

“Welcome to the Jungle”: Questioning the Notion of Subversive Laughter through the Analysis of Kristen Schaal’s Performance

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Abstract

Kristen Schall’s stand-up routines serve as a case study for post-second wave feminist comedy. Adopting a “kid persona” in Joanne Gilbert’s typology of female comic styles, Schall uses body language and a child-like delivery to accent the gendered and sexualized material giving rise to an incongruity that generates not only laughs, but subversive political action and the occasion for philosophical insight.

Keywords: Stand-up comedy, Feminism, Kristen Schaal

The relationship between feminism and laughter has been challenging both in daily life and in the academy. Accordingly, Kathryn Kein states: “The meager scholarly space devoted to feminism and humour is likely shaped by the fraught relationship women and feminism have had with humour in our cultural imagination” (Kein 2015: 672). Fortunately, in conformity with the remarkable increment of comedic performances created by women in the last decades, the phenomenon of laughter has attracted considerable attention from feminist scholars. The performances of certain stand-up comics have been popular research topics.¹

As “the first new form of entertainment to grow up alongside the women’s movement” (Gray 1994: 143), stand-up comedy has become a medium of representation for women’s long-*othered* experiences. Since stand-up comedy makes extensive use of autobiographical material, it suited the second-wave feminism’s motto “The personal is

¹ Some examples are Paula Poundstone, Sarah Silverman, Margaret Cho, Wanda Sykes and Ellen DeGeneres.

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political”² well and made it possible for women to share their political and cultural critiques through personal experiences and observations without financial challenges and/or potential censorship in other mediums like formal theatre, film and television.

Moreover, the recognition of laughter as a powerful social force³ and the figure of the stand-up comedian as “licensed spokesperson” (Koziski 1984: 65) made this performance form a focal point for the feminist discussions on social change through performance. Judith Butler’s theory of gender, which defines the notion of gender as a constructed identity over time, has generally been a point of departure for these discussions. Her theory argues the performativity of gender, which draws attention to the possibilities of its deconstruction. She suggests the potentiality of *subversive laughter* in parodic practices of heteronormativity, which can “expose the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (Butler 1999: 179). In this regard, feminist scholarship has usually evaluated laughter, triggered by stand-up comedians, as either affirmative or subversive with respect to its approach to gender and to the other power structures in a given society.

In some feminist studies, entering the male-dominated comic stage as a woman is already evaluated as a feminist act.⁴ Accordingly, Joanne R. Gilbert calls the very act of a female comic standing onstage and getting paid for speaking about any topic a feminist triumph (Gilbert 2004: 167). Regina Barreca also sees all women’s humor in some way feminist excluding the ones using self-deprecation.⁵ Thinking of the long history of

² “The personal is political” is a worldwide known motto, which appeared first as the title of an essay published in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation* in 1970. The essay was written by Carol Hanisch and is available at <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html> (accessed May 23, 2016).

³ Among the countless works regarding the power of laughter, the article *The Laugh of the Medusa* by Hélène Cixous is one of the most well known in feminist circles.

⁴ See (Walker 1989: 9) and (Lavin 2004: 12).

⁵ Regina Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White...but I Drifted* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), 182.

trickster archetype as male⁶, it is likely that a female comic has to deal with “a type of ideological resistance caused by centuries of cultural conditioning” (Gilbert 2004: 32) throughout her career. A brief look at the statements of practitioners of this genre can provide enough evidence on the ongoing prejudice and discrimination against women by some audience members and promoters.⁷ Additionally, at this point in time, when the unfunniness of women in comparison to men is still a heated discussion⁸, feminist scholars have the right to claim that the performance of a female comic is a subversive act in itself.

Nevertheless, the feminist scholarship does not just settle for the above arguments for its assertions of subversion through stand-up comedy. In search of subversive laughter, performances of many female stand-up comedians have been analysed beyond their textuality. Performer's body, persona, joke delivery style and relationship to the audience have been the main aspects under scrutiny. Yet, the target of the joke has probably been the most decisive point in the subversion debates. In particular, the hegemonic constructions of gender have been favorable targets for subversive laughter. But the use of self-deprecation, which was identified by early studies as a hallmark of female humor⁹, was accused of reinforcing the status quo by some scholars¹⁰. Although each example

⁶ Tannen asserts that, the female trickster was allowed to appear in western collective culture in the last 400 years of a 4000 years history. See Rickie Stefanie Tannen, *The Female Trickster: The Mask That Reveals, Post-Jungian and Postmodern Psychological Perspectives on Women in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3.

