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

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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 Moradiyan 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.

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When Politics Were Fun: Recovering a History of Humour in U.S. Feminism

Kirsten Leng

Abstract:

Based on archival research, scholarship from the emerging field of Feminist Humour Studies, and engagements with feminist and poststructuralist theory, in this article I make the case for recovering a history of humour in feminism, with a focus on 20th century US-based feminist practices. I argue that retrieving evidence of feminist humour—whether as political performance (street protests, “zaps”) or cultural artefacts (comics, music, plays, polemical texts)—enables scholars to re-imagine feminism and its past, and opens up new ways of thinking about both. Using humour as a focal point through which to narrate feminist history allows for a recovery of neglected and marginalized voices from the feminist past. In so doing, humour facilitates a redrawing of the conceptual map that informs prevailing narratives about feminism and its history. Furthermore, engaging humour opens up new lines of inquiry for future researchers, including an investigation of how feminists’ engagements with humour—and the new, subversive realities they engendered—helped shape feminist attitudes, subjectivities, and communities over the course of generations.

Keywords: activism; Guerrilla Girls; COYOTE; Flo Kennedy; humour; feminism.

“Comedians are leading the feminist movement,” declared a March 2015 article on the website *mic.com*. Citing much-lauded examples like Amy Poehler, Jessica Williams, Kristen Schaal and Amy Schumer, the article took stock of contemporary female comedians’ growing commitment to broaching issues such as pay equity and reproductive rights in mainstream media, and remarked upon their powerful influence in shaping generational attitudes. According to the article’s author Marcie Bianco, Poehler et al. have come to occupy a vaunted place as champions of gender equality because “comedy can make feminism more palatable and accessible to a general public weary of a movement marred by stereotypes of ‘man-haters.’”¹

¹ Marcie Bianco, “Comedians Are Leading the Feminist Movement--And Here’s What That Says About Us,” *mic.com*, 20 March 2015, <http://mic.com/articles/113262/comedians-are-leading-the-feminist-movement-and-here-s-what-that-says-about-us>. It is worth noting that, later in the article, Bianco argues that the success of feminist humour may also have a dark side: namely, that it might reflect a growing intolerance towards women’s anger and “seriousness,” a denial of women’s articulation of interiority,

Bianco was not alone in her praise of feminist comedians in 2015. In the wake of the critically acclaimed third season of *Inside Amy Schumer*, the blockbuster success of Schumer's romantic comedy *Trainwreck* (2015), the growing popularity of Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer's *Broad City* (2014-present), and Melissa McCarthy's surprise action hit *Spy* (2015), think-pieces and op-eds on the power and seeming omnipresence of funny feminists abounded.² Many of these articles treated feminist humour as a wholly unprecedented phenomenon, or at best gave mention to a handful of "pioneers"—usual suspects like Joan Rivers, Carol Burnett, and Roseanne Barr. Bianco was rare among journalists in arguing that "throughout modern history, women have used humour as one of their most incisive tools against misogyny"; and yet, the examples she provided (Gilda Radner, Jane Curtain, Lucille Ball, and Marla Gibbs) again came from the mainstream pop culture canon.³

As a scholar who studies the history of feminist theory and activism, I have been intrigued by such commentary. On the one hand, I am heartened by the seeming explosion of contemporary feminist comedy, as its varied manifestations offer exciting interventions into what are, unfortunately, perennial debates. On the other hand, I cannot help but think that this moment actually recapitulates a longstanding yet elided tendency among feminists to draw upon humour as a mode of political activism and community formation. Working backwards from the present, one can point to a range of individuals and events from the worlds of professional comedy and activism, including: "third wave" zines; alternative comics like Janeane Garofalo and Margaret Cho; 1980s woman-centered sitcoms like *Murphy Brown* (1988), *Kate and Allie* (1984), and *The Golden Girls* (1985); Whoopi Goldberg's "Live on Broadway" performances and Lily Tomlin's

subjectivity, and self-reflection, and a displacement of energy from legal and policy-oriented remedies for sexual inequality.

² See, for example Rachel Sugar, "2015: The Year Women Took Over the Comedy Box Office," *splitsider.com*, 29 December 2015, <http://splitsider.com/2015/12/2015-the-year-women-took-over-the-comedy-box-office/>; Melena Ryzik, "The Sneaky Power of Amy Schumer, in 'Trainwreck' and Elsewhere," *New York Times*, 8 July 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/movies/the-sneaky-power-of-amy-schumer-in-trainwreck-and-elsewhere.html>; Nick Clark, "Edinburgh Fringe 2015: Stand up if you think women are the punk rock of comedy," *The Independent*, 9 August 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/comedy/features/edinburgh-fringe-2015-male-comedians-in-short-supply-this-year-says-never-mind-the-buzzcocks-star-10447601.html>; Katy Brand, "Next time you're called a 'humourless feminist'? Bust out one of these gags," *The Telegraph*, 9 January 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11334955/Feminist-jokes-to-prove-women-have-a-sense-of-humour.html>; Emily Nussbaum, "The Little Tramp: The Raucous Feminist Humour of 'Inside Amy Schumer,'" *The New Yorker*, 11 May 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/11/the-little-tramp>. Intriguingly, these articles appeared contemporaneously with others that noted that women's progress in primetime TV has stalled since the 1990s and early 2000s. (See: Megh Wright, "Women's Progress in Primetime TV Has Stalled Since the 2000s, According to Study," *splitsider.com*, 15 September 2015, <http://splitsider.com/2015/09/womens-progress-in-primetime-tv-has-stalled-since-the-2000s-according-to-study/>, and Nell Scovell, "The 'Golden Age for Women in TV' is Actually a Rerun," *New York Times*, 12 September 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/opinion/sunday/the-golden-age-for-women-in-tv-is-actually-a-rerun.html>) and documented widespread discrimination against women behind the camera in the film and television industry (see: Maureen Dowd, "The Women of Hollywood Speak Out," *New York Times*, 20 November 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/magazine/the-women-of-hollywood-speak-out.html>).

³ Bianco, "Comedians Are Leading the Feminist Movement--And Here's What That Says About Us."

one-woman shows; self-proclaimed “fumerist” (feminist humourist) Kate Clinton; feminist journals like *On Our Backs*; events like the Southern Women’s Music and Comedy Festival; the Lavender Menace Zap at the May 1970 Meeting of the National Organization for Women (NOW); Karla Jay’s 1970 Wall Street “Ogle-In”; the 1968 Miss America Pageant Protests; path-breaking stand-up performer Jackie “Moms” Mabley; and “first wave” feminist satirical short stories and plays that highlighted the absurdities of misogyny.

The plethora of examples provided above—and these just scratch the surface—reveal that humour has long pervaded feminist politics, culture, and activism, contrary to the incredible amnesia (or perhaps willful ignorance?) that prevails when it comes to acknowledging the presence of humour in feminist activism. To combat the recurring erasure of humour from feminism, in this article I make a case for recovering a history of humour in feminism, with a specific focus on US-based feminism from the 1960s onwards. In what follows, I argue that retrieving evidence of feminist humour—whether in the form of political activism (street protests, “zaps”) or cultural artefacts (comics, music, plays)—enables scholars to re-imagine and rewrite prevailing narratives about feminism and its past. Furthermore, engaging humour opens up new lines of inquiry for future researchers, including an investigation of how humour helped shape feminist attitudes, subjectivities, and communities over the course of generations.

In pursuing a history of humour in feminism, I seek to contribute both to the young and dynamic field of Humour Studies, and to the more established historiography on US-based feminism. This project fills notable gaps in both fields. Only relatively recently have scholars in Humour Studies begun to investigate the roles women, gender, and sexuality play in comedy and humour;⁴ investigations into humour’s political potential for feminism are even more recent.⁵ Very few of the existing studies of gender, sexuality, and humour have adopted an historical

⁴ Classics and soon-to-be classics of the field include Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Regina Barreca, *They used to call me Snow White—but I drifted: Women’s Strategic Use of Humor* (New York: Viking, 1991); Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), and Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004). Intriguingly, Mary Ritter Beard, the pioneering feminist historian and co-founder of the Sophia Smith Collection (Smith College) and Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America (Radcliffe College), found the subject of women and humour important enough to co-edit, with Martha Bensley Bruère, a book on it: *Laughing Their Way: Women’s Humor in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).

⁵ Here I am referring primarily to cultural studies of feminist humour, such as Linda Mizejewski’s *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), and Domnica Radulescu’s *Women’s Comedic Art as Social Revolution: Five Performers and the Lessons of their Subversive Humor* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2012). Indeed, the field of “Feminist Humour Studies” is incredibly recent. See Kathryn Kein, “Recovering Our Sense of Humor: New Directions in Feminist Humor Studies,” *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 3 (2015): 671-681. Humour has played a fleeting role within feminist theory: rare, notable examples include Donna Haraway’s celebration of irony as a tool in “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181, and Hélène Cixous’ reflections on the revolutionary power of women’s laughter as refusal in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976), 875-893.

perspective, or have explicitly addressed the political.⁶ Meanwhile, histories of US-based feminism tend instead to focus on well documented and high profile activists, intellectuals, organizations, conferences, theories, and policy proposals; humour constitutes a marginal and under-examined presence.⁷ In writing a history of humour in feminism, I aim to highlight the diffuse yet undeniably generative “world-building” potential of (funny) feminist creativity. Moreover, I hope to demonstrate that neglecting the humorous impulse within feminism in favour of “serious politics” establishes a false binary: what’s funny is not necessarily frivolous.

To effectively and comprehensively search for humour in the feminist past, I argue that we ought to conceptualize feminism not only as a set of principles and political demands, but also as a practice. Here I am particularly indebted to the work of political theorist Linda Zerilli who, drawing on Hannah Arendt, proposed an understanding of feminism as a practice of freedom realized in “world-building” action. In proposing this definition of feminism, Zerilli explicitly intended to counter “means-ends” or instrumentalist approaches that justified women’s freedom in the name of social justice, social utility, or social improvement.⁸ According to Zerilli, “If we value women’s freedom because it is useful in solving certain social problems, we may not value freedom when it interferes with social utility or when more expedient ways of reaching the same social results can be shown. Freedom disturbs the use of politics as a means to an end; it is always ‘out of order.’”⁹ Freedom, Zerilli asserts, inheres in action; echoing Simone de Beauvoir, she insists that “to be free is to be able to do.”¹⁰

Note here that Zerilli’s definition does not specify what the action is meant to achieve: the moment of doing is a moment of indeterminate transformation. Thus, for her “the problem of freedom for women...[is] a problem of transforming the conditions of the common world.”¹¹

⁶ An excellent example of these few is Sara Warner’s *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performances and the Politics of Pleasure* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), which focuses specifically on lesbian feminism. See also *Humour and Social Protest*, edited by Marjolein t’Hart and Dennis Bos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); this volume is a supplement of the *International Review of Social History*.

⁷ For histories of feminism focusing on the Women’s Liberation era, see for example Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000); Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: Delta, 1999); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); and Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage, 1980).

For histories of feminism that seek to challenge the “waves” narrative (which tends to favour white women’s experiences), see *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U. S. Feminism*, edited by Nancy A. Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010). For earlier histories, see Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Viking, 1983); Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); and Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman’s Rights Movement in the United States*, 3rd revised edition (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996).

⁸ Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

⁹ Zerilli, 9.

¹⁰ Zerilli, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Zerilli's emphasis on actions that seek to transform to "the world," that is, "the creation of the space in which things become public," further defines feminism as a specific kind of practice: a world-making practice involved in "publicly articulating matters of common concern."¹² The act of publicly articulating common concerns has the potential to forge new bonds of community, possibly even seeding the grounds for what scholars such as Nancy Fraser, José Esteban Muñoz, and Michael Warner have termed counterpublics.¹³

And yet, it is important to stress that the effects of these world-building actions cannot be controlled or known in advance, nor can their meaning be entirely determined by the actors involved. Zerilli cites Arendt directly to note that, "Whoever begins to act must know that he [sic] has started something whose end he can never foretell, if only because his own deed has already changed everything and made it even more unpredictable."¹⁴ For Zerilli, again following Arendt, the unpredictability and "boundlessness" of world-building practices are not to be feared: rather, they enable us to approach feminism "as a practice of freedom that is creative or inaugural."¹⁵ Framing feminism as a practice of freedom that is creative in turn allows a "potential role for imagination" as a "political faculty."¹⁶ In Zerilli's view, "Political claims rely on the ability to exercise imagination, to think from the standpoint of others, and in this way to posit universality and thus community. The universality of such claims depends on their being not epistemologically justified...but taken up by others, in ways that we can neither predict nor control, in a public space."¹⁷

In many ways, Zerilli's definition of feminism as a practice of freedom is congruent with the nature of humour as a practice. Humour—whether manifesting as irony, parody, satire, or carnivalesque play—is not explicitly means-end oriented. It may articulate matters of "common concern" (common to a particular community), but the intention belying the humorous act or creation cannot determine its reception and effects. Humorous acts mobilize the imagination to allow an audience member to view the world from a different perspective, and to envision and explore alternative ways of being and living. Indeed, it has become axiomatic within Humour Studies to argue that humour and the laughter it produces constitute moments of productive disruption that undermine authority and the status quo, however briefly.¹⁸ In so doing, humour can encourage the formation of new, albeit fragile, communities, and simultaneously affirm the value of those communities.¹⁹ It is within such communities that feminists may take care of their

¹² Zerilli, 15, 22.

¹³ See for example Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", *Social Text* 25, no. 26 (1990): 56–80; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

¹⁴ Zerilli, 14.

¹⁵ Zerilli, 23, 24.

¹⁶ Zerilli, 29.

¹⁷ Zerilli, 30.

¹⁸ Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 15. See also Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett, "The Seriously Erotic Politics of Laughter: Bitches, Whores and Other Fumerists," in *Philosophical Feminism and Popular Culture*, edited by Sharon Crasnow and Joanne Waugh, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 23-24.

¹⁹ Willett and Willett, 24.

political selves: after all, as Jo Anna Isaak points out, “Laughter is first and foremost a communal response” that produces “sensuous solidarity.”²⁰ Furthermore, while humorous acts may be highly contingent in terms of their impact and effects, contingency is “the condition of world-creating and world-building power,” as Zerilli pointed out vis-à-vis feminism.

In light of the many traits feminism and humour as practices share in common, I maintain that exploring their interrelationship offers new avenues for scholarly work. Specifically, approaching feminism as a practice—one oriented towards freedom and world-building—and examining the role that humorous acts, texts, and performances played in animating this practice opens up feminism’s past to new narratives. It enables scholars to re-evaluate which actors and organizations have been scripted as protagonists in feminism’s past, to re-plot the sites where feminism happened, and to reassess what feminism’s “successes” and “failures” have been. Asking these questions anew allows scholars to de-centre both the well-heeled, bureaucratized feminism of the National Organization of Women, and the highly educated yet fractious feminism of the myriad Women’s Liberation organizations. Furthermore, it facilitates the recovery of neglected and marginalized voices, as well as an accounting of the full extent of feminism’s expressions and social, cultural, and political locations. Much in the way that historians such as Dorothy Sue Cobble and Paula Giddings productively disrupted feminist narratives contoured by the political activities and experiences of white middle class American women by highlighting the activities of working women, union activists, and African American women, using humour as an organizing principle requires that scholars re-map the feminist past and move away from histories whose plots are anchored by purportedly “central” organizations, intellectuals, and activists.²¹

I write this article in the thick of research, and in the midst of discovering the archives’ depths and limits. Given the slipperiness of my central research terms, in its earliest stages my project required an open inductive approach—and a lot of faith in archivists’ judgment regarding what constitutes evidence of humour within feminism. I have combed through the papers of feminist organizations, activists, writers, performers, and artists housed in archives across the United States, and have focused on groups and individuals active from the 1960s to the present.²² In the course of investigating varied and surprising sources, I am discovering the diversity of feminists’ use of humour across a range of media, places, and spaces, as well as recurring patterns in its deployment. Slowly, the rich tapestry of humour within feminism is coming into view.

²⁰ Isaak, 5. Willett and Willett further argue that humour can underwrite a feminist “erotic politics of laughter and joy (17).

²¹ See Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), and Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984).

²² Thus far, I have visited the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society of Northern California; the Sophia Smith Collection: Women’s History Archives at Smith College; the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America; the New York Public Library Archives and Manuscripts Division; Fales Library at New York University; and the Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture at Duke University. Forthcoming visits are planned to UCLA’s Special Collections, the June Mazer Lesbian Archives in West Hollywood, the Getty Institute, and the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn. Suggestions for areas of further research are most welcome.

Some examples drawn from my own research in progress suggest the breadth of humour's manifestations within feminism, and the kinds of voices that can be restored to feminism's history. Beyond the myriad feminist performers and events mentioned at the outset of this article, humour draws attention to overlooked groups such as COYOTE, an early sex workers' rights organization founded in San Francisco in 1973. The group eventually grew beyond San Francisco to establish branches throughout the United States and develop relationships with sex workers' rights groups in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the

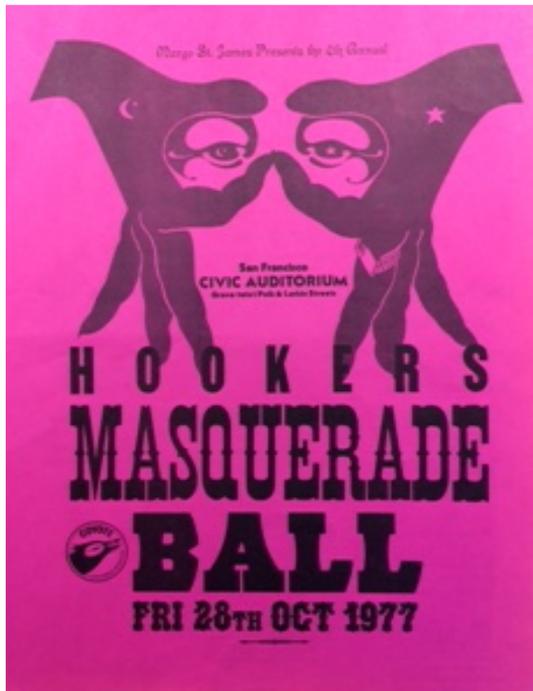


Fig. 1 Advertisement for the 1977 Hookers' Masquerade Ball in San Francisco.

Courtesy of COYOTE Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

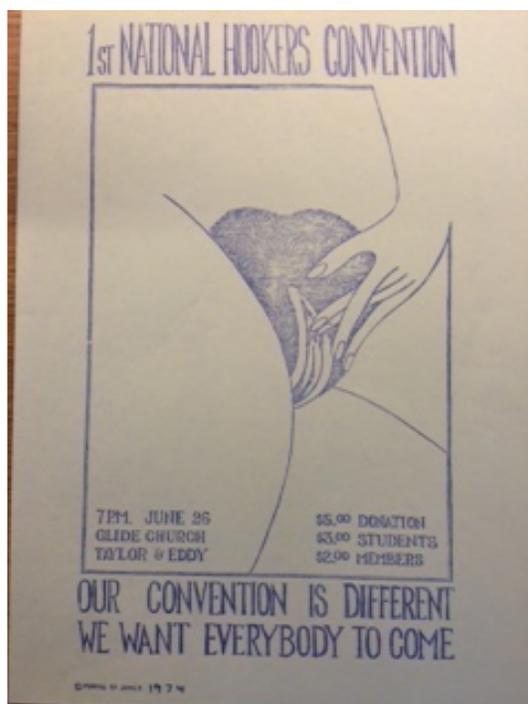


Fig. 2 Flyer for 1st National Hookers Convention, 1974.

Courtesy of COYOTE Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

Netherlands. It also forged alliances with prisoners' rights groups, LGBT groups, anti-pornography groups, the Feminist Party, and, perhaps most surprising, the Wages For Housework movement. COYOTE, which stood for "Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics," described itself in its early promotional literature as "A Loose Woman's Organization."²³ Led by former sex worker Margo St. James, COYOTE cultivated a wide network of sex workers, intellectuals, celebrities, and journalists through its exuberant activism. COYOTE produced cheeky publications like "Coyote Howls" and "Tricks Comics" (illustrated by R. Crumb); hosted International Hookers' Film Festivals; supported theatrical performances such as "The Annie Sprinkle Story" and Carol Leigh's performances as "Scarlot Harlot"; organized National Hooker Conventions, which combined policy workshops with music and comedy performances; held annual Hooker's Masquerade Balls, which advertised themselves as "the social event of the year for heterosexuals, bisexuals, trisexuals, transsexuals, nonsexuals, and other sexual minorities who feel they are discriminated against"; and launched the Florida-based "Kiss and Tell" campaigns that called out hypocritical sexually conservative politicians.

As suggested by its self-description, its explicit and playful use of the terms "hooker" and "tricks," its appeal to comics and theater as modes of public communication and representation, and especially its adoption of the masquerade ball as a key tool for fundraising and political awareness, COYOTE deployed a carnivalesque approach to its activism that mocked and inverted hegemonic sexual morality. COYOTE refused not only the politics of shame, but also the politics of respectability; instead, it celebrated sexual minorities and plurality, and flipped existing narratives by highlighting the perversity and inequities involved in policing sex work. COYOTE was especially attuned to double standards when it came to evaluating and policing sex; to this end, it announced that the inaugural theme of the Hooker's Masquerade Ball was "No Hippo-Critters Allowed." Likewise, COYOTE drew attention to racial and class biases in prostitution law enforcement, and insisted on a view of sex work as *work*, not as crime. Arguably, COYOTE's carnivalesque activism aimed to challenge the frame surrounding public discourse on prostitution, and specifically to undermine the false moralism that justified harsh police crackdowns. It also championed the sex workers' agency, underlining their ability to make decisions on their own behalf. Furthermore, it sought to combat a view of sex as dirty and base, and to celebrate sexual pleasure as inalienable to the human experience. As stated on the flyer for the 1st National Hooker's Convention, COYOTE's sexual politics were "different": "We want everyone to come."

