

Pussy Riot's humour and the social media: Self-irony, subversion, and solidarity

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Abstract

This paper seeks to demonstrate that both the media impact and political success of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot rest on their use of new media, on the one hand, and on an aesthetic principle of humour, on the other, or, more specifically, on a kind of humour that is both self-reflexive and subversive. Pussy Riot operate through a style of guerrilla communication that re-signifies signs and symbols for their own purpose in a self-ironical, comical manner. I will indicate the contradictions and ambiguities of various interpretive frameworks – which not only create humour but are particularly motivating factors in the (personal) decision to become politically active. The speed with which one can communicate within social networks made it possible that infectious laughter about the absurdity of the events in Moscow was able to spread so rapidly. Reassurance and the community's solidarity were closely connected to the fun and joy of the individual internet user.

Keywords: Pussy Riot, new media, feminism, YouTube, humour, self-irony, guerrilla communication, solidarity, rhizome.

1. Introduction

Pussy Riot's performances can either be called dissident art or political action that engages art forms. Either way, our performances are a kind of civic activity amidst the repressions of a corporate political system that directs its power against basic human rights and civil and political liberties. The young people who have been flayed by the systematic eradication of freedoms perpetrated through the aughts have now risen against the state. We were searching for real sincerity and simplicity, and we found these qualities in the *yurodstvo* [the holy foolishness] of punk.

(Tolokonnikova 2012)

In May 2012, the Russian punk band Pussy Riot staged an illegal performance in order to draw attention to the unlawful ties between the church and the state. As a result of the media attention and the positive reactions the performance garnered, the band was brought to trial for this act of civil disobedience, which in turn resulted in severe sentences for its members, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina. The course and outcome of the trial met

with harsh public criticism and created to a movement that expressed its solidarity on various public platforms. With the aid of solidarity concerts featuring international pop stars, a groundswell of support was triggered which spread through social media and led many to question the foundation of constitutional rights and to attack Russia's totalitarian power structures. These conservative, patriarchal, and authoritarian structures were successfully unmasked and obstructed, which subsequently led to longer-term international political debates and real political action.

Milevska (2006) detects a link between the current political landscape – a large number of violent conflicts and political/social conservatism – and a paradigm shift in politically active art and artistic activism, which formalise a relationship between subjects. She investigates the relationship between art, aesthetics, and solidarity and sheds light on the lack of sustainability of many communal projects. She explains this phenomenon by citing the difficulty in creating a communal sense of “We”: “Often a lacking sense of belonging to a group or the absence of a shared identity with artists or initiators hinders a genuine feeling of participation” (Milevska 2006: 1). I will argue from this premise and inquire into what connection may lie between the manner in which the activist-feminist punk band Pussy Riot portrays itself and its performances, and the enduring solidarity it has generated throughout the world.

In this essay, I will show that the success of Pussy Riot can be traced in large part to their sense of humour and their strategic use of social networks. The calculated combination of humour as a stylistic device of their performance and their presentation on the online platform YouTube were the key to their success. I will analyse how Pussy Riot used humour in the tactical framework of their performances and public appearances and how the combination of humour and self-irony as a decisive aesthetic principle and the strategic use of social networks paved the way for global attention. Moreover, using a special kind of humour in conjunction with the guerrilla communication tactics – which were related to the styles of communication in social media – was instrumental in the creation of a solidarity community. I will present Pussy Riot's aesthetic principle as a form of humour that is self-reflexive and corresponds to Critchley's (2004) definition of humour, whose parameters are the recognition of one's own wretchedness through critical distancing. In order to better understand the issue, I will differentiate between two different kinds of humour and laughter: a hurtful, humiliating kind, which occurs on a vertical axis; and a strengthening, self-empowering kind, which tends to run on a horizontal axis and to be peaceful because it is interwoven with self-irony.

After introducing these different directional qualities of humour and laughter, horizontal versus vertical – top down or bottom up – and going into some detail concerning normative humour theories, I will continue by analysing how humour works as an organising principle in Pussy Riot's performances. I will thus show that the punk band undermines traditional expectations in all aesthetic areas – the venues, the manner of physical and gestural presentation, the costumes, the lyrics, and the instrumentation – and produces comedy by incongruously toying with norms and rules.

The band's headgear occupies a special position in this context – the colourful balaclava worn by the performers. It was not only a comical quote from the typical attire of male aggression and propensity to violence, but also became one of the most important surveying signs and symbols that the punk band took from their original context and, by means of comic re-framing, invested with fresh and unique meaning. This headgear has become the expression of solidarity – and at once the identification – of a community and is crucial to its rapid growth.

Hence, Pussy Riot operate through a guerrilla communication style which uses new media, and thus they used these signs with the aim of creating communal identity and recognition value (cf. Langston 2012). The performers do not appear as individuals but

embody a political idea in their anonymity (cf. Žižek 2013), which was able to rapidly spread through social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter (cf. Burchell 2015). A playful joy of humorous participation were the decisive factors (cf. Day 2011) in creating a kind of laughter that dispersed through the non-hierarchical channels of the internet in a rhizomatic way (cf. Deleuze & Guattari 1987).

This form of communication of political protest corresponds to an altered and more easily accessible form of youthful revolt since the rise of the Web 2.0. To elaborate on this notion, I will discuss Burgess & Green's (2009), Gerbaudo's (2012), Epstein's (2015), Yaqub & Silova's (2015), and Paparcharissi's (2015) theories on the importance of the new social media in modifying contemporary youth protest. In reference to Polletta (2006) and Plessner (1982) I will then point to the contradictory character and ambiguity of the various interpretative frameworks and the strengthening power of laughter as particularly motivating factors in one's personal decision to become politically active.

I will show that Pussy Riot's brand of comedy is far from harmless and, instead, mirrors and therefore threatens social community. By parodic exaggeration, their ironic commentary increases the gap between a general yearning for a just world and brutal reality – with great satisfaction, a likeminded audience bears witness to the way in which the deficits in the current Russian system are laid bare. This humour, however, plays out at the expense of the Russian Orthodox community, who in their humiliation propagate swift and severe punishment for the performers. When faced with a prison sentence, then, performers ultimately could only fall back on their sense of humour to cope with the injustices they suffered as a consequence of their actions.

2. Humour's normative ethics: Horizontality versus verticality

In this chapter I will pursue the idea of what I call *horizontive humour* – a term I will discuss in more detail below – which I detect in Pussy Riot's politically motivated performances. For this purpose, I will first point out various characteristics, definitions, and genres of humour.

Satire, in its literary and dramatic iteration, is based on a humour that follows the bottom-up principle on a vertical axis and attempts to reveal, and make an example of, political and/or social injustices in order to harm the powerful (cf. Stott 2014: 152–163). Those in power, on the other hand, are reassured in their power by exposing, weakening, degrading, ridiculing, or taunting their inferiors, the weak, the ugly, or the other. Laughing guarantees control, serves to uphold status and hierarchy (cf. Martin 2007) and follows the vertical bottom-down principle, which we all know from jokes at the expense of others and also from comedies with a moral or educational impetus (cf. Stott 2014: 3–7, who explains that this type of comedy started with Aristophanes and continued with Molière into current Hollywood productions). The tradition of such humour is owed to a psychological and/or sociological motive that may traditionally be defined using Superiority/Disparagement Theory (cf. Martin 2007: 43–57).

