effective* action. But successful action both generates new states of affairs and responds to current ones.[32] I turn now to the *responsiveness* of aesthetic critiques. We exhibit characteristically agential responsiveness when and to the extent that our actions are responsive to our situation *as a whole*, taking into account its many, richly textured details and their relative significance. When we characterize a situation to which an agent is responding, we will always abstract away from some detail, lest those descriptions be endless. But certain details of our situations are more relevant to how they should respond (and, so, more important to include in our descriptions).

The idea that aesthetic critiques can be better responses to one's situation than various alternatives – including (attempted) moral critique – straightforwardly trades on the above characterization of Becca's situation. We could simply describe Becca's situation as involving sexism, injustice, or a moral slight. And, correspondingly, we could say she is "missing the point" when she does not respond with moral critique. But this is just to abstract away from details about the very nature of the injustice to which she is subject. It is to ignore the fact that her interactive context is unjust (in part) *because* it is agentially constraining. This kind of situation disempowers oppressed agents from engaging in the usual array of responses we might expect from empowered agents. It is bad insofar as it places moral criticism outside the

explore whether the ethical disvalue of harassment could depend *directly* on its aesthetic disvalue (see Song 2025 for recent discussion).

[32] See Muñoz 2021 on the idea of action as a "response to a situation." I am grateful to him for helpful conversation about this point.

socially normal or intelligible.[33] Becca's choice to respond to *this very feature* with aesthetic critique displays a sophisticated responsiveness to this situation, richly described and contextualized. Becca's response does not miss the point – she is cleverly responding to the fact that her situation sets her up as missing the point.

III. Non-interactive aesthetic critique and the badness of oppression

I've argued that aesthetic critics embedded in non-ideal interactive contexts can exercise effective and responsive agency by offering aesthetic critiques. This secures a place for aesthetic critique as a kind of "on the ground" resistance to manifestations of oppression which happen to be aesthetically disvaluable. And it secures my primary argumentative aim: namely, to defend critics against the charge that they are missing the point.

In this section, I provide some tentative reasons for a more ambitious defense of aesthetic criticism's role in feminist politics. Perhaps it is not just individual manifestations of oppression which *happen* to be aesthetically disvaluable that merit our criticism, but oppressive systems *as a whole*.[34] If there is some more general connection between these systems and certain forms of aesthetic disvalue, we can make sense of aesthetic critiques like Solanas's. After all, she does not have the excuse of operating within an interactive context in which moral critique will be unsuccessful, yet she still identifies boringness as her primary complaint against patriarchy. Perhaps Solanas is tracking something about patriarchy's badness: it really does lie, in part, in its boringness, and not only in its injustice. If this is so, aesthetic critiques may not only be useful tools for non-ideal, on the ground, applied feminist practice. They may also play an

[33] I discuss this injustice in more detail in Sicilia forthcoming.
[34] A more direct philosophical route to this conclusion is an embrace of the Platonic view flagged in the introduction. But I won't dissect this view or assume its truth here.

important role in our upstream theorizing about the badness of oppression itself. They may help explain why we have reasons to resist oppression in the first place.

What would it mean to claim that patriarchy and other oppressive systems have objectionable aesthetic features like boringness?[35] Start with the idea that oppressive systems are collections of patterns of injustices which are underwritten or perpetuated by *ideologies*.[36] For many theorists, "ideology" is a metaphysical posit that addresses a specific question: how can we explain the *persistence* of social-group-based injustice?[37] These theorists observe that there have been collections of patterns of social-group-based injustice in all or most of our societies since the beginnings of recorded human history. And there is something a bit puzzling about this. After all, we know social identities do not in fact reflect differences in our moral statuses, and humans are clever enough to figure this out. Indeed, a primary puzzlement concerns why oppression persists or reemerges even when members of cooperating groups all or mostly disavow beliefs that would justify it. Even when we are capable of the insight that oppression is a bad, unjustified form of social organization, why do we find ourselves perpetuating and recreating it? The concept of "ideology" helps supply an answer.