Perhaps a more famous example of funny feminism is the Guerrilla Girls, a collective of pseudonymous artists, academics, and art world professionals whose provocative and playful posters took on sexism and racism in the art world and beyond beginning in 1985. From the outset, humour was an intentional mode of intervention for the "Girls." In an interview in *Guerrilla Girls Talk Back* (1991), "Louise the Poster Girl" stated, "[m]aking point blank demands won't necessarily change a thing...Making demands are the tactics of the 70s and let's face it, they didn't really work very well. So we decided to try another way: humour, irony,

²³ Coyote Records, 1962-1989 (81-M32—90-M1), Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

intimidation, and poking fun.”²⁴ To wit, in their Mission Statement the Guerrilla Girls state that they

are a group of women artists, writers, performers, filmmakers and arts professionals who fight discrimination. Dubbing ourselves the conscience of culture, we declare ourselves feminist counterparts to the mostly male tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hood, Batman, and the Lone Ranger. We wear gorilla masks to focus on the issues rather than our personalities. We use humour to convey information, provoke discussion, and show that feminists can be funny. In 14 years we have produced over 70 posters, printed projects, and actions that expose sexism and racism in the art world and the culture at large. Our work has been passed around the world by kindred spirits who consider themselves Guerrilla Girls too. The mystery surrounding our identities has attracted attention and support. We could be anyone; we are everywhere.²⁵

Over the years, the Guerrilla Girls toured nationally and internationally, collaborated with groups like ACT UP, and even did fundraising with female comedians.

Although in recent years the Guerrilla Girls have been more likely to organize and feature in art exhibits than to critique them, in their early years they plastered aesthetically arresting posters throughout New York City that raised provocative questions about racial and gender inequalities in the art world, and about the economic consequences of these inequalities. In addition to a crisp, pop art style, the posters deployed dark humour to express the Girls’ “outsider within” perspective on cultural politics.²⁶ For example, a 1990 poster satirized the tokenistic approach to diversity that prevailed in the art world (and broader culture) through a “Pop Quiz,” which asked: “If February is Black History Month and March is Women’s History Month, what happens the rest of the year?” The answer: “Discrimination.” Over time, the Girls developed a distinctive iconography through such posters that melded aesthetics and politics.

Humorous politics seem especially pronounced among queer feminist activists such as the fire-eating Lesbian Avengers, founded by Ana Simo, Sarah Schulman, Maxine Wolfe, Anne-Christine d’Adesky, Marie Honan, and Anne Maguire in New York in 1992. Like COYOTE, the Lesbian Avengers were active on a range of issues, including police violence, prison abuse, immigration, anti-abortion violence, anti-WTO economic activism, and gay adoption; they also developed alliances with groups such as the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, ACT UP, Camp Sister Spirit, and the Coalition for Women in Prison. Also like COYOTE, the Lesbian Avengers established branches across the United States. The San Francisco branch of the Avengers described itself as “A direct action group of lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered women focused on issues vital to our survival and visibility” founded “on the principle that dykes have been doing social activism for decades but almost never specifically on our own behalf... The Avengers was born out of the need for a political group *of dykes working for dykes*.” In their promotional literature, the Avengers made clear that, “We like dramatic, sexy, media-savvy,

²⁴ Guerrilla Girls Archive, 1985-2010 (MSS 274), Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The language of the Outsider Within is borrowed from Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (Oct.-Dec., 1986): S14-S32.

GUERRILLA GIRLS' POP QUIZ.

Q. If February is Black History Month and March is Women's History Month, what happens the rest of the year?

A. Discrimination.

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM GUERRILLA GIRLS CONSCIENCE OF THE ARTWORLD

Fig. 3 Guerrilla Girls, Pop Quiz, 1990. An updated version appeared in Minneapolis in 2016.

Copyright © Guerrilla Girls, courtesy of guerrillagirls.com.

humorous, in-your-face political action. We're pissed off and not interested in being good little girls. But we're also deadly serious about what we're doing for our survival and visibility."²⁷ The Lesbian Avengers are responsible not only for establishing the Dyke March but also taking on sexism and homophobia in both straight society—as witnessed by the San Francisco branch's "weenie roasts" in support of Lorena Bobbitt—and in the LGBT community, evidenced by the San Francisco branch's 1994 protest, "Castro on the Rag."²⁸ Other actions by the San Francisco branch included releasing crickets in the headquarters of Exodus International (known as the Day of the Locusts), protesting the Promise Keepers, singing Christmas carols in public spaces with new queer lyrics ("Come Out for the Holidays"), and mailing toilet paper to conservative former governor Pete Wilson in advance of his inauguration ("Flush Pete Campaign").

As suggested by the various actions mentioned above, the Avengers used a range of humorous techniques for diverse ends. The San Francisco branch's invocations of "weenies" and being "on the rag," for example, provided means to call out sexism and aggressively claim public space. The "weenie roast" served not only to support what the Avengers saw as Lorena Bobbitt's act of defiance and self-defence, but also to implicitly condemn the domestic abuse and marital rape that precipitated Bobbitt's actions. Meanwhile, putting "Castro on the Rag" both conjured a distinctively (cisgendered) female experience, and facetiously drew on the fearful associations between menstruation and female unruliness to highlight the Avengers' rage over the perceived misogyny that prevailed in a nominally lesbian-friendly space. The more light-hearted but equally political "Come Out for the Holidays" similarly endeavoured to draw attention to lesbian concerns while occupying public space ostensibly as carollers. Conversely, actions such as the Day of the Locusts literalized the prophetic threats and visions of homophobic conservative groups as a form of parody and carnivalesque reversal. Unleashing locust surrogates highlighted the absurdity of the homophobes' apocalyptic pronouncements, and demonstrated the Avengers' refusal to be victim to reactionary heterosexism. For the Avengers, then, humour served as a vehicle for playful yet hard-edged defiance.

²⁷ Lesbian Avengers Records (96-10), GLBT Historical Society of Northern California.

²⁸ Ibid.



Fig. 4 (Left) Flyer for Lesbian Avengers Fundraiser. Women's Action Coalition records. Manuscripts and Archives Division. The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

Fig. 5 (Right) Flyer for “Castro on the Rag” event. Courtesy of Lesbian Avengers Records, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

Beyond recovering overlooked organizations, looking for humour allows scholars to revisit pivotal yet elided historical actors. Florynce “Flo” Kennedy, for instance, has suffered incredible neglect within existing histories of feminism.¹ Although some scholars have dismissed Kennedy as a “minor key” in feminist politics, she uniquely helped bridge the gaps between radical (white) feminism, Black Power movements, and queer movements.² As Kennedy’s biographer Sherie Randolph has noted, Kennedy dedicated her life to fighting the interdependent injustices of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism. Kennedy’s politics were informed not only by her training as a lawyer, but also by her media savvy and penchant for street theatre. She organized numerous irreverent protests, including the 1968 Miss America protest in Atlantic City, NOW’s “Flush Colgate-Palmolive” demonstration against hiring discrimination that same year, and the “Pee-In on Harvard Yard” in 1973 to protest the lack of restroom facilities for

¹ The astounding neglect of Florynce Kennedy makes Sherie Randolph’s recent biography all the more welcome. See Sherie M. Randolph, *Florynce “Flo” Kennedy: The Life of a Black Feminist Radical* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

² Patricia Bradley, *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963-1975* (Jackson MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), 73.

female students.³ She infused all of these actions with joyful profanity and songs, such as “Tired Of Fuckers Fuckin’ Over Me.

Kennedy stressed the need for playful actions because she knew they would get media attention, and because she wanted “politics to be fun.”⁴ In Kennedy’s view, “the best way to recruit is to be having fun...[Other] people like to be dreary. I try to be as undreary as I can be.”⁵ As Randolph observed in her biography, “Kennedy hoped to make fighting for justice irresistibly pleasurable to organizers by emphasizing every moment of joy and humour that could be found in working together and defying an enemy... [H]er street performances at protests not only were meant to agitate and captivate the media and her adversaries but also were designed to inspire the demonstrators.”⁶ Randolph made a point to note that “Kennedy rejected the notion that comedy, especially in the hands of a woman, should be equated with a lack of seriousness. Like black women radicals Toni Cade Bambara and Queen Mother Moore, who were both known for their sarcastic wit, Kennedy made great use of laughter as a weapon and a shield.”⁷ Kennedy simultaneously participated in humorous street theatre and in more legibly political endeavours, such as providing legal counsel to Valerie Solanas, fighting in state courts to legalize abortion, and founding the Feminist Party in 1971, which supported Shirley Chisholm’s campaign for President of the United States.

Although feminist cultural products have not suffered the same neglect as the aforementioned feminist activists, not all aspects of feminist culture have been equally studied and celebrated. Looking for humour, my research has led me to (re)discover early third wave cultural phenomena and ephemera, some of which, such as zines, are only now slowly gaining

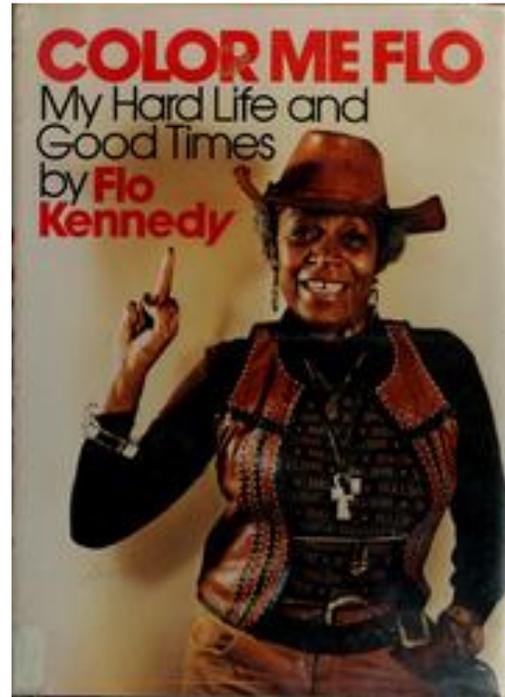


Fig. 6 Cover of Florynce “Flo” Kennedy’s 1976 autobiography, *Color Me Flo: My Hard Life and Good Times* (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976).

³ Irene Davall, “To Pee or Not to Pee, Sexism at Harvard,” *On the Issues Magazine Online*, Summer 1990, http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1990summer/summer1990_DAVALL.php.

⁴ Florence Kennedy, “It’s Damn Slick Out There,” interview with Sohnya Sayres, 347; cited in Randolph, 4.

⁵ Abby Karp, “Flo Kennedy,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 14, 1988; cited in Randolph, 153.

⁶ Randolph, 153-154. Randolph observes: “Part of what annoyed [Kennedy’s] adversaries and attracted some feminist followers was Kennedy’s privileging of satirical amusement and unleashed pleasure as part of her political actions.”

⁷ Randolph, 155.

traction as a focus of archival collection and scholarship.⁸ Two particular areas that have attracted my attention in the archives are music—specifically proto-riot grrl punk bands—and (queer) feminist cartoonists. Riot Grrl is not a phenomenon often associated with humour; here, the dominant affect is assumed to be anger. However, it is worth remembering that anger and humour are not antithetical: indeed, the aggression often associated with making jokes is precisely what has led many commentators to assert that women are not and cannot be funny. Moreover, effacing humour within Riot Grrl leads us to overlook the work of pioneering groups such as the Berkeley-based punk group the Yeastie Girlz, whose lyrics and iconography playfully and explicitly engaged female sexuality, pleasure, desire, and stereotypes. In their own words, the Yeastie Girlz saw themselves as “women who reject the way women and their bodies have been treated throughout time. We do not hate men, we only hope to educate and renew their ideas about women.”⁹ The Girlz toured in the United States and Europe with performers like Jello Biafra, Fugazi, Loveslug, and Sweet Baby Jesus. Founded in 1987, the band, which counted Cammie Toloui, Joyce Jiminez, Jane Guskin, Kate Rosenberger, and Wendy O Matik as members at various points in time, mined and mimicked the grotesquery and disgust associated with the female body and female sexuality. They explained their name as a “vaginal twist” on the Beastie Boys, and described their music as “vaginacore acapella rap.” Their band symbol was an androgynous smirking face underscored by two crossed tampons, and their album, *Ovary Action* (1988), featured songs as “You Suck,” “Sperm Brain,” “Orgasm Addict,” and “Fuck Yourself.” Their gig posters often featured photocopied close-up images of female genitalia, and they used tampon applicators as instruments in their performances. Judging by their fan mail, they developed a loyal fan base of women and men that extended beyond the United States into the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Spain, Canada, Australia, Japan, and even the Federated States of Micronesia. For many, the Girlz’s raunchy feminist take on sex and gender was central to their appeal. Arguably, they belong to a tradition of ludic feminist musicians such as Peaches, whose work and performance use explicit sex talk to parody the sexual abjection cast upon women’s bodies—and instead find power and pleasure there.

In comparison to feminist cartoonists, Riot Grrl and its predecessors have received considerable scholarly attention.¹⁰ Perhaps because of assumptions about cartoons and comics as “low” cultural forms, the long-standing association between feminism and cartooning—and particularly queer feminists and cartooning—has been woefully neglected. After the successful Broadway adaptation of her graphic novel/memoir *Fun Home* (2006)—as well as the incorporation of the now famous “Bechdel test” into the pop culture lexicon—Alison Bechdel

⁸ In the United States, see for example Barnard’s Zine Library, Rock! Paper! Scissors! Zine Library in Oakland, the West Coast Zine Collection at San Diego State University, DePaul University Zine Collection in Chicago, Hampshire College zine collection in Amherst, Olympia Zine Library in Olympia, Washington, and Zine Archive and Publishing Project in Seattle, Washington. For recent scholarship, see Janice Radway’s ongoing work on Girl Zines and Riot Grrl culture; see for example Janice Radway, “Girls, Reading, and Narrative Gleaning: Crafting Repertoires for Self-Fashioning within Everyday Life,” in *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations*, ed. Melanie C. Green, Jeffrey J. Strange, and Timothy C. Brock (Mahwah: Erlbaum, 2002), 183-204.

⁹ Yeastie Girlz (2013-M299), Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

¹⁰ For welcome exceptions to this general rule, see Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).



Fig. 7 and Fig. 8 Courtesy of Yeastie Girlz Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

has become a familiar figure to publics beyond the devoted community of readers of her long-running and acclaimed cartoon series, *Dykes to Watch Out For*. However, as her personal papers, recently acquired by Smith College, reveal, Bechdel belonged to a cohort of primarily queer and feminist cartoonists, many of whom began working in the 1970s.¹¹ Beyond Bechdel, prominent and prolific feminist cartoonists include Trina Robbins, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Lee Binswanger, Lee Marrs, Lynda Barry, Nicole Hollander, Roz Chast, Joan Hilty, Ellen Forney, Kris Kovich, Jennifer Camper, Roberta Gregory, Jackie Urbanovic, Juliet Doucet, and Diane Di Massa. Beginning in the 1970s, these artists started forming professional associations and publishing their own work. In 1972, Trina Robbins, member of the Berkeley feminist collective “It Ain’t Me, Babe,” founded *Wimmen’s Comix* to publish an eponymous comic book that featured women artists, and to countervail the sexist underground “comix” scene flourishing in New York and San Francisco at the time.¹² In these early texts, feminists addressed issues rarely covered in comics, including abortion, sexual harassment, sexism, and single-motherhood. Around that same time, Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevely (aka Chin Lively) began self-publishing

¹¹ Notably, Bechdel’s network extended out to include figures like comedian Kate Clinton, performance artist Holly Hughes, scholar and activist Barbara Smith, and writer Susie Bright.

¹² Dez Skinn, *Comix: The Underground Revolution* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 164. Initially members of the *Wimmen’s Comix* Collective included Sharon Rudahl, Trina Robbins, Lee Marrs, Terrie Richards, Pattie Moodian, Michelle Brand, Lora Fountain, Shelby Sampson, Aline Kominsky, Karen Marie Haskell and Janet Wolfe Stanley. The collective folded in 1992 (167). Skinn notes that Robbins also produced “It Ain’t Me, Babe Comix” (Last Gasp, 1970), which constituted the “world’s first all-woman written and drawn comic book” (158).

Tits & Clits, which explicitly addressed female sexuality to counter the misogynistic images of women circulating in male-dominated “comix.”¹³ One year later, Mary Wings published the first lesbian comics, *Come Out Comix* and *Dyke Shorts*.¹⁴ By the 1990s, groups such as the Lesbian Cartoonists’ Network, W.I.C.C.A (Women in Comics Creating Anarchy), and Friends of Lulu had formed in order to promote female professionals in the comics industry.

Although feminist cartoonists faced significant challenges in terms of syndication (does it surprise anyone that mainstream media outlets were not champing at the bit to print feminist cartoons, which derived humour from the absurdities of patriarchy and heteronormativity?), their work nonetheless found diverse and loyal audiences. These artists self-syndicated or published serially in feminist and LGBT magazines, and appeared both nationally and internationally. Working through Bechdel’s papers, one of the most striking findings has been the extensiveness of her readership. She received fan mail from across the United States as well as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, and Finland. As was the case with the *Yeastie Girlz*, the breadth of her reach and resonance with culturally and nationally diverse audiences is remarkable. Part of the power of comics and cartoons for female audiences, as scholars such as Hilary Chute and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley have shown, lies in its world-making power.¹⁵ Untethered from the world as it currently exists, the sequential arts possess a unique ability to visualize “unreal” alternatives. These alternatives have the potential to shift the reader’s perceptions, and to subvert existing systems at the level of the imagination by playing on readers’ fantasies and desires. Particularly for women, cartoons and comics can play on the dynamics of “looking” and being “looked at.” Moreover, they can make the private public, and in so doing rescue from silence and invisibility experiences often relegated to the former realm.

As this overview of select examples from the deep and varied history of humour in feminism has shown, humour allows for the examination of marginalized yet remarkable individuals, groups, and cultural products. The assemblage of activists, organizations, and artists brought together by a focus on humour drives home a fundamental yet often overlooked insight about the character of feminism and feminist history: namely, it is essentially “rhizomatic.” Drawing here on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, I argue that humour allows us to “re-map” feminism and conceptualize it as comprising heterogeneous, connected elements with multiple exit and entry points.¹⁶ Conceptualizing feminism “rhizomatically” is both generative and incredibly democratic. It enables us to approach feminism as a collection of non-reductive multiplicities without a centre, and thus without singular origin and causation.¹⁷ A rhizomatic feminism allows us to envision connections between disparate and heterogeneous groups, actors, events, and texts in ways that do not perpetuate hierarchies constructed around supposedly central and peripheral figures. In fact, a reconstituted map of feminism may be not only much

¹³ Skinn, 164.

¹⁴ Skinn, 167.

¹⁵ See Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 21.

¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, 6, 9.

more racially and sexually diverse than previous histories allow, but also politically, socio-economically, and even *affectively* diverse. COYOTE, Florynce Kennedy, the Guerrilla Girls, the Lesbian Avengers, the Yeastie Girlz, and feminist cartoonists all figure into a shared, interconnected feminist past along with more familiar actors like NOW and the Redstockings. Humour may serve here as a crucial “lineament” that enables us to apprehend these connections.¹⁸

Such a decentered, multitudinous vision of feminism also offers new ways of narrating feminism’s past. Existing histories have traced feminism’s supposed successes and failures, from the formation of the National Organization of Women to the Woman’s Strike on the one hand, to the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment, universal day care legislation, and perennially imperilled reproductive rights on the other. The story that remains to be told is how feminism as a set of ideas, a ground for subjectivity, a basis for community and “counterpublics,” and a political stance persisted over the decades, in spite of the ups and downs suffered by feminism as a movement. Here I argue that the consistent presence of humour within feminist activism and culture played an integral role in the perennial circulation of feminism over the past forty years.

Acknowledging the persistence of feminism enables scholars not only to dispense with the troublesome “wave” metaphor that has been used to characterize the feminist past as a series of ebbs and flows, but also to consider how the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of successive generations of feminists were forged. By tracing “flows” of influence, scholars may gain a better understanding of how outrageous, humorous protest actions may have offered new, appealing models of subjectivity that held out the promise of personal and political transformation. Cultural products such as comics, zines, music, television shows, and films offered new forms of subjectivity and provided points of identification that could ground both new understandings of self and new forms of community, whose existence may be obscured by the lack of concrete organizational structure. These insights offer two possibly interrelated, potentially fruitful lines of inquiry for future researchers: first, a multi-generational oral history that examines how feminists came to their feminism, accompanied by an ethnographic study of present day processes; and second, an analysis of how being a “fan” of particular feminist figures, groups, and cultural products helped forge feminist subjectivities and politicized communities, as fans convened in “real life” at events like the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, Comic Cons, or Ladyfest, and online via chat rooms and social media platforms. Here, researchers can draw on a number of conceptual resources from the burgeoning field of Fan Studies, the vast literature on publics and counterpublics, as well as Habermasian Humour Studies scholarship such as Amber Day’s *Satire and Dissent* (2011).¹⁹

In this article, I have endeavoured to make a case for why a history of humour in feminism is worth recovering. I have demonstrated that it would allow for a retrieval of marginalized individuals, groups, and voices, and in so doing recast the narrative of feminism’s past from one of dramatic ruptures and epic battles, to one of persistent presence and diffuse yet undeniable influence. I have further argued that it would allow scholars to engage new theoretical and

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 21.

¹⁹ See Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debates* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2011). For Fan Studies, see for example Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2013), and *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

methodological approaches to feminism, and that it would specifically open up new lines of interdisciplinary inquiry into how and why individuals become feminists. Particularly in this moment of concerted mainstream attention to humour as a potent vehicle for feminism, reclaiming this past seems more urgent than ever. The stakes are not merely intellectual, but political as well. Neglecting the humorous impulse within feminism's past establishes a specious break between present-day "funny feminists" and their supposedly dour predecessors. It thus narrows and flattens our understanding of the deep and varied roots of contemporary feminist practices. Perhaps more importantly, it denies feminism its longstanding creative powers of world-building and subject formation, arguably its most potent yet elusive attribute. Recovering humour in the feminist past is thus an act of empowerment that enables us to appreciate the true extent of the cultural, social, and political revolution feminism has affected.