Accordingly, Thomas Hobbes, who can be placed in the Platonist tradition, regarded laughter solely in its negative dimension: as ridiculing, mocking and humiliating, as an inhuman haughtiness (cf. Hobbes 1959; Morreall 1987; Bachmair 2005). Having entered discourse as a superiority theory and having been firmly established as such (cf. Schörle 2007) – albeit no longer being the *status quo* in contemporary theory – this type of laughter plays its aggressive role in everyday life: in daily use, it is directed against ethnic or other minorities and apparently ditzy women, thereby underlining their function as sex objects; it can be utilised by demagogues to weaken the opposing party; it can also be used subversively in order to disavow the powers-that-be. But this form of humour always remains one-sided,

does not allow for any ambivalence, subordinates contradictoriness to simple categories, and, in doing so, structures the world into easily identifiable categories: good and evil, right and wrong, intelligent and stupid. Along with Stott, I see a dangerous weapon in the act of laughter as self-affirmation at the expense of others: “When laughter is directed with aggression, it can be an extremely powerful tool, representing its targets in purely negative terms and reinforcing prejudice” (Stott 2014: 169). Thus, Hobbes is the theoretician of a tradition that had a very influential successor in Henri Bergson (1911), and which uses laughter in its vertical dimension from top to bottom as an instrument of power in order to punish, correct, and discipline.

Likewise vertical but working in the opposite direction of impact, subversive laughter by the likes of Bakhtin (1990) or Mulkay (1988), used by those oppressed and discriminated against, seeks to weaken, denunciate, and satirise those who are higher up in the social hierarchy. This type of humour finds its means of expression in the form of satire, caricature, or the political cabaret, and is also often used as a feminist tool (Barreca 1988).

Feminist theoreticians such as Little (1983), Apte (1985), Kaufmann (1991), Gray (1994), and Rowe (1995) who have written about the emancipating power of humour, can be placed in the tradition of Barreca (1991), who encourages women to defy the myth that “women don’t have a sense of humour” to develop their own sense of humour, and not to shy away from laughing out loud and with their mouths agape – in short, to dare to be a bad girl or an unruly woman, to be open with their own opinion in order to become stronger and to use the power they will thereby attain.

In practice, however, this strategy often leads to an adoption of the male tradition of aggressive and hostile humour targeted at keeping women as docile as possible; and thus, the adaptation of such a violent humour becomes the weapon of choice for many women. In the interest of feminist causes, women have rightly begun to abstain from using ingratiation tactics or self-deprecatory humour that long used to be a common tool for women: “The tactic of adopting the traditional formula of self-deprecatory humour may serve as a face-saving strategy for the benefit of the audience. By exposing their own foolishness, female comics soften the jab at men” (Russell 2002). Ingratiation through dishonest, opportunistic laughter, however, solely serves to get another person’s attention, validation, or favour and often ends in false admiration, self-deprecation, craving for attention, and compliance (cf. Martin 2007: 121).

Other theoreticians focus on the tradition of a “typically feminine” humour¹, which is characterised by creativity, spontaneity, multi-perspectivity, joy, fun, and – last but not least – a large amount of amusing self-reflexivity and self-irony (cf. Jenkins 1985; Kotthoff 1988, 2006). This is also a kind of humour that can be used as a feminist strategy, as self-empowerment through mutual female encouragement and the recognition of difference are at its centre (cf. Merrill 1988). Radulescu (2012), who investigated the autonomous power of early female comedians, follows French feminists Cixous (1976) and Irigaray (1985), “in the discussion of the relations between the female body, female humour and creativity, and, respectively, in the discussion of mimicry and hysteria as dimensions of subversive forms of performance for women” (Radulescu 2012: 16). As early as 1968, the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1968) focused on a kind of comedy that did not rely on the humiliation of another person but on countering control with something uncontrollable and thus triumphing over it. She took this premise to formulate an understanding of humour as a social force that subversively challenges power.

Feminist defenders of an aggressive kind of humour may put forth the following argument: one who uses humour that incorporates one’s own fragile I – acting self-reflexively, self-critically, and also self-ironically – runs the risk of weakening one’s own position and should be criticised for using self-disparaging irony.

This is not necessarily the case, as Weisstein (1973) pointed out. When women seemingly deride themselves, they often mock the roles they have been ascribed as women, thus subverting or at least calling into question the validity and inalterability of these roles. It is not female weakness or incompetence they are laughing at, but traditional, oppressive patriarchal mechanisms and the absurdity of the assumption that the values that go along with them are set in stone.

Comedy that recognises the value of female experience may be an important step in developing a culture that allows women to self-critically question the stereotypes that have governed our lives. A strong rebellious humour empowers women to examine how we have been objectified and fetishised and to what extent we have been led to perpetuate this objectification.

(Merrill 1988: 297)

Likewise, Finley (1993), Russo (1994), Russell (2002), Parvalescu (2010) and Radulescu (2012) indicate that some kinds of female humour can be insurgent and self-affirming without adopting a traditionally male humorous performance marked with competitiveness and aggressiveness (cf. Coser 1960). A comforting, self-ironic strength distancing itself from pain, humiliation, and perfectionism may facilitate a mutual derision of fears and insecurities. Mutual reassurance can be based on the recognition of potential and real weakness. In this case, humour employs distance and comfort on a psychological level and group encouragement, collectivisation, and inclusion on a social level. Humour that draws from this strength, is – in my opinion – not vertical (neither top to bottom nor vice versa) but horizontal, flat, and multi-perspectival without being hierarchical.

This kind of humour reveals internal contradictions and incongruities, and can be placed in the Hutchesonian tradition (1987/1750). Hutcheson (1987/1750), who was one of the first philosophers of the Enlightenment, intended to oppose Hobbes's philosophy – the so-called Superiority Theory – with his philosophy, the Incongruity Theory, although the latter primarily describes the way in which humour, comicality, and laughter come about and does not necessarily have any moral implication (cf. Stott 2005). Hutcheson, however, proceeds from a positive image of humanity and human beings who are versed in compassion, sympathy, and altruism; laughter about others is not exclusively generated by vanity but also by love. According to Critchley (2004), humour is similar to love in that it reveals a person's own fallibility, but does so in a consoling, wise, and funny way. Critchley defines a humour dealing with the inherent fallibility of all human beings according to Freud (1924) as super-ego II, which asserts itself against the disease of ideality and teases by acknowledging the individual as part of an imperfect world. Therefore, considering oneself ridiculous is – as Berger (1998) pointed out – the essence of a kind of humour that keeps one from perishing in one's desperation but conveys a feeling of emancipation, consolation, and childlike joy.

In this context, I would be remiss if I did not briefly mention irony as a stylistic device. Hutcheon (1994) investigates the political power of irony and points out relevant variations that produce different communicational effects. Oppositional irony can be as transgressive and subversive as insulting and offensive. Self-protective irony can be self-deprecating and ingratiating as well as arrogant and defensive. Ludic irony can be humorous, witty, playful, and teasing, or irresponsible, trivialising, and reductive. Complicating irony may be complex and ambiguous in a positive sense, or misleading and imprecise. Reinforcing irony has both emphatic and decorative effects. Dealing with these oppositions, she concludes by criticising the semantic tradition of "thinking of irony only in binary either/or terms". As a way out of these restrictions, she suggests thinking about

[a] new way of talking about ironic meaning as, instead, relational, inclusive, and differential. If we considered irony to be formed through a relation both between people and also between

meanings – said and unsaid – then, like the duck/rabbit image, it would involve an oscillating yet simultaneous perception of plural and different meanings.

(Hutcheon 1994: 66)

Muecke (1969) distinguishes irony from (political) satire, because the former does not serve the interest of stability. He agrees with Moreton Gurewitch (1962), quoting, “Irony deals with the absurd, whereas satire treats the ridiculous.” and “irony entails hypersensitivity to a universe permanently out of joint and unfailingly grotesque” (Muecke 1969: 27). In this sense, self-irony is a response to the absurdities and contradictions of the world in general and private hopes and desires in particular.

