

Who GETS to make jokes and who NEEDS to make jokes

Visual Culture

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Who GETS to make jokes and who NEEDS to make jokes

What is a joke? Why do we laugh when the comedian on stage says the punchline, or when our friend says something outrageous or idiotic? Is humour a source of short lived power over the intended target or “butt” of the joke? *Who* is the target? More importantly, who gets to target people? *Who* is the person with the “power” who *gets* to make jokes? For centuries historians, psychologists and Greek philosophers, such as Plato, have theorised why we laugh. Plato once pondered if people find humour in “the misfortune of others because of feeling superior” (Sabato, G. 2019). The question of just why we laugh is elusive, and personal to an individual, that however didn’t stop Sigmund Freud from positing that laughter is a “release of pent-up, nervous energy” (Sabato G, 2019).

In today's world, humour is invariably linked to wit and intellect. Those who “get it” and those who “don’t” are at odds, and one is seen as superior, asserting that there is at least some form of power within humour and the art of the joke. In this essay I will discuss the question; Who GETS to make jokes and who NEEDS to make jokes?

Recently Tommy Teirnan had to issue an apology for offending RTE presenter Emer O’Neill by telling the audience of his comedy set a joke involving Dublin Zoo and taxi drivers (R.T.E. 2023). I reference this incident to highlight who GETS to make jokes, or who thinks they can. As a white Irish man, Tommy Teirnan felt as if he was in his right to perform a joke that had very racist connotations and portrayed the people in the taxi driving profession in a very stereotypical and derogatory way. This however is an unfortunate trend amongst specifically white, male comedians and artists alike, the notion of entitlement to say as they please as they haven’t experienced the hardships the victims of their jokes have, and are tone-deaf or worse, aware and unbothered by the hurt and offence they cause.

Within comedy and art, one recurring 'butt' of these jokes are women. Why? Because comedy, like art, is traditionally viewed through the eyes of a white man. Consider briefly the jokes made at a woman's expense. A punchline containing derogatory language, a reference to PMS or the damaging stereotypes of the 'angry black woman', 'the feminazi' or the 'dumb blonde'. Why are these 'jokes' so common? Why do male comedians, our friends, artists and society choose to play into these harmful jokes? Boutonnet suggests that it is all about power. "It is about one group being threatened by another and using humour to bond and assert power." (Boutonnet, J. 2014). As mentioned by Boutonnet, humour can be weaponised when those making the joke are threatened, and in order to regain power they use their 'threat' as the butt of their joke, which in turn elevates them to a position of superiority and power, as suggested by Plato.

If it is all about power then the constant onslaught of tasteless jokes, humour that toes the line and damaging comedy delivered by men can be taken as them overcoming this threat and instead pushing the boundaries of its once perceived threat to subdue it. "Men's humour is more frequently aggressive or sexual in nature." (Cernerud, L. 2004). There is no witt in jokes about feminists, rape culture or stereotypes of women that have been decided by the very men who then make these 'jokes'. No matter the woman, no matter what she has accomplished or what she is like, she will always be the 'butt' of a thoughtless and offensive joke. "It typically takes only one feminist to make a joke. In fact, she *is* the joke." (Bergmann, M. 1986). This statement highlights the notion that no matter what a woman is standing for, what she says or does can be compressed into a fickle joke that undermines her intelligence and agency. This is a very common strategy used by male comedians or men trying to argue against a woman's opinion. Consider the aforementioned stereotypes in this essay, how often in modern media can we see these tropes being used against women to silence and undermine them?

Men's humour balances on the line of overtly offensive and dark humour. However, why do we, as a society, excuse it? Why do we allow the blame for a 'bad' joke to fall on the victim for not laughing, instead of the joke teller who said something obviously offensive or derogatory? Because the woman who does not laugh is "dubbed a "killjoy" or "can't take a joke." (Bergmann, M. 1986) Men GET to make jokes about taboo subjects because of years of being the one with power, while also being threatened by those who go against it. They GET to 'joke' about topics that affect everyone else but them, with little to no backlash, and no care for those they affect.