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“Shame Yourself”: 1950s American Television and the Discreet Disruptions of Gertrude Berg

Paul Michael Babiak

Abstract:

*This article undertakes a re-examination of the comedy of *The Goldbergs*—a popular American serial that made its start in the early days of radio and was then adapted to television in the late 1940s. Under the guiding hand of its creator, Gertrude Berg, and through the dominant character of Molly Goldberg, the archetypal Jewish mother, the show expresses a distinctively feminine subjectivity whose tacit contestation of the dominant mores of 1950s American society can be recognized in numerous “discreet disruptions” that permeate the series’ episodes at the levels of narrative, character and relationship, and performance style. The show’s unique approach to comedy can be summed up as working to produce a particular quality of laughter: the laughter of “voluntary self-deflation,” connoted by the Yiddishism “shame yourself.”*

Keywords: Domestic Comedy, Early Television, Ethnic Humour, Laughter, Situation Comedy, Women’s Comedy.

Since the 1970s, it has been the fashion in much television scholarship to treat the 1950s American television show, and especially the sitcom, as the quintessentially naïve text—uncomplicated, univocal, and especially, “representational.” This view of 1950s television has tended to prevail in spite of the fact that early television in general manifests textual multivocality to the utmost degree. In their seminal essay “Television As A Cultural Forum,” Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch show how even an episode of *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) can represent a point of convergence for a variety of heterogeneous and often conflicting discourses.¹

This reductive view of 1950s television has underlain the valorization of some figures—Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), for example—and the marginalization of others. Most conspicuous among these is producer and actress Gertrude Berg, the creator and portrayer of Molly Goldberg, U.S. television’s archetypal Jewish mother in *The Goldbergs* (1949-1957).² In

¹ Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, “Television As A Cultural Forum,” in *Television: The Critical View*, 7th edition, edited by Horace Newcomb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 561-573.

² Originally called *The Rise of the Goldbergs* during its time on radio, from 1929-1934, the show was popularly referred to simply as *The Goldbergs*. This was the name used when the show returned to radio intermittently from 1936-1949, before live-broadcast television episodes began to air under the same title.

the mid-1980s, feminist scholars like Patricia Mellencamp revived Lucy for feminism,³ while Berg, the original first lady of American television, has remained relegated to the sidelines of television history. In retrospect, it is not difficult to understand why she had been overlooked as a women's comedian. *The Goldbergs* is overwhelmingly positioned as ethnic humour deriving from the caricatures of the vaudeville stage, and seminal essays on the series treat it as such, defining the show exclusively by its overarching narrative of a Jewish family in the Bronx optimistically seeking to become assimilated to the ways of the New World.⁴ Furthermore, Berg's enthusiastic collaboration with the American corporate superstructure renders the figure of Molly suspect as a potential mouthpiece for the show's sponsors and network patrons. Finally, Gertrude Berg's work has been overlooked for study as the locus of a distinctively feminine form of humour because, in each episode's movement from domestic harmony to its disruption and then back, the show works on at least on one level to reaffirm the patriarchal ideology conventionally associated with 1950s America.

However, Gertrude Berg was a genuinely fine artist whose creation, Molly Goldberg, took on a life of her own, and captured the attention of the United States for almost three decades. Her grip on the nation waned, George Lipsitz maintains, with the demise of the ethnic family sitcom as exemplified by *The Goldbergs*, and the move towards the more "ethnically neutral" television family which accompanied the rise of the telefilm format (initiated with *I Love Lucy*). In this essay, I argue that the comedy of Gertrude Berg represents a distinctively feminine, and proto-feminist, form of humour, with a rhetorical strategy—"discreet disruption"—and a mode of audience address that proposes a distinctive laughter theory of its own. This mode of audience address is exemplified, as I will show, by the formula "shame yourself." At the same time, the show's feminist comedy is concealed within, and to a certain extent discreetly disguised as, ethnic humour.⁵

In formulating this argument, I make a distinction between "feminine" and "feminist" which I argue is crucial to the task of forming a just appreciation of Gertrude Berg's comic practice. I will be using *feminine* to refer to a sensibility or subjectivity associated with female

The television show was called *The Goldbergs* through the transition to the telefilm format until late in 1955, when, in the final months of its production by Guild Films, it acquired the alternative title, *Molly*.

³ Patricia Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism and Freud: Discourse of Gracie and Lucy" in Tania Modleski, ed., *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 80-94.

⁴ Such as: George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," *Cultural Anthropology* 1.4 (Nov. 1986): 355-387; Horace Newcomb, "The Opening of America: Meaningful Difference in 1950s Television" in Joel Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 103-123; Donald Weber, "Memory and Repression: *Goldberg* Variations," in *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to the Goldbergs* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 126-155; and Vincent Brook, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got 'Berg-larized' in the Process)," *Cinema Journal*, 38.4 (Summer 1999): 45-67.

⁵ As Kathleen Rowe astutely observes, "Tolerance for a wife/mother's disruptiveness tends to increase when a sitcom plays across ethnic or class difference. A husband's authority can be tested more boldly when he is a non-WASP like the Cuban Desi Arnaz or the Jewish George Burns." Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 81.

performing bodies, which articulates (or attempts to articulate) one of an indefinite number of possible femininities. I will be using *feminist* to denote the body of ideological, political, and aesthetic practices and discourses that seek to advocate on behalf of the feminine, and to interpret attempts at articulating various femininities. There is possibility for slippage here with respect to articulation, since the articulation of a feminine subjectivity may or may not be feminist in the sense that it invokes those practices and discourses in order to advocate for it. That is why I must hesitate to claim Gertrude Berg's practice as feminist, strictly speaking. Insofar as it represents the articulation of a distinctly female subjectivity it is *feminine* instead. But since it inevitably resists those cultural practices of 1950s America that tend to silence female voices, thus indirectly advocating on behalf of the feminine, Gertrude Berg's comic practice ought to be regarded as significantly anticipating the feminisms of subsequent decades. I have tried to mediate this apparent contradiction by referring to Berg's work as tacitly "proto-feminist."

The comedy of *The Goldbergs* is rooted in *heteroglossia*—the co-presence and mutual contestation of multiple voices within a single text. According to Bakhtinian theory, this is a sufficient condition for carnival⁶ and by extension, carnival transgression. Looked at in this light, a number of features of *The Goldbergs* that seem quaint, arbitrary or idiosyncratic begin to come into a different focus. These include the insistent transgression of the "fourth wall" in the show's opening and closing product ads; the constant disruption of the action by shouts through the window from the other gossips in the apartment block ("Yoo-hoo, Mrs. Goldberg!"); the liminality of the setting (every space in the Goldberg apartment opens up into another space); and the characters' continual, almost farcical, bursting through doors, doorways, and windows. Most importantly, there is the figure of Molly herself in whom, as I shall argue later, the outlines of the carnival archetype as identified and described by Kathleen Rowe in her insightful study, *The Unruly Woman* (1995), are distinctly discernable. It is its nature as a multivocal, carnivalesque text that sets *The Goldbergs* apart from the thematically binary farces that have been accepted as the representative texts of the 1950s American sitcom.

Ironically, given the customary associations of carnival transgression, the conciliatory nature of Gertrude Berg's comedy becomes problematic, and forces us as viewers and scholars to re-examine some of our basic assumptions about the transgressive efficacy of comedy, and especially its "disruptive" capacities. Can disruption be less than revolutionary? Can comedy be disruptive and still work within dominant paradigms? Must it be violent or destructive to enact disruption? What are the signifiers of "disruption"? What are its objects, and what are its aims? As Todd Gitlin observes in relation to prime-time television, the dominant ideological order is never completely entrenched.⁷ On the contrary, there are always gaps in its hegemony which that order is constantly striving to fill; it is constantly attempting to assimilate oppositional or alternative orders and, indeed, the multivocality of televisual texts may well be the main symptom of its fundamental instability. The dominant order is therefore more susceptible to transformative disruption from within than demolition from without. What is important is whether the tendencies of that dominant order to suppress people are sustained or subverted. I suggest that disruption of the dominant order may be seen to occur whenever its ideological oppressiveness is thwarted. This is frequently accomplished in *The Goldbergs*.

⁶ That is to say, a state of free play in which the normative and the natural destabilize each other—in Bakhtin's own terms, "A 'world inside out.'" Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1969), 11.

⁷ Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology," *Social Problems* 26.3 (Feb. 1979): 251-266.

We can recognize four major categories of disruption functioning in *The Goldbergs*: i) outright opposition, working through various forms of antithesis to obliterate the dominant; ii) transformation, proceeding by forms of inversion and substitution to reverse the efficacy of the dominant's ways and means; iii) more modest forms of redirection, working to channel the ways and means of the dominant towards ends other than those they were designed to serve; and iv) perturbation, the creation of dissonances to inhibit the smooth functioning of those ways and means. Therefore, in *The Goldbergs*, what may appear to be trivial dissonances on the surface of the text are often indices of more radical disruptions operating at a deeper level.

The comedy of Gertrude Berg is fundamentally *kindly*. Pressed on the subject, I believe she would agree with comedy theorists, from Aristotle to Stephen Leacock, that "it is a prime condition of humour that it must be without harm or malice."⁸ For Berg, though imbued with left-wing political affinities,⁹ the pre-methodical benevolence entailed by the humorous project extended to her network and sponsors as well, and it imposed on her a need to avoid explicit polemics. Berg's biographer Glenn Smith cites a memo from the Berg archive at Syracuse University in which she asserts the need for compromise:

I certainly wish I could say and act out what I believe to its utmost [...] I should like to get some of it into the Goldbergs because it has got an audience, but I have scrupulously refrained, trying to live up to my contract as honorably as possible. I mean to help the sponsor sell his product, which means creating good will for him. To say what is a personal belief on my part would be unfair because it might endanger some one else as well as myself, and an innocent party too [...]¹⁰

In Berg's case, not only would it have been courting cancellation, it would have been acting in bad faith to have made her series a forum for the kind of explicitly oppositional, overtly disruptive comedy that some later feminist theorists would demand. Thus, the disruptions of Gertrude Berg, though occasionally radical, are always discreet.

The Goldbergs, by means of its characteristically dialogic dissonances, its substitutions and inversions, both superficially affirms *and* profoundly (though discreetly) disrupts the dominant discourses of American society of the 1950s as expressed in the conventions of 1950s situational comedy. Through in-depth textual analysis, I shall concentrate on Gertrude Berg's comedy at three levels: narrative and genre, focusing primarily on Gertrude Berg as author of the series; character, focusing mainly on Molly as the primary influence on the series' production of laughter; and finally the level of performance, in which I will focus on Berg's embodiment of the "discreetly disruptive" character Molly.

A note on production is necessary to clarify the textual evolution of the series. *The Goldbergs* came to television on CBS on January 10, 1949. In June 1951 Berg's sponsorship agreement with General Foods expired and the show was cancelled. It returned to the airwaves in February 1952, this time on NBC under a "rotating sponsorship plan" between the Vitamin

⁸ Stephen Leacock, "Humour As I See It," in *Further Foolishness: Sketches and Satires On the Follies of the Day* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1968), 159.

⁹ See, for example, Chapter 1 of Glenn D. Smith, Jr.'s *Something On My Own: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 10-21.

¹⁰ Glenn D. Smith, Jr. *Something On My Own: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007): 81.

Corporation of America, Ecko Products (steel), and Necchi Sewing Machines. However, by May of the same year, both Ecko and Necchi had pulled out; after July, the show was dropped from the NBC network schedule. Following a brief flirtation with the possibility of incorporation as a segment of Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theatre*, on July 3, 1953, the show returned to NBC under the sponsorship of RCA, running Fridays at 8:00 p.m., until November that year, when Berg suffered a collapse from which she remained convalescent until early 1954. By this time, audience ratings had declined and neither NBC nor CBS was interested in running the show. Berg brought it in its live-television format to the Dumont network while still under the sponsorship of the Vitamin Corporation of America. By this time, Dumont was also falling on hard times, unable to retain either its most popular programs or their sponsors. In the fall of 1954, *The Goldbergs* left the Dumont network (which folded completely a year later), and in spring 1955, Berg entered into an agreement with the independent production company Guild Films to continue *The Goldbergs* in telefilm format for release directly into the syndication market without a network run. The show continued in syndication until the spring of 1956.¹¹

In his biography of Berg entitled *Something on My Own* (2007), Glenn D. Smith Jr. shows how, throughout the show's long history on both radio and television, Berg remained the dominant influence on all aspects of production. As the end credits of the show invariably emphasize, she wrote the scripts (assisted by Michael Morris as Script Editor from the NBC period). During the Guild Films period, she occasionally shared writing credits with both Morris and her son, Cherny Berg. Smith describes how the business model of early television enabled Berg to retain autonomy as the head of her own production company, although during the Dumont period and afterwards she delegated this responsibility to her son, Cherny.¹² The company then worked together with in-house producers—Worthington Miner at CBS, Richard Clemmer at NBC, Henry Opperman at Dumont, and William Berke at Guild Films—who provided directors for the show—Walter Hart and Matthew Harlib at CBS and NBC, Martin Magner and Walter Hart at NBC, and Marc Daniels (of *I Love Lucy* fame) at Guild.¹³ Though her autonomy was evidently compromised by the Guild Films period, Gertrude Berg retained the final authority over the writing of the show, its production, and even its performances.

The show's production history is relevant when considering which period the textual analysis should rely upon most heavily. The bulk of the extant episodes are from the Guild Films period, but as Vincent Brook convincingly argues, by these episodes the show had begun to move toward the narrative approach of a show like *Father Knows Best*—shifting the action to suburbia, emphasizing the paternal authority of Molly's husband Jake, and removing Molly from the environment of the "Yoo-hoo" circle.¹⁴ While both Brook and Donald Weber base their analyses of specific shows on the Guild Films episodes, my discussion will rely on the live-to-air

¹¹ For *The Goldbergs*' move from radio to television, see Chapter 7 of Glenn D. Smith, Jr.'s *Something on My Own: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 111-143. For the cancellation of the show in the wake of the Philip Loeb affair, see Chapters 8-10, 147-181. For the moves to NBC, Dumont, and then into syndication, see Chapter 11, 185-203.

¹² Smith, *Something on My Own*, 116-120.

¹³ For Berg's collaboration with Worthington Miner, see Smith, 115-116. Changes in production personnel are reflected in the show's credits as it moved from CBS, to NBC, Dumont, and finally to Guild Films.

¹⁴ Vincent Brook, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got "Berg-larized" in the Process)," *Cinema Journal* 38.4 (Summer 1999).

episodes produced between 1949 and 1953. Though less numerous, these episodes are more representative of Berg's vision. In spite of the shifts in emphasis in the Guild Films episodes, however, I assert that the conclusions drawn here generally hold true for them as well.

Discreet Disruptions in Narrative: Structure, Story and Genre

Molly Goldberg looks out of her apartment window into our living rooms and initiates the episode of September 28, 1954¹⁵ with a characteristic blend of old-world candour and new-world optimism:

Hello? I'm not gonna ask you how you feel, because if you listened to me, you must be feeling good. And if you didn't, then shame yourself. And why shouldn't you feel wonderful on a beautiful fall day like this?¹⁶

She isn't merely rhapsodizing. Although Molly's paean to good feelings and good health is sincere, it is about to segue into a eulogy of Rybutol, the vitamin supplement produced by the show's sponsor. As Lynn Spigel has pointed out, these commercial messages, which began and ended each episode and were delivered in character and in direct address, privileged the "pure communication" of the commercial message over the "theatrical" artifice of the shows' stories,¹⁷ thus subordinating the narrative drive to the commercial logic of competition and consumption. While performing this business-oriented function, Gertrude Berg utilized these spots skillfully at several levels. The spots amplify character and situation; they serve as classically formal preludes and postludes that introduce and comment upon the main action; and, most importantly, they disrupt the distance between performer and audience by incorporating the spectator into Molly's circle of friends, who hail each other through apartment windows with disruptive "Yoo-hoos" in order to gossip. In so doing, Berg subtly aligns viewers' sympathies with Molly and against her husband Jake (who frowns on her "mixing" with the Yoo-hoo circle) and positions their optical perspective with Molly's. When the commercial is at an end, and Molly turns in towards her apartment to begin the action of the episode, the camera follows her, and we look wherever she looks to see what is going to happen. At the end of the story, Molly looks back out at us to deliver, in the context of a final word on behalf of her sponsor, her own interpretation of the story's events. Unlike the masculine perspectives imbricated in the very titles of 1950s sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy*, *My Little Margie* (1952-1955) and *I Married Joan* (1952-1959), the structuring gaze of this series is unmistakably that of its female protagonist. The inversion of perspective discreetly positions the viewer within a community of interest (coded feminine) which, through television, she organizes around herself. In this way she subordinates the "pure communication" of the show's advertising function (the organ of a social order in which male

¹⁵ The live-to-air episodes of the show can be reliably identified by initial broadcast dates only. For Guild Films episodes from Sept. 22 to Dec. 12, 1955, both initial airdates and titles are available; for subsequent episodes, there are titles only.

¹⁶ Gertrude Berg, creator. *The Ultimate Goldbergs*. UCLA Film and Television Archive. Shout! Factory, 2010, Disc 3, Track 6, 00:00:44-00:00:56. The episode is accessible online at <https://archive.org/details/theGoldbergs-28September1954>.

¹⁷ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 168-169.

values dominate) to its ritual function: the communal dissemination of “gossip,” or informal wisdom (also coded feminine). As Donald Weber reminds us, the thrust of Molly’s wisdom is always to caution Jake, and her audience, about “the spiritual costs of acquisition”¹⁸—that is, to critique from a female perspective the “masculine” logic of competition and consumption that the series *seems* to affirm.

The typical structure of a *Goldbergs* episode likewise contests the retributive, or “talion,” formula of shows such as *I Love Lucy*, in which a character disrupts the initial equilibrium of the situation and is punished, the punishment marking the return to order. In each episode, a threat arises, either from without or from within, with the potential to disrupt the tranquility of Molly’s domestic economy. She attempts to deal with it, but is initially unsuccessful; matters are made worse, and Molly is typically blamed. But at the crisis point of the action, some character makes an unexpected gesture of humility; and suddenly the resolution of the problem that seemed inescapable becomes clear. The initial stability of the group is not simply recovered but enhanced.¹⁹ Both in their positioning of the audience and in their typical structures, episodes of *The Goldbergs* posit antitheses to the paternalistic formal conventions of the 1950s sitcom.

The plots of these stories are dialogical in that they typically seem to represent compromises between two very different kinds of narrative: one with a classic “talion” resolution like that of *I Love Lucy* (A transgresses against B; B retaliates, putting A “back in his/her place”), and another, less punitive one that supervenes.²⁰ Another profound form of dialogical

¹⁸ Donald Weber, “Memory and Repression: *Goldberg Variations*,” in *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to the Goldbergs* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 149-150.

¹⁹ For example, in the episode dated September 5, 1949, a new landlord, Mr. Peach, takes charge of the Goldbergs’ apartment building at 1038 Tremont Avenue. Jake wishes to circulate a petition in order to force Mr. Peach to make improvements to the building. Molly, fearing the tendency of this “masculine” approach to escalate, instead presents a list of requests from all the tenants to the new landlord “in mine fashion”—that is, during a friendly chat over a glass of lemonade. Ironically, Mr. Peach takes note of the chat as evidence that there has indeed been organized activity on the part of the occupants: “Mrs. Goldberg, I can see by this list of names and demands that there has been a tenants’ meeting.” He promises to meet the grievances, but he emphasizes that “This is a hardship.” When Jake learns of the ominous phrase “This is a hardship” (which he recognizes as a legal formula permitting a rent increase), he is instantly beside himself with feelings of betrayal, which he unhesitatingly vents on Molly. Learning of the impending increase, the other tenants turn on her as well. Only after Molly, with the collaboration of the “Yoo-hoo” circle, has prepared a surprise birthday party for Mr. Peach (at which they offer, and he accepts, a nominal increase of two dollars per month), does it transpire that Mr. Peach hadn’t intended to raise the rent at all. The community at 1038 Tremont Ave. ends up more secure than it would have been, on collaborative rather than adversarial terms with its new landlord.

²⁰ In the very earliest surviving episode of the *The Goldberg*’s glory days on CBS, from August 29, 1949 (<https://archive.org/details/theGoldbergs-29August1949>), the Goldbergs return to their apartment in the Bronx from a vacation at Pinkus’ Pines, their favorite summer resort in the Catskills. They have had a wonderful holiday and have made some highly advantageous contacts, which they enthusiastically share with all their friends. But these “contacts” turn out to be based only on big talk and self-promotion. As Jake bitterly fulminates, a phone call to Uncle David reminds the Goldbergs that they have been as guilty of shameless self-promotion as anybody else, and they acknowledge their fault. But it turns out that the critical contact Jake has made is genuine after all, and the Goldbergs finish the episode once again at the apex of their fortunes.

disruption is one of the most distinctive and remarkable regular features of the stories of *The Goldbergs*. In contradistinction to the farce-plots of other 1950s sitcoms, the generic frames of these stories will suddenly shift, so that a tale which began in the register of “domestic comedy” will, by the mid-point of the story, shift to that of melodrama, where it will remain until the sudden, startling climactic reversal that returns the narrative to the register of comedy.²¹ The pathos with which these scenes are enacted is often so compelling that the show briefly crosses the line into soap opera and we find ourselves responding to dramas of heartrending loss. As in all great comedy, there is a tragic vision that underlies the comedy of Gertrude Berg; at the core of it is an attempt to express a genuinely female subjectivity within the constraints of mid-twentieth-century American culture.