Rorty’s (1989) figure of the *liberal ironist* points to the same direction. Rorty describes the figure of the liberal ironist as a person who uses self-mocking detachment in order to pursue a meaningful way of life. This person tries not only to endure his/her own pain with critical distancing by way of irony and humour but also uses an intra-individual conflict resolution program in order to take a stand and challenge the boundaries between personal and public interests despite all their contradictions. According to Goldberg (2014), performance artists search for transformation in a liminal state between reality and artistic play and, in doing so, act on a spectrum between self-reference and public interest. Following Rorty and Goldberg, I define the performers in Pussy Riot as liberal humorists who use humour successfully not only for challenging given structures, but also for achieving a meaningful way of life, which is evident both in their artistic initiatives and their private demeanour – their public yet non-artistic appearances.

The function of humour and laughter as a normative force plays a key role in my considerations, as I proceed from the assumption that one cannot effect sustainable changes using punishment, negativity, and exclusion. Inclusive laughter, however, does not persevere in limited social formations but strives for a larger community, in which those who have a diverging opinion can also have a positive function (cf. Morreall 2009). We should remember that any form of comedy and humour is inclusive and strengthens groups and also delineates and excludes. The same social and psychological force that strengthens the “I” and the group can simultaneously exhibit collectivising and segregating functions, depending on which side one finds oneself.

I use Deleuze & Guattari’s (1987) figure of the rhizome – which I discuss below – to describe the potentially subversive power of a kind of laughter that fosters multi-perspectivity and, within a manifold root system, reduces a dichotomy of “vertical” and “horizontal” to absurdity. The rhizome is especially suited to visualising how laughter which involves a political statement can spread through the internet’s various channels. My concept of multi-perspectivity contradicts a total horizontality, as much as every form of humour – like irony – may have both an integrative and segregating function. A potentially vertical or denigrating or offensive potential should therefore not be excluded from consideration. I tend to avoid the term *horizontal humour*, and propose a neologism: I would call a humour with the aim or tendency to avoid any form of hierarchy *horizontive humour*, as it includes the issue of different perspectives and takes a position that creates a broad horizon.

In summary, I put forth a kind of humour that strives for horizontality and still functions as a feminist tactic. I detect in the performances of Pussy Riot the creative production of a comedy that self-reflexively focuses on their own weaknesses and contradictions, thus filtering out the subjective position’s perspective, exposing traditional dichotomies and vertical power structures, and eliciting non-aggressive but transgressive laughter. This laughter can help to raise awareness, strengthen subversive agency, and build solidarity and community. It can be persuasive in a highly inclusive and humorously playful way and at the same time strengthen the socially degraded individual despite her/his self-irony.

3. Humour as the organising principle of performance

To begin with, humour in the performances of Pussy Riot manifests itself as an aesthetic tactic used as a means of political emancipation. They employ gestures of provocation with which they attack prevailing types of conformity. At the same time, they pervert the dominant cultural aesthetics by taking certain dress codes to extremes or using gestures and behaviours in disproportionate ways to subvert the spaces dedicated to specific practices.

This strategy engages in various forms of expression and embodiments of humour in the media, using wit, grotesqueness, irony, and parody, whereas I am especially interested to explore the aspect of parody in relation to Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. In order to break out of continually repeating practices – which constitute traditional gender codes – Butler suggests shifting or realigning the norms that are at the basis of this repetition by radically multiplying the gender identity. The crucial question here is which interventions in a ritualised repetition are possible. Butler argues that by parodistically paraphrasing traditional feminine and masculine gender roles – for instance in drag queens or lesbian butch–femme relationships – the possibility of radically changing identity and gender emerges. Parody is therefore not simply distorting, exaggerating, or ridiculing imitation, but offers the possibility of performance, a shift in traditional codification. By confusing the gender binary, cultural configurations of gender and gender identity are able to multiply:

Just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as* the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalised performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself. [...] Hence, there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects.

(Butler 1990: 146)

Pussy Riot's artistic acts, the punk concerts, have taken place on the rooftop of a public bus, as evidenced in Figure 1, on the Red Square (Figure 2), in public or publicly accessible venues like subway stations, at exclusive fashion shows, or outside a prison. Pussy Riot appears swiftly, as if out of nowhere, and for a short time take over spaces of power, consumption, and urban order. They give musically-oriented performances that not only provoke wonder and surprise due to their incongruous placement in a given location but also question the meaning and purpose of the chosen place and use the redirected focus to their advantage.



Figure 1. Pussy Riot concert on a public bus

They act in the style of a traditional punk band with head banging and clenched fists, boxing rhythmically against the heavens; menacing and defiant gestures are choreographed; they kick their legs in the air while playing air guitar with their hands. On the whole, however, the acts look amateurish and clumsy: the performers hop up and down like puppets or marionettes, with stiff limbs and automated movements, as if controlled by invisible strings. In this ungainly physicality they display the “mechanical in the living”, which Bergson (1911: 13–25) describes as an inflexibility that threatens the preservation and success of bourgeois society, constitutes a breach of its laws, and must therefore be subjected to ridicule. The uncoordinated movements, the seemingly unintentional stumbling, and the mechanical repetition of movements have an amusing effect. Through their physicality, the performers create a humorous contrast both to the seriousness of their mission and to the blasé punk attitude, using irony and parody as a stylistic device. They appear downright ridiculous, which they achieve by eschewing the expected behaviour of a punk band. By styling themselves as a childishly harmless group of puppets, they pretend not to take themselves seriously. With their prepubescent attire, they parody an antiquated image of girls in a Butlerian way; making themselves seem younger than they are, and thereby quite harmless, lovely, and cheerful. In doing so, they are queering naturalisations, exaggeratedly reenacting a behaviour expected from young girls. Making fun of the audience’s expectations, they present something entirely differently than what they mean. The members of Pussy Riot are everything but that what they show: They are angry young women who strategically perform very consciously, yet do not let themselves be put off.



Figure 2. Pussy Riot Concert on the Red Square

As Figure 3 shows, their colourful costumes are ambivalent as they point out distinctly female clichés, on the one hand, and combat exactly the kind of image into which patriarchy has tried to squeeze women – the harmless, sexy girl, the pretty mannequin, the elegant lady who emphasises male power as a kind of visual adornment or delightful accessory. Thus, they project this image in order to destroy any illusion of grace, harmony, and submissive femininity.



Figure 3. Pussy Riot members being horsewhipped in Sochi

As decided feminists they not only parody and satirise the manly gestures of a classic punk band that dresses in sombre colours, wears rough materials, and behaves in a depressive and aggressive manner, but they also portray themselves as former marionettes at the hands of the powerful, who now free themselves and set out to destroy the conventional order. In light of this, the costumes they wear are of great significance.

Their trademark is the balaclava, which the band members wear in unusually bright colours, at times adorned with pompoms, which makes these face masks look hand-knit; holes are cut out haphazardly for the eyes and mouth. Their heads give the impression of rag dolls or bunnies, yet there is a constant suggestion of menace, since we tend to associate this look with the military, police, or terrorists. Their unstylish, non-sexual clothing and stockings are also displayed in garish colours; their homely smocks look thrifty. Sometimes one of them will stuff a lopsided pillow under her shirt to symbolise motherhood. Overall, the outfits look more like something children might wear rather than punk goddesses or hardcore rebels, and it is instantly clear that their disguises are meant to deflect attention away from the individual and towards a message. Notwithstanding, a germ of truth can be recognised in their costumes, because what the performers borrow from children is more than clothing; it is a fearless cheekiness, an undimmed laughter, a humour which imitates and parodies, which seems absurd and nonsensical but which above all transgresses prohibited borders with a zest for life and the allure of the forbidden.