While oppressive systems are not knowingly, intentionally maintained by an organized group agent, their features are nonetheless non-accidental in ways often described as *functional*.[38] Knowing something about these functions allows individuals to anticipate how some particular situation is likely to go: the man interrupts the woman, the white person crosses the street to avoid the Black man, the police assume the disabled person is dangerous,

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[35] In this section I assume that manifestations of oppression (both traditional art objects and everyday objects and experiences) are appropriate objects of aesthetic evaluation. See Saito 2024 for an overview of the inclusion of everyday objects and experiences under the ambit of the aesthetic, and for helpful citations.
[36] This is Martín 2024's helpful characterization of oppression.
[37] Haslanger 2017, 2. More precisely, these theorists often seek to explain both the *persistence* of injustice (i.e., its enduringness over time) and the *robustness* of injustice (i.e. the tendency for patterns of injustice to reemerge even after correction or amelioration); see Martín 2024, 227–28 on the distinction. I refer to ideology in the pejorative sense here.
[38] See Geuss 1981, 8; Haslanger 2017, 3; Dror forthcoming on functionalist accounts of ideology.

and so on. As Haslanger points out, "It is hard to have radically new experiences, because ideology manages and filters experience for us."[39] Functionality also makes it possible for us to anticipate how our *collective human history* is likely to go. Human society *in general* is likely to give rise to patterns of gender-, race-, and ability-based injustice, recycling many of the same strategies, dynamics, and practices. Not only does ideology limit the experiences that individuals might have; it limits the collective experiences that human beings as a group might have.

Insofar as ideologies function to perpetuate predictable collections of patterns of injustices, they tend to give rise to repetitive ways of life. In this way, they have a characteristic effect on what is sometimes called the "shape of history." I have in mind what Sam Scheffler calls our "ongoing human history," forming "a temporally extended chain of lives and generations".[40] As evaluative metrics like equality, flourishing, and suffering fluctuate over time, this history can progress, improve, decline, or plateau. Given the features of ideology just articulated, it has a characteristic effect on certain evaluative metrics – notably, equality between people of different social groups – over time. It will both reliably impede progress toward greater equality, and also tend to reverse that progress when it does occur. Not only will it limit some dimensions of collective improvement; it will do so repeatedly, via the same kinds of (dominating and reactionary) forces. In short, ideology tends to make our history *repetitive* in certain respects.

Might this lend credibility to the idea that oppressive systems tend to be boring? Of course, functional repetition is not sufficient for boringness. Functionality is often thought to be closely intertwined with positive aesthetic evaluation.[41] And repetition is interestingly aesthetically ambivalent. While often associated with unpleasantness, repetition perhaps universally

[39] Haslanger 2017, 11
[40] Scheffler 2013, 43
[41] See, for instance, Saito 2007, 159–60; Carlson and Parsons 2008; Forsey 2013; Paris 2020.

contributes to the aesthetic character of music.[42] The ambivalent aesthetic dimensions of repetition are often explored in the context of routine. Routines are on one hand seen as hypnotic, stable, and comforting; on the other, weary, tiresome, alienating.[43] Functional repetition can take on negative or positive aesthetic valances. Such repetition may be boring only when its valance is negative.

Here, I'll take on (without argument) a popular view of why this is so. Theorists who accept that boringness is a legitimate evaluative criticism[44] tend to emphasize its connection with attention: as Dan Moller puts it, "the boring arises when we reasonably expect something to give at least well-positioned audiences sufficient reason to focus their attention, and yet it does not do so."[45] For these theorists, when an experience fails to engage us in the expected ways, it not only bores, but *is boring*. (I follow Moller here in referring to normative and not merely predictive expectations.) The rhythmic circular rotation of a laundry cycle might be soothing precisely insofar as it doesn't invite us to focus our attention. The absence of surprise or variation might pleasantly lull, providing the sense that the machine can function without our needing to keep watch. But when an amateur movie director's long shot of a washing machine fails to intrigue, inspire, or advance the plot in any way, the very same sight might be criticizably boring. After all, we reasonably expect intrigue, inspiration, or plot advancement in a movie context. Because the director could have chosen a better shot – and, in this context, *should* have – we might chafe against her insistence that we devote our attention to this one.[46]

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[42] Thanks to Hannah Kim for pointing this out.

[43] Highmore 2004

[44] …As opposed to thinking "boringness" is the misplaced complaint of someone experiencing boredom, a charge for which there are no fitting conditions; see Moller 2014, 181. While I take on some assumptions about the fittingness conditions of boringness here, I intend to be fairly ecumenical with respect to the nature of boredom itself.

[45] Moller 2014, 183. See also Calhoun 2011, 273.

[46] This is not to say that a long shot of a rotating washing machine couldn't be interesting in any film! But, if handled poorly, its boringness would be explained by the way it fails to engage our attention in a way we can reasonably expect. (See Moller 2014, 184; Elpidorou and Gibson 2022 on successful instances of intentionally boring art.)