The structural regularity with which Molly is threatened with this loss—or alternatively, reproached by those in whose interests she exerts herself—suggests that at the heart of Berg’s vision is an insight like that expressed in the terms of Freudian psychoanalysis by Judy Little in her landmark book, *Comedy and the Woman Writer* (1983):

[T]he primary world is especially the world of the infant’s relation to the mother – not to both parents. Since the mother, or nurse, cannot constantly be feeding the child or giving it attention, the child experiences its first sense of betrayal at the hands of a woman. [...] [M]ost of the ambivalences which human beings of both sexes feel towards woman—those ambivalences culturally documented in mythic symbols of woman as guide, fate, temptress, betrayer—are rooted in the very young child’s earliest interactions with the mother.²²

Kathleen Rowe, in *The Unruly Woman* (1995), likewise finds the root of “matriarchal humor” in women’s defensive response when “the rosy illusions promised by the narratives of romantic comedy have been replaced by a very different reality”:

Women’s comedic traditions, whether in print or performance, have tended toward the less aggressive form of what Freud calls humor, which preserves the ego by denying or transforming threatening or painful emotions. Because anger is one of the most socially unacceptable emotions for women, it provides fertile ground for being reworked into

²¹ The best example is one of the earliest extant episodes of *The Goldbergs* dated September 12, 1949 (<https://archive.org/details/theGoldbergs-12September1949>). Molly’s wealthy and successful but selfish cousin Simon has come for dinner. When an argument between him and Jake escalates, Simon is suddenly taken ill and the Goldbergs’ home is turned upside down to accommodate him. As Simon contemplates his own imminent death, he is stricken with remorse for the way he has treated others. Seeking to make amends, he prepares to sign cheques to all his poor relations. However, the results of the cardiograph test come in and they are negative. Learning he is not about to die, Simon refuses to share his wealth and leaves the apartment, but not before a comedic deathbed scene—played with deathly seriousness—in which he proclaims to Molly: “I wanted the wrong things. Now I know when it’s too late [...] Why did I turn my back on my own flesh and blood? Why, Molly?” (00:14:15-00:14:54). The scene is a clear parody of what Mary Ann Doane, in *The Desire to Desire* (1987), has called “the medical discourse” in the women’s films of the 1940s—with Cousin Simon riotously feminized and substituted for the pathologized female protagonists of the cinematic melodrama.

²² Judy Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Sparks and Feminism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1983), 12-13.

humor [...] Domestic humor or ‘matriarchal laughter’ expresses accommodation and resignation, according to Judith Wilt, by piling ‘sandbags of wit against the flood of anger and pain.’²³

But Gertrude Berg has a particular gift for the production of pathos by means of a skilful substitution of temporalities, which lifts the laughter of *The Goldbergs* out of resignation and restores to it the ring of triumph. As Mary Ann Doane observes in *The Desire to Desire* (1987), the pathos of the maternal melodrama is “generated by what [Franco] Moretti describes as a ‘rhetoric of the too late.’ [...] Pathos is thus related to a certain construction of temporality in which communication or recognitions take place but are mistimed.”²⁴ This same point is carried further by Linda Williams in her influential 1991 essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” who argues that the mistimed recognition is a fundamental distinguishing feature of the melodrama. For Williams, the deep structure of each of the “low” film genres (porn, horror, and the “women’s weepie”) resides in each of three primary forms of infantile “enigma” (sexual desire, sexual difference, selfhood) that is “solved” by means of an “original fantasy” (family romance, seduction, castration). This fantasy is endlessly repeated in the fantasies underlying the perversions (masochism, sadism, sado-masochism), each possessing a temporality of its own (“on time!”, “too soon!”, and “too late!”). Williams excludes low forms such as slapstick comedy from this schema on the grounds that slapstick comedy “has not been deemed gratuitously excessive;”²⁵ a position on which I differ. On the contrary, as Noël Carroll has argued, the affect generated by slapstick is the exact counterpart of that generated by horror—once the danger of harm has been removed. For Carroll, the slapstick clown is the counterpart of the monster, deprived of its ability to hurt.²⁶ But the hurt of the horror film is intrinsically related to its temporality, in which things typically happen before one is prepared for them (“too soon!”); the movement from horror to humour implies at the same time a modulation from the “too soon!” of horror to the temporality of the comic. This, I would argue, should be expressed as “just in the nick of time!” It will readily be seen that the distinction between melodrama and romantic comedy likewise resides in exactly the same substitution of the “just in the nick of time!” of the comic for the “too late!” of melodrama.

By means of this oscillation between pre- and post-Oedipal structuring fantasies, facilitated by the technical and industrial specificity of television, Gertrude Berg is able to offer a form of women’s comedy in which the female heroine repeatedly extricates both herself and others from the catch-22 of the Oedipal triangle that so imprisons the heroines of the cinematic melodrama of the 1930s and 1940s.²⁷ In the looking-glass world of *The Goldbergs*, the castration complex, rather than an immutable condition of existence, becomes simply a curious irrelevancy:

²³ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 69.

²⁴ Mary Anne Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 91.

²⁵ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly*, 44.4 (Summer, 1991): 4.

²⁶ Noël Carroll, “Horror and Humor,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57.2 (Spring, 1999): 145-160.

²⁷ As described, for example, by Doane in *The Desire to Desire* and Alison L. McKee in *The Woman’s Film of the 1940s: Gender, Narrative, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014).

frequently an obstacle, but never insuperable.

The substitution of temporalities underlies the radical shifts in tone in *The Goldbergs* that follow immediately on those moments of intense sadness when the characters renounce their follies by a profession of humility. In these moments the resigned pathos of “matriarchal laughter” as conceived by Judith Wilt, is suddenly transformed into a triumphal renewal of the vitality and optimism of romantic comedy as Molly shames herself, and then suddenly discovers the key to the solution she has been searching for “just in the nick of time.” With these substitutions comes a tacit but radical rejection of the classical positioning of female protagonists as passive sufferers that typifies the women’s films of the 1940s and the soap operas of the following decade. In her hands, the domestic comedy becomes a new chapter in an ongoing romance, to which courtship and marriage are only the prologue. Though *The Goldbergs* tirelessly rehearses the tropes of traditional domesticity, it looks past them towards a greater fulfillment at the same time.

On the level of narrative, then, *The Goldbergs* offers several forms of disruption which all discreetly subvert the ideological work of the 1950s television sitcom. Berg’s tactics to that end are to substitute a female structuring gaze and narrative perspective in place of the typical masculine ones of 1950s television; to contain the inflationary logic of consumption and competition (coded “masculine” in the context of the show’s character typology) within the ritual logic of sharing and communion (coded “feminine”); to interweave the conventional talion plots of sitcom farce with stories that substitute the expansion of the community for the punishment of a scapegoat; and to shift between the generic frames of melodrama and romantic comedy.

Discreet Disruptions in Character and Relationship

As I have suggested, *The Goldbergs* constitutes a conspicuous exception to Rowe’s otherwise astute observation that “[t]he pleasure of situation comedy does not arise primarily from narrative suspense about the actions of its characters or from its one-liners, but from the economy or wit with which it brings together two opposing discourses.”²⁸ Indeed, the typical *Goldbergs* episode is primarily concerned with what the characters will do and how their choices will affect their relationships.²⁹ But this is not to claim that the personages of *The Goldbergs* are particularly strong characters—on the contrary it accounts for them sufficiently to view her husband Jake, her son Sammy, her Uncle David and cousin Simon, her daughter Rosalie, her extended family and the “Yoo-hoo” circle as simple functions of their relationships with Molly, the “fixerkeh” who, above her husband’s protests, resolves all their difficulties.

As a literary construction, Molly’s primary characteristic is the “Mollypropism.”³⁰ These range from simple Yiddishisms (like substituting “mine” for “my”), to redundant high diction,³¹

²⁸ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 81.

²⁹ The discovery of a solution, moreover, typically involves Molly thinking her way out of the box of an apparently inescapable dilemma (frequently one in which a woman is caught by the division of her loyalties between two different men) and asserting a third discourse that it has excluded.

³⁰ I have been unable to trace the provenance of this label for Molly’s signature verbal mannerism. Glenn Smith references it in the context of Berg’s radio work in *Something On My Own: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 94. He cites Donald Weber’s essay “The Jewish-American World of Gertrude Berg: *The Goldbergs* on Radio and Television,

apparently innocent *doubles entendres*,³² quaintly mixed clichés³³ and other more complex structures. In the episode about the new landlord, Jake tells her “Molly, it is on account of people like you that the world revolves on its axis and never changes.” To this she responds, with delicate mock-offense, “Oh, so it’s my fault the void is revolving on de axis?”³⁴ The way that these Mollypropisms distort, and even invert, the meaning of everyday English furnishes an excellent example of what Judy Little, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin in her essay “Humoring the Sentence,” calls “women’s dialogic comedy”:

A woman’s discourse usually carries with it some hint of the language and worldview of the patriarchal structures in which she lives. There is [...] an “infection in the sentence.” But one might also say that the infection from the male language and culture produces antibodies: there is a “dialogic” tension, often comic, between the two “voices” that contend in the same sentence.³⁵

We have already seen how this dialogic tension manifests itself in Gertrude Berg’s technique of plot construction. But one of the show’s primary inversions of the logic of the marketplace that underlies its sponsorship, is its insistent affirmation of people’s moral value for each other as relatives and friends over their use-value as consumers and items of consumption. This affirmation is often expressed in a particularly tendentious mode of Mollypropism that is in constant use throughout the series: a Yiddishism that substitutes the pronominal indirect object of an action for its direct object.³⁶ Molly employs it with the utmost frequency with reference to the actions she performs on behalf of other people, especially Jake, often with bizarre results. For

1930-1950” in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 85-99. Although Weber discusses Molly’s speech in detail in each of three articles examining *The Goldbergs*, he does not use the term ‘Mollypropism.’ Neither does George Lipsitz in “The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs,” *Cultural Anthropology* 1.4 (Nov. 1986): 355-387. The term *is* cited, however, in Joseph Litvak’s chapter “Comicosmopolitanism” in *The Un-Americans: Jews, The Blacklist, and Stoolpigeon Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 161. In Litvak’s analysis, the Mollypropisms are “dialectic booby-traps” that function to subtly subvert the politics of ethnicity in much the same way that I am claiming they function to discreetly disrupt the politics of gender.

³¹ Molly: “Hello? Yes? Speaking, conversing on the phone [...]” (Sept. 5, 1949).

³² “Jake, darling, I’m thinking now that we have a new landlord that I should ask him to do me [...] decorate me, paint me the whole apartment” (Sept. 5, 1949).

³³ Jake: “Ignorance is nine-tenths of the law,” or Molly: “Jake, don’t turn over the apple cart till you’ve tasted the apples” (Sept. 14, 1954).

³⁴ Gertrude Berg, creator. *The Ultimate Goldbergs*. UCLA Film and Television Archive. Shout! Factory, 2010, Disc 1, Track 2, 00:05:32-00:05:40.

³⁵ Judy Little, “Humoring the Sentence: Women’s Dialogic Comedy” in *Women’s Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 19.

³⁶ It is an ethnic subversion that implicitly reproaches the English language for having no dative case, unlike Yiddish or German.

instance, she demands of him at the breakfast table: “Should I fry you?”³⁷ In another episode she asks Uncle David for help preparing supper: “David, come, peel me, yes, darling?”³⁸ and in yet another she requests of Rosalie, “So take my leg out of the oven and Papa’ll carve it.”³⁹ In some episodes these Mollypropisms verge on the grotesque:

MOLLY: [*Leaning out of the window of a neighbour’s apartment where she is visiting, to Jake, at her own*] Did Rosalie take my leg out of the oven?

JAKE: It’s standing on the table...

MOLLY: Slice me, I’ll be in in a minute.⁴⁰

These are typical of Berg’s comic technique in discreetly disrupting the language of the dining table to incongruously raise for a moment the question of who is being made an object, and for whose benefit. Beneath the dissonances created by this form of Mollypropism, traditional gender-coded notions of activity and passivity are being subtly subverted (i.e. disrupted) by a characteristically dialogical technique.

Thus, as she is premised on *heteroglossia*, it is plain to see how Molly is a carnivalesque figure. In fact she bears a striking, though distant, resemblance to the archetypal “unruly woman” or “woman on top” described by Rowe. Rowe persuasively locates the origins of this figure in the carnivalesque, and its latter chapters trace its elaboration through Hollywood’s romantic “screwball” comedies of the 1930s and 1940s.⁴¹ She observes: “as the drive towards domestication and containment associated with the 1950s was closing down familiar options for representing female audiences on the big screen, others were opening up on TV, modified to suit the needs of the new medium.”⁴² For Rowe, the relocation to television furnished the character with new opportunities for transgression rooted in three specifics of the medium: “flow,” the comparatively low definition of the televisual image, and its address to its audience.⁴³ In her first chapter, Rowe gives a taxonomy of the character’s definitive features that startlingly confirms this genealogy:

1. The unruly woman creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, men. She is unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place.
2. Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites.
3. Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone.
4. She makes jokes, or laughs herself.
5. She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social

³⁷ “Is There A Doctor In the House?” (1956), 00:10:00. Jake responds, “On both sides, please.”

³⁸ Sept. 14, 1954, 00:26:28-00:26:30.

³⁹ May 25, 1954, 00:08:55-00:08:58.

⁴⁰ Gertrude Berg, creator. *The Ultimate Goldbergs*. UCLA Film and Television Archive. Shout! Factory, 2010, Disc 2, Track 1, 00:11:28-00:11:36.

⁴¹ Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, 31-34.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

construction of gender.⁴⁴

In the looking-glass world of the Goldberg home Molly is the dominant character. In fact, her defiance of her husband's cautions against "mixing" (i.e., intervening in her neighbours' problems) due to her excessive benevolence, effectively appropriates his Talmudic responsibility to perform *mitzvot* (acts of charity) on behalf of the family, thus disrupting the traditional Jewish patriarchal family structure. Molly's dominance is made visible through her body and the space it commands on screen in comparison to other characters as she is physically excessive. She is repeatedly teased about her weight and in two separate episodes tries unsuccessfully to reduce it. Her speech also habitually runs over its boundaries and is marked as excessive not only by the Mollypropisms, but by radical contrasts of tempo, pitch and volume, and is often punctuated with gentle laughter. But though she is the mother of two children and is unrestrainedly affectionate with all the members of her family, always reaching out a maternal hand to touch or stroke them, her sexuality throughout the series (consistent with the era's prejudices about the sanctity of motherhood) is made conspicuous by the absence of intimacy between her and her husband. Indeed, several episodes pointedly contrast her with more slender, more sexually desirable (though not necessarily younger) women.⁴⁵

Molly's relationship with her husband Jake is unquestionably the major axis through which her character expresses itself: Jake's opposition to Molly's "mixing," and his antagonism towards the "Yoo-hoo" circle is the series' central structuring convention. However, his attempts to confine her to her domestic duties are half-hearted and always fail. The reason is that Jake genuinely loves and admires his wife, and his pride when her "mixing" is successful is ungrudging. Jake realizes, and in often acquiescing to his wife tacitly acknowledges, that it is his relationship with Molly that keeps him on an even keel and makes it possible for him to play the role of father in a secure and happy home. So while it is undeniable that a great deal of the comedy in *The Goldbergs* is, as Patricia Mellencamp observes in respect to the comedy of *I Love Lucy* and *Burns and Allen* (1950-1958), a comedy of containment, I would argue that what is celebrated in *The Goldbergs* is a state of *mutual* containment: that what makes the Goldbergs' a happy home is that Jake and Molly mutually both contain and complete each other. That is why the balance they strike is so delicate.⁴⁶ However, it cannot be denied that it is achieved at the cost of the evident suppression of both Molly's and Jake's identities as subjects of specifically sexual desire. Whereas unrestrained desire is the profoundly threatening essence of the unruly woman type as Rowe conceives it, in Molly the threat of excessive female desire is consistently—though never quite satisfactorily—sublimated into motherhood.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁵ These also tend, interestingly, to be women in the show that have personal accomplishments outside the home and that have achieved independent social stature and earned the respect of men: women like her husband's forewoman, Natalie Felsen, or her son's prospective mother-in-law, Mrs. Barnett.

⁴⁶ For me, the image in which this state of affairs is summed up is the potted flower on Molly's windowsill (in the CBS episodes it is a Sanka tin). While the flower pot contains the plant, the plant contains both the seed from which it sprang and the seeds which will spring from it; and it is these which make the pot what it is rather than some other kind of vessel; held in this delicate balance, though they have nothing but each other to keep them there, both flower and pot teeter precariously on the windowsill, but never fall to the alley below.

Consequently, the more gender-transgressive aspects of the unruly woman type as described by Rowe are displaced from Molly onto her constant ally and frequent surrogate, Uncle David.⁴⁷ In Uncle David, we have a radically feminized “little old man” who regularly transgresses the boundaries of gender. Throughout the series we see him playing a surprising variety of roles, ranging from the hyper-masculine to the quasi-feminine, and subverting each role he undertakes—though always under the protective aura of “Jewish humour.” He is Molly’s friend and confidant, often conspiring with her in her schemes to solve other people’s problems. He frequently dons an apron to iron clothes, helps Molly with her knitting or with the cooking, sometimes providing meals for the family. Indeed, the extravagance of his pride in his son “Solly de doctor” is far more reminiscent of the stereotypical Jewish mother than of the authoritarian father. However, despite these stereotypically feminine qualities, he is also stereotypically masculine in his insecurity and competitiveness.⁴⁸ After Molly, he is the series’ prime exponent of pathos. For instance, in the episode of September 7, 1954, Uncle David is baited by his shrewish sister, Molly’s Tante Elke, into moving out of Molly’s home and in with his son Solly.⁴⁹ Here, he is waited on hand and foot by servants, but hardly sees his busy son. Eventually, we see David sitting at a richly laden table in his son’s home and hear the chatter of voices at a social gathering. As the camera draws back from medium close-up to long shot, we see that the table is set for one, and that David is alone, listening to the radio. Invited back for dinner at Molly’s house he rhapsodizes over the pampering he receives at his son’s, getting more and more tearful as he goes on:

UNCLE DAVID: And then, the supper table ... the supper table, all my Solly’s doctor friends are sitting. I’m sitting on the top of the table ... and there isn’t a question in the conversation that my Solly don’t look to me for an opinion. “Papa, darling, what do you say? Papa, darling, what do you say? [*He begins to weep*] I’m a king. A king.”⁵⁰

“King” David’s line is repeated in a high falsetto that makes it sound like nothing more than the cry of an unhappy child: the paradigmatic Jewish patriarch is subverted here by dissonant citation through the figure of a lonely and wistfully mendacious old man.

In accordance with the core values of 1950s American television, the containing narrative arc of *The Goldbergs* seems to privilege the male side of the family. At its beginning, Jake and Molly are still struggling to establish themselves and their children are still in school. Throughout the live-to-air episodes, Jake’s business becomes increasingly successful while the children grow up, and, coinciding with the move to Guild Films and the telefilm format, the family ultimately moves out of their Bronx apartment to a home in the New York suburbs. In the final episode of the series from 1956, Sammy gets married to his girlfriend Dora Barnett, and the

⁴⁷ As Rowe further states in *The Unruly Woman*: “She may be old or a masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque” (31).

⁴⁸ In the episode from August 7, 1953, David makes the family miserable with his jealousy of Jake’s Uncle Berish, who has come to stay with them, championing his son Solly as a real doctor against Berish’s son, who is only a dentist. See: <https://archive.org/details/TheGoldbergsLiveAug.71953>.

⁴⁹ Available at: <https://archive.org/details/theGoldbergs-7September1954>.

⁵⁰ Gertrude Berg, creator. *The Ultimate Goldbergs*. UCLA Film and Television Archive. Shout! Factory, 2010, Disc 3, Track 3, 00:24:41-00:25:08.

suggestion is that the wedding marks the conclusion of one cycle tracing the rise of a Goldberg male with the beginning of another tracing the rise of his son. But earlier, by the show's 1953 season (when he meets Dora), Sammy has already virtually ceased to be a presence in the family, only cropping up momentarily at the beginning or end of an episode on his way to or from a date. By 1954 he has left for college, so that the destiny of Jake Goldberg's son and heir becomes more and more of an irrelevancy as the series proceeds.⁵¹

Instead, the fate of Molly's daughter Rosalie becomes the primary concern of the show. The "Young Woman With A Problematic Future" is, indeed, one of the tropes of 1950s television that has been most overlooked by television scholars, despite the ubiquity of the character type—from Babs in the earliest episodes of *The Life of Riley* (1953-1958) to Betty in *Father Knows Best*. But in *The Goldbergs*, it takes on special prominence as the series turns on the problem of how much of the spirit of her mother will continue to survive in the figure of Rosalie. By the Guild Films period, the series' proairetic drive is sustained largely by our concern for Rosie and the problem of what she should do with her life.⁵²

There is a fundamental inversion, then, in *The Goldberg's* valorization of character and relationship over the farcical action typically given priority in the American sitcom. This inversion is itself a function of the show's incarnation of the unruly woman in the person of Molly Goldberg, which is itself reflected in a variety of dissonances (as through the Mollypropisms), inversions (as in the power dynamics within the Goldberg household), and transgressive substitutions (such as the treatment of gender roles in the figure of Uncle David), all of which are delivered under the pretext of "Jewish humour." In so doing, the show discreetly disrupts our complacent acceptance of the representational conventions of American television of the decade. The same conventions conceal our own ambivalence towards the women who play the most significant roles in our lives and tend to rationalize our complicity in their oppression.

Discreet Disruptions in Performance: The Laughter of Voluntary Self-Deflation

As Molly sets out to solve her friends' difficulties, she is repeatedly made the object of her loved ones' scorn. Her family patronizes her, her friends castigate her, successful women like Mrs. Barnett humiliate her, and her extended family frequently bullies her. We are constantly made to pity her; but never to identify with her. On the contrary, as spectators we are most frequently aligned with the characters who denigrate her. But when we laugh, we never laugh *at* her—we always laugh *with* her. Humorous pleasure in *The Goldbergs* is always related to a reconciliatory movement between the characters and ourselves, to sudden but discreet disruptions of the

⁵¹ Molly's relationships with her children are evidently the reverse of Gertrude Berg's with hers: Gertrude's son Cherny was permanently on hand as the producer of her show, whereas, according to Glenn D. Smith, Gertrude's relationship with her daughter Harriet was on the back burner as long as she continued to be occupied with the series.

⁵² At the same time, an egregious example of the series' accommodation of contemporary attitudes to gender is furnished by its treatment of the character's interpreter, Arlene McQuade, who blossoms, between 1949 and 1954, not only into a versatile and highly engaging performer, but also into an attractive young woman. With increasing frequency, as she does so, the show repeatedly abandons both its forward narrative movement and its stylistic integrity to pause and present Arlene/Rosalie in more or less static long shots (rather than the medium shots it typically favors) that linger dotingly over her, decked out in bathing suits, dressing gowns, and form-fitting fashions, and occasionally leaning provocatively over desks and tables.

distance between the characters and us.