Figure 4. Pussy Riot in their rehearsal room

Before I go into the special significance of the balaclava in this particular context, I would like to consider the content of their lyrics in terms of its humorous potential. All of their performances are characterised by provocative, inflammatory incitements, that are nevertheless fraught with absurdity and ironic ambivalence and are not to be taken literally: “Bitches piss behind the red walls”, “Naked cops rejoice in the new reforms”, “Riot calls for the System’s Abortion”, “For our joint freedom, a whip to chastise with!”, “Seduce battalions of police damsels!”, or “Occupy the city with a frying pan!”² These are ostensibly a call to arms, but in their comical absurdity they are in fact meant to be a critique of the system and a challenge to fellow citizens: in other words, an incitement to question the political status quo and our own pre-emptive obedience, and to oppose injustice.

Therefore, the humour of the lyrics accompanying the band's performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour and the performance itself should be viewed in this light, for the chosen location is fraught with exceptional symbolism.



Figure 5. Concert at the Cathedral

The Moscow-based art historian Degot (2012) describes this cathedral as “perhaps the most ideologically charged place in Moscow [...]. It is a political institution and at the same time it is the heart of the Orthodox Church's economic power”. The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is no ornamental accessory but first and foremost a pillar of political power. It is this symbolic order that was the target of Pussy Riot's attack: they defiled the hallowed place and mocked it. Given that this humorous disparagement was partly in the guise of prayers, the ostensible target – church and state as an interwoven unity – felt itself under siege, and churchgoers had their feelings hurt as well. Thus, alongside the left-wing protest movement appearing mostly in the Western part of the world, another community emerged in Russia: activist, orthodox believers who could not or would not accept the humour of the act. They interpreted the lyrics as a literal attack on their religious faith and vehemently sided with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and President Vladimir Putin. “...Virgin Mary, Mother of God, put Putin away...” and “...Virgin Mary, Mother of God become a feminist...”³ are humorous aspirations with a powerful core of truth. The wish to better the world with the help of the Virgin Mary is as earnest as it is implausible, given that the performers do not abide by the codes of behaviour prescribed by the church. In their act, the symbolic figure of Mary, Mother of God, is endowed with a perverted political significance. It is therefore through Pussy Riot's exhortation of Mary to eliminate corruption by the church and the state that an ambiguous appropriation of the saint emerges. She becomes the patron saint of all those who would openly criticise the prevailing system and those who do not fit the official gender stereotypes: women who refuse to assume their submissive role as housewives and all members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community (cf. Willems 2014). The lyrics “...the Church's praise of rotten dictators” and “...Patriarch Gundyayev believes in Putin/Bitch, better believe in God instead” should therefore be understood as direct accusations, which in their comical overstatement take on a more powerful significance. In the course of their performance, the band members took over the sanctuary, a place where

women are generally forbidden; in the act of subverting the role of holy ceremony ascribed to the venue, they were either committing blasphemy or sanctifying the punk concert itself. This provocation, combined with the symbolic gestures of battle, of raised fists, of kicks against the holy relics, and of appropriating the Virgin Mary for private purposes, was seen as a real threat to the clergy. The line “Shit shit holy shit, shit shit holy shit”⁴ in particular was considered the worst possible insult, and its humorous, ironic content was deliberately overlooked. Pussy Riot can be placed in the Russian tradition of God’s Fools, the *yurodivy*, which were allowed to distance themselves and speak and act like no one else (cf. Gathmann 2009).

Fools, whose legitimacy was manifested in their own absurdity and their role as critics of the ruling class, uttering unpleasant verities, were not exclusive to Russia but were a medieval European figure: fools breached the rules and amused the rulers by their brazenness, yet without destabilising the system itself (cf. Schörle 2007). In the Middle Ages, the Christian Church had to adopt a number of indelible pagan traditions. Along with travelling artists, minstrels, and comical street theatre, certain forms of miscreed and heresy which threatened the power of the Church had to be tolerated. Rome was not successful in prohibiting cheerful pagan rituals. As a consequence, one of those pagan rites that established itself was the popular *Feast of Fools* (*Festum Stultorum*), which was celebrated by the lower clergy and featured a great deal of crude blasphemy. During the Middle Ages, humour was an elaborate method to defy the many dark, threatening, and repressive elements of life (cf. Zijderveld 1976; Berger 1998), and these feasts were like small islands of time, during which the population could run riot and free itself, if only to later dutifully and obediently return to the oppressive daily routine. But how subversive these feasts and rituals really were is scientifically disputed (cf. Mulkay 1988; Bakhtin 1990). They were organised by different fools’ associations, whose members were predominantly young people from a similar social class who got together, made jokes, and engaged in mischief, or played caricatural theatre. The court jester was allowed to offer relatively blunt criticism. Through his non compos mentis persona, he could voice disagreeable truths without being sanctioned and, with his carnival license, contributed to stabilising the prevailing order. The Russian *Fools for Christ* were called *yurodivy*. The figure of the Fool for Christ can be traced back to Paul the Apostle, who declared that to become wise (in the Christian sense), one must first appear a fool in the eyes of the world (cf. 1Cor 3:18–20). The Russian Orthodox version, the *yurodivy*, led an eccentric life: it was assumed that they had received divine inspiration, and therefore, they were not ostracised as mad people and were not subject to the control of the Czar, so that they were also free to criticise him (cf. Kobets 2001). Seen in this light, the lyrics “holy shit” might even lose its blasphemous connotation and remain a simple idiom of surprise, bewilderment, and incredulity.

The band’s lyrics, their juxtaposition of religious exhortations with insults, their costumes, and their performative gestures can be linked to genuine punk behaviour. This behaviour, however, is constantly subverted, ironised, and contrasted. This subversion can also be traced from a musical perspective. In aftermath of the live performance, the artists created a music video⁵ drawing on both the performance and the prior rehearsal, in which we hear shrill, amateurish guitar sounds and strident voices, on the one hand, and a perfect choral polyphony with a harmonising piano accompaniment, on the other. One might conclude from viewing this video that content, message, and form are pitted against each another on every aesthetic level, creating a multifaceted aesthetic conflict.

This incongruity creates the appearance of comicality, which, however it is construed, is not only intended to produce laughter but also to emotionalise, to question normativity, to struggle with the cultural order, to pluralise the settings of sex and gender identities, and to uncover inconsistencies within the political and social system.

4. The balaclava as a humorous symbol and a means of forging community

I will relate the large number of people who show active interest in helping the imprisoned band members to the notion of multitude as used by Virno (2005). According to Virno, it is the non-governmental public sphere that characterises the multitude's mode of existence, and civil disobedience is its basic form of political action, which aims to question the executive power of the state. The method of civil disobedience is to subvert the pre-emptive obedience that gives rise to the powerful state, to reveal the hidden assumptions that underpin it, and to challenge their legitimacy: "Radical disobedience, therefore, 'precedes all civil laws', for it does not limit itself to breaching them, but calls the very foundation of their validity into question" (Virno 2005: 72).

It has always been the integral aim of the Pussy Riot's artistic-activist concept to expand and to gain new members, thereby eschewing artistic personalities (or individual "celebrities") in favour of symbolism and unmitigated protest:

Serafima: "Our goal is to move away from personalities and towards symbols and pure protest."
Tyurya: "We often change names, balaclavas, dresses, and roles inside the groups. People drop out, new members join the group, and the lineup in each Pussy Riot's guerrilla performance can be entirely different."