The unconflicted idealogue regards the persistence of oppression as more like the soothing washing cycle than the boring movie shot of it. Since we shouldn't expect to find variation in the hierarchical forms of social organization that shape our history, we shouldn't be disappointed by its absence. She may agree that human history is repetitive in that we revert to hierarchy, but disagree that what gets repeated contributes to the kind of negative evaluative metrics that impede our overall progress. If she is truly unconflicted, the idealogue's worldview must be underwritten by certain beliefs; namely, that what I'm calling "manifestations of oppression" are simply necessary truths resulting from the essential nature of marginalized people. The ideology critic disagrees, viewing them as contingent truths resulting from flawed exercises of human agency. The disagreement is also moral, since the critic insists that these are manifestations of *injustice*, and indeed that their persistence is *itself* something for which we must take responsibility, while the idealogue abnegates responsibility for this persistence through the tidy turn of phrase "just the way things are."

In addition to these epistemic and moral disagreements, my suggestion is that the idealogue and ideology critic also have a closely related aesthetic disagreement. For if persisting oppression was a necessary truth resulting from the essential nature of marginalized people, we could not have a reasonable normative expectation that human history be otherwise. And, if boringness depends on the legitimacy of our normative expectations for things to be otherwise, a repetitive human history could not be genuinely boring (bored though some of us may be). The idealogue holds that patterns of dominance or hierarchy emerge and reemerge because of what different sorts of people are inescapably like. If she were right about this, we could not reasonably expect deviations from our natures, so we could not reasonably expect a different, less repetitive, shape of history. If, on the other hand, persisting oppression is a contingent result of the maintenance of unjust systems, it is *of course* reasonable to expect human history to

be otherwise.[47] Not only are these systems the products of human agency, but their role in shaping our collective human history is, moreover, a legitimate concern for reasonable persons.

Admittedly, it is difficult to explain exactly why the shape of history has evaluative significance for us. But it is equally hard to deny.[48] Scheffler, for one, has influentially argued that the significance of our actions depends in part on our role in this history, which helps explain why what happens to future humans after our deaths can matter to us. Even when we won't ourselves witness future human extinction, its possibility is a threat to value and meaning in our lives.[49] Well-calibrated human valuers do not wish to be members of a declining civilization.

Just as it is legitimate to expect human history not to take the shape of decline, we should legitimately expect something other than dull, repetitive stagnation. When ideology leads to the persistence and reemergence of collections of patterns of the very same kinds of social-group-based injustices, it functions not just as a drag on our collective *moral* progress, but also as a constraint on the narrative shape of human social organization over time. If this is right, the badness of sexism (racism, ableism, and so on) lies, in part, in how it renders our collective human history less interesting than it should be.

On this proposal, the idealogue's refusal to concede the boringness of patriarchy is just another distortion. Defenders of the status quo often insist that it is importantly "ordered" or

[47] To be clear, when we expect history to be otherwise, we expect the human collective (not, somehow, *history itself)* to meet our expectations. There are a few ways to precisify this, as an expectation of each particular member of the collective, an expectation of all members of the human collective generally, or an expectation of the collective as such (see a helpful overview of these possible objects of attitudes in White 2025, sec. 2.2-2.3). I suspect it is somewhat common that we form and express expectations of the human collective. Consider disappointment in humans in general for failing to address anthropogenic climate change, for failing to secure a less violent world order, or for failing to protect democracy. These forms of disappointment indicate normative expectations that we do a better job of these things.

[48] The helpful idea of the "evaluative significance of the shape of history" comes from Masny 2025, who offers his own account of this significance. I don't mean to take a stance on what explains the evaluative significance of the shape of history; I merely want to take on board the intuitive idea that it has significance.

[49] Scheffler 2013; Scheffler 2018

"right," features which are often treated as aesthetic baseline qualities that pave the way for more complex evaluations: harmony, naturalness, balance, effortlessness.[50] Manifestations of our allegedly essential natures are "invisible, glorious, glamorous, and normal," and their persistence and reemergence is "just the way things are."[51] In addition to challenging the idealogue's beliefs and actions, ideology critics must challenge this aesthetic presentation. Instead of viewing hierarchical societies as naturally balanced, the ideology critic insists that they are in fact *dis*ordered, that they "look wrong" or "feel wrong", paving the way for complex evaluations like dull, wearying, and boring. Instead of pleasantly lulling us into acceptance of the ordered world, oppressive systems criticizably bore us by limiting the human stories of which we can be a part.

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There is, of course, much more to say about the nature of this disvalue and its role in feminist and broadly anti-oppressive politics. For all I've said, only a particular way of conceiving of boringness, and its relationship to attention, permits us to criticize oppression in this way. Even if this is so, I certainly do not mean to suggest that our strongest reasons for resisting oppression are aesthetic ones. Nor does this mean that all manifestations of oppression are aesthetically disvaluable. Some sexist movies are innovative, some racist jokes are funny, and some exercises of domination manage to be creative. The point is that oppression tends to give rise to repetitive patterns at the highest level of social organization. To notice this persistence and not find it boring is to miss something.[52]

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[50] Leddy 2005, 8–9 discusses these aesthetic qualities.