Our positioning in these instances is, of course, partly a function of the writing, but it is constructed mostly by a delicate manipulation—and frequent inversion—of the signifiers of closeness and distance between herself and her audience that is the hallmark of Gertrude Berg’s performance style. Early in her career, she apparently learned that radio technology made it possible to reverse expectations and render the most dramatic moments in the softest tones of voice. She may also have learned early on that this enabled her to experiment with similar reversals of pitch and tempo. In any case, we frequently find her doing exactly the opposite of what a theatrical comedian would do in taking a dramatically “strong” position. For example, in the episode with the new landlord, when Jake rebukes her and she responds, “Oh, so it’s my fault de voild is movink on de axis?” another comedian, Lucille Ball for example, would likely speak the line loudly, with numerous *portamentos* up and down in pitch on “Oh” and “my” to highlight the absurdity of the idea. But Berg’s Molly does the opposite: she speaks the line softly, wonderingly, remaining within a narrow cluster of tones high in her falsetto voice, as though Molly found Jake’s rebuke somehow plausible, and were struck, even hurt, by it. While we may have been, up to now, on Jake’s side in the argument, we are suddenly swung over to sympathy with Molly and we laugh, not at her, but at the injustice of Jake’s hyperbole and at the double meaning of the even greater hyperbole she substitutes for it; one that absurdly, but significantly, equates her with God, bearing the reproach for the wrongs done by humans.

On the other hand, Molly’s *yiddishe* dialect is just one feature of her persona that may prevent many viewers from coming *too* close to her until the crucial moment. It enables Berg to reserve maximum intimacy and expressiveness for the emotional high point of each episode, when the distance between spectator and performer is suddenly (but discreetly) collapsed.⁵³ She communicates pathos as profound and as widely accessible as Chaplin’s, but it is pathos of a different sort—one rooted in feminine subjectivity. Performed in this delicate manner, the humour that the scene elicits is a form of what Freud calls “‘broken’ humour—the humour that smiles through tears.”⁵⁴ So similarly when Molly’s loving husband criticizes her wardrobe, or her children snicker at her dowdy hats, Gertrude the actor is able to register a combination of dowdy frumpiness and genuine hurt that both amuses spectators and reproaches them for their complicity. The mode of engagement that Berg’s performance technique seems to solicit most is empathy: an intuitive association mediated by a distance that is both respectful of her difference and sensitive to the burdens it imposes on her.⁵⁵

For Patricia Mellencamp, the laughter of *I Love Lucy* is not primarily comic, though it partakes of physical comedy. Rather it is humorous as it involves “an economy of expenditure on

⁵³ The approach of Gertrude Berg the performer to these moments is masterly. For example, after her cousin Simon has reproached her bitterly for poisoning him rather than thanked her for nursing him to health, and exited, her voice becomes even softer than usual, almost inaudible, and lingers tremulously in her upper register. Her eyes widen, though they do not fill with tears—rather than self-pity, what projects itself through the televisual window is the unbearable weight of her hurt.

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 298. This is a description that is regularly applied to Jewish humour.

⁵⁵ In a preludic Rybutal ad for the episode dated June 8 1954, she complains, regarding the oppressive summer weather: “It’s not the heat; it’s the humility.” Rosalie appears at the window to correct even this: “Humidity, Ma!! (00:00:47-00:00:50).

feeling”— i.e., on women’s feelings of anger at their domestic oppression.⁵⁶ Humour, in the Freudian schema, stands in contrast to jokes, which consist instead in “an economy in expenditure on inhibition.”⁵⁷ It also contrasts the comic proper, which consists instead in “an economy in expenditure on ideation (cathexis).”⁵⁸ That is to say, on the energy that is invested in a particular thought, represented by a comparison between the laughter and the object of laughter.⁵⁹ In slapstick comedy, for example, the disproportion between the energy invested in the violence of the clown, and the energy one would invest in real violence, renders one’s own violent energies superfluous, and they are discharged in laughter. Freud doesn’t discuss character comedy as a distinct category, but the notion of comedy as “an economy in expenditure on ideation (cathexis)” is perfectly appropriate to the character comedy of Gertrude Berg. The indignities Molly suffers are things we would resent very much if they happened to us—but she doesn’t resent them at all. As viewers we may look down on her for this— until the pivotal moment when she shames herself and is proven to have been right after all. At that point, we are prompted to shame ourselves by a reciprocal movement, and to acknowledge that our own investment in our resentments is similarly disproportionate and should be economized on likewise; and as we imagine it so, the now-superfluous resentful energy we’ve been carrying around with us is discharged in laughter. The pleasure of our laughter is the reward of abandoning our common sense (and the selfish husbanding of our resentments that goes with it) and uniting with Molly in a voluntary act of humility.

In this way, the comedy of Gertrude Berg moves beyond mere “accommodation and resignation” at women’s domestic oppression in postwar America. It shows instead how resentment can be transformed into triumph; how the cathexes of psychic energy that are bound to women’s sense of their victimization can be liberated and set in service of their egos once again. The transformative laughter of “voluntary self-deflation” can enable women to look with indifference and even a sense of superiority on the depredations to which men have subjected them. It thus suggests a matriarchal folk wisdom that has lain latent in the popular culture of all ages, and one that may be associated with Hélène Cixous’ description of the laughter of the Medusa.⁶⁰ As Kathleen Rowe asserts, laughter such as this can even mobilize “the uncanny and ambivalent power of the female gaze to look on the castrated man and restore his potency,”⁶¹ as Molly does for the parade of hapless young men that seek her assistance throughout *The Goldbergs*. But the precondition for this laughter rests in a psychological attitude that is the antithesis of that which finds in comedy an outlet for more or less un-displaced rage—for example, in the stand-up comedy that has been the principle subject of theorization for feminist

⁵⁶ Patricia Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism and Freud: Discourse of Gracie and Lucy” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 93.

⁵⁷ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 302.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Mellencamp is one of the few commentators to realize that the humour of *I Love Lucy* is not that of slapstick comedy, though she is evidently unaware that this is true even of Lucy’s physical humor.

⁶⁰ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 355.

⁶¹ Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, 211.

scholars of comedy such as Linda Mizejewski, Susan Lavin, Rebecca Krefting, and Domnica Radulescu.⁶² On the contrary, its preconditions are the renunciation of rage, the disavowal of threat, and a movement towards reconciliation.

Conclusion

Gertrude Berg was evidently not a feminist—though she likely would have been one had she not accepted that her silence on social issues was the price she had to pay for a conspicuously successful career in a male-dominated industry. In her writing she drew heavily on the ethnic, class, and gender stereotypes that were hallmarks of the overwhelmingly white protestant, bourgeois, and patriarchal ideologies that prevailed in televisual culture of postwar America. In framing the product spots that both began and concluded each of her live-to-air episodes as “gossip” exchanged among friends across the airshaft, and in aligning her diegetic apartment window with the televisual apparatus, Berg did, to some extent, subvert her construction of a community of interest (coded feminine) to the ultimately patriarchal interests of Madison Avenue. And in each of her stories she did affirm the consonance of conventional domestic harmony, relying on a traditionally gendered division of labour, with progressive American social values. Superficially, *The Goldbergs* can be read as a representative, “naïve” American sitcom of the 1950s. But Gertrude Berg was both a talented writer and performer, who articulated a distinct subjectivity through her creation of Molly Goldberg, which she rooted in her own experiences as an American-Jewish woman. In so doing, she made this subjectivity communicable and, to an extent, “universalized” it by making it accessible to a mass audience. She thus made women’s dialogic comedy available to viewers able to adopt an appropriately empathic subject position. To those who were not, she offered alternative pleasures: *The Goldbergs* is a text that remains legible from a variety of perspectives.

As I have shown, the feminine subjectivity latent in *The Goldbergs* comes into conflict at every level with the antithetical (patriarchal) values imposed on it by the postwar television industry as conditions of its articulation. The effect is to produce a series of textual disruptions analogous in television to what Judy Little calls “an infection in the sentence” in literature.⁶³ To summarize these in the reverse order to that in which I proposed them: there are first of all numerous surface perturbations, best exemplified by the Mollypropisms, that discreetly problematize the order of subjects and objects in the Goldberg household. Others include the incursions of the “Yoo-hoo” circle on Jake’s domestic autonomy; the denigrations Molly repeatedly suffers, and the reversals of performance technique by which Gertrude Berg the actor registers them. Second, these are the symptoms of numerous redirections: for example at the level of story, in which narratives that tend towards what I have called a talion “masculine” ending, terminate instead in more inclusive “feminine” resolutions. At the level of the series, there is a redirection of the overarching narrative from a concern with Sammy’s future to one

⁶² Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); Susan Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance: Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and Roseanne* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); and Domnica Radulescu, *Women’s Comedic Art As Social Revolution: Five Performers and the Lessons of Their Subversive Humor* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2012).

⁶³ Little, “Humoring the Sentence: Women’s Dialogic Comedy,” 19.

with Rosalie's. Thirdly, these are related in turn to a number of outright inversions and substitutions that transform the discursive effect of each episode. Of these, two are the most conspicuous: first, the inversion of melodramatic and comic temporalities in the development of the action; and second, the substitution of the "laughter of voluntary self-deflation" for the laughter of sadistic deflation of the other (more proper to farce) at its climax. Underlying all of these, however, there is deeply concealed within the fabric of every episode a fundamental antithesis that we may read as straightforwardly (though subtly) oppositional. Ultimately, it is Molly's kindly will that governs the progress of the plot and provides its resolution; and it is Molly's perspective, established formally during the beginning and ending product spots, that structures the story. The hand that holds the Rybutol bottle is the one that rules the diegetic world of *The Goldbergs*.

At the same time, then, as it enthusiastically rehearses the tropes of 1950s television and reproduces its ideology, serves the interests of its male-dominated social order, and affirms its values, *The Goldbergs* also resists them. In this essay, I have shown that this is not due to any conscious ideological project on the part of the series' author and lead performer, but is instead the consequence of Berg's truthful articulation throughout the series of her own subjectivity as a Jewish-American woman through discreetly disruptive humour, and the often surprising multivocality of 1950s television.

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The Acoustic Screen: The Dynamics of the Female Look and Voice in Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin*

Najmeh Moradiyan Rizi

Abstract:

*Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the representation of women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has been one of the main concerns of Iranian officials. This concern caused the enforcement of cinematic restrictions on Iranian cinema in 1982, known as the Islamic Codes of Modesty. The prohibition of the close-ups of women's faces was one of these cinematic limitations. Since then, Iranian filmmakers have used a great amount of creativity in their films to not only represent Iranian women on the screen, but also to criticize the gender-segregated laws of Iran. Their creativity and efforts have gradually challenged and changed the modesty regulations. Abbas Kiarostami's film, *Shirin* (2008), stands out in this regard as the film provides an unprecedented portrayal of Iranian women through the use of close-up shots of 114 actresses throughout the film. This paper examines the aesthetics and politics of Kiarostami's cinema through a feminist analysis of *Shirin* in order to locate Kiarostami's film within a larger socio-cultural context of Iran. The main focus of this study, therefore, is to show how Kiarostami uses the cinematic apparatus to highlight female subjectivity not only in literary and cinematic platforms, but also in Iran's history and society.*

Keywords: Abbas Kiarostami; feminism; gender; Iranian cinema; Iranian women; *Shirin*.

The post-revolutionary cinematic works of Abbas Kiarostami have been the sites of film critics' and media scholars' analyses and debates over the years. Among the praises of Kiarostami's cinema, there have also been questions and critiques of the lack of representation of Iranian women.¹ Some critics have considered this lack to be part of Kiarostami's non-political approach to Islamic cinematic restrictions,² imposed upon Iranian cinema in 1982, known as the Islamic Codes of Modesty.³ Others have related it to

¹ Kiarostami started his cinematic career prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution by making films for and about children for the "Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults." Therefore, some film critics have pointed out that children's cinema helped Kiarostami to align his post-revolutionary filmmaking to the gender-segregated and censored environment of Iranian cinema.

² Azadeh Farahmand, for instance, challenges the lack of female presence in Kiarostami's films by asserting that "the political escapism in Kiarostami's films is a facilitating, rather than a debilitating, choice, one which caters to the film festival taste for high art and restrained politics" (Farahmand 99).

Kiarostami's cinematic style, rather than his reluctance to deal with political and social issues. In this regard, film scholar David Oubiña postulates a "principle of subtraction" in Kiarostami's films: "It is not an adding together of shots but, quite the opposite, what is left after eliminating surplus images [...]" (Quoted by Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* 152). This subtractive style is actively at work in Kiarostami's cinema, especially in regard to the representation of Iranian women.

Regarding Kiarostami's post-revolutionary films, Negar Mottahedeh asserts that "woman is what is subtracted from the screen in his oeuvre, and yet, this palpable absence in the actual narrative and on the visual track has given the figure unbounded significance" (91). Mottahedeh then goes on to name the visual treatment of women in Kiarostami's cinema an "absent presence" (Ibid.). There are, however, two major films among Kiarostami's cinematic works that mainly focus on women: *Ten (Dah)*, (2002) and *Shirin* (2008). These two films, aside from situating Iranian women at the center of their cinematic narratives, provide a close study of them within a socio-cultural context of Iran. Both films should also be considered two moments of cinematic rupture in Kiarostami's professional career: In *Ten* he breaks away from the village setting of his previous films by centering on the urban lives of Iranian women in Tehran, and in *Shirin* he diverges from the long shots of his realist cinematic style by presenting only the close-up shots of Iranian women's faces.

Given that in Iranian cinema, "the female body, which has been defined in historically charged and culturally assertive terms, is constantly reinvested thematically and technically" (Moore 1), this article aims to assess the politics and aesthetics of Iranian women's representation in Kiarostami's cinema within the broader context of Iranian society by focusing on two major goals. First, to provide a feminist study of Kiarostami's *Shirin* in order to highlight the significance of Kiarostami's shift from the "absent presence" of women in his films to foregrounding their subjectivity. Second, to underline Kiarostami's self-reflexive cinema in *Shirin* through the emphasis on cinematic spectatorship and artistic connections to other mediums, particularly Persian literature. The feminist approach in this article has a socio-cultural and religious specificity which is mainly based on the official implementation of Islamic Shi'i laws after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and its effects on women's representations in Iranian cinema.⁴

As post-revolutionary gender-segregated laws have attempted to protect Iranian women's virtue and integrity, so have the Islamic Codes of Modesty in Iranian cinema tried to shield the female body from commodification. These codes, applied to the cinema in 1982, affected both thematic and formal aspects of Iranian films. As Hamid Naficy explains, the modesty codes "governed the characters' dress (long, loose-fitting), behavior and acting (dignified, no body contact between men and women), and gaze (averted look, no direct gaze)" (133). Women were

³ According to these codes, close-ups of a woman's face and her body parts, shot-reverse shots of characters in a male-female conversational scene, direct touching, as well as direct looking between a man and a woman were all prohibited. Iranian actresses were also required to wear the veil in all scenes, both exterior and interior.

⁴ As Afsaneh Najmabadi mentions, "One of the problems with current discussions of Islam and feminism is ahistorical generalizations. These generalizations screen away vast historical and contemporary differences among countries as diverse as Algeria, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Indonesia, to name just a few" (Najmabadi 29). This article, therefore, aims to provide a feminist reading of *Shirin* that pertains to the socio-cultural and religious context of Iran.

mainly depicted as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters in the background and therefore did not advance the films' narratives. Also, they "were often filmed in long shot and in inactive roles so as to prevent the contours of their bodies from showing" (Ibid.). The significant point, however, is that since 1982 the Islamic Codes of Modesty have been gradually reinterpreted, challenged, and changed. Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin* is an explicit example of this change. The film utilizes the close-up shots of women's faces as its main cinematic form to not only present a liberated portrayal of Iranian women on the screen, but also to challenge the cinematic conventions associated with the close-up shots of women's faces in Western cinema.⁵

***Shirin*: Mirroring the Self-Reflexive Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami**

Kiarostami's self-referential cinema has provided a unique way for him to highlight the limitations of the cinematic apparatus, among other themes. At the end of *Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm-e gilās*, 1997), the final scene, depicting Mr. Badii (Homayoun Ershadi) in the grave looking at the cloudy sky, fades to Kiarostami and the rest of the film's cast and crew including the cinematographer, sound manager, and the lead actor. Kiarostami then announces the end of his shooting by asking his crew to rest under the shadow of a nearby cherry tree. Here, cinematic self-reflexivity explicitly shows itself through the emphasis on the act of filmmaking. Further, in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Bad ma ra khahad bord*, 1999) there is a scene in which the lead actor, Behzad Dorani, looks into the camera and shaves his face as if the camera is his mirror and he sees himself by looking at the spectators (See Fig. 1). An identical technique is used in *Copie*



Fig. 1 The actor treats the camera as a mirror. (Film still from *The Wind Will Carry Us* (Kiarostami, 1999))

⁵ As noted by many Western feminists, in Western cinema, especially classical Hollywood cinema (roughly from 1917 to 1960), close-ups of a woman's body parts tend to objectify the female body. "The use of such close-ups for the heroine stresses that, unlike the hero, she is valued above all for what her appearance connotes, for her beauty and sexual desirability" (Chaudhuri 37).

conforme (*Certified Copy*, 2010) when Juliette Binoche looks into the camera/mirror and applies her lipstick. In these scenes the screen has two different functions: It works as both a barrier and a connector. The screen separates/connects the cinematic world of narrative from/to the real world.

The interaction between the real and diegetic worlds is also tangible in *Shirin*. The film offers close-up shots of 114 women (113 Iranian actresses and a French actress, Juliette Binoche) in a cinematic auditorium, all of whom appear to be watching a famous Persian romance, *Khosrow and Shirin* (*Khosrow va Shirin*). In fact, we follow the story of Khosrow and Shirin through Shirin's voice-over, and instead of viewing the romance, we watch the emotional and engaging expressions of the story on the actresses' faces. There is no doubt that we, as the spectators of the film, are asked to engage with these actresses, the spectators of the love story within the film. What happens here is the circulation of looks between the film's spectators and the actresses/spectators of the romance. In *The Wind Will Carry Us* and *Certified Copy*, the cinematic self-reflexivity finds an explicit momentum, while in *Shirin*, it exists throughout the 92-minute film. There is no implication of the mirror here, rather the screen these women are looking at overlaps with our screen (as the spectators of the film) and both are aligned with the position of the camera. The role of camera/mirror, therefore, changes to camera/screen and reflection to projection. In this situation, the real world and the cinematic reality interact with each other such that the notion of cinematic spectatorship becomes complex. In this regard, Laura Mulvey, whose familiarity with Iranian cinema provides a meticulous insight into Kiarostami's self-reflexive cinema, points out:

Kiarostami explores the narrow line between illusion and reality that is the defining characteristic of the cinema [...] This 'what is cinema?' approach to filmmaking affects the spectator's relation to the screen [...] To ask the spectator to think—and to think about the limits and possibilities of cinematic representation—is to create a form of questioning and interrogative spectatorship that must be at odds with the certainties of any dominant ideological conviction—in the case of Iran, of religion. (Afterword 260)

Although Mulvey wrote this prior to the making of *Shirin*, there are two main points in Mulvey's description of Kiarostami's self-reflexive cinematic style that are present in *Shirin*. The interaction of the real world with the cinematic reality is reflected through the presence of Iranian actresses. Those who have been actresses on the screen are now the spectators within the film. They might still be considered actresses for us, but their spectatorship is a reflection of our spectatorship. The selection of 113 Iranian actresses pays homage to Iranian cinema as well as Iranian television and theatre with an emphasis on the roles of women across these mediums.⁶ The inclusion of different actresses from different generations also recognizes both pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods of Iranian cinema. We do not get to know anything about the private lives or the characters of these Iranian actresses throughout the film, yet our association with them is through the roles they have played in Iranian films. Regarding the inclusion of a French actress, Juliette Binoche, Sara Saljoughi explains that this “functions to [...] include Kiarostami's subsequent film, *Certified Copy* (2010) [...], but also locates Iranian

⁶ *Shirin*, through its soundtrack, also pays homage to radio and the art of dubbing in Iran. By using famous figures of radio and movie dubbing such as Khosrow Khosrowshahi, Manuchehr Esmaili, and Fahimeh Rastkar, Kiarostami acknowledges an era in Iranian cinema when the imported foreign films were dubbed for screening in movie theatres or for television.

cinema in a global context. Binoche's face thus serves as an index for European cinema in the same way that the Iranian actresses' faces point to the work of Kiarostami's colleagues at home" (526).

Furthermore, *Shirin* signals the limitations of cinematic representation, especially in regard to women, in the context of Iranian cinema and society. Compulsory veiling of Iranian women after the Islamic Revolution has divided the perception and the use of space in Iranian society into two major sectors, the public and the private. Both a movie theatre and a narrative space on the screen are considered public spaces. Therefore, the presence of any unrelated men as spectators in the movie theatre and as cast and crew throughout the film production requires all actresses and those women working on the set to wear the veil. Both of these situations are presented in *Shirin*. In this film, all the women, as actresses and spectators, have headscarves reflecting the religious notion of film viewing as part of an ideological cinematic apparatus in Iran. As Saljoughi writes, "Because he is filming in Iran, Kiarostami is required to observe, at a basic level, the modesty laws by exhibiting women in veils. But, his lengthy mediation on the female face [...] offers a bold challenge to the law's emphasis on not looking at women, at avoiding a spectator-image relationship based on the fulfillment of the desiring male gaze" (533). The representation of the love story of *Khosrow and Shirin* through the soundtrack also hints toward the restricted representation of heterosexual love in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. In other words, the elimination of the image from *Khosrow and Shirin*'s love story acknowledges a challenging awareness that its referential point is the representation of women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema as both spectators and actresses.

