



Introduction to Humorous Disruptions: Humour and Technologies of Disruption in Feminist Media Theory and Practice

Desirée de Jesús, Rachel Webb Jekanowski and Tess McClernon

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In this issue, we explore the ways in which humour operates as a disruptive feminist technology in film, television, and digital platforms. Considering the rise of feminist humour studies and the contemporary popularity of comedic feminist web series which have crossed over to television—such as that of Issa Rae, whose current HBO show *Insecure* (2016 -) follows in the wake of her popular web series *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011-2013), as well as Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson’s *Broad City* (2009-2011) (2014 -) —this specially themed issue enters into an important conversation about the historical humorous interventions of women and feminists in film and visual media, and contextualizes more recent projects in contemporary cultural debates. When we first announced this thematic focus, we were asked whether feminism could be funny, and about the timing and importance of this topic for a journal about film and the moving image. These questions invoke a common misperception about the cultural economy of humour, in which contributions by women are more likely to be disregarded by popular or mainstream audiences who consider the comedy of (frequently white) men to be more “universal” than the work of cis-gendered women, queer individuals, and people of colour (Krefting 2014). Following Jo Anna Isaak’s declaration that women’s laughter can indeed be revolutionary (Isaak 1996), the field of feminist humour studies has defended humour’s status as an often overlooked form of feminist intervention, with all of its complex manifestations through irony, parody, play, and the carnivalesque. We would extend this one step further, to argue for feminist humour’s potential as a disruptive technology, transforming the ways in which scholars and practitioners communicate feminist ideas and disrupt cultural economies of humour. Such scholarship draws attention to the ways in which understandings of the term “feminist” can be complicated and change over time, between bodies of theory, and through different forms of media and comedy. Moreover, scholars within this burgeoning field have also attended to matters of difference and a range of postfeminist positions, particularly in relation to comedic work and the authorship of contemporary figures like Mindy Kaling and Amy Schumer. Thus, for film and moving image studies, this question of the “usefulness” or “timeliness” of feminist humour provides avenues for considering how the determination of who and what can be funny, as well as the construction of alternate networks for the development and circulation of creative content, are inherently political. The ways in

which these considerations are interrogated in this issue's three articles differ in terms of methodologies, objects of study, and engagement with women's comedy and feminisms; collectively, however, they all speak to the disruptive and potential of feminist humour for mainstream cultures.

Kirsten Leng's article "When Politics Were Fun: Recovering a History of Humour in U.S. Feminism" opens this issue by calling for a sustained reconsideration of feminist media's rich and diverse histories. Drawing on extensive archival research, Leng traces a history of several American feminist practices from the twentieth century, from political performances and material artefacts including feminist zines. This approach, she asserts, enables scholars to use "humour as a focal point through which to narrate feminist history," thereby providing tools for the "recovery of neglected and marginalized voices" within both media history and studies of political action (Leng 1, this issue). By pulling these acts of disruptive performance, parody, and satire from feminist media archives, this essay contributes to the writing of feminist humour's history; a history which helped lay the cultural and political groundwork for many contemporary female artists, media-makers, and comedians in the United States and Global North.

In "'Shame Yourself': 1950s American Television and the Discreet Disruptions of Gertrude Berg," Paul Babiak argues for a reconsideration of the work of comedian, writer, and performer Gertrude Berg, the creative force behind the American radio-turned-television serial *The Goldbergs* (1949-1957). Babiak proposes that Berg's comedy, as well as her character Molly Goldberg, function as a proto-feminist form of humour that relies upon the rhetorical strategy of "discreet disruptions," along with modes of audience address and playful uses of Yiddish language. These discreet disruptions, he claims, are disguised by the show's ethnic Jewish humour yet they also strive to create a distinctly feminine comedic subjectivity for Berg's performance. In his recuperation of Berg as a proto-feminist figure, Babiak's article contributes to conversations about whether cultural and media scholars still require feminism, and how studies of creative women like Berg who do not explicitly identify as feminist contribute to ongoing inquiries into women's authorship, humour, and modes of socio-political disruption through mainstream media platforms.

The third article in the peer reviewed section moves from women media-makers and theories of disruptive humour within the American context, to an argument for the continued relevancy and necessity of feminist film analysis within contemporary film studies. In "The Acoustic Screen: The Dynamics of the Female Look and Voice in Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin*," Najmeh Moradian Rizi proposes a feminist reading of the representations of Iranian women in *Shirin* (2008) and the ways in which the film's cinematic form and aesthetics situate women's subjectivities in relation to Iranian literary culture and society. By adopting this approach, Rizi demonstrates the continued timeliness of feminist film inquiry as a methodology. Although each author takes up a different media technology and engagement with feminism, all three articles reveal and celebrate the potential of women's disruptive and creative forces, and outline some of the potential lines of inquiry for future scholarship in feminist humour studies.

As part of our exploration of these important issues, we gathered feminist and critical race scholars together to discuss contemporary strategies for combatting oppression and building solidarities through humour. The resulting two-day colloquium last October, "Humorous > Disruptions: Laughter and Technologies of Disruption in Feminist Film and Media" encouraged conversations about art and pedagogy, with an emphasis on the interrelationship between

practice and thought.¹ With two roundtables, three themed panels, and a lively media exhibition, scholars and artists from around North America traveled to Montreal to share their experiences and work. The first roundtable, “Knowledge Production and Pedagogy,” brought together professors from varying disciplines, including gender studies, cultural studies, education, and film and media studies. Their diverse perspectives resulted in a productive dialogue between participants and attendees; from Virginia Woolf, to video games, to sexploitation cinema, each speaker drew upon a rich history of women intervening through humour. Further, we learned that for those in teaching positions, experimentation with humour also serves as a powerful pedagogical tool and methodology. The first day of the colloquium concluded with an exciting media exhibition that brought together a collection of video and online games, animation, and short films, among other examples of art created for and by feminists.² Each work registered affective and humorous engagements with race, gender, cybernetics and the body.

