

Seriously Funny: An Autoethnographic Investigation Into Humour's Subversive Power

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Abstract

At the heart of the autoethnographic quest is a desire to examine the complex ways in which an individual and their surrounding culture intersects, and to explore the outcomes of that juncture. This paper details that pursuit, using an autoethnographic methodology to examine the way in which the author's embodiment of humour has functioned to subvert cultural norms and prescriptive gender roles. Through critical reflection on one example within a series of the author's driver's licences, we glimpse the destabilising potential of making a humorous spectacle of oneself in a culture that attempts to silence and objectify women, in the process challenging both the author's and society's complicity in that role.

Keywords: humour, autoethnography, gender roles, subversion

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Unlicensed LOLs: Gender roles and acts of humorous subversion

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Figure 1¹

I'm 22 and my sister has dropped me off at the Belmont Forum post office. She'll meet me at our designated spot in half an hour; ample time to complete my mission. My hair is unkempt and the roots badly in need of a touch-up – I've worn half of it loose, and the rest is pulled into two buns perched on the top of my head like budding horns. Dangling from my ears are a pair of cheap earrings purchased for the occasion from a bargain basement store in the shopping centre. They are red hearts dangling within three other sets of hearts and they are exquisitely gaudy – Boy George would have a problem with them. I'm wearing foundation that is several shades too dark, and the cerise-coloured lipstick I've applied well beyond the contours of my lips is bordered by a dark brown lip liner which has, at a glance, given me a Salvador Dali-like

¹See Appendix

moustache. The bright aqua eyeshadow that covers my entire eye socket, and slightly beyond, meets the bold blushed circles on my cheek completing the picture of an insane circus clown temporarily let loose in the city.

“Next,” says the lady at the counter. She hasn’t looked up yet, she is still finishing off the paperwork from the woman in front of me, but when she finally does, it is with a double take. She recomposes herself – it’s rude to stare – “how can I help you?” she says. I remind myself that no matter how uncomfortable I feel, I’ve done nothing more offensive than apply my makeup in an unorthodox way. Emboldened by this fact, I say confidently “I’m here to renew my driver’s licence and update my photo.” It has no doubt become apparent to her in the course of our conversation that there is a chunk of lipstick on my front teeth, and that I am quite comfortable with it being there. She is in a compromised position, but I meet her gaze – this is how I wear my makeup, what’s it to you? – “I’ve just got to go out back,” she says, picking up some paper and shuffling it into a neat pile before exiting through a door behind the counter. She stays in there for several minutes. Through a small head-height glass panel, I can see her talking with someone – her superior, I presume – and gesticulating. He glances sideways at me, the same shocked expression passes over his face, and I stifle a laugh.

I have rarely met anyone for whom the viewing of these driver’s licences, and the stories related to the arduous, albeit entertaining, task of obtaining them has not provoked laughter, however a reaction that incites mirth is unlikely to be seen as holding much political clout. In *The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought*, John Morreall discusses the general aversion towards humour expressed within Western philosophy from antiquity onwards. These objections, he posits, have their origins in the work of Plato and Aristotle, are expanded upon in the writing of philosophers such as Rene Descartes and Thomas Hobbes, and continue to manifest in contemporary thought, Morreall stating: “The dominant Western tradition has viewed seriousness as the highest stance, and play, including humor, as merely refreshing us for more seriousness” (1989, p. 254).

Even my own initial understanding of these pranks was that they were simply a humorous diversion, devoid of any real underlying significance: a comical personal dare, perhaps, or an interesting test of what one could “get away with” on an official document. What was uncovered in the process of my autoethnographic investigation, however, revealed a deeper political import, and constitutes a clear challenge to the objections raised by Morreall, highlighting humour’s ability to critically examine the very “serious” ramifications of cultural conformity (in this case the meticulous circumscription of female behaviour and appearance.)

This reevaluation of particular events in one’s life is a common feature of the autoethnographic process which involves placing personal phenomena (artifacts, anecdotes, recollections) within a wider cultural, social and political context. Often in the process of doing so, a deeper meaning behind specific events, or shift in viewpoint, emerges. Discussing the way in which the stories we tell about ourselves are modified over time, Carolyn Ellis notes:

Our versions change as we age and have new experiences... Thus reexamining the events we have lived through and the stories we have told about them previously allows us to expand and deepen our understandings of the lives we have led, the culture in which we have lived, and the work we have done (2009, p. 13).

Reflecting on these driver's licences and the time frame in which they were situated, I was fascinated to realise that while every year I took the opportunity to dress up in ways which were patently nonconformist, I was simultaneously preoccupied by an eating disorder whose very origins were based in a desire to conform. In other words, while I was busy eschewing traditional notions of female beauty, I had nonetheless succumbed to societal pressures that place an inordinate amount of value on a woman's appearance.