⁷ One example among many others can be seen at:

http://www.chortle.co.uk/news/2013/10/02/18772/were_still_discriminated_against (accessed February 01, 2017). Another example is the interview of Tina Fey:

<http://www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/a5146/tina-fey-interview/> (accessed February 01, 2017).

⁸ “Why Women Aren't Funny” written by Christopher Hitchens for Vanity Fair in 2007 is a well-known article, which in a way re-ignited this debate.

<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2007/01/hitchens200701> (accessed March 11, 2017).

⁹ Such early studies include: “The Feminine Routine” (1976) and *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (1988).

¹⁰ The critique of such scholars like Lisa Merrill, Regina Barreca and Philip Auslander can be found in the following works respectively: “Feminist Humor: rebellious and self-

should be considered in its own context, the invaluable works of feminist performance critics provide a framework for further research.

Grounding my analysis on previous feminist studies, I would like to take a performance by Kristen Schaal, who is an understudied performer, as my case study for this presentation. She belongs to a generation that took advantage of the gains of second-wave feminists. Even though feminist material is not her only focus, she can serve as a good example of the contemporary feminist stand-up comedian from the *western* world. The performance of interest took place on 10th of August 2012 for Outside Lands Festival in San Francisco. Through analyzing some of her material, I would like to take a closer look at the concept of subversive laughter.

She starts her routine by quoting some lyrics from "Welcome to the Jungle" among the most well-known songs of the band Guns N' Roses. She chooses especially the lyrics with misogynistic undertones such as, "You're a very sexy girl, very hard to please, you can taste the bright lights, but you won't get there for free... Feel my, my, my serpentine, you are in the jungle baby, you're gonna die." Taken out of their context and performed by a female performer with the "kid persona" instead of the aggressive front man Axl Rose, the hegemonic masculinity reflected in the lyrics becomes the butt of the joke. In that sense, this is a good example for the subversive laughter.

"Kid persona" is a term that I borrow from (Gilbert 2004: 97), who criticizes prior feminist studies for not mapping the typology of female comic traditions in her inspiring work *Performing Marginality*. She asserts that the tradition of American female comics, who first took the stage in the nineteenth century, evolved into five postures that are classifiable in the contemporary stand-up comedy by women: the *kid*; the *bawd*; the *bitch*; the *whiner*, and the *reporter*. Even though a chart including only five persona types may be limiting and generalising, such an effort for mapping the tendencies of female performers is a valuable contribution to the literature on the intersection of women and comedy.

affirming," *They Used to Call Me Snow White... But I drifted: Women's Strategic Use of humor*, "Brought to You by Fem-Rage: Stand-Up Comedy and the Politics of Gender."

Gilbert identifies the kid persona as desexualized and consequently non-threatening. She gives Ellen DeGeneres and Paula Poundstone as examples of this persona and details the way they fit the properties of this type. Accordingly, they use clean language, get along with the audience well and entertain without intimidating, which can ensure some audience identification.

With the way she dresses, her body language and her childlike voice, that she also makes fun of in her routine by saying "You know how hard it is to order fireworks over the phone? All I get is sparklers," Schaal fits Gilbert's kid persona. Even though Gilbert finds this persona type not threatening in contrast to the *bawd*¹¹ or the *bitch*¹² and therefore not subversive in a way because it downplays gender, Schaal's persona increases the absurdity of her sexual jokes. This way, she offers a clear view on her inability to reach the "ideal womanhood." In her inspiring work "Technologies of Gender," Teresa de Lauretis identified the discrepancy between "Woman" as representation with the capital letter and "women," the real, historical beings and social subjects.

Such a joke in Schaal's act, which plays with this discrepancy, is based on her junior high school experience. She uses self-deprecation as a comic strategy in her joke and explains her failure in asking out a fellow student Kyle by acting a scene next to the water fountain in school. The -supposed to be- erotic act of drinking water from the fountain by bending over and licking water like a cat, fails miserably done by Schaal, who does not even need to act in a different way while impersonating her 13-year-old self. The

¹¹ The bawd is explained as the antithesis of the kid with its sexually suggestive material. This is generally an aggressive, not so young and physically large woman, who often makes fun of male sexual abilities and openly shows desire especially for younger men. Championing female sexuality, she may seduce male audience members and win their identification. See Gilbert, 100-108.