(Langston 2012)

The colourful balaclava, the band's trademark clothing, allows them to remain anonymous and by means of this symbol to attack other symbols of power. This is a clever aesthetic tactic, because it is very easy for the "many" (Virno 2005) who wish to visually take part in the protest to appropriate these symbols and participate publicly. As band member Garadzha explained in an interview with Henry Langston:

Pussy Riot has to keep on expanding. That's one of the reasons we choose to always wear balaclavas – new members can join the bunch and it does not really matter who takes part in the next act – there can be three of us or eight, like in our last gig on the Red Square, or even 15. Pussy Riot is a pulsating and growing body.

(Langston 2012)

Pussy Riot are linked with the representatives of the Riot Grrrl movement, whose tactics of resistance are characterised by joy, lust for life, aggressive humour, hyperbolic irony, and non-hierarchical guerrilla communication (cf. White 1992). These young, angry girls use contradiction as a powerful feminist tool to challenge notions of what it means to be "feminine" or "normal".⁶ In this tradition, prevailing societal codes are not only subjected to irony and thereby questioned, but also appropriated, perverted, recast, subverted, and removed from their original context in order to reach a new consensus. It must be shared by the "many" so that this consensus can in turn establish a new language, and can then bring about desirable change in society (cf. Virno 2005).

The balaclava plays a vital role in this process. Its colour and style signal playful femininity, although this type of mask is in itself a symbol of war, crime, and violence. In Germany, they are especially associated with the movement of independence during the 1970s and 1980s, and Subcomandante Marcos, donning a black balaclava, became the anonymous hero of the international anti-globalisation movement. The origins of this headdress are of a military nature, which can be traced to the Ukrainian city of Balaklava. By recasting it in cheerful colours, Pussy Riot mock the symbol and strip it of its ominous air. In this way, the headdress is invested with a different message, signifying the end of the

masculine martial connotation and bearing the unmistakable sign of a new protest movement. This spread so far and wide across the Western world that one could even call it fashion: the collective “We” (Milevska 2006) began wearing the headdress to signal their solidarity with the political and artistic cause.

5. Guerrilla communication, transgressive humour, and rhizomatic laughter

According to Isaac (1996: 4), “in the 1980s something quite remarkable happened: using the subversive strategy of laughter, women artists began turning the culturally marginal position to which they had always been relegated into a new frontier”. The Guerrilla Girls are pioneers in this context, and Pussy Riot are their rightful heirs, as it were, since they share not only their choice of headdress as a textile medium of guerrilla communication but also some international members as well as their feminist ideals. The Guerrilla Girls, formed in the 1980s – the heyday of postmodern irony – are a group of female artists based in New York who founded an international network and whose members lead successful campaigns worldwide to this day. A comic parallel emerges in the alienation of meaning, exemplified by the anonymity of the masks. In the case of the Guerrilla Girls and their gorilla masks, the wordplay implies both an animal menace and carnivalesque whimsy. Some of their members operating anonymously under a pseudonym – similar to the Pussy Riot performers – explain the effect their guise has in the media:

Guerrilla Girl 1: “We spell it like the freedom fighters, but then we wear gorilla masks, so that it works imagistically. It’s very effective. You have this angry gorilla image combined with a female body – and the women have reason to be angry. So when you see the image, you think of what a guerrilla girl stands for, which is self-proclaimed consciousness of the art world”.

Romaine Brooks: “It was also to take feminism, which at that point was becoming a dirty word, and make it sexy and funny”.

Guerrilla Girl 1: “and to make it very positive”.

Romaine Brooks: “We have done enough lecturing across the US and around the world that Guerrilla Girl chapters just sort of spring up; they’re run more like a franchise. They’re independent from us”.

(Gablik 1994: 7)

Pussy Riot works according to the same concept as the Guerrilla Girls. They declare that due to the ongoing growth of Pussy Riot as an organisation, they have nothing to fear, and if the police imprison one of them, many others will show up in colourful balaclavas and continue the fight against the Russian symbols of power (cf. Langston 2012).

Žižek, who has also appeared as a supporter, assesses their concept of female activism as the personification of an Idea. He considers Pussy Riot to be the embodiment of anti-cynicism, since as conceptual artists they embody an Idea that matters rather than representing individuals who can be imprisoned. For this reason, they wear balaclavas, which represent de-individualisation and liberating anonymity. “And this is why they are such a threat: it is easy to imprison individuals, but try to imprison an Idea!” (Žižek 2012.)

Two of them were indeed imprisoned for almost two years and sent to labour camps far from their families, and it is questionable if they had expected their punishment to be so severe. Nevertheless, by using methods of guerrilla communication, Pussy Riot achieved transgression and garnered solidarity. Spectators and participants all over the world shared profound insight into the nature of hierarchy and patriarchy and their roles in exploitation. The Performers offered themselves up in their own absurdity, thereby calling for the ridicule

of a personified injustice. By means of this collective derision, the “many” (Virno 2005) coalesced into a community and a “We” (Milevska 2006) was able to emerge. When one laughs *at* Pussy Riot’s performers, one is forced to laugh *with* them about the absurdity and injustice of the world, and by laughing, one acknowledges one’s own involvement therein: one is complicit in and cognisant of this injustice and must therefore contribute in order to effect social change.

In *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* (1996), Jo Anna Isaac uses laughter as a metaphor for transformation and for thinking about cultural change. I concur and define the kind of laughter Pussy Riot seeks to provoke as *rhizomatic laughter*. In using the term *rhizomatic laughter*, I adopt Deleuze & Guattari’s concept of the *rhizome*, which corresponds with Pussy Riot’s political and social purposes, on the one hand, and with their strategy of using humour and laughter as a networking tool, forcing solidarity, on the other. The rhizome is a constantly and exuberantly growing entity that resembles a tuber: it had no margins, no vertical axis, but tubers and nodes instead, forming plateaus. It is an endless root system with countless strands that are connected to each other in a flexible manner, complement and strengthen each other, and lead to accumulations within which forces bundle. The rhizome can be placed in opposition to the binary way of thinking, since it proceeds from a strong unity and from there on sprawls further into multiplicities:

A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive [...].

(Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 7)

However, a rhizome has yet another considerable trait, with which the unifying and subversive force of humour that wants to spread can be explained: it can be interrupted or torn at any point, it continues at its own or other lines. Deleuze & Guattari liken it to ants, which one cannot control, since they form an animal rhizome that still falls into formation when its largest part is destroyed. Rhizomatic laughter also has the ability to spread further; it implies a constant “becoming”, a continuous new stratification, a change, which is implicit in the perpetual sprawling of laughter. The figure of the rhizome illustrates how an Idea spreads through humour – as Žižek (2012) would attest – whereby laughter appears as its means of transportation. Rhizomatic laughter – spreading especially rapidly through the internet – campaigns for multi-perspectivity, which reduces the dichotomy of vertical and horizontal laughter to absurdity – which I have defined as *horizontive humour* – and thus aims at a broader view without blinding out existing power relations. It can then spread its roots in the relatively flat and accessible zone of the World Wide Web and trespass on the tuber-like fabrics of the “real” world. As Irving Epstein remarks,

[t]he concept of networking implies a horizontal rather than vertical communicative structure, as leadership and decision-making are more likely to occur on a collective rather than hierarchical basis, according to consensual rather than directive top-down approaches.