"Those who hold the power in a culture develop a preference for humour that victimises the powerless, while the powerless develop a preference for self-victimising humour." (McGhee, 1983, 186) Those who get to make jokes have dominated humour, somewhat smothering the voices of those who need to make jokes. But, why would one need to make jokes? Who needs to make jokes?

Women, as I have previously mentioned, are often the "butt" of the classic male joke. Their perceived weakness or opinions make women the target of many stereotypical and offensive 'jokes'. Once a woman makes her dislike for these jokes apparent, she suddenly 'can't take a joke', and is, therefore, no fun and doesn't have a sense of humour.

Christopher Hitchens asks his reader to "please do not pretend not to know what I am talking about." as he posits that women as a whole, bar a few stereotypical exceptions, are not funny. In Hitchens' 2007 Vanity Fair piece "Why Women Aren't Funny", he picks apart female comedy and compares it crudely to male humour. Womens' 'lack of sense humour' in Hitchens' mind seems to stem from the fact many jokes made by men are at the expense of women. He praises few female comedians while also insulting them through derogatory language or terms. "Most of them, though, when you come to review the situation, are hefty or dykey or Jewish, or some combo of the three" (Hitchens C, 2007). Hitchens' suggests there is only humour where a woman appears more masculine or plays into traditional male

humour. Hitchens, as a man and someone in a position where he gets to make jokes or articles detailing his opinion as the undeniable truth, is aware of the power men have within humour, and hangs it over womens' heads as if to mock them with his sickeningly false intellectual jargon and entitlement.

This is why women don't GET to make jokes, they NEED to make them. Not only to let their voices be heard and to prove to men that they too are funny, if not funnier in many cases, but to challenge the power held by men within the world of humour.

However, with cultural shifts, humour too changes. Throughout the earlier examples of female humour, many jokes were "self-deprecatory in tone, by and about women." (Bunkers, S. L. 1985), however, Bunkers continues to write of how a "trend in womens' humour has had a movement away from self-deprecatory and towards sarcastic, which reflects the consciousness of the potential for women claiming power." This 'claiming of power' is happening across many mediums and platforms. Women are using humour to challenge institutions, male dominance, and power through literature, comedy, and art to mention a few.

I would like to focus on how womens' use of humour in art is used to challenge society, power and stereotypes, all while staying true to their own craft.

Take Valie Export as an example,



(fig 1) Valie Export, Body sign Action 2, 1970

Valie Export's work incorporates humour alongside feminism in a daring and experimental way through photography and body modification. This work is titled Body Sign Action 2, in which she tattooed a garter strap on her thigh and posed nude. The piece is a thinly veiled jab at the male gaze, in which Export plays on sexual fantasy and takes control of the situation through the use of control, illusion using tattoos and humour.

She is challenging the power men assume they have, especially within the art world, using comedic strategies to stand out and make a point. In 1970 she chose to change her name to Valie Export, which was "inspired by the branding of Smart Export cigarettes" (Dazed, 2023).

She provoked the artworld through her exuberant use of her body in art, her constant pushing of gender boundaries and controversial public performances. By inserting herself into overpoweringly male spaces she reclaimed the space for female artists and women alike. Her use of humour allowed her to wessel into these spaces, she NEEDED to make jokes, and incorporated them into her art in a subtle yet powerful way. Another method she employed in her work was commitment and effort. Going all the way to get a tattoo of your art, for your art is funny in and of itself, but simply proves the ability and sense of humour she had.



(fig 2) Guerrilla Girls, Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get Into the Met. Museum? 1989.

The above image (fig 2) is from the Guerrilla Girls' exhibition *The Art of Behaving Badly*, 1989. The Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous group of feminist artists who create work dedicated to the lack of representation of women and minorities within galleries and artistic spaces. This 1989 piece is aimed at The Met. Museum. The artists say they conducted "what [they] affectionately came to call the 'wienie count.'" (Kahlo, F., & Kollwitz, K. 2010) throughout the museum, and found results depicting a severe lack of female artists (as seen on the image above, fig 2).