***Shirin*: The (In)Visibility of Iranian Women in Cinema and Literature**

As noted earlier, the actresses of *Shirin* appear to be watching the love story of Khosrow and Shirin on the screen. This romance is an adapted narrative from *Khosrow and Shirin*, the literary masterpiece of the twelfth-century Iranian poet, Nezami Ganjavi (1141-1209), that centers on a love triangle. Shirin, the Armenian princess, and Khosrow, the prince of Persia, fall in love with each other. Although Khosrow loves Shirin, due to political interest he marries Maryam, the daughter of a Byzantine king. Shirin also has another lover, Farhad, who is the master of stone carving. Farhad is trapped by the jealousy of Khosrow and kills himself when he is falsely told that Shirin is dead. Later in the story, Shirin finally marries Khosrow, but kills herself upon witnessing the murder of Khosrow by his son from another woman. This story, as the object of the actresses' gaze on the screen, is provided to us only through the soundtrack. But why does Kiarostami connect this love story from classical Persian literature to the medium of cinema? How do cinema and literature, as the artistic showcases of Iranian culture, represent women? And what is the relationship of this cinematic and literary representation to the situation of women in today's Iran? In fact, the significance of *Shirin* can be found in the connection it creates between Persian literature, one of the main sites of Iran's cultural expression throughout its history, and Iranian cinema, one of the main sites of cultural representation in contemporary Iran. These two mediums have a crucial role in defining and naturalizing the notions of femininity in Iranian society, and *Shirin* explores this role.

Throughout the history of Iran, a woman's invisibility, chastity, charm, and silence have been considered her ideal features. These feminine characteristics of Iranian women have had a major impact on the representation of heterosexual love stories in both Iranian cinema and Persian literature, which entail the recognition of women's presence in their narratives. This

means that the cinematic and literary tropes, used in the representation of Iranian women, often protect these feminine ideals. It is in this situation that classical Persian literature is full of narrative poems on heterosexual love such as *Leyli and Majnun* (1188), *Khosrow and Shirin* (1175-1191), and *Vis and Ramin* (1055).⁷ Furthermore, in Persian literature, as in Iranian cinema, “in the act of narration, the poet [the filmmaker] and the reader [the spectator] are always present and witnessing” (Milani, “The Politics and Poetics of Sex Segregation” 4). This makes the representation of love as a personal and emotional act very challenging. In Persian literature, as Farzaneh Milani explains, Iranian poets and authors “reconciled narrative needs with social properties [...] Some writers, for instance, imported their heroines from foreign lands. Shirin, the lofty heroine of Nezami’s *Khosrow and Shirin* is from Armenia; in the same work, Maryam, Khosrow’s first wife, is Byzantine” (Ibid. 3-4). The prejudiced and possessive protection of Iranian women not only shows itself in these literary works, but also in Iranian cinema. In fact, since the advent of cinema in Iran at the outset of the twentieth century, it took a considerable amount of time before Iranian women appeared on the screen. Dönmez-Colin writes:

The first Iranian silent feature film, *Abi and Rabi* (1930) [...] was a comedy with no women in the cast or the crew. The second Iranian film, *Brother’s Revenge* (1931) daringly introduced two women characters but they had to be played by non-Muslims [...] [The taboo broke] with *The Lor Girl* (1933), the first sound film [...] featuring a Muslim [Iranian] woman, Ruhangiz. (11)

Although in Kiarostami’s *Shirin*, the audio narrative revolves around the love story of an Armenian woman within the context of Iranian culture, we follow the story by meditating on the faces of Iranian actresses. Therefore, the dominance of women’s roles (woman as the actress, woman as the spectator, and woman as the narrator) becomes central in the film. Shirin, the narrator of Kiarostami’s film and the heroine of the classical Persian story of *Khosrow and Shirin*, connects the notions of femininity in Iranian society from the past to the present. This connection signals that the roles of modesty governing Iranian literature and cinema come from the ideological notions of a nation that also controls the representations of literary heroines and cinematic actresses. In *Khosrow and Shirin*, Shirin is a wise, independent princess with power, wealth, and mobility, but her desire for Khosrow, the king of Persia, is totally controlled and regulated. In the film, as we hear, there is a party held in Armenia in which Khosrow demands Shirin’s body. In response, Shirin says, “The king desires an intimate union of Shirin’s body to warm his bed; water to quench his thirst. But alas, it is quenched at the cost of Shirin’s virtue.” Therefore, she denies Khosrow’s carnal request in order to protect her virginity and virtue until she becomes his wife. The presence of Iranian actresses in *Shirin* reminds the audience of the modesty codes, imposed upon Iranian cinema in the post-revolutionary era in order to control the visibility and mobility of Iranian women in this medium. The old and young actresses on the screen, however, show the continuity of the legacy of female presence in Iranian cinema that is becoming more powerful.

The connection between the story’s heroine, Shirin, and these actresses also points to the challenging history of literature and cinema in Iranian society with regard to notions of femininity and representations of women. As Azar Naficy asserts, the love stories of classical Persian literature “are supposed to revolve round the male hero. But it is the active presence of the women that changes events, [and] [...] diverts the men’s life from its traditional course [...]”

⁷ The *Encyclopedia Iranica* is used for indicating the production dates of these Persian literary works.

(117). This strong presence of Iranian women in the narratives of classical Persian literature, however, occurs in a fictional world. As Iranian women gradually start to gain a real, powerful presence in contemporary Iranian society, “their active and subversive function [in classical Persian literature] is turned into a passive and submissive one” (Ibid. 119) in contemporary Persian literature.⁸ The voice of Shirin in Kiarostami’s film is the majestic voice of a woman in classical Persian literature that is going to fade in Iran’s contemporary literature, and the death of Shirin at the end of the film may point to this issue. However, contemporary female writers such as Forough Farrokhzad, Simin Behbahani, and Shahrnush Parsipur have tried to revive the voice of Iranian women in the literary world.

The same situation has happened in Iranian cinema. In pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, the portrayal of women as either chaste individuals, confined within the familial structure (mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters), or cabaret dancers and prostitutes, were two extreme female portrayals that did not represent the reality of women’s lives at that time. Also, in the early years of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, the representation of women became radically unidirectional—passive, chaste, and submissive. However, none of these efforts could prevent Iranian women from having a strong cinematic presence. In fact, the Iranian actresses in *Shirin* are continuing the strong presence of Shirin. This time, however, they are not merely performing in a transcendental world of literary narrative or a cinematic fictive world, but in today’s Iran. The continuity of female influence and power from Persian literature to Iranian cinema, and then to Iranian female audiences in Kiarostami’s *Shirin* uses the cinematic apparatus to underline female individuality. The following section focuses on the functions of the female look and voice in *Shirin* to depict this continuity.

***Shirin*: The Liberation of the Female Look and Voice in Cinema**

Besides the historical ties regarding the treatment of Iranian women in literature and cinema, it is the significance of female identification and spectatorship that connects the story of a heroine like Shirin to the actresses and female audiences of the film. In *Shirin*, Kiarostami activates and mobilizes the look in order to represent a heroine’s story to the women/actresses and the female spectators. Considering the notions of female charm and invisibility in Iranian culture, a woman not only cannot be an agent of the look, but she should also veil herself in order to block the male gaze. In Kiarostami’s *Shirin*, however, the Iranian woman is simultaneously subject and object of the gaze, positions that are denied by the cinematic modesty codes and Iranian culture. In this film, the female gaze finds a subjectivity as the circulation of the look centers on “looking” rather than the object of that look. In this regard, Asbjørn Grønstad asserts, “In Kiarostami’s film the object of the gaze is forever severed from the seer, an elision which produces a double absence and accentuates the act of looking as an isolated event [...] [Therefore,] in *Shirin* seeing takes precedence over being seen” (30). There is no doubt that the actresses on the screen are the objects of our look, but due to the aforementioned effect of the

⁸ Azar Naficy in her article, “Images of Women in Classical Persian Literature and the Contemporary Iranian Novel,” explains that many social changes in Iran, including the compulsory unveiling of women during Reza Shah’s reign, occurred simultaneously with the introduction of the novel in Iran. As women were coming to the fore in the society and public spaces, the anxieties of Iranian men found one of its expressional venues within the contemporary Iranian novel. “The women ruling with wit and majesty over the fertile land of classical Iranian literature are stripped and divided in the later romance-novels, and mutilated and murdered as in [Sadeq] Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl*” (120).

cinematic apparatus, the actresses' look is aligned with ours, highlighting the act of our cinematic spectatorship. In fact, what is at stake in *Shirin* is the centralization and activation of female look and female subjectivity as the main components of the narrative movement.

Laura Mulvey identifies three looks within a cinematic apparatus: "That of the camera as it records the profilmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" 208). In addition to Mulvey's categorization, Paul Willemsen defines a fourth look, "the look at the viewer," which is an imaginary look "in the field of the other" (216). All of the above-mentioned looks are active and present in *Shirin* including the imaginary look of the other, which is recognizable through the traces of lights and shadows on the actresses' faces, a sign of the screen in front of these women and a signification of the other's gaze.

In *Shirin*, the four looks of the cinematic apparatus are interwoven complexly into two main categories. The looks of the camera, the audience, and the imaginary other collapse into one look, and the look of the characters becomes the only one standing on its own. However, the characters' gaze is only definable through its interaction with the other three, or the one integrated look. Therefore, the gaze of the female audiences is aligned with the female imaginary look, and both are in interaction with the look of the female characters. What happens here, then, is the domination of the female gaze throughout the film. Although there are some male spectators in the auditorium in the film, they are always in the darkness, in the background, and mostly out of the frame (See Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Male spectators are not visually emphasized in the film. (Filmstill from *Shirin* (Kiarostami, 2008))

The circulation of the female look in *Shirin* influences female identification. Kiarostami uses close-ups as his cinematic approach to convey the articulation of female identification (from the soundtrack's story to the women/actresses who are watching the story, and then to us). By representing the faces of the actresses in close-up shots, the film's spectators become closer to them. This closeness, besides breaking the modesty codes of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema

that are supposed to make Iranian women distant and inaccessible, plays a major role in the recognition of female desire and identification.

In *Shirin*, we do not have any background information about the women represented on the screen, though we know them as actresses and associate them with their roles in previous films. Also, our look constantly moves from one close-up shot of a face to another. But, there is a subtle identification at work that comes from the continuity of the story on the soundtrack as well as the masterly use of close-up shots within the narrative structure by Kiarostami. As Elizabeth Cowie argues, with regard to the conventional use of the close-up in (Western) cinema, “Identification [...] arises not with the visual view of a character but with a close-up shot of the character looking [...] It is an identification of order: I am what I see” (105). Indeed, the reason that Kiarostami provides us with the close-up shots of the actresses’ faces looking at Shirin’s story, without providing us with their point-of-view shots, must have something to do with the process of female identification (See Fig. 3). Cowie, in her explanation of identification through close-up, furthermore claims that this identification would soon transform “to medium-shot from close-up, or to the object of glance, [which] breaks up the absorption in the image of the other [...]” (Ibid.). The exception, however, is Kiarostami’s *Shirin*. Neither does it provide us with the “object of glance,” nor does it move away from close-up to medium shot or long shot. Therefore, the absorption in the narrative is progressive and continuous.



Fig. 3 The actresses’ connection to the story resonates through their emotional expressions. (Film still from *Shirin*)

As the female look becomes active in *Shirin*, the fetishization of the female body fades away. Regardless of the static impression assigned to the close-up and the closeness of the female body to the audience, which might provoke the implication of possession and fetishism as is the case in classical Hollywood cinema (roughly from 1917 to 1960), the close-ups of *Shirin* work towards subjectification of the female body rather than its objectification. The women in the film are introduced to us, from the beginning, in close-up shots and throughout the film their proximity to us remains immutable. The close-up shots, therefore, do not break the female body; rather, they dominate it. In fact, it is mainly through these close-ups, and through the look and

the values associated with it, that the female identification in the film can be understood. It is because “spectatorship refers not just to the acts of watching and listening and not just to identification with human figures projected on the screen, but rather to the various values with which film viewing is invested” (Mayne 31).

The significance of the female look and spectatorship in *Shirin* constitutes another instance of self-reflexivity in Kiarostami’s cinema. Generally, in cinema it is accepted that “the spectator has the privilege of ‘invisibility,’ looking without being looked at” (Stacey 21). In *Shirin*, however, we not only watch the women/actresses of the film as the spectators of Shirin’s love story, but we also get involved in a cinematic reality that reflects the reality of our own spectatorship. In Laura Mulvey’s words, “In Kiarostami’s cinema, an aesthetic of digression leads toward an aesthetic of reality, not in a simple opposition to fiction, but towards ways in which the cinema acknowledges the limitations of representation” (*Death 24x a Second* 125).

This self-referentiality of cinema and “the limitations of representation” manifest themselves in *Shirin* through the separation of the image and sound tracks. There is one dominant voice in the film and that is the female voice-over. Therefore, as much as the treatment of the female body and the unleashing of the female look are important in *Shirin*, so is the liberation of the female voice. Throughout the history of Iran, the female body and voice have been oppressed as “both tongue and body can speak [...] Both are powerful transmitters of messages. Both can be muted, mutilated, appropriated” (Milani, *Veils and Words* 48). In contrast to the historical attempt at ostracizing the Iranian female body and voice, the separation of the soundtrack from the image in *Shirin* gives an independent identity to the female voice and body.

At the beginning of the film, Shirin directly calls upon her female spectators to hear her story: “Listen to me, my sisters. It’s time for my story. Right here, by the lifeless body of Khosrow.” Then, Shirin explains the events through an extended (audio) flashback, which relays why she is in her current situation. In fact, her voice is auto-biographical and authoritative. These features of Shirin’s voice-over are the same as the characteristics of male voice-over in classical Hollywood cinema. In this regard, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, based on Kaja Silverman’s theories of sound in film, write:

Silverman detects in the use of sound in classical cinema a similarly hierarchical gender logic as Mulvey had seen in the visual structures of look and gaze: ‘a textual model which holds the female voice and body insistently to the interior of the diegesis, while relegating the male subject to a position of apparent discursive exteriority by identifying him with mastering speech, vision, or hearing.’ (143)

In Kiarostami’s film, however, Shirin’s voice highlights Iranian women’s powerful subjectivity. As the female voice in *Shirin* is a disembodied voice, the spectators can only relate the voice to a woman named Shirin. There is no other information about the voice and its body, which makes Shirin ethereal and mysterious. To disembody the Iranian female voice is to represent the freedom of Iranian women’s individuality and to expand their power beyond cultural and historical boundaries. In other words, Kiarostami disembodies Shirin’s voice in order to prevent it from localization and limitation. It is only with this technique that the process of female identification—from Shirin, a twelfth-century heroine, to the Iranian female spectators inside and outside of the film—becomes complete. This female identification resonates at the end of the film when Shirin points to the emotions and sympathy of her female audiences by saying, “You listen to my story and cry. Through these tears, I see your eyes. Are you shedding these tears for me, Shirin, or for the Shirin that hides in each of you?”

As Shirin's disembodied voice on the soundtrack creates a mysterious perception of the heroine, so do the images of women/actresses without any voice. Although the women on the screen are famous actresses and may look familiar to us, the elimination of their voices has made them characteristically equivocal in a way that even the visual images of their expressions cannot provide an insight into their characters and personalities.⁹ In the case of either the female image without voice or the female voice without image, Kiarostami prevents the Iranian women from being fully exposed to the spectator's gaze, thus creating a unique cinematic representation of Iranian women rarely seen in Iranian cinema. In regard to the separation of a woman's voice and body in a cinematic representation, Kaja Silverman starkly mentions:

To permit a female character to be seen without being heard would be to activate the hermeneutic and cultural codes which define woman as 'enigma,' inaccessible to definitive male interpretation. To allow her to be heard without being seen would be even more dangerous, since it would disrupt the specular regime upon which dominant cinema relies; it would put her beyond the reach of the male gaze. (164)

Both of these cinematic situations, described by Silverman, exist in Kiarostami's *Shirin*, and each has its own cultural, social, and religious implications. The voice of Shirin may be the voice of each of the actresses or female spectators of the film: a voice from Iran's literary past that summons Iranian women to revive their mobility and courage, and to take actions toward achieving their passions and desires.

By considering *Shirin*, indeed, it is difficult to argue that Kiarostami's choice of these actresses and the story of *Khosrow and Shirin* does not relate to the gender politics of Iran. Through cinematic self-reflexivity, Kiarostami creates connections between spectatorship and identification, desire and subjectivity, literature and cinema, and past and present. He then situates these ties within the socio-cultural history of Iran. Therefore, Kiarostami forms a cinematic aesthetics that reflects the politics of gender in Iranian society. In *Shirin*, he intentionally breaks away from the depiction of women through an "absent-presence" style in order to centralize the Iranian women's look and voice as a contradictory practice against the oppressive gender and sexual laws within both Iranian society and Iranian cinema. This attempt makes *Shirin* not only an aesthetic rupture in Kiarostami's oeuvre, but also a unique representation of Iranian women on the screen in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.

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⁹ In *Taste of Shirin*, a documentary about the making of *Shirin* directed by Hamideh Razavi, Kiarostami asks the actresses to think about their memories and experiences in order to more easily express their emotions. In this regard, Kiarostami tells his actresses, "The best way is to play a personal movie of your own [...] If you remember a story that made you sad 10 years ago, if you remember it, it will give you a better sense of your role." But, even here, we do not know what these actresses are thinking about, and therefore, our close understanding of their characters remains impossible.

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This Is Not a Joke: Review of “Performing Praxis” Roundtable

“Humorous > Disruptions Colloquium: Laughter and Technologies of Disruption in Feminist Film and Media.” Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. October 16-17, 2015.

Reviewed by Aditi Ohri and Xander Selene

Shelley Niro, Liz Clarke, and Ara Osterweil came together for “Performing Praxis,” one of two roundtables included in the colloquium “Humorous > Disruptions,” sponsored by *Synoptique* in October 2015. Their presentations were politically engaging, provocative, and funny. However, the panel engendered an intense discussion that was far from lighthearted. For Niro, humour gave levity to legacies of genocide and colonialism in Canada; for Clarke, it functioned as a negotiating tool in the corporate world of Hollywood; and, for Osterweil, it mingled with rage and served as a counterpoint to the hopelessness incited by the structural patriarchy of the Western art world. Humour, as each speaker idiosyncratically demonstrated, has the ability to act as the silly putty that binds feminist theory to practice. Like silly putty, it may bind theory to practice effectively... or it might turn into a ball and bounce away. A tension permeated the presentations and pointed to the negative correlation between a speaker’s privilege and her willingness to use humour reflexively. Each speaker indirectly conveyed that feminist praxis varies according to social position. Survival strategies adopted by Niro, a Kanien’kehà:ka (Mohawk) feminist and independent artist, differ from those employed by Clarke, a white feminist scholar recently hired by the University of New Brunswick as an assistant professor, and those employed by Osterweil, a white tenured professor at McGill University. Over the course of this panel, it became clear that white feminists in positions of institutional authority, particularly tenured faculty positions, have privileged access to rhetorical devices and comedic postures that those peripheral to academia dare not engage.

The first panelist, Shelley Niro, is an Indigenous artist from the Six Nations reservation in Ontario. In her presentation, she showed the intersections of trauma, recovery, and humour in artworks relating to her personal life, her family, and her community. In her photographic work, she drew on political events such as the 1990 Oka Crisis, which infiltrated her daily reality. Her images playfully confronted stereotypes about Indigenous peoples and reflected on collective experiences of poverty in *Waitress* (1986), land dispossession in *This Land is Mime Land* (1995), and domestic violence in *The Rebel* (1991). Throughout her art practice, she reflects on the struggle to retrieve Mohawk history, tradition, and language from the cultural landfills created by centuries of colonialism.¹ Niro concluded with a screening of her video *The Shirt* (2003). In the

¹ Ryan Rice. “Oh So Iroquois!” in *Oh So Iroquois!*, ed. Emily Falvey (Ottawa, ON: Ottawa Art Gallery, 2007), 57-65.

wake of dark and difficult knowledge, the artist found beauty in the landscape of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) territory—what we call Southern Ontario and upstate New York—laughing at North American histories of conquest and the contemporary tokenization of Indigenous peoples confined to reservations, despite living on their ancestral territories. “My ancestors were annihilated, exterminated, murdered and massacred,” Niro’s video declares, “... they were lied to, cheated, tricked and deceived... attempts were made to assimilate, colonize, enslave and displace them... and all’s I get is this shirt.”² As observed by an audience member, Niro sublimates the anger at the inherited norms of the colonial political landscape to grapple with the contemporary challenges of decolonization for Indigenous peoples and settlers. Niro stated that sometimes her art “comes from a place of anger,” but it does not remain there. She elaborated, “as I start to work through the work I find that anger dissipates and then it becomes a place of entertainment or joy or just kind of a place where you can laugh.” Niro’s humour is accessible, resilient, and transformative.

Dr. Liz Clarke, at the time of this panel an Assistant Professor at Concordia University’s Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, shared comparative research on female screenwriters from the early twentieth century and contemporary women scripting, producing, and directing television. Clarke found that writers and actresses such as Mindy Kaling, Tina Fey, and Lena Dunham relay narratives of sexism eerily similar to their silent film-era counterparts. Clarke screened clips from Tina Fey’s primetime hit series *30 Rock* (2006-2013), using the show as a mode of analysis for women navigating Hollywood, both a creative and corporate world. Clarke identified inconsistencies between the selective inclusion of women in Hollywood’s corporate spaces and the long-term goals of the feminist movement, such as bridging the wage gap, but did not engage critically with popular liberal feminism. If women “lean in”³ and imitate powerful white men in order to succeed in Hollywood’s corporate spaces, these negotiations continue to feminize certain forms of bureaucratic labour and exclude people who fall outside the norms of respectability defined by white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy.⁴ Clarke related a comment made by her former professor, Robin Wood: he was disappointed that feminists had not yet dismantled corporate America. Yet dismantling the corporate machine was never a goal of liberal feminism, which endorses corporate culture as potentially liberating.⁵ Neither Clarke nor Wood should puzzle over this. As long as liberal feminism remains the most visible form of feminism, women in positions of power, such as Liz Lemon from *30 Rock*, will continue to be the butt of every joke. Clarke’s discouraging conclusion that this tension is potentially irresolvable conjured, for one audience member, a fatalistic emotional framework that offers only laughter or tears as appropriate responses to sexism in the mainstream media.⁶

² *The Shirt* can be viewed online at IsumaTV: <http://www.isuma.tv/imaginative/shirt>.

³ Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In* (New York: Knopf, 2013).

⁴ bell hooks, “Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In,” *The Feminist Wire* (October 28, 2013), accessed July 26, 2016, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2013/10/17973/>.

⁵ Nina Powers, “FeminismTM: Two Sides of the Same Con,” in *One Dimensional Woman* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2008), 29-38.

