Refusal, jamming, and absurdity: Feminist tactics in social media

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Abstract

On a stage of ubiquitous online sexism, this chapters explores feminist tactics of resistance with a focus on refusal. We move from feminist memes trading in vintage imageries steeped in heterosexual parody to jamming in social media, such as when pornographic deepfakes of Taylor Swift were buried by alternate content by her fans. We land on absurdity as a tactic not confined by such reactivity but allowing for turning things around and eschewing the logic on offer instead. From genderqueer comedy to the X/Twitter account "Men Write Women," absurdity helps craft spaces for affective relief and shared hilarity.

Keywords: absurdity, feminist humor, online sexism, refusal, social media

Introduction

It is not breaking news that social media platforms can be hostile, even violent sites for users coded as female and/or feminine, even as these very same sites also allow for spaces of support, organization, and resistance. From the slut-shaming of social media influencers, celebrities, and regular users showing off degrees of skin to doxxing (publishing personal information, such as addresses or telephone numbers) or waves of trolling and harassment, social media can quickly shift into the terrain of aggression and silencing, not least on platforms such as X/Twitter profiled as a site of public debate. Indeed, the ubiquity of online hate, sexism, and misogyny (Penny 2013; Jane 2016) fuelled by toxic masculinity (e.g., Marwick and Caplan 2018; Massanari 2015; Phillips 2015) has been documented for well over a decade; the popularity of influencers such as Andrew Tate advocating for male supremacy suggest that the trend is far from waning.

Online humour trades in and contributes to networked misogyny peaking in events such as "the incel rebellion" of involuntarily celibate men organizing on online platforms and categorically targeting their misogynistic hate (Banet-Weiser 2018). There is such ubiquity to

online sexism that it may in fact be difficult to find examples of feminist humour on any given platform, and to land on anti-feminist and sexist content instead. This is even the case on TikTok known for its playful modes of engagement wherein influencers of all kinds make use of humour to pack their message (Matamoros-Fernández 2023): unless one's account has been algorithmically primed to find certain kinds of content, a newbie will find her top recommendations being those finding much fun in presumed feminist idiocy.

There is much to critique and resist in the reach and mundaneness of sexism and outright misogyny fuelled by the conventions of online humour targeting women, queers, trans and nonbinary people, and racial others (Marwick 2014; Kanai 2016), reinforcing and reaffirming "notions of gender that are binary and hierarchically opposite" (Ringrose and Lawrence 2018, 686), and lacing mundane networked sociality with the constant risk of mockery, ridicule, and humiliation (Highfield 2016; Massanari 2015; Milner 2014; 2016; Phillips and Milner 2017). Starting from this markedly depressing acknowledgment, this chapter explores feminist tactics of resistance with a focus on refusal – on creating a break or a gap in the logics of exchange and, possibly, on turning things around.

Parody

As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) has argued, "popular misogyny" online involves the fantasy of turning back the social clock and move back to a time when women presumedly knew their place, when trans rights were not an issue, and when queers did not have civic rights. This is certainly a tendency written large in Andrew Tate's and Jordan Peterson's popular social media calls for patriarchy. At the same time, a considerable bulk of popular feminist humour, as distributed through memes, coffee mug slogans, postcards, and fridge magnets alike, trades in the commercial imageries of the 1950s and 1960s promoting heterosexual romance and nuclear family life, turning their intended message inside-out into critical commentaries of gendered relations of power. Hence an online meme of a housewife proudly holding multiple saucepans full of food, lifted from a vintage advert, thinks to herself "another day of outward smiles and inward screams." Another featuring an excited woman fondling a freshly washed shirt sarcastically exclaims, "laundry! grocery shopping! carpool! and it's not even my birthday!"

Such imagery continues the tradition of Situationist International's tactic of *détournement* where objects of commercial popular culture are appropriated for resistant political ends. Like situationists replacing the captions of popular comics with lines from Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1994/1967) – a Marxist critique of consumer culture – feminist memes trading in vintage imageries are steeped in parody. Yet there is also something quite harmless to tapping into imageries of seven decades past revolving around the institutions of heterosexuality of the white, Western, and middle-class kind, to deliver a political message akin to that of Betty Friedan's bestselling 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* detailing the perils of white straight American ciswomen of a certain class – the conditions of lesbian, bisexual, working-class, transwomen, or women of colour not being a consideration. While we are not denying the gratifications involved in turning idealised homemakers into mouthpieces of gendered disillusionment, such memetic cultures remain ultimately regressive in the dictionary sense of the term: they turn to a former or less developed state of affairs rather than tap onto contemporary developments and contestations. There is safeness to this.