(Epstein 2015: 12)

Rhizomatic online laughter, therefore, is a laughter that embraces multiplicity and its inherent contradictions and does not – contrary to appearances – adopt a stance of dichotomous aggression. It is a laughter that mirrors the condition of the one laughing. One could liken it to a line of thought breaking out of desiccated, circumscribed thought patterns and power structures in an attempt to form temporary, vibrant alliances – which Deleuze & Guattari

(1987) term plateaus. The contagious power of laughter helps to embrace fresh strands and individual lines, enabling the formation of powerful new (media) networks.

Along with other networks such as Pinterest and Facebook, YouTube can be interpreted as such a rhizomatic structure of collective creativity. While YouTube, Inc. does intervene in the creative process in the way the content is presented, arranged, and commented on by the viewers, the significance of YouTube as a cultural tool depends strongly on the autonomy of the individual user. In the process of uploading, commenting, and sharing, YouTube is being shaped, as it were, by a more or less anonymous collective as a rhizomatic construct: “through the many activities – uploading, viewing, discussing, and collaborating – the YouTube community forms a network of creative practice” (Burgess & Green 2009: 61).

However, videos cannot always be shared and disseminated unfiltered. Censorship in terms of content and policies is possible via the organisation itself or the respective country (restricting or blocking a given channel); it is applied with increasing frequency, even in the West (cf. Euteneuer 2014; Robertson 2016). In this essay, I am unable to give a detailed answer to the question of how the user is able to creatively circumvent these restrictions and fall back on other online channels to disseminate their ideas – that is to say, how they can form new rhizomatic segments if the others are blocked. The fact remains that the YouTube business model relies on added value by dissemination:

its distinctive technical affordances makes porting YouTube content elsewhere a trivial matter of copying and pasting code, allowing videos to be inserted into diverse cultural economies and social ecologies.

(Burgess & Green 2009: 116)

In addition, the process through which a specific YouTube clip becomes (socially or politically) relevant – that is to say, how often the clip is viewed and “liked” – can be compared to a plateau, in which a temporary power is inherent (cf. Burgess & Green 2009: 63 ff.). The manner of communication through YouTube can therefore be defined as *rhizomatic*.

In the specific case of the “Punk Prayer”, YouTube was the main channel of communication. The convenient accessibility made it possible for horizontive humour to spread throughout the whole world, causing new alliances to form, the restrictive order to be attacked, and a certain amount of power to be gained. Judging from the swift dissemination of the clips, it was clear that the artists had hit a social nerve. In a strategic move, on the same day the “Punk Prayer” had taken place (Feb. 21, 2012), Pussy Riot decided to post an earlier performance held in the Red Square. Ironically, it was not until after this video went viral on the internet and drew global attention to Pussy Riot that it dawned on the authorities that they could not stand for such attacks, resulting in the arrest of two band members eleven days later.

6. Social media, humour, and new forms of protest participation

As the realities of mass media communication have evolved, so too have the tactics employed by political activists. More and more groups are now building their actions around a playfully ironic sensibility.

(Amber Day: 145)

The fact that Pussy Riot have been able to acquire so many followers worldwide with the help of the balaclava is due to the particular way one communicates on the internet. As Epstein (2015) pointed out in his analysis of contemporary forms of protest in the Web 2.0, the former slogan “the whole world is watching”, which served the youth protest in Chicago

in 1968, has entered a new dimension. In the days of globalisation youth protests achieve global visibility which is no longer meant in a metaphorical way – as it used back then, even when those protests had an international outcome. Epstein concludes that the nature of youth protest is greatly shaped by social media and the possibilities they provide to react quickly and spread information conveniently, and depends largely on the structures within the concept of networking itself. As “the notion of value within the moral economy framework has specific salience when examining contemporary youth protest” (Epstein 2015: 11), virtual spaces like Facebook and Twitter are crucial, because they allow users to share and reconfigure content for new – often personal – purposes, which frequently alter meanings within these new contexts. Moreover, the term *watching* loses its passive nature – no longer are people merely sitting in front of a television screen: handling the new media requires more active participation, consisting of posting, sharing, liking, following, and so forth. This led Epstein (2015) to the conclusion that in the age of globalisation, political awareness means more than simply perceiving a set of images, and due to this global consciousness, political protest was renewed assertively and in completely different ways. So even in Russia, where circumstances do not allow physical expression of protest within public spaces, the imagery and social media reporting allowed for at least a small degree of free speech.

In the case of Pussy Riot, the effective use of the internet determined the entire process – starting from people watching the “Punk Prayer” video on YouTube, sharing it, learning about Putin’s response, commenting on it, creating different supportive and information-sharing communities, so that within twenty-four hours the story had spread internationally, and a support system was formed. Twitter flooded with messages and images of supporters worldwide, Amnesty International got involved, Western print media and television reacted, as did Western political leaders. Not only did everyone have the opportunity to watch the action performance, to follow the reactions in Russia and to stay informed, but they were also able to actively participate without considerable effort, from their desks, so to speak. Nevertheless, Epstein indicates that it remains necessary for activists to be present in concrete places and concrete situations of protest to achieve an effective outcome – although, in his opinion, internet communication is still central to this goal:

When one is notified of a demonstration that will take place, and becomes aware of the acquaintances and friends of friends who will participate, it is easier to make commitment to the cause and express physical support for the goals of a movement through attending the protest march in person. In this way, the virtual and actual forms of relationship building in the name of a political cause become complementary and mutually supportive of one another.

(Epstein 2015:13)

Most notably, the pace at which one can communicate on the internet is crucial for global support. The exchange of news in real time, made possible for smaller groups via WhatsApp, or appeals to solidarity on a grand scale via Twitter and Facebook are at the forefront here. As cultural practices from external sources are quickly adopted, adjusted, and recreated, new forms of protest occurring in other parts of the world serve as an important paradigm. In his analysis of the mobilisation of collective action during the protest movements in the Arab world, Greece, Spain, and the United States in 2011, Gerbaudo (2012) concluded that social media had a pivotal role in all of them. The individual movements in different parts of the world influenced each other via the internet: the use of social media by Arab Spring protesters during the Egyptian Uprising in December 2010 had an effect on the Indignados of the Movimiento 15-M in Spain 2011. The Occupy Wall Street movement in the USA, which started on October 11, 2011, can also be linked to the interaction of online communication and street action by their Spanish counterparts, and the subsequent Occupy movement as a

refined consequence thereof. Pussy Riot was in turn influenced by these movements as well as by the Zapatistas in Mexico (cf. Gerbaudo 2012).

Aside from those forms of intertwining protest, the importance of quickly readable images must be taken under consideration, as they are crucial in this form of communication. However, this aspect of political utilisation has remained neglected so far, as Yaqub & Silova (2015) illustrate:

Among the most understudied and undervalued political capacities of new media technologies is the potential to easily create, replicate, modify, and disseminate *imagery*, whether in form of videos or jpegs, gifs or memes. Spectacle and sensational imagery have always been a part of political discourse and struggle, from the relatively innocuous 2D texts or political cartoons to the extremes of public self-immolation. But in the age of new digital media – of blogs, YouTube and photo-sharing platforms – the consumption and the production of images have become increasingly easy, accessible and ubiquitous.