[51] MacKinnon 1987, 52. The ideological phrase "just the way things are" appears frequently in MacKinnon's writing, along with various other aesthetic contrasts that reflect the perspectives of the idealogue and the ideology critic. Perhaps most dramatically, she describes the ideological presentation of pornography as a "harmonious and balanced place" in which the sexes are "perfectly complementary": "[w]omen's desire to be fucked by men is equal to men's desire to fuck women" (MacKinnon 1987, 171–72).

[52] Compare Moller 2014, 183's remarks: "It may be true that to the sufficiently fertile mind there will always be a nearby source of interest, but this is just changing the subject, not establishing that the lecture or music itself is not boring—just the opposite, since the shift in focus is motivated by and thus confirms the presence of the

If part of oppression's badness lies in its boringness, we can make sense of some ways we act out against it. Theorists of boredom point out its close relationship to restlessness and normative delinquency.[53] Boredom is an "unpleasant state during which one experiences not only weariness and fatigue but also frustration and irritability."[54] The sense that I *must* do something (wait in line, finish my dissertation) – even if it is an end I've set for myself previously – instills an unease that manifests in a desire for rebellion. That the activities we use to escape boredom are often not themselves meaningful underscores the point: boredom arises when we are forced to comply with normative requirements, so eschewing requirements becomes attractive. As Calhoun writes, "the satisfaction of the escape resides in one's refusing to do (at least temporarily) the has-to-be-done that bores."[55] Unlike apathy, boredom "is not a state of resignation or motivational loss: when bored we have not given up; rather, we are strongly motivated to escape our situation".[56] The fittingly bored are thus not inactive. They are desperate to bring about something new.

Discussions of boredom focus mostly on its tendency to lead to rebellion against legitimate normative systems, but I think the point applies just as well to the "should" of compliance with oppressive norms. The has-to-be-doneness of say, performing the gender one is assigned at birth, may engender restless friction among those critical enough to notice its force. Becca and other victims of gendered harassment may feel suffocated by the sense that this kind of treatment is "just the way things are". One feels stifled by norms of systems which have been in place far into the past, and which threaten to remain in place long into the future. For these

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boring". To take interest in a particular, creative catcall is just to locate a source of interest next door to the big, boring, sexist system of which it is a part.

[53] Calhoun 2011; Yao 2015. As Elpidorou 2023, 695 summarizes, the volitional content of boredom can be "best understood as the imperative 'Do something else!' without however specifying what that something else is exactly."

[54] Elpidorou and Gibson 2022, 202

[55] Calhoun 2011, 272

[56] Elpidorou and Gibson 2022

reasons, we should say something different about the bored delinquent of patriarchy and the bored delinquent of, say, instrumental rationality. The dissatisfaction of the former may trade on a rich understanding of what, exactly, is troubling about our social world.

IV. Conclusion

We can now return to the question posed at the beginning of the paper. When aesthetic critics reach for charges of corniness and boringness, rather than wrongness, to describe aspects of their social worlds, does this necessarily reflect a poorly calibrated response to this wrongness? I've insisted that, if aesthetic critics are "missing something", it is not because *they* criticizably fail to respond to their social worlds; rather, it is sometimes because *those social worlds* have deprived them of opportunities for effective and responsive moral resistance. Aesthetic critiques are effective, responsive strategies for navigating precisely this. While not typically the stuff of revolutions or dramatic confrontations, they permit oppressed persons to respond to agential threats, and to slip free of constraints imposed by restrictive interactions.[57]

I've also suggested that, even when aesthetic critics are not trapped in restrictive interactions, their complaints may articulate a desire to slip free of objectionably boring human narratives. As Vivian Gornick dramatizes the stakes of this impulse in her introduction to Solanas's *Manifesto:* absent a revolution, "human beings remain in the death grip of truths which long outlive themselves, and the history of the [human] race is a history of the painful waste of life."[58] Some aesthetic critiques help us appreciate persisting injustice as not only a moral

[57] See Scott 1985's discussion of forms of "everyday" peasant resistance which "require[d] little or no coordination or planning," and "typically avoid[ed] any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority" (xvi).
[58] Gornick 1970, xxxiv

outrage but also an utter bore. Through such complaints, we express a desire to be a part of a human story which is genuinely worth telling.

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