¹² According to Gilbert, the bitch persona evolved out of the bawd tradition and is the angriest female comedic persona. The bitch uses put-downs and insults in her comedy and basically tells whatever she wants. Her targets are mostly men. The examples that the author provides for the bitch persona such as Joan Rivers, Wanda Sykes, Judy Tenuta, Roseanne Barr, Robin Tyler and Lea Delaria, are often referred to as feminist comics in academic works. See Gilbert, 108-114.

subversion debates in feminist scholarship on the usage of self-deprecation can be discussed over this joke.

Although there are contradicting views on self-deprecation in feminist literature, the same joke can be affirmative or subversive or both based on the laugher's understanding of the joke. Some may laugh at Schaal's incompetence with feeling of superiority, which would be affirmative of status-quo. Others may laugh with her in recognition of the absurdity of a thirteen year old girl's endeavor to arouse a boy based on cliché representations of female sexuality, which would be subversive as a parody of dominant societal expectations from "ideal women." One may laugh for both reasons or for a totally different reason, which may not be even directly related to the performance text so it seems crucial for the researchers, who work on the concept of subversive laughter to examine the performances from the audiences' perspective, which is unfortunately not common probably due to the difficulty of gathering and analysis of data. What renders this joke even more interesting for the discussion of subversive laughter is the twist that Schaal adds at the end of it. After the girl fails at her attempt to be sexy by drinking water from the fountain, she dismantles the fountain with her bare hands and throws it out of the window angrily with reference to the ending of the movie "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," which has been labelled as sexist by many. Transferring the power of six feet seven inches tall narrator of the film to thirteen year old self, Schaal subverts the self-deprecatory and realistic pattern of the joke.

Another sexual joke in Schaal's act is about pleasing a man. It starts with a classic and conservative setup: "My mother told me that the best way to please a man is through his stomach." She does the first *cognitive shift*¹³ by announcing that she found a convenient detour, which is his penis. Second shift follows by her demonstration of the act. Accordingly, she pins the man to the ground. She uses the microphone as if it is his penis. This action refers to "an analogy endorsed by male comedians (Auslander 1993: 318)," which can also be named as *microphone as the phallic symbol*. Then she goes on to distort

¹³ (Morreall 2009: 50) suggests that, the traditional theories of humor have a phenomenon in common: "a *cognitive shift* – a rapid change in our perceptions or thoughts."

the act of pleasing by rotating her tongue around the microphone without touching it. Feminist comedy has mainly been engaged in such jokes concerning sexual topics and has looked for ways to upset gender roles.

The last bit of Kristen Schaal's performance is especially a very good example for this article's discussion due to the subversive elements it contains. Schaal talks about her dream of being a magician as a child and her disappointment about all magicians being men. She refers to the burning of the witches, which she ironically takes as the reason for the lack of female magicians. This way, she reminds the audience of the long history of demonization of women in patriarchal societies. She manages to get an exceptionally long twelve seconds of laughter in two waves by taking this joke a little further.¹⁴ She yells "Why?" as she hits the parts of her body with the microphone, which are the main indicators of her femaleness. This can be evaluated as a parody of Freud's theory on penis envy, which has been criticized by many feminist scholars.

Then she performs an audition for magician's assistant, since this is the only role available to her. She recreates the cliché magician scene with the help of playing the instrumental version of the track "Eye of the Tiger" by Survivor and using a red flapper headband as an addition to her costume. Without the magician, who is the focus of such performances, the scene changes drastically and becomes a parody of a well-known image. The unnamed assistant becomes the protagonist and her minor role as a figure, who is only there to look pretty and to underline the success of the magician by her smile and her surprised appreciation is ironically highlighted. Her normally ignored activities become meaningless and ludicrous without the act of the magician and the passivity of this figure is revealed.

Schaal also offers a peek into the possible backstage experience of the assistant by showing the change of her attitude the minute she is no longer to be seen by the audience.

¹⁴ "Consider that two seconds of laughter is respectable; four seconds greets the best joke of a standard Tonight Show monologue. To get a laugh up to six seconds—an extraordinary occasion—you generally need two distinct waves of laughter, as in the case of jokes that are immediately funny and funnier (they are usually self-reflexive) upon reprocessing" (Limon, 2000: 12).

Her continuous smile turns into signs of boredom and anger in the imaginary box, where she waits as the potential victim of long knives or a saw for the purpose of excitement and she takes this as an opportunity to make a quick phone call. This bit unmasks the absurdity of this traditionally female job, which does not normally stand out due to our viewing habits.