In his influential work *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger addresses this cultural tendency to focus almost exclusively on a woman's appearance, noting that women, from an early age, are conditioned to "survey" themselves, his premise being that "how [a woman] appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life" (1972, p. 46). Admittedly, an increasing number of the male population struggle with eating disorders, however the vast majority of sufferers are women, a fact that has not escaped feminist thinkers who have viewed the pursuit of thinness (read beauty) as yet another manifestation of a patriarchal rule that demands women embody specific, idealised notions of femininity, or what Judith Butler refers to as "performances" – deviation from which results in "clearly punitive consequences" (1988, p. 522). Myriad feminist writers have drawn on Foucauldian notions of discipline, surveillance and power to explain women's obsession with dieting and its attendant disorders. In *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, for example, Sandra Bartky details the way in which gendered disciplinary procedures serve to create Foucault's "docile body," a body that is consumed by a process of relentless self-surveillance (1990, p. 80).

In attempting to create what I viewed as the "correct" or socially acceptable body, I enacted the kind of normalising process outlined by Foucault in *Discipline and Punishment*, one that, significantly, occurs independent of external force. As Foucault posits:

There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself (1980, p. 154-155).

Under the aforementioned gaze, no part of my day was unaccounted for – every mouthful was strictly and painstakingly monitored. What had I had for breakfast, and how many kilojoules did it contain? How did that make me look or feel? Did it make me feel bloated or undesirable? And if so, how was I going to rein in my kilojoule intake for the rest of the day, week or month?

During the course of my treatment, the therapist I was seeing recommended writing a letter to myself that outlined my main concerns with gaining weight, and what I disliked most about my current appearance. The following is an excerpt from that letter:

I just don't want to be in this body anymore. It repulses me. What I would give to escape it, to not be trapped in it and constrained by it. I wish that we could all not

have bodies - just float around, disembodied, so people would judge you on the basis of your mind alone...

What is striking about this portion of the letter is its articulation of a seemingly irrational desire to transcend the body. Desires such as this, however, are more logical than they may initially appear, according to feminist theorists. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and The Body*, Susan Bordo discusses the negative implications of a mind/body dualism that casts women on the side of body, and men, the mind. Western philosophical thought from Plato onwards, she argues, has cemented this tacit distinction, bringing with it a variety of adverse side effects:

The cost of such projections to women is obvious. For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, the body is the negative term, and if woman is the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death (1993, p. 5).

She views, then, the pursuit of the anorexic (and those striving towards such extremes) as a desire to fashion a more masculine body, or alternately to return to one that is more infantile in appearance. In the process of losing weight, a female loses those physiological features such as breasts and hips that are representative of the post-pubescent female body. Aspiring towards this outcome, she argues, represents an attempt to transcend the aforementioned female “body,” with all its limitations and degradations, and become the eternal, pure (male) “mind.”

My letter clearly articulates such a desire: to become, as it were, that quintessentially masculine mind with all its virtues of rationality, essentialism, transcendence and spirituality. In achieving this end, my letter suggests, I would effectively bypass the corporeal limitations of the feminine body; one which has traditionally been viewed as “merely the crude container of the mind” (King, 2004, p. 31).

Regardless of whether we are fully cognisant of them, views such as this are deeply entrenched in our psyche, perpetuated by society’s favouring of a woman’s body or appearance over her intellectual capacity. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler argues that it is impossible to escape the fact that we are both formed by, and reliant on, such social norms, and she argues that to deny this is to deny reality altogether. She proposes another way to live, however, one that involves living paradoxically, stating:

If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of my constitution (2004, p. 3).

This paradoxical state, Butler suggests, is an ideal site of resistance for women. It involves a realistic acknowledgment that the normative pressures faced by women are deeply ingrained in the social order, while simultaneously finding creative ways to subvert that system.

Such inventive means of challenging a dominant social order are outlined in Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* which outlines the consumptive practices inherent in everyday activities as diverse as reading, walking and cooking. Rather than viewing the consumer as an inert and passive entity, however, he uses descriptors for them such as “unrecognized producers,” “poets,” even “trailblazers” to highlight their potential generative capacity (1984, p. xviii). Despite being limited in their

ability to subvert paths etched out by the “strategies” of the powerful, he suggests that consumers regularly create novel, alternative forms of resistance which he labels “tactics.” Since they constitute an “art of the weak” (p. 37) and have no concrete base from which to operate, they must take place, he argues, in the territory of the powerful. In other words, they must subvert from within the system. As Certeau notes:

Although they remain within the framework of prescribed *syntaxes* (the temporal modes of schedules, paradigmatic organization of places, etc.), these ‘traverses’ remain heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate and in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of *different* interests and desires (1984, p. 34).