(Yaqub & Silova 2015: 115)

That is to say, one can quickly and effectively appeal to solidary action with the aid of emotionalising images, but, as Ventura (2001) found, the documentation of one's own artistic contributions also reinforces solidary activism and functions as a form of art and politics, which can spread via image-centric networks and blogs like Facebook, flickr, tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest. Young people in particular utilize images, adapting them for their own interests. In this way, they participate in a polyphonic dialogue about political events. Image-based political participation takes on a significant role especially in the events concerning Pussy Riot. Here, visualised commentary in the tradition of political cartoons and caricature is accompanied by diverse forms of humour, which can occur, as mentioned above, on a vertical axis – which is to say as a form of satire. Figure 6 shows Putin being labelled rather bluntly as a pussy:

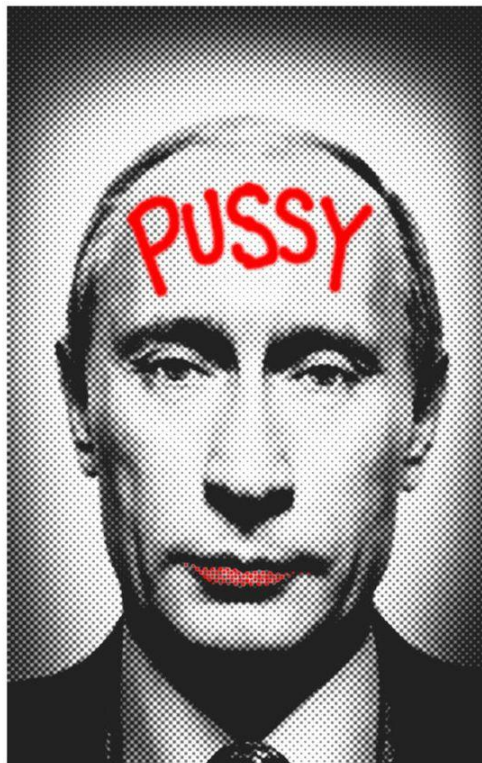


Figure 6. Putin as Pussy

In Figure 7 the now famous photograph of Putin shirtless is placed in a child's drawing sitting on a horse. One can find this picture on the Facebook site Free Pussy Riot Now (Putin, Fear No Art). One user comment adds to the overall visual joke with the caption, "Putin handcuffing his horse":

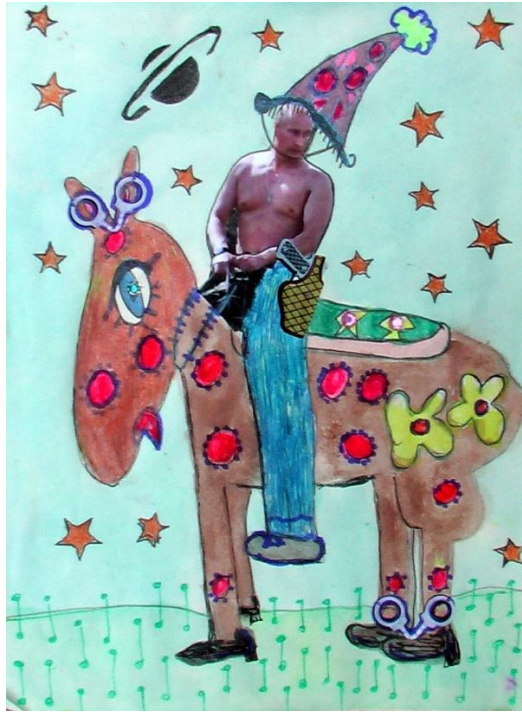


Figure 7. Putin handcuffing his horse



Figure 8. "Trump & I take our tic tacs before grabbing some pussy"

Under the hashtag #TrumpTapes, one finds on the still-current FreePussyRiot Twitter page Putin and Trump as gay lovers in leather sucking on pink penis lollipops (Figure 8). Those kinds of adapted pictures are so-called *memes*. Memes are parodies, remixes, or mashups created by internet users. These highly popular props of the participatory culture are cultural reproductions resulting from a practice of copying and imitating. One can understand memes as modes of communication that relate to each other spreading from one media platform to another: “Like many Web 2.0 applications, memes diffuse from person to person, but shape and reflect general social mindsets” (Shifman 2014: 4). Functioning as a form of political participation, their content flows over boundaries and blurs the lines between interpersonal and mass communications either in a deadly serious way or as a form of internet humour oscillating between bottom-up and top-down laughter. They are modes of expression in public discussions where multiple opinions are negotiated. So, memes are used as both individual statements and expressions of connectivity.

We find impressive evidence of creative and humorous memes showing the complicity of private citizens and fans of Pussy Riots on dozens of pinboards on Pinterest. Unlike the examples in Figures 6, 7, and 8, which degrade Putin, many memes are political statements and reinforcing expressions of solidarity fitting into the category of what I have termed *horizontive humour*. The adaptation of Arnold Böcklin’s painting *Spring* from 1876 (Figure 9), of three dancing girls making music, posted by an unknown user and shared by so “many” (cf. Virno 2005) that its source cannot be traced (not even by me after extensive research).



Figure 9. Adaptation of Böcklin’s *Spring*

Another meme shows four ballerinas, for instance, also known as the Little Swans from *Swan Lake*, whose pointe shoes, tutu skirts, and balaclava gleam in garish colours in a post on August 17, 2012, the “Day of Solidarity with Pussy Riot” (Figure 10), or the heroine worshiper in the style of an orthodox icon wearing a balaclava thrusting a clenched fist in the air (Figure 11).



Figure 10. Swan Lake

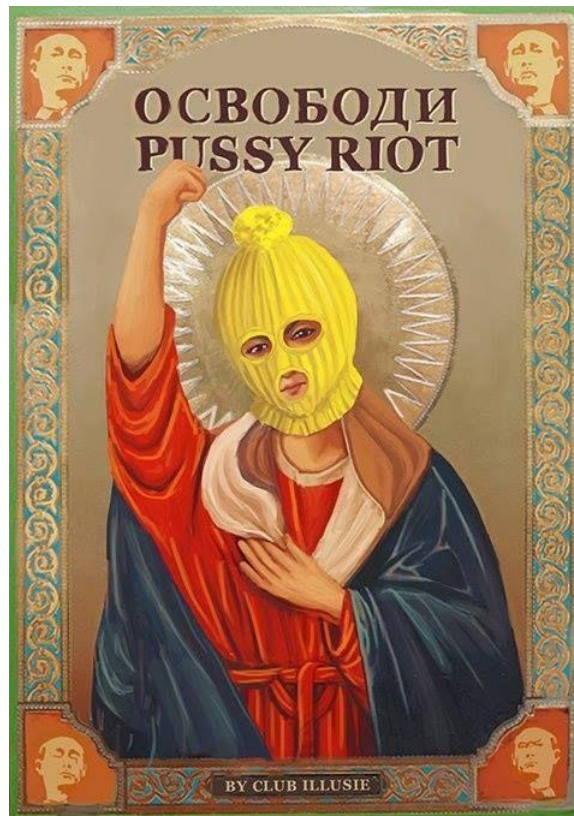


Figure 11. Image of Saint with balaclava

Figure 12 shows women with less-than-ideal bikini figures wearing colourful balaclavas at the beach, which might be interpreted in the context of Pussy Riot – as some supporters did by reposting the picture and identifying the women as humorous sympathisers of the punk band.⁷ Upon closer research, however, they turn out to be wealthy Chinese women who protected their faces from getting a tan by wearing “facekinis”.⁸ This might even be construed as an example of appropriation, as it is unclear whether Pussy Riot were aware of the Asian beauty ideal of paleness and this headgear trend to foster it – and used the images because of their similarities with Pussy Riot’s visual vocabulary.



Figure 12. Facekinis

In addition, visual statements from more credible sources like Amnesty International have gone viral as well, such as those of several of the best-known statues in Belfast (Figure 13), which Amnesty dressed in colourful crocheted balaclavas to show solidarity with the imprisoned Pussy Riot band members.



