



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 posterizing 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.

Jillian Vasko is a Master's student in Film Studies at Concordia University.

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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