⁶ René Girard, “Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis,” in *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 121-135.

The third and final paper, by Dr. Ara Osterweil, Associate Professor of Film and Cultural Studies in the English Department at McGill University, provided attendees with a delirious and tragicomic performance. Flailing between rage, reluctance, impatience, and despair, Osterweil offered examples of feminist artists, artworks, and gestures that say “fuck you” to the art world status quo as a survival strategy. Her wildly incoherent academic posture, which went from adulation of the pacifist Yoko Ono to a celebratory description of Valerie Solanas’s armed attempt on the life of Andy Warhol, advanced no determinate theory or thesis. Osterweil confessed she threw her presentation together in thirty hours while on sabbatical, when she would rather have been drinking bourbon and painting in the Southwest. She prefaced her talk with the caveat that any “actual theorizing has been tabled until September 2016” and that “if you want more than my preliminary thoughts on this matter you can go fuck yourself.” Rather than considering the complexity of negotiations necessary to reach solidarity among artists across class, race, and gender, she roared “fuck you” sixty-six times in twenty minutes. Osterweil employed Peter Bürger’s term “historical avant-garde” for the American avant-garde movements of the late Modernist period, yet she did not integrate his critique of the aesthetics of shock—namely, that shock’s lack of specificity fails to produce praxis toward a concrete goal.⁷ Despite the superficial performativity of her gesture, Osterweil failed to be reflexive. Even though she recognized the relative impunity granted to her as tenured faculty, she did not admit her privilege as an academic. In response to a question about her accountability to taxpayers who subsidize her salary, she denied this fact, defensively stating, “I don’t live in an ivory tower.” Let us hope that she was joking.

Humour can work to confuse, to transform, and to revitalize academic spaces with wit and candour. Humour can be uplifting and healing across cultures; it can increase creative capital for a select few behind closed corporate doors and it can be used as an empty rhetorical device to shock audiences. At a feminist conference, one would hope that critical minds come together to generate courageous responses to feminist problems. The claims brought to the fore by Dr. Ara Osterweil point to a necessity for brave spaces, where speakers in positions of privilege are held accountable for their words, arriving with a willingness to admit the specific limitations of their perspectives.⁸ Osterweil and Clarke both bring forward feminist strategies that are not accessible to all feminists. Are working-class feminists of colour granted opportunities to negotiate with managers and bosses to climb the corporate ladder? Are they as successful as American visual artist Carolee Schneeman when they openly defy their antagonists and employers? Are Native voices granted space for their anger in the public sphere without significant backlash? Indigenous feminists such as Shelley Niro do not have the luxury of public despair and aggression in a society that discredits their communities through insidious stereotypes while denying ongoing land dispossession and histories of genocide, the root causes of Indigenous peoples’ marginalization. In the face of a cultural climate hostile to First Nations, Niro’s work proudly and joyfully affirms Indigenous identities.⁹ Niro’s artistic praxis self-reflexively uses

⁷ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 80-81.

⁸ Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, “From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces,” in *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, ed. Lisa M. Landreman (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2013), 141.

⁹ Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 66.

satire to infuse difficult knowledge with levity and hopefulness for communities in recovery from generations of trauma. To be critical praxis, humour must do more than disrupt—it must also choose the right target. In this, Niro’s humour clearly hits the mark.

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Medusa's Laugh: Relief or Resistance?

"Humorous > Disruptions Colloquium: Laughter and Technologies of Disruption in Feminist Film and Media." Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. October 16-17, 2015.

Reviewed by Jillian Vasko

"Between tears and laughter... the difference is not in nature but degree."¹
René Girard (1972)

In an essay entitled "Understanding Patriarchy," bell hooks recalls the many times she has been met with laughter when using the phrase, "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," to describe what she terms "the interlocking political systems that are the foundation" of American politics (2013, 1). To hooks, this laughter is a "weapon of patriarchal terrorism," that "functions as a disclaimer, discounting the significance of what is being named" (2013, 4). hooks interprets this laughter "as the audience's way of showing discomfort with being asked to ally themselves with an anti-patriarchal disobedient critique," and continues, "this laughter reminds me that if I dare to challenge patriarchy openly, I risk not being taken seriously" (ibid). While I take hooks' interpretation seriously, I cannot help but recall the times that I too, as a woman very much aligned with anti-patriarchal disobedient critique, have laughed uncomfortably at similar designations. I chose to preface my review with this anecdote as a way of illustrating the diverse reasons and positions from which we, as women, laugh.

The roundtable "Performing Praxis" at Concordia University's *Humorous > Disruptions: Laughter and Technologies of Disruption in Feminist Film and Media* colloquium provides a productive site for examining this question. The presentations focused on the ways that female artists and activists have deployed humour and their bodies in their artwork to provoke discussions about taboos, gender, and sexuality. Speaking on this topic, artist Shelley Niro, professor Liz Clarke, and artist/professor Ara Osterweil outlined some diverse comedic strategies female creators have mobilized over the past one hundred years to contend with the "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" in which they live and produce their work.

The three presentations centered specifically on the uses of comedy employed by female artists, activists and entertainers in the global West, predominantly in North America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Shelley Niro's presentation, "Living on the Reserve and How That Has Shaped My World View," discussed how her community-oriented, often satirical art acts as an articulation and transformation of the anger and alienation she experiences as an indigenous woman living in a colonial society. Liz Clarke's talk, "Power Empowerment, and Memoirs of Comedic Show-Runners," drew parallels between the 'creative labour' described in

¹ René Girard, "Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis," *MLN* 87.7 (1972): 811-826.

the memoirs of early Hollywood's many and all too often forgotten female screenwriters such as Frances Marion, and the autobiographies of contemporary high profile writer/actors like Mindy Kaling and Tina Fey. Finally, Ara Osterweil delivered her powerful ode to my favourite expletive, "Fuck You! A Feminist Guide to Surviving the Art World." Osterweil's presentation profiled thirteen ways feminist artists like Carolee Schneemann and Yoko Ono have said, "fuck you" to the male-dominated art world using everything from vaginal scrolls to gorilla masks to fart jokes and flies.

Arguably, the types of humour outlined in these three presentations could be divided into two perspectives: the assimilationist and the radical. In the former, we could place professor Clarke's presentation, as it exposed how the tactics for navigating a male-dominated industry used by highly visible women in Hollywood today are in fact one and the same as those developed by women working in the earliest days of the film industry. Clarke's presentation traced how, in their autobiographical writings and television shows, these modern women laugh and joke, often at themselves, to transform the pain and drudgery of being assigned gendered tasks years after so called Women's Liberation.

In the latter category we could place the presentations of Shelley Niro and Ara Osterweil. Both Niro and Osterweil discussed female artists who have wielded comedy, often of the darkest variety, as a proverbial hammer and sometimes literal weapon (as in the case of Valerie Solanas) with which to smash through centuries of male domination in the art world and every other facet of society. Niro and Osterweil's talks centered on women's radical rejections and responses to their own and other marginalized peoples' ongoing oppression. For example, Niro's presentation demonstrated how her work deploys a resistant strand of humour that affirms indigenous identities, cultural traditions and perspectives, while simultaneously mocking the colonial oppressor and rewriting history. Works such as her video "The Shirt" present a defiantly revisionist history of colonialism in North America, thus revealing how community-oriented humour can be concurrently cathartic and resistant. The six-minute video adopts stylistic tropes familiar to colonial and ethnographic discourses of "educational" or "documentary" media such as omniscient, meandering shots of landscape and sentimental atmospheric music. These elements are infused with new meaning and black humour when juxtaposed against the re-education Niro advances through the statements strewn across the white tee-shirts worn by female residents of the [Six Nations Reserve](#). The white tee-shirt, a potent symbol of late capitalism, American cultural hegemony, and white supremacy evokes the exploitation, domination and commodification of the very land and people that the film thematizes.

Osterweil's treatment of the radical feminist collective, the Guerrilla Girls, who in 1984 embarked upon a campaign to protest the Museum of Modern Art's sexist 'survey' of the contemporary art world that included only thirteen women out of one hundred and sixty-nine artists, provides another example of feminist artists and activists using their bodies to occupy and subvert spaces traditionally presided over by the patriarchy. The Guerrilla Girls' protest endeavoured to create space in both the canon and the museum for the display of female art. Donning gorilla masks and aggressively postering buses, buildings, and everything in between, the Guerrilla Girls, like Niro, literally wrote themselves into the history and spaces that systematically excluded them.

Situating the presentations as I have, it seems easy to assert that whereas the women that Clarke evokes who have attained some status in the dominant culture use comedy to sublimate pain, to ease their capitulation to patriarchal culture, the women Niro and Osterweil champion

use humour to refuse and provoke that same patriarchal culture. And yet, like so many apparent dichotomies, this simple division soon gives way to dialectic.

Listening to the presentations, I could not help but recall the quote I prefaced this review with. The originates from René Girard's 1972 essay, "Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis," a piece that places Girard in a long line of canonical Western (read: white male) theorists and philosophers whom from the time of Aristophanes have attempted to unravel the mystery behind the question: why do we laugh? For Girard, both laughter and tears are forms of bodily catharsis aimed at repelling a threat. At their most basic, tears and laughter are sublimations—the key difference is that, "laughter is the only socially acceptable form of catharsis," and as such, we often laugh when we find nothing funny at all (Girard 815, 1972). Following this argument, Girard concludes that tears and laughter are far from diametrically opposed responses, rather, they are simply different methods of sublimating what essentially amounts to the recognition of human powerlessness over our own destinies.

If we consider the presentations with Girard's ideas in mind—that we often joke when we find nothing funny at all—and that laughter is a form of socially acceptable catharsis, then perhaps we need not oppose the presentations at all. Instead, it is my contention that their use of comedy ultimately amounts to a feminist survival strategy, a method through which, no matter how subtly, women have been writing themselves into history for centuries. Revising political histories and spheres through the articulation of the personal experience is a longstanding feminist practice. From Renaissance feminist Laura Cereta's interventionist letters, to Hélène Cixous' pleas for women to "write themselves," to formative, although problematic, examples of early popular feminism that gave voice to a "problem that has no name," and texts by black feminists like Patricia Hill Collins, the power of naming experience and forcing conversation is a tried and true feminist tactic—essential to the development of intersectional feminism and feminist modes of analysis.²

While Clarke's heroines battle patriarchy and gender roles on prime time television, Osterweil's anarcho-feminist artists smash the patriarchy in the hallowed halls of the academy and museum. Shelley Niro tackles colonialism, racism, and gender essentialism both inside and outside the reserve. We can, and should, compare and contrast and critique these responses. Yet, we must also remember that whether they are crying on the inside while cracking self-deprecating jokes, or they laughing defiantly in the face of the oppressor, ultimately, these women are using humour to survive and represent themselves in a society that has demanded they stay silent. And so we must listen to them when they speak.

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² See Laura Cereta's *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist* (1997), Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1997), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (2000).

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Critique de *Film and Games: Interactions*

Deutsches Filminstitut, dir. *Films and Games: Interactions*. Catalogue d'exposition (Francfort-sur-le-Main, 1er juillet 2015 au 31 janvier 2016). Berlin : Bertz + Fischer Verlag, 2015. 255 pages.

Compte-rendu par Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon

L'entrée des jeux vidéo dans les musées est toujours accompagnée de questions quant à la manière dont il est préférable de les exposer. On cherche entre autres à connaître son public, à savoir s'il est familier avec le sujet présenté. Puis, on élabore diverses stratégies afin de l'interpeller, qui mettent parfois l'accent sur la présentation de grands succès commerciaux ou des mascottes populaires telles que Mario et Sonic. D'autres misent sur l'expérience du joueur, des jeux étant disponibles pour tous à l'essai comme ce fut le cas dans l'exposition *Films and Games: Interactions*, organisée par le Deutsches Filminstitut. Du même titre, son catalogue d'exposition, publié en 2015 et dirigé par Andreas Rauscher et Eva Lenhardt, contient cependant peu de traces de cette dimension expérientielle. Il rassemble une vingtaine de textes de chercheurs d'études cinématographiques et vidéoludiques, de critiques et de journalistes, des entrevues avec des praticiens, chacun portant son attention sur les dynamiques unissant le cinéma et le jeu vidéo, qu'elles soient esthétiques, intermédiaires, transmédiales, et dans quelques cas, historiques ou muséologiques. Alors que quelques écrits concernent des phénomènes culturels en lien au jeu vidéo et la relation du jeu vidéo à l'art, s'écartant de ce fait du fil conducteur du catalogue, en aucun cas les auteurs n'en profitent pour faire pénétrer le lecteur dans l'univers d'un jeu vidéo, pour lui décrire le processus de jouer ou la structure des jeux. Cette omission est problématique en raison du public non-joueur visé, qui ne pourra avoir une idée de ce que font exactement les joueurs en jeu.

D'une part, *Films and Games* a pour objectif d'introduire le jeu vidéo à un auditoire qui n'y est pas initié, principalement en jetant un regard sur le jeu vidéo à la lumière de concepts théoriques et de caractéristiques définissant le cinéma. Afin de mieux familiariser le lecteur au sujet présenté, les écrits sont appuyés d'illustrations et de notes en marge définissant des termes propres au vocabulaire vidéoludique, par exemple : « cutscene » (59); « first-person shooter » (62); et « quest » (166). La longueur des chapitres varie entre cinq et dix pages environ, ce qui permet d'offrir un survol satisfaisant de sujets spécifiques, comme les adaptations vidéoludiques de films hollywoodiens, les machinimas, ou les problèmes de conservation. D'autre part, le but du catalogue est aussi de rapprocher deux différents médias. Les auteurs se concentrent donc sur leurs convergences à un tel point qu'ils négligent les qualités distinctes des jeux vidéo, telles que l'expérience interactive qui lui est propre, brossant par conséquent un portrait largement incomplet.

Notamment, certains d'entre eux analysent l'esthétique cinématographique des jeux vidéo sans tenir compte de leur impact dans la jouabilité. Prenons pour exemple le texte de Benjamin Beil, intitulé « Point of View and Virtual Camera » (125-132), dans lequel il s'intéresse aux références stylistiques du point de vue vidéoludique à l'image

cinématographique. Il souligne entre autres les reflets de lumières, les tremblements de la « caméra virtuelle », et le bruit numérique découlant de l'esthétique du *found footage* dans le jeu *Kane and Lynch 2: Dogdays* (IO Interactive, 2010). Beil ne mentionne qu'en conclusion la fonction ludique de ces effets, qui s'intensifient lorsque l'avatar est blessé (131). Il aurait été pertinent d'ajouter que cette fonction s'inscrit dans une tradition des jeux de tir, dans laquelle certains éléments de l'interface extradiégétique comme les jauges de vie ont laissé place à des manifestations plus ou moins diégétiques qui ne font pas référence au cinéma, telles que les taches de sang à l'écran ou le passage au noir et blanc de l'image. Peu importe leur degré de transparence, les interfaces ont avant tout comme utilité de communiquer l'état du jeu au joueur (Jørgensen 2012). L'esthétique de *Kane and Lynch 2* est surtout connue au sein de la communauté des joueurs pour ses conséquences fâcheuses sur la jouabilité. En particulier, on retrouve sur les forums de discussion de nombreux joueurs témoignant avoir réagi négativement aux mouvements prononcés et incontrôlables du point de vue, de telle manière qu'ils ont éprouvé un mal des transports. En bref, il aurait été possible d'offrir une perspective plus large des interfaces et du point de vue vidéoludiques au lecteur afin de s'assurer qu'il puisse comprendre leur fonction ludique et non seulement stylistique.

Un autre exemple d'une recherche de similitudes au détriment de dissimilitudes se trouve dans le texte « The Promethean Impulse in the Interactive Feature Film » de Marcus Stiglegger (29-37). Ce dernier soutient que les films interactifs¹ promettent aux joueurs un rêve de scénarisation et de réalisation cinématographique, qu'ils seront en mesure de manipuler l'intrigue du récit comme ils l'entendent (34). Par contre, d'une vue d'ensemble, ne serait-ce pas plus juste de parler simplement d'agentivité (« the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices » (Murray 1997 : 126)) ? En contraste du réalisateur et du scénariste, qui conçoivent quelque chose à l'intention d'un public, le joueur peut incarner des personnages, jouer pour expérimenter ses propres désirs (Murray 1997) ou encore des comportements extraordinaires (Salen et Zimmerman 2004), ce qui n'est pas souligné dans le texte de Stiglegger. À ne voir strictement que du cinéma dans les jeux vidéo, il semble que des comparaisons superficielles ou imprécises peuvent en être dressées, comme il est le cas dans nos deux exemples de texte ci-dessus.

Des différences entre les deux médias apparaissent tout de même en cours de lecture, mais elles proviennent surtout de manière éparse des concepteurs de jeu interviewés par Rauscher. Par exemple, Jörg Friedrich explique sa conception des choix moraux des joueurs dans *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012), Jordan Mechner (créateur de la série *Prince of Persia* (1989-)) discerne l'expérience du temps chez le joueur de chez le spectateur, et Deniss Schwarz (designer de jeu chez Crytek) décrit l'un des défis des scénaristes de jeu vidéo, qui doivent proposer des structures narratives flexibles pouvant s'adapter à des changements au design de jeu durant la production. Leurs témoignages permettent de venir combler les lacunes des discours un peu trop unidirectionnels des autres auteurs et de créer ainsi un dialogue entre la théorie et la création.

Pour résumer, il y a un paradoxe entre l'approche didactique de l'exposition et celle du catalogue. Les exposants ont donné aux visiteurs la possibilité de découvrir les jeux vidéo en y jouant, d'en faire l'expérience pour mieux les comprendre. Le catalogue rompt avec cette idée, puisque l'expérience du joueur n'est en aucun cas le centre d'intérêt des textes, à l'exception de quelques observations des concepteurs de jeu dans les entrevues. Bien que le jeu vidéo est influencé en partie par le cinéma, les auteurs cherchent à unir leurs caractéristiques sans consacrer d'espace à les distinguer, ce qui ne permet pas d'en dresser un

¹ Il inclut dans cette désignation les jeux de David Cage, pouvant être résumés à des séquences animées dans lesquelles le joueur est amené sporadiquement à prendre des choix, visionner la manière dont le protagoniste les interprète, et y constater leur impact (ou non) sur le récit.

portrait comparatif juste et adéquat pour le lecteur peu connaisseur ciblé. *Films and Games* possède une certaine valeur encyclopédique, réussissant à regrouper les discours d'une variété de professionnels sur des rapports qu'entretiennent le cinéma et les jeux vidéo. Cela dit, la discussion reste trop souvent à la surface (imagée) des jeux vidéo, y évacuant ses propriétés uniques. Je recommanderais alors aux non-initiés d'aller jouer avant de lire le catalogue.

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Reading for Knowledge and Pleasure: Re-evaluating *Forbidden Love*

Jean Bruce and Gerda Cammaer. *Forbidden Love: A Queer Film Classic*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2015. 160 pages.

Reviewed by Kristi Kouchakji

A production and exhibition study mixed with a healthy dose of analysis, Jean Bruce and Gerda Cammaer's monograph *Forbidden Love: A Queer Film Classic* (2015) examines the multiple ways Lynne Fernie and Aerlyn Weismann's 1992 film raises questions of identity in public spaces. The authors begin with an analysis of the archival material used in the film and the research process undertaken by the filmmakers before moving into a more fleshed-out production history. They thus position *Forbidden Love* as a film about identity in public spaces expressed through the interactions between its archival materials, documentary interview segments, and fictional sequences, while being careful to situate the film's production in its proper historical context of queer visibility in Canada and within the National Film Board specifically. Bruce and Cammaer then explore the film's hybridity and direct address as a means of both queer subject formation and challenging non-queer spectators. They conclude with an overview of the struggle to return the film to the NFB's circulation catalogue in a time of extreme austerity-minded budget cuts, as well as a critical reflection on the digital mastering and French versioning of the film.

Forbidden Love examines the ways in which lesbians in the 1950s-1970s were forced to hide their identities outside gay bars and hew to stringent butch/femme norms inside the bars. The film does this through interviews with lesbians who had been part of the bar scenes in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, as well as with Ann Bannon, the author of lesbian pulp fiction novels that had happy endings (an unusual resolution in the genre at the time). These interviews are intercut with fictional sequences taking up these issues in the style of Bannon's novels, and archival material depicting police raids on gay bars and general societal attitudes towards homosexuality. Stating that the explicitness of the fictional scenes in *Forbidden Love* serve as "corrective narrative strategies" for the forcibly hidden identities described by the women interviewed in the film's documentary sequences, Bruce and Cammaer ultimately argue that "cinematic representation is a vital means by which we can gather together historical and contemporary resources (...) and by gaining such visibility, become known to each other again. This is a political act" (44). While this argument would retain some urgency even if the film had been made today, Bruce and Cammaer contextualize it by positioning both the film and the research process behind it as effectively recuperating a queer archive from mainstream erasure. This recuperation is successfully presented as being as political as the film itself.

In analysing the film, Bruce and Cammaer argue that in mixing documentary with melodrama, the filmmakers rely on a strategy whereby the viewers are invited to read the film

either as “straight” (so to speak) documentary, or as camp. This speaks to both lesbian and non-lesbian viewers in ways that invoke multiple identifications, queering film, form, and spectator at once. For Bruce and Cammaer, this is exemplified in the “payoff” of the sex scene between fictional characters Laura and Mitch, ending with a freeze frame. The authors contend that this serves as a means both for lesbian viewers to see their desires and identities projected on screen, and of making all viewers aware of their voyeuristic desires, further calling attention to a more general desire to produce or acquire new knowledge, and blurring the line between the two desires while calling the spectator’s attention to the politics of their own gaze. Writing that “the result is that *Forbidden Love* manages to be pro-lesbian for lesbians and non-lesbians alike, independent of their access to the stories,” the authors further position the film’s mismatched or subverted expectations as the film’s primary strategy in queering a number of genres and aspects of cultural history (96). This includes happy endings in place of pulp’s tragedies, fictional inserts in documentary, and camp elements in a format (and from a studio) thought of chiefly in association with the term discourse of sobriety.