The second roundtable, “Performing Praxis,” sought to bring together scholars and practitioners to consider the divide between the academy and creative labour. Our goal was to participate in building dialogues across the apparent separation between feminist media practices and academic study; a division many feminists feel mirrors cultural biases against women aligning more broadly. Indeed, through a discussion that took us from television sitcoms about women in the corporate sphere to the lived experiences and resistance of First Nations women, we interrogated spaces that perpetuate alienation between women of varying backgrounds, as well as ways we might move forward by using humour as a guiding mechanism. Similarly, our panelists presented cutting-edge research on humour as it is used in various media and socio-historical contexts, including experimental feminist cinema, the particularities demanded of women performing stand-up comedy, and the ways in which techno-labour interacts with the gendered body.

Through our work organizing the colloquium and media exhibition, the five of us—including Julia Huggins and Vanessa Meyer—discovered that hosting and organizing a feminist colloquium proved to be as much of a learning experience as the knowledge shared by participants. Rather than prioritize our respective research on feminisms, we approached the development of the colloquium’s theme and the curation of the feminist media exhibition as our intervention into the field. We hoped the event would challenge some of our basic tenets of the relation between feminism and humour, and serve as a pedagogical tool. The ideas and perspectives brought forth by our presenters provoked diverse responses, and we are pleased to share two conference reviews that address the urgent and continued necessity of hosting feminist colloquia. In “This is Not a Joke,” Aditi Ohri and Xander Selene argue for critical praxis using humour, and the radicality of resistance from the outside, in positions that are not supported by art or academic institutions. Jillian Vasko offers a second perspective on the roundtable in “Medusa’s Laugh: Relief or Resistance?”, proposing that the three talks offer a dialectic of humour’s cathartic and revolutionary potential in the face of patriarchal and racial oppression. Taken together, these reviews illuminate the importance of creating feminist spaces of exchange and listening inside and outside of the academy.

¹ A complete description of the Humorous > Disruptions colloquium, including biographies of the roundtable and panel participants, is available online at: <http://www.humorousdisruptions.ca/>.

² For more information on the pieces showcased in the curated media exhibition and artists, please see: <http://www.humorousdisruptions.ca/exhibition/>.

The journal issue concludes with a collection of book reviews and a conference report, which likewise take up humour, feminism, and gender across popular media. The first book review is by Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon in which he offers a critical reading of *Film and Games: Interactions* (2016), an exhibition catalogue published by the Deutsches Filminstitut in Germany. *Film and Games* offers an edited collection of articles by journalists, critics, and scholars addressing interrelations between videogames, digital media, and cinema as both aesthetic and cultural forms. Next, Kristi Kouchakji reviews Jean Bruce and Gerda Cammaer's *Forbidden Love: A Queer Film Classic* (2015) in "Reading for Knowledge and Pleasure: Re-evaluating *Forbidden Love*." This monograph is the first scholarly account of Lynne Fernie and Aerlyn Weismann's 1992 Canadian film, which sought to document the lived experiences of lesbians living in urban centres like Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. Kouchakji argues that despite the book's valuable scholarly contributions and political stance, the book becomes mired in its own identity politics around queer readership and spectatorship. In "Watching Gender Through an Austere Lens," Lisa Aalders reviews Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker's edited compilation *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity* (2014), which similarly engages with gender and identity through cinema and television. Aalders evaluates the extent to which *Gendering the Recession* analyses how the 2007-2008 economic collapse and recession reflected upon and dynamically reshaped gender in American, British, and Irish popular culture and media, particularly in relation to postfeminist and affluent femininities.

Finally, Jake Bagshaw's review of the tenth Max and Iris Stern International Symposium, which took place at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MAC) in April, 2016. In his symposium review, entitled "Sans Blague/No Joke: The Matter of Humour in Contemporary Art," Bagshaw focuses on the tensions created between the presentations made by visual and performance artists and the more conventional academic presentations which preceded them. He also situates the symposium's theme of comedy and art within gallery spaces in relation to two art exhibitions at the MAC, *Ragnar Kjartansson* and *Ryan Gander: Make every show like it's your last*, which coincided with the symposium. Bagshaw argues that despite the symposium's internal tensions, the event serves as an example of both the emerging academic interest in humour studies and comedy's uses within the gallery, and a disjuncture between practitioners of comedic performance and those scholars seeking to theorize it.

We would like to conclude our introduction on an optimistic note. As emerging scholars, we understand the often unfair and unequal demands placed upon women intellectuals, teachers, and creative labourers. We are all the more honoured, then, to thank the participants, artists, authors, and editorial staff who dedicated their time, creative energies, and research to make this issue possible. We hope the colloquium and journal issue will contribute to the ongoing work of creating spaces for feminist interventions, and offer another platform for the public discussion that feminist theory and media practices require and demand.

Desirée de Jesús, Rachel Webb Jekanowski, and Tess McClernon are doctoral candidates in Film and Moving Image Studies at Concordia University. Julia Huggins recently completed her Master's degree in Film Studies, and Vanessa Meyer is a doctoral candidate in Communication Studies, also at Concordia University.

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