As can be seen from the examples mentioned, Schaal's jokes tend to subvert, transgress and parody the dominant imaginary. Following Morreall's assertion regarding the notion of cognitive shift, it can be stated that jokes mostly rely on norms to create laughter through incongruity.¹⁵ So, for each attempt to subvert the dominant culture, one must first repeat it to some extent¹⁶, which is also true for each joke that I discussed here.

This provokes the following questions: Do subversive jokes help us to "create new meanings for gender, race and sexuality (Dolan 2005: 46)" as the utopian struggle of feminist performance or do they serve just as a *relief*¹⁷ from the burden of the expectations embedded in the dominant culture? Is the term "subversive laughter", which is frequently used in feminist literature, the right term for canalizing the power of laughter to the creation of new meanings and social change or should we try terms like "utopian laughter" or "fabulative laughter", which do not strive to subvert the hegemonic imaginary but aim to promote an alternative imaginary instead? Can the constructions of hegemonic imaginary *utterly* be avoided during a laughter-inducing stand-up comedy performance? Are there any escape strategies? Does surreal humor, which is not frequently used in stand-up

¹⁵ (Morreall 2009: 11) calls this as violation of "our normal mental patterns and normal expectations."

¹⁶ Focusing on the terms of parody and travesty, Andreas Böhn also questions this contradiction in his article. See Andreas Böhn, "Subversions of Gender Identities through Laughter and the Comic," in *Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media* (New York: Rodopi, 2009), 52.

¹⁷ For the relief theory of humor, see Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 5, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

comedy¹⁸ and even used less by female performers, hold promising possibilities for such an escape? Can Donna Haraway's concept of *speculative fabulation* (SF) be an inspiration for feminist stand-up comics, who strive to "promote an alternative imaginary to a hegemonic imaginary"¹⁹?

Such a questioning for escape possibilities is a product of the feminist perspective, which is dominant in feminist scholarship on comedy and it strives to see more than sheer entertainment in comedy for the sake of social change. Although this perspective is very valuable due to the power inherent in humour and the undeniable abundance of sexist humour, it risks losing the laughter on the way. The fact that the only indicator for a stand-up performance's success is seen as continuous and mass laughter and there is even software for scoring stand-up performances based on the duration of laughter they evoke²⁰, makes this performance form especially challenging for the pursuit of new meanings through performance. If the comic is not ready to take the risk of "no laughter" or even "less laughter," she will be canalized to do what worked before. Her jokes will be non-threatening to mainstream values and norms. Structure, target and theme of her jokes will remain in a well-known pattern, which leaves hardly any space for imagination. Benefiting also from her acting experience, Kristen Schaal adds surreal elements to her material and tries different comic structures and strategies, which go beyond the classical punchline based stand-up comedy tradition. Especially the last bit reveals much more than it repeats in terms of its approach to the normative images.

Even though the discussion of possible answers to all the above-mentioned questions exceeds the scope of this paper, as an answer to the last question I can say that

¹⁸ Eddie Izzard and Noel Fielding are popular stand-up comedians, who use surreal humor in their acts.

¹⁹ "...it is simply to promote an alternative imaginary to a hegemonic imaginary and to show, through that assertion, the ways in which the hegemonic imaginary constitutes itself through the naturalization of an exclusionary heterosexual morphology." See (Butler 1993: 91).

²⁰ An example of such a program is *Comedy Evaluator Pro*, which is an online software for Comedy Performance Benchmarking & Improvement: <http://www.comedyevaluatorpro.com/> (accessed February 01, 2017).

Haraway's concept of SF can be a valuable inspiration for feminist stand-up comedians. With her work, Haraway encourages to engage in SF, which is in her words "fabulating, making fable as a place for ... wild facts. Facts that won't hold still. Wild facts inhabit fables."²¹ SF is used as an abbreviation for different terms including speculative fabulation, such as *science fact*, *string figures*, *science fiction* and *speculative feminism*. In between these words, I am especially inspired by string figures because I think it is notably relevant as a metaphor for stand-up comedy practice.

Stand-up comedy is a practice of *sympoiesis*, which means making together. Stand-up comedian plays a kind of cat's cradle with the audience. Joy and laughter can only emerge with the will and the creativity of both the performer and the audience. Thinking with the SFs of Donna Haraway, stand-up comedian and the audience can work together towards the creation of new meanings and future possibilities and challenge the heavy reliance of stand-up comedy industry on sexist and racist clichés and stereotypes, which is only for the benefit of mass laughter and easy consumption.

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²¹ From Donna Haraway's public lecture, which took place on March 24, 2014 at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada:
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