It is our argument that when considering contemporary feminist tactics, whether these be on social media platforms or somewhere else, it does not suffice to focus on gender alone, given the complex – and often violent – entanglements of racialisation, sexual identifications, minoritarian gender positions, religious alliances, and the dynamics of social class and privilege. This does not mean that feminist laughter needs to cater to all directions at every moment (surely nothing kills the spontaneity of a giggle more swiftly!) but that conceptualisations thereof need to be not merely mindful but attuned to the complexities of intersectional connections.

Jamming

Building on situationism and fellow cultural movements such as post-WW1 dadaism, culture jamming – also known as tactical media – was identified as a resistant activist tactic in the 1990s in projects critiquing media logics through parody and reversal, including anti-advertising initiatives and pranks by artist/activist groups such as RTMark and Yes Men (Harold 2007; DeLaure and Fink 2017; Carducci 2020). The turning around of corporate messages has remained a recurrent tactic, as when the feminist group FORCE spoofing PINK, a lingerie line by Victoria's Secret, a then leading brand known for its narrow take on female beauty and feminine sexiness over a decade ago, and harnessing attention to rape

culture and the importance of consent instead on their site coined for the purpose (Madden et al. 2018). Similarly, albeit not identically, in 2022, people making use of Twitter's new policy of selling blue verification badges for eight US dollars created verified accounts announcing, for example, that the medical company Eli Lilly (critiqued in the US for their overtly high pricing) was giving away insulin for free, that the banana brand Chiquita was overthrowing the Brazilian government, and that British Petrol had second thoughts on their practices of killing the Planet Earth.

Jamming can also occur in a more literal sense in flooding a page, an account, a hashtag, or a thread with alternative content, to side-track and redirect its original focus. Hence K-pop fans responding to Dallas Police Department's request for sharing videos on their app of "illegal" protests following the death of George Floyd in 2020 – this being one of the major catalysts for the Black Lives Matter Movement – with K-pop memes and videos, factually disabling the request and mass-posting similar content on Twitter with hashtags such as #BlueLivesMatter and #WhiteLivesMatter used for undermining the protests (Reddy 2020; Cho 2022). And when Kirk Douglas, a key Hollywood star of the 1950s and 1960s, died the same year, social media tributes were countered by posts identifying him as the rapist of the then teenage Natalie Wood in 1954, and renaming the day as "Natalie Wood Day" so that her name began to trend over his (Paasonen and Horeck 2023). And as pornographic deepfake images of the pop star Taylor Swift began to circulate on X in January 2023 to high international visibility, her fans – known as "the swifties" – reacted by flooding the platform with videos of her performing in order to bury the deepfakes under a mass of other content.

Such initiatives exemplify Megan Boler's (2008) discussion of media tactics as interventions in hegemonic structures – whether these be corporate ones or ones advancing more or less routine forms of sexism. Such turning against is an efficient, and fast, tactic of throwing a wrench in machineries of oppression. However, as we have argued before (Sundén and Paasonen 2020), the initiatives that tend to gain high visibility – from the #metoo movement reacting to sexual harassment and violence to women sharing galleries of unsolicited dick pics as documentation of mundane harassment – are reactive in the sense of responding to, and resisting, social inequalities. While resistance entails a refusal to play along and conform to the state of things, reactivity is a means of turning tables by making things public, or by giving rise to parody and laughter.

Yet even given this potentiality, there is passivity to reactivity in that it seldom extends beyond that which it comments on and intervenes in: that is, reactivity rarely scales into world-making, or to imagining the world differently, beyond its tactical foci. Reactivity has arguably been part and parcel of feminism since the 19th century as the movement began to argue for equal rights in a context where these were explicitly unavailable, so that feminism has responded to the lack of rights, equality, space, and agency throughout its modern history – and continues to do so. This is not to argue against the plain and continuing necessity of such political action. But when considering ways of imagining alternatives – the kinds of futures and realities that we may want to aspire to, and the worlds that we would like to coin – there are tangible limits to tactics building on reactivity. The same applies to some forms of humour and playfulness within feminist resistant tactics, such as the memetic appropriations of vintage commercial imageries addressed above.

Absurdity

While parody can pack quite a punch, our work on feminist social media tactics has landed us on absurdity as a tactic that allows for turning things around and eschewing the logic on offer. Following thesaurus definitions, the absurd translates as "ridiculously unreasonable, unsound, or incongruous," "extremely silly or ridiculous," and "meaningless." Escaping sense and reason, the absurd borders on the idiotic and the inane while also testing the boundaries of reason as irrational, illogical, and pointless – as already suggested by the term's Latin root, *absurdus*, as "out of tune, uncouth, inappropriate, ridiculous." In her taxonomical analysis of humour, Marta Dynel (2014, p. 628) sees absurdity as not entailing a negative evaluation of, or reaction to that which it makes fun of. Its illogical trajectories may well land us who-knows-where instead.