The Guerrilla Girls use humour in the form of the now iconic guerrilla masks, their use of photoshop and photo manipulation, as well as their witty and powerful statements. "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" (Guerrilla Girls 1989) for example. Even their way of speaking about their work is light hearted and humorous, "We were sure things had gotten better, especially after years of Guerrilla Girls' complaining." (Kahlo, F., & Kollwitz, K. 2010). When all of their strategies are put together they become an unstoppable force of change that challenges power, injustice and gender stereotypical issues.

Without their use of humour their protests and concerns would remain perfectly valid, however their notability would most likely be less than today. Women NEED to make jokes to force themselves into the spotlight in order to fight their point, establish themselves and ensure change.



(fig 3) Sarah Lucas, Au Naturel, 1994

The exhibition, Au Naturel 1994, focuses “on both physical and metaphorical subject matter” which “twist and challenge convention.” Lucas uses objects like domestic furniture “as substitutes for body parts, and the artist’s use of common food, such as eggs, as a means of exploring sexual ambiguity and tension between the familiar and absurd.” (Hériard Dubreuil, L. 2018). Lucas’ work represents objectified sculptures of the female body, often made from household items, such as Au Naturel (fig 3), where the use of melons and bucket depict a woman, and two oranges and a cucumber positioned phallically represent a man.

Lucas’ work depicts the human body in a subtle, yet intimate way that’s shrouded in humour. The use of phallic objects displayed in an obviously posed way breaks down the barriers of art and invites childish giggles and playground humour.

The New York Times desires her work as “[her] works tend to be raw, sexually hilarious and heartily sceptical of propriety and societal repressiveness, especially concerning the body and its basic impulses.” Smith, R. (2018).

Her use of humour and obvious jokes invite the viewer into the artwork, to feel comfortable and to learn. Lucas' work is heavily feminist, which can intimidate those uneducated on what feminism is, and what it stands for, but her witty and effective work easily captures the audience and educates them while making them laugh.

Challenging power through humour doesn't need to be obvious, as shown by Sarah Lucas, or it could be an artistic "slap in the face", as shown by the Guerrilla Girls. The concept of challenging humour suggests that there is indeed a power imbalance between men and women, or that there is a societal need for change. We as a society still view humour as a way "to attract one and other and to signal romantic interest," rather than a natural way to bond as a group. This creates a barrier between men and women when it comes to comedy. According to Scientific American's article, titled The Humor Gap, "men want someone who will appreciate their jokes, while women want someone who makes them laugh." (Nicholson, C. 2010) This statement further alienates funny women, and the notion that gender does not dictate humour.

This is why women NEED to make jokes, because we as a society have allowed men to decide that women are not funny, because they don't want them to be. Men want to be the joke makers, and have women as their subservient audience who will laugh no matter the content of the joke. Returning to the article by Christopher Hitchens, Why Women Aren't Funny, Hitchens describes a woman's laugh in an almost perverted way; "I am talking about that real, out-loud, head-back, mouth-open-to-expose-the-full-horseshoe-of-lovely-teeth, involuntary, full, and deep-throated mirth" (Hitchens, C. 2007). Even something as simple and natural as laughter is sexualised by men, this is why Hitchens posits women do not NEED to be funny, as they are desired regardless of their humorous ability.

This is why I believe that women are a specific group of people who NEED to make jokes. Women have always been funny, at least to other women. This label of unfunniness plastered onto an entire population of people is not only wrong, but a clear sign of the

intimidation that men feel from a funny woman. Because if she is funner than him, what does he have to offer and impress her with? That's the underlying message I personally took from Hitchens' Vanity Fair article. Referring back to Boutonnet and her theory of humour being inspired by threat, it becomes clear that the threat men feel from a powerful or funny woman far outweighs their care for whether or not a woman is truly funny.

In conclusion, I posit that there truly is power in humour. The power has traditionally been held by men and their traditionally aggressive comedy, but now with artists, comedians and women willing to go against the norm and the societal constraints put onto them we see that power being threatened. A powerful woman is a funny woman, which can be intimidating to the fragile egos men have built their humour around. Traditionally men GET to make jokes, but now especially, women NEED to make them, not only to establish that they are truly funny, but to challenge the power men believe they have.

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