That said, the authors’ claim that *Forbidden Love* “speaks for and to generations of gay women” is just broad enough to run counter to the film’s argument against essentializing queer women’s identities. This is ironic, given that one of the things the authors admire is the film’s approach to its subjects, as evidenced by their vigorous defence of the film against test-audience complaints about the majority of subjects being white middle-class women while non-white subjects are treated in a reductive way. Further, this claim is footnoted to attribute it to one specific co-author, as if the other wished to distance herself from it. This indication of potential conflict between the authors is echoed in several abrupt shifts in voice and tone throughout the book, as well as some structural inconsistencies and areas where ideas seem out of place by tens of pages, all pointing to a potential disconnect between the authors that could not be resolved in the editing process. A side effect of this is the authors’ habit of ending paragraphs with insightful nuggets, such as “melodrama offers new approaches to the documentary as well as to the pulp novel, and in doing so it suggests new ways of exposing cultural history to the accountability of a critical gaze” (111), without more thorough build-up or further development.

Also contradicting *Forbidden Love*’s anti-essentialism is a strange implication throughout the book that viewers of the film can be divided into two camps, lesbian and non-lesbian, and a further implication that non-lesbian here means straight. This erasure of spectators who identify between these two poles in the authors’ working definition of queer is troubling. However, applying what the authors position as a queer approach to spectatorship—namely, reading against the grain in order to derive pleasure or produce knowledge, as exemplified by the film’s subjects’ recollections of reading lesbian pulp fiction—to the reading of this book allows for pleasure and knowledge to be created even if such a tack implicitly confirms monosexism as a new norm against which to define queer. This comes through most clearly in the authors’ discussion of the camp aesthetic at work in *Forbidden Love*’s formation of a queer spectator. Writing that “If the camp aesthetic is understood at all, whether it is read as politically retrograde or progressive, it indicates not only its volatility and subversive potential, but also the central ambivalence of postmodernism and, arguably, of the political concept of queer itself,” the authors further claim that camp as political and cinematic strategy requires a spectator who already “gets it” and can interpret the film both ways in order to derive maximum benefit from it (118). This seems to also be the mode of readership required here: a reader who gets both the

political and scholarly projects inherent in both the book and the film will be most readily able to find something productive in the breach between the two, and to derive both knowledge and pleasure in this work.

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Watching Gender Through an Austere Lens

Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, eds. *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014. 320 pages.

Reviewed by Lisa Aalders

In *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity* (2014), editors Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker offer a collection of essays that look to a variety of media forms to consider the specific impact of gender in framing the 2007-2008 economic collapse and subsequent recession in an American, British and Irish context. In many ways, *Gendering the Recession* functions as a response to the last collection Negra and Tasker co-edited *Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* by examining how the recession has shaped and reoriented existing postfeminist tropes. Thus, *Gendering the Recession* considers how notions of affluent femininities of self-fashioning and choice are recontextualized in the recession era such that the postfeminist figure becomes “an icon of excess as much as admiration.”¹ By focusing on gender, the anthology’s authors are able to examine how recessionary narratives are informed by gendered imagery that paints austerity as masculine, rational and tough in contrast to the feminized indulgence of the “nanny state.” In such a context, gender equality (along with racial and other equality-based movements) are positioned as “luxur[ies] that can no longer be afforded.”² Ultimately, Negra and Tasker argue that popular culture resists any kind of substantial system critique in favour of a narrative that places affected populations in the position of quietly coping. In order to examine such narratives, the essays that make up *Gendering the Recession* examine a variety of media including network television, popular cinema, blogs, vlogs, documentaries, reality television and popular fiction. While the book itself is divided into ten individual chapters (plus the introduction), I will discuss it according to four interrelated themes that I feel best summarize the content of the book: the narrative of endangered masculinity, the role of race in popular recessionary narratives, the rise of blogging as recession-era domestic labour, and the home as a threatening and threatened space.

In the first chapter, Suzanne Leonard examines the crisis of masculinity that emerges in the context of what some journalists referred to the “mancession,” a term intended to highlight men as the primary victims of the economic downturn. In this context, the figure of the man who refuses to grow up (as seen in such films as *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* from 2012) positions men

¹ Diane Negra and Yvette Tasker, “Introduction: Gender and Recessionary Culture,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvette Tasker (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 4.

² Ibid.

as simply failing to adjust to their domestic roles as opposed to highlighting any kind of systemic reasons for their “failure.” Leonard argues that such narratives that position women as successful in contrast to their male companions ignore the ways in which women—compounded by intersections of race, class and dis/ability—have disproportionately shouldered the burden of austerity. Moreover, Leonard goes an extra step to consider how these recessionary discourses encourage resentment and hostility towards women. While I would have preferred more engagement with how the recessionary slacker figure can be usefully distinguished from pre-recessionary slackers, Leonard’s chapter works well in setting up questions and issues that will recur throughout the book.

Continuing along this theme of disempowered American masculinity, Sarah Banet-Weiser examines advertising and the idea of “branding” the recession. Her argument principally looks at how recession-era advertising positions the recession as an obstacle to be overcome by individual men fulfilling their own moral and national obligation. In particular, she examines Levi’s Go Forth “Ready to Work” campaign, which launched in 2010 and employed text from Walt Whitman’s “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” to suggest a sense of American optimism, grit and determination in the face of hardship. Banet-Weiser argues the campaign positions consumerism as a means of revitalizing the nation, the economy and the American male. Hannah Hamad’s chapter also considers the relationship of media and consumerism in proposing shallow solutions to harsh economic realities. Hamad’s focus is on reality television and specifically the U.K. program *The Fairy Jobmother*. The show features a reality TV expert by the name of Hayley Taylor—an authoritarian matriarchal figure in the vein of Supernanny’s Jo Frost—whose job it is to coach the chronically unemployed into a state of “job readiness.” As with the Levi’s campaign, *The Fairy Jobmother* places an emphasis on individual responsibility and using consumerism to dig oneself out of the recession (the latter being most apparent during the inevitable makeover sequence). *The Fairy Jobmother* also reveals the threat of emasculation as embodied by the angry audience reactions to Taylor’s matriarchal guise. Both Banet-Weiser and Hamad’s chapters are strong by virtue of the focused examples that they draw on to illustrate neoliberal ideology in the pop cultural sphere. Meanwhile, Hamilton Carroll’s chapter on recession-era print fictions, specifically *The Financial Lives of the Poets* (2009, Jess Walter) and *The Ask* (2010, Sam Lipsyte) is a weaker point in the anthology. Much of this chapter was dedicated to examining how the white-collar male protagonists felt emasculated by their various failures. Unfortunately, it seemed to be covering similar ground as other chapters and therefore felt more forgettable. Carroll’s argument that through the process of narrating their failures the male protagonists are able to claim a tenuous form of success seemed like a promising argument but ultimately required more explanation and evidence.

While many of the chapters briefly touched on matters of race, only two chapters focused on it in greater depth. Isabel Molina-Guzmán’s chapter takes a look at the character of Gloria on the American television show *Modern Family*, locating her within a history of Latina spitfires employed to ease white resentment directed towards Latina/o immigrants in the wake of economic downturn. In doing so, Guzmán contributes to a much-needed discussion on how race amplifies already gendered feelings of resentment. Meanwhile, the concluding chapter by Anikó Imre locates the issue of race in a specifically European context with the U.K. reality show *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (with some additional attention paid to its American incarnation). Imre’s chapter effectively details how the gender politics expressed in the show function to justify the terms of neoliberal inequality. For example, Imre identifies how the giant, “excessive” bridal gown that appears in each episode operates as a potent symbol of feminized waste. In a social-

political context where the “problem” debt-ridden nations of the European Union (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Ireland) are referred to as GIPSI by mainstream news outlets, Imre demonstrates how narratives of wasteful and excessive spending are both raced and gendered.

Meanwhile, two of the collection’s essays look at the gender politics of blogging and the emergence of self-fashioning as an entrepreneurial venture. Elizabeth Nathanson’s chapter discusses the rise of the “recessionista,” which she describes as “a careful shopper who does not abandon consumer culture altogether in light of the global recession” but rather puts in the time and energy to find the most affordable items.³ Nathanson examines “everyday girl bloggers” as well as makeup vloggers to think about how these entrepreneurs blur distinctions between life and style, essentially revealing how consumption merges with labour such that the consumer-based quest for “self expression” is transformed into a profitable venture. Along similar lines, Pamela Thoma’s chapter looks at the rise of blogging as feminized domestic labour as depicted in two recession-era chick flicks: Nora Ephron’s *Julie & Julia* (2009) and Ryan Murphy’s *Eat Pray Love* (2010). She considers both films from the makeover narrative they recount and how these texts celebrate an idea of transformation that increases domestic labour for their female subjects and reinvigorates normative gender roles. Although these chapters cover similar ground, they feel more complementary than repetitive in tracing the gendered implications of professional blogging and how it fortifies the already gendered terms of unpaid labour.

Given the centrality of the housing market to the economic downturn, there are two chapters that take a look at the home as a space that is both threatened and threatening. Tim Snelson looks specifically to American horror—with a focus on the *Paranormal Activity* film franchise and the first season of *American Horror Story*—to think about how the home is positioned as a space of “disruption, takeover and abandonment.”⁴ The chapter offers an interesting take on how the anxiety of the housing crisis gives new meaning to older “haunted” house horror tropes. However, by also highlighting gender in his examination, Snelson demonstrates how these narratives which may problematize the ideal of the nuclear family nonetheless end up positioning women as the saviours of the endangered home. In doing so, these representations function to reinforce ideas of female domesticity and stewardship over the home. Meanwhile, Sinéad Molony looks at the positioning of the working class Irish home (and by association the working class female body) as a site of “national shame and disruption that troubles ordinary heteronormative domesticity.”⁵ In doing so, Molony makes a point of establishing the particular social-political-economic context in which these representations occur. This involves detailing the masculine, anti-authoritarian tone of the “Celtic Tiger” era of free-market expansion that set up the economy for failure. In wake of the economic downturn, Molony remarks on how the same spirit of individualism displaces the burden of responsibility onto the female working-class body. Her examination looks at two documentaries: Ken Wardrop’s *His and Hers* (2009) and Maya Derrington’s *Pyjama Girls* (2010). While the former projects the nostalgic and sentimental image of a middle class, heteronormative Ireland, the latter

³ Elizabeth Nathanson, “Dressed for Economic Distress: Blogging and the ‘New’ Pleasures of Fashion,” in *Gendering the Recession*, 139.

⁴ Tim Snelson, “The (Re)possession of the American Home: Negative Equity, Gender Inequality, and the Housing Crisis Horror Story,” in *Gendering the Recession*, 161.

⁵ Sinéad Molony, “House and Home: Structuring Absences in Post-Celtic Tiger Documentary,” in *Gendering the Recession*, 184.

adopts a condescending gaze towards the failures of working class women and their homes to live up to the middle class ideal. Molony's chapter is strong precisely because of the historical context she takes time to establish and by grounding her arguments in the specifics of Ireland. In this way, I would argue her work demonstrates the value of specificity in approaching questions of media.

Ultimately, *Gendering the Recession* offers engaging research about a topic that is fresh and deserving of attention. By focusing on gender in recession-era media, this collection of essays is able to highlight the ways in which economic narratives are informed by ideas of endangered masculinity, excessive femininity and the like. I think the editors of the collection would agree that there remains much to be said on this topic. Although *Gendering the Recession* exclusively looks at American, British and Irish media, it does not frame it as such. Instead, it rather problematically refers to its corpus as simply "media and culture." In doing so, it positions Western English-based content and context as universal and loses some of the nuance that otherwise propels much of the work. While I do not protest their decision to limit the scope of their project, I do wish they had made a point of addressing it as such and framed their work accordingly. Thus, there is much work to be done about how this topic translates in differing cultural contexts and how the questions that the book raises may be differently posed in these different socio-political contexts.

Likewise, there is a remarkable absence of any discussion of sexuality and how it may affect these gendered narratives. While this may have been a consequence of limiting the scope of their project, it seems to me that many of the works that are discussed rely on an often assumed heteronormative understanding of gender. For example, to what extent does the notion of the "mancession" rest on a heteronormative fantasy of masculinity? How do masculine and feminine queer subjects disrupt or complicate these recessionary narratives? These questions open up space for further research and contemplation of the way that popular media positions gender in recessionary narratives. To that end, *Gendering the Recession* can therefore be seen as a starting point for further examinations of gender and media in the age of austerity. Building on existing discussions of media in the age of neoliberalism,⁶ *Gendering the Recession's* focus on gender affords it a meaningful place in film and media scholarship despite its limited focus on an American, British and Irish context.

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⁶ I am thinking of books such as Jyotsna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner's *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique* (2011), which unlike *Gendering the Recession* examines different global contexts such as Latin America and Asia.

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Disruption Through Laughter? *Sans Blague/No Joke* at the MAC

**“Sans Blague/No Joke: The Matter of Humour in Contemporary Art”
Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, Montreal, Canada.
April 1-2, 2016**

Reviewed by Jake Bagshaw

The tenth Max and Iris Stern International Symposium, which takes place annually at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, was entitled *Sans Blague/No Joke: The Matter of Humour in Contemporary Art*. The symposium, which featured a variety of scholars, curators, and artists working within the realm of comedy and its relation to the production of art, was organized to coincide with the MAC’s exhibitions *Ragnar Kjartansson* and *Ryan Gander: Make every show like it’s your last*. Comprised of over thirty multi-disciplinary works, Gander’s show sought to provoke reconsideration of the act of gazing upon, and engaging with, art inside the gallery space by using visual gags to provoke reflection upon modes of viewing.¹ Installations such as *Magnum Opus* (2013) epitomized this approach; the work is constructed out of a large, sculpted cartoon pair of eyes and eyebrows, which followed visitors around the gallery and created expressions to react to what it saw using these limited features. Another visual gag was the arrangement of furniture-like objects obscured by large white sheets, as if they were not to be seen or were being protected from dust. *Make every show like it’s your last* played upon the artist’s desired interpretations of common symbols and objects in conflict with how they may tend to be visually recognized and processed within gallery spaces.

Kjartansson’s work deals more directly with the artist’s involvement with the ongoing practice of producing art, and similar to Gander, reflexively queries this phenomenon with flashes of comedy.² *The Visitors* (2012), which constituted a major part of Kjartansson’s exhibition, featured nine video projections of musicians playing disjointed parts of the same song. While the overall tone of the piece was rather melancholic, a viewer might have been more inclined to gaze into the odd scenery of each panel—in which Kjartansson plays a guitar in a bathtub, while other participants play their instruments in separate rooms of a desolate building—than to listen intently to the moody, atmospheric original song. Both Gander and Kjartansson’s exhibitions correlated to the theme of the symposium, particularly the notion that comedy’s relationship with art is a tenuous, and often very tongue-in-cheek, facet of the artistic process.

¹ Wanda Palma, “Ryan Gander at the MAC.” Press Release. *Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal*, 2016. Accessed 11 August 2016. <http://www.macm.org/en/communiques/ryan-gander-at-the-mac/>.

² “Ragnar Kjartansson.” *Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal*, 2016. Accessed 11 August 2016. <http://www.macm.org/en/expositions/ragnar-kjartansson/>.

The symposium's timely interest in comedy's relation to contemporary art could be linked to recent re-emergence of comedy within popular media. While the symposium presentations primarily focused on art within the gallery setting, separate discussions between academics and artists increased the complicated nature of comedy's status within art today. After opening with presentations from scholars from Anglophone and Francophone universities in France, Canada, and the United States, the symposium then departed from critically engaging with art texts to welcome contemporary comedic artists whom, as I soon found out, performed during their presentations.

I would like to focus this exhibition review primarily around the presentations that diverted from typical scholarly analyses often found at Humanities conferences and symposiums. Indeed, one characteristic aspect of *Sans Blague/No Joke* was the organization of curators and performance artists' presentations after the more conventional academic presentations. The placement of these more humour-focused pieces disrupted prior presentations aimed at conceptual arguments; it was itself a spectacle, suggesting the audience reflect on the ostensibly consistent mode of academic inquiry in contrast to the ever-evolving and at times baffling performance art featured in the symposium.

Professor Anna Dezeuze of the École supérieure d'art et de design Marseille-Méditerranée, for instance, presented "The Deadpan Inertia of the Body-Sculpture." Dezeuze discussed sculpture's inert lack of movement as not only a key aspect of its form, but also how the mimicry of this facet has contributed to modern comedy in established Western performance art. One memorable example Dezeuze provided was British artist Dominic Watson's video *Are You Not Entertained?* (2013). In it, the artist, garbed in glam rock clothing, plays air guitar to Henry Moore's minimalist sculpture of a seated couple, gesturing towards the couple as if awaiting their reactions to his performance. The obvious joke of the piece is rooted in the understanding that on the outset of the video, Watson will never get an answer to his titular question. Among the several works that Dezeuze cited as indicative of this quality, what remained consistent in her discussion was the notion of sculpture's "inertia," or passivity in tension with human interaction and movement. Dezeuze's paper proved to be a concise discussion of traditional aspects of sculptural form and their correspondence with contemporary visual humour showcased in performative art.

American actress, comedian, and Artforum curator Miriam Katz' presentation "The Transformative Power of Comedy" dealt more directly with emergent forms of comedy in contemporary art and media. Katz' presentation questioned the role of professional comedians in relation to artistic performance in a gallery context. Noting her organization of a panel of well-known comedians, including actor and comedian Tim Heidecker at the MoMA PS1, Katz described the panel's presence as indicative of a reflexive move, meshing writers and performers working in mainstream media alongside the environment of a conference typically tailored towards artists working within the museum system. Katz argued that this growing interest in comedy is partially substantiated by digital multimedia platforms' advancement of varied programming. The digital turn has enabled a growing variety of video productions (particularly comedy) that work to equalize both access and interest in the consumption and subsequent participation in comedy.

Katz also briefly discussed her own work within acting and comedy, and suggested that multidisciplinary approaches to understanding and working in comedy and art, or rather, comedic art, foster a wider and richer network of the two often-separate professions. Increasingly popular media platforms of comedy, such as YouTube vlogging, streaming television on

demand, or web-based meme culture allow these interstices of comedy and scrupulous social commentary to indeed enter artistic circles both within academia and galleries. One needs to look no further than Concordia University's own student-run galleries to observe similarly interdisciplinary works toying with contemporary media, often including artworks that sarcastically (and humorously) reflect on the artist's own relationship with their work.

American performance artist Michael Portnoy's "Dropped jokes, Broke jokes, Pause jokes, Tone jokes, Jokes that strangle each other to sleep..." was an obviously more performance-oriented presentation consistent with Portnoy's artist persona. Best known for his "Soy Bomb" incident at the 1998 Grammy Awards in which Portnoy, originally hired as a backup dancer, crashed the stage when Bob Dylan was playing. Tearing off his shirt to reveal "Soy Bomb" written on his chest, Portnoy danced aggressively towards Dylan for less than sixty seconds before he was removed. Portnoy's presentation focused on his recent installation work, featuring an aesthetic he termed "relational Stalinism." Tongue planted firmly in cheek, Portnoy explained that the perplexing "gambling tables" devised for his installations, which demand audience participation, parody complex political and philosophical concepts commonly found in contemporary conceptual art. The lengthy titles of his works, coupled with their absurdist designs ("schizopoetics") at once clearly ridicule and bring introspection to extant works by other artists. Bringing further sarcasm to his praxis, Portnoy maintains an earnestly 'serious artist' persona that is comically at odds with the absurdist angles of his work. This persona seemed to have transferred to the symposium as well: Portnoy prepared an extremely long PowerPoint to accompany his presentation. After getting several minutes to conclude, he quickly described each panel and explained if he was allotted more time to speak, only *then* would we fully comprehend the complexity of his body of work. While Portnoy's presentation was clearly more of a performance than a conventional conference paper, the adherence to his esoteric artist character was especially remarkable given the often incoherent concepts alluded to within his work. Thus, Portnoy's presentation was an example likeable to Katz' interest in bridging comedic intervention into the space of lauded art and performance. Portnoy's stage character used vocabulary mimicking art theory language such as Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, while also (to a hazy degree) explaining his own practice as an artist. The strategic humour of "Dropped Joke" slyly mocked the concept of the conference presentation while simultaneously placing itself within the same model of presentation.

In line with Katz and Portnoy's presentations, this section of the symposium concluded with American artist and comedian Casey Jane Ellison's "THANK ME VERY MUCH: A GUIDE TO LAUGHING EVERYWHERE." Accompanied by a minimalist PowerPoint displaying the title of the presentation, Ellison's deadpan, professedly disinterested stage persona diverged from Portnoy's energized discussion. Throughout, Ellison's phone kept ringing (an obvious gag) while she refused to answer it. Then, she asked the audience to applaud for her being on stage. The general structure of Ellison's presentation was that of a stand-up comic, with Ellison speaking about her daily failures, such as a strained relationship with her mother while frequently pausing for laughter or applause that she often demanded to hear. More than arouse laughter, Ellison's stoic persona and monotonous demands were instead directed towards inciting discomfort in the audience. "THANK ME VERY MUCH" was an explicit parody of both stand-up comedy and was a disruptive performance in the face of usual conference presentations. Opposing the standards of an academic paper as well as a comedic routine, Ellison's character left the audience at once interested and somewhat confused as how to respond to the performance, especially in regard to the progressively performative works it followed. Ellison's

devoted stage persona was not as well received in its comedic rhetoric as Katz' or Portnoy's presentations. Rather, Ellison's character's bluntness ("my fucking mom is calling me again") and apparent disinterest in contributing to the ongoing dialogue of art and comedy (either directly or indirectly given Portnoy's obvious satire of art talks) failed to punctuate the symposium's overall thematic interests.

The organization of the symposium distanced the artist presentations from typical academic papers, revealing instead the—at times productive—lack of understanding between comedic performance art and the scholarly engagement seeking to explain it. Ironically, such interest in performance was never brought into discourse by the academic presentations as much as it was suggested and hinted at by the "stand-up" routines. The contrast of the performances with the papers given conveyed a gap of research that has yet to be explicated within academia. More explicitly, the curatorship of the symposium presentations, and namely the emphasis on performance, hinted to this writer that academia lacks a firm grasp of the disruptive potential comedy within contemporary art. Nonetheless, such gaps provide abundant potential for locating comedy's role within the professional art world, and, perhaps, vice versa.

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