Let us consider for a moment the world of stand-up comedy and its ripple effect in social media. In March 2024, the comedy special "Gender Agenda" debuted on Netflix, hosted by the Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby. The origin myth of this showcase is absurd in and of itself and includes Gadsby's public letter (posted to their Instagram in October 2021, gathering closer to 75K likes) addressed to their "Netflix daddy," the co-CEO Ted Sarandos, following his infamous staff memo in defence of Dave Chappelle's "The Closer," a Netflix comedy special which caused an outcry in LGBTQI circles due to its blatant homophobic and transphobic jokes. In a move which may well read as "biting the hand that feeds you," as

Gadsby puts it, the letter included the colourfully worded segment "fuck you and your amoral algorithm cult…I do shits with more back bone [*sic*] than you. That's a joke! I definitely didn't cross a line because you just told the world there isn't one". As a consolation, "Gender Agenda" is up on the platform and has an international line-up of genderqueer performers, featuring, among others, Mx Dahlia Belle, a black trans woman and U.S.-based writer and performer. Clad in an amusingly conservative cobalt blue dress, her musings on the miracle of trans vaginas gained a reel-shaped cross-platform social media afterlife:

> Factory-default vaginas are the divine gateway of life. Our species could not exist without them. I will never take that away from you, because I don't want to. And also, there are plenty of things an aftermarket vagina can do, that a stock vagina cannot, like destroy the fabric of Western civilization as we know it. Only my pussy does that! Only mine! … That's miracle pussy.

By pointing at the absurdity of how trans women's bottom surgeries are perceived to pose a threat to Christian lives, unleashing waves of anti-gender hate, Belle plays into this very explosiveness. While absurdity indeed often emerges from such sites of reactivity and critique, it also escapes these by turning things preposterous, ludicrous, and inappropriate, landing us somewhere different – and, occasionally, who-knows-where. Even though a genderqueer stand-up comedy evening and its social media reverberations may not fully land us in such an other-place – Gadsby themselves referred to the show as "the carbon offset show" as a compensation for injuries past – the feminist initiatives driving things to a logical breakdown though *reductio ad absurdum* – a logic wherein a proposition is led to a ridiculous conclusion have such potential.

Hence our fascination with the X/Twitter account "Men Write Women" exploring sexist tropes in literature attributed to male authors through quotes but, even more centrally, through user participation running away with the said quotes and developing their logics to full fruition (Sundén and Paasonen 2021). Consider, for example, a repost citing an unremarkable passage from the multi-bestselling John Grisham – "She coughed, a hacking, irritating cough which reddened her face and gyrated her full breasts until they bounced dangerously close to the typewriter keys" – at the end of year 2023. In addition to predictable reaction GIFs communicating blinking disbelief, users followed the accounts' tradition of chipping in by elaborating on the excerpt just shared. "It's a good thing most men wear

trousers, otherwise their gyrating penises would cause everybody on public transport massive hip bruises during flu season!," one follower suggests. "I have a bad chest cold/cough and it's just nonstop gyration. Once they start slowing down, I cough and then they start back up again. I'm dizzy", another complains. A third suggests a stylistic edit for added eloquence: "Her triumphant titties twirled tragically in a typewriterly trajectory." Such moments of mundane fun do not a revolution make, yet they help to craft spaces for affective relief and shared hilarity that can add to one's liveliness as capacity to act – and be, in this sense, life-enhancing (cf. Spinoza 1992).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored feminist humour as tactics of resistance with a focus on refusal, jamming, and absurdity – on breaking with the sexist logics of exchange and on turning things around or upside down, potentially creating lines of flight to who-knows-where. Absurd feminist humour has a particular lightness to it, yet remains grounded in something much heavier – paradox that provides a foundation or a tactic for dealing with a ridiculous world.

It is also crucial to note that all examples of feminist laughter in social media are, by necessity, specific to platforms. As such, they are connected to platform vernaculars – the mundane codes and casual norms of exchange that take shape over time – while their lifespans follow those of the service(s) on which they operate. Since Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter (since renamed X) in 2022, most of the platform's policies and practices harnessing hate speech have been cut back, resulting in many feminist users either abandoning the site or significantly cutting back their use, given the rife aggressive ubiquity of on-platform misogyny. This development is visible in how "Men Write Women's" once lively commenting culture has turned into a mere drizzle and how it has grown into something of an influencer account.

Even as more could be said of the monetization of feminist humour online, it is our concern here that viral instances of absurdist laughter targeting sexism have grown rare since the immediate aftermath of the #metoo movement that fuelled online circulations of outrage, anger, mockery, and *detournement* alike. It is not surprising that people may find little to laugh about in contexts where reproductive rights are aggressively scaled back, anti-gender

and transphobic sentiment runs rife, and war and terror impact people in chilling and highly gendered ways. It is nevertheless also the case that, in dire times such as ours, the affective release of laughter – be it targeting something specific or communicating the ontological absurdity of things – is badly needed indeed.

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