Although Certeau never really touches at any length on humour in his treatise, I believe that humour comprises yet another tool or “tactic” for undermining the “strategies” of the powerful. My collection of driver’s licences, for example, constitute a humorous act of rebellion that operates within the “gaps” of the same system that seeks to contain it. Since few personal documents carry more weight, or are more “official” than a driver’s licence, to have one’s photo taken and licence renewed is to remain within the very “framework of prescribed syntaxes” that Certeau discusses. Furthermore, by virtue of its “official,” “governmental” nature and scrupulous monitoring of individuals and identities, the licencing department functions as an apt metaphor for patriarchal rule. If the metaphor works (and I believe it does), then humorously dismissing the licence’s intended purpose constitutes a kind of figurative act of rebellion against patriarchy itself.

One way in which traditional notions of femininity are undermined in the above driver’s licence is through my unorthodox and comical (mis)use of makeup. Traditionally, makeup is viewed as a tool used by women to beautify themselves (the end goal of which is to make them more attractive to others). It is significant, then, that I applied my makeup towards a purely comical end, and that rather than *enhancing* my looks, it clearly detracted from them. In *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* Sandra Lee Bartky highlights the rigid guidelines surrounding the application of makeup, noting that it constitutes “a highly stylized activity that gives little rein to self-expression,” and stating that the woman who is “novel” or “imaginative” in her approach to applying makeup is “liable to be seen not as an artist but as an eccentric” (1990, p. 71). This unorthodox or “eccentric” use of makeup, then, parodically undermines the policing of what should constitute an aesthetic and individualised act of self-expression for women as well as flouting its intended purpose of beautification.

Not only does the driver’s licence eschew customary notions of beauty, but contra the longstanding tradition of woman-*as*-spectacle, it involves consciously *making* a spectacle of myself. As Helen Malson notes, in Lacanian thought, the woman is associated with an excess, an excess traditionally “not so much celebrated as reviled” while also representing a lack through a figurative castration (1997, p. 236). This compromised position, of being both a “lack” and an “excess,” non-spectacle and spectacle, presents an untenable position, one which reaches its most troubling manifestation in the female “spectacle” who is subject to the relentless scrutiny of the male gaze while also remaining silent, composed and submissive. Noting this imperative for women to embody composure or containment, Catrina Brown and Tod Augusta-Scott state:

From an androcentric lens, women may be seen as talking too much and being too emotional or too needy. The message is that women should ‘tuck themselves in,’ not take up too much space, and not appear to be uncontained (2007, p. 122).

This desire to stay out of view, as it were, while maintaining the perfect body became apparent during another exercise conducted by my therapist wherein I was told to say immediately what came into my head when I thought of being skinny. The following responses were recorded in a journal:

- *If I’m smaller, I’d just feel better. (Later changed to ‘if I’m smaller, I’d just be better’).*
- *I like being treated as I am when I am smaller.*
- *Being smaller means I don’t need to have accomplished as much.*
- *I’m valued less if I’m bigger.*
- *I like fitting into spaces other people can’t and needing less room than others.*

The words that continue to appear here: “smaller,” “less big” “take up less room” exhibit a similar self-effacing logic, a desire to disappear from view, or to at least be *less visible*. In other words, to be the *antithesis* of a spectacle. And yet, a curious logic is at work in that these comments coexisted with a continuation of dressing up for my driver’s licences – an act that places me very firmly back in the sphere of *spectacle-maker* rather than *spectacle*. In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, Mary Russo recalls being cautioned as a child against this danger of “making a spectacle” of oneself. Doing so, she recalls, constituted a “specifically feminine danger” and could result from something as innocent as “*overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap*” (1994, p. 53, emphasis my own). Coincidentally, these cautionary examples are similar to the ones contravened in my driver’s licence. The “overly rouged cheeks” are not just an amusing disguise, but a comical misappropriation of what is considered to be makeup’s sole purpose. The “voice shrill in laughter” not only expresses amusement, but strips the emperor of his clothes, exposing the absurdity of idealised notions of beauty and containment.

Regardless of her particular response to that pressure, it is undeniable that contemporary Western society places extreme pressure on women to be thin. For whatever reason, the individual with an eating disorder is unable to resist the call. In other words, thinness is a cultural pressure that only some succumb to in levels that are unhealthy and potentially life-threatening while still exercising significant power over the remainder. As Carole Spitzack notes:

There is a fragile dividing line between the obsessional tactics of anorexics and the routine beauty rituals of ‘normal’ women. Everyday performances of femininity... require considerable strategy and endurance because they are scripted meticulously and often judged unmercifully” (1993, p. 2)

Since it is inevitable that these pressures will be felt, how is one to react? What tactics are at the disposal of a woman who wishes to challenge traditional notions of feminine beauty and composure? The answer, I believe, lies somewhere in Butler’s proposal that we exist in a paradoxical state. It is a tenuous position, for sure, but it is bolstered by utilising humour’s destabilising potential, through enacting comical

performances of subversion which challenge the dominion of oppressive notions of “femininity.”

Appendix



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