Figure 13. Statues in Belfast

Amnesty International even launched a website, still active today, on which everyone can share their solidarity photographs.⁹ Many of them testify to a cheerful sense of humour, such as Spiderman and Barbie showing sympathy for Pussy Riot (Figure 14), an adaption of Grant Wood's *American Gothic* (Figure 15), or three Statues of Liberty fighting to free Pussy Riot (Figure 16).



Figure 14. Barbie and Spiderman

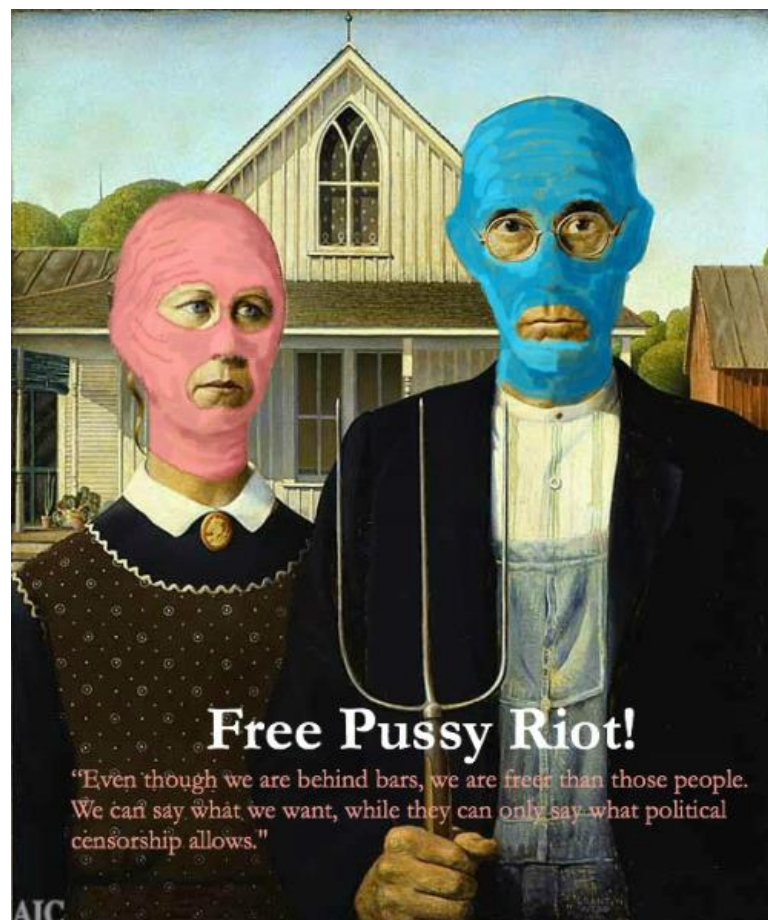


Figure 15. American Gothic



Figure 16. Statue of Liberty

Papacharissi (2015), who is interested in the balance between affect and ideology and how it enhances or entraps publics through media, comes to the conclusion that new media facilitate the construction of making (or the interpretation) of situations unknown to us by evoking affective reactions. New image-based media convey a sense of immediacy, letting users feel as if they were on site and inviting people to make up their own story about current events and to get into new forms of civic mobilisation, as evidenced by many respectable news outlets who treat the twitter feeds of their viewers like news (e.g. BBC's NewsWatch, CNN's iReport):

The storytelling infrastructure of platforms like Facebook or Twitter invites observers to tune into events they are physically removed from by imagining what these might feel like for people who directly experienced them.

(Papacharissi 2015: 4)

Political and social events that can be witnessed up close can lead to fierce reactions. In order to process these affects, the viewer who feels directly addressed seeks an outlet, an opportunity to express his/her emotions. Liking, sharing, posting, and re-posting on social networking websites provide this opportunity requiring relatively little effort on the user's part.

People who shy away from negotiating complex political subjects in real space, are given the opportunity to agree and associate with others, without running the risk of compromising their own belief system. Online platforms link consensual private interests with the ideologies of specific groups. Individuals motivated by their affects to express themselves are free to connect with a community of conforming opinions. Papacharissi calls such groups that unite out of these motives *affective publics* (Papacharissi 2015: 125). The creation of such groups that form out of consensual interests therefore has a great deal to do with the unconscious affects of individuals that lead them to develop attitudes and motivations on the basis of a

given political event. New digital technologies thus provide media networks that are held together by the stories and narratives of the individual users:

Technologies network us but it is narratives that connect us to each other, making us feel close to some and distancing us from others. As our developing sensibilities of the world surrounding us turns into stories that we tell, share, and add to, the platform we use afford these evolving narratives their own distinct texture, or mediality. In doing so, media do not make or break revolutions but they do lend emerging, storytelling publics their own means for feeling their way into the developing event, frequently by making them a part of the developing story.

(Paparachissi 2015: 5)

Affective publics are also powered by affective statements of opinion. This leads to a feeling of solidarity, which in turn motivates the individual to engage in a political movement and thus leads to “connective action”. This process of investment by the publics is networked digitally but connected discursively by a common mode of affective attunement.

The fact that millions of people have watched the “Punk Prayer” video and the viewer comments underneath it indicates that the performance was powerful enough to affect the public and to generate an emotional reaction that had to be shared with others. This emotional impact can be linked directly to the humorous style of the performance itself. Since it does not allow a clear reading, it leaves room for individual interpretation, which is in turn informed by specific desires, assumptions, grievances, and experiences. Personal identification, consternation, pain, fright, disgust, and hatred; from knowing and approving laughter to tears of rage or humiliation – there are a range of experiences that allow for an emotional response that leads to comment and share these feelings with a community of like-minded people. There, negative feelings lead to the positive feeling of belonging to an interest group. Additionally, the constellation may create an emotional distance, in which humorous comments, videos, memes, etc. may be shared with other members. In this way, sympathisers use a stylistic device that Pussy Riot introduced and that has a psychological component: creating distance through playful and humorous levity. Seen negatively, this could lead to an eventual banalisation and a general rejection of a given issue. Viewed with the targeted long-term perspective in mind, however, the threat of an unjust system can be counteracted with a momentary cooling of emotional responses, a temporary attenuation that, if used as a breathing space, can allow the feminist movement to draw renewed strength.

As Epstein succinctly put it, “the efficacy of social media usage as a tool [...] has expedited successful protest outcomes” (Epstein 2015: 3). In addition, life-affirming humour, especially in visual representations, played a pivotal role in the case of Pussy Riot. They succeeded in striking an enormous global media chord; nevertheless, it is clear that it was not the performances themselves – or their recording – that were instrumental in generating global interest, but rather the government’s reaction to them. It was not until Putin’s overblown response, which further tarnished his image in the eyes of the West, that Pussy Riot’s dissident, anarchistic, and feminist position reached a global audience and became a subject of political discourse (Segschneider & Heinrich 2014). This, however, does not yet fully explain the countless instances of solidarity generated by the campaign. To what extent did Pussy Riot’s humour play a strategic role in this?

7. The moment of solidarity

Polletta studied the importance of narratives in relation to the mobilisation of political and social movements in her book *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (2006). She analyses different formats of storytelling in courtrooms, newsrooms, public

forums, and the United States Congress from the sixteenth century to today. She finds that in storytelling, moments of contradictoriness, complex ambivalence, and hence the absence of a clear moral message, are more likely to have political effects:

Although narrative's ambiguity, or, as I prefer to say, its openness to interpretation, can make for confusion, it can also generate political resources [...]. I show that stories in which words or images are oddly juxtaposed have helped disadvantaged groups to chip away at the conceptual oppositions responsible for the uneven benefits of social benefits. Citizens have used stories with seemingly contradictory normative points in deliberative forums to arrive at unanticipated areas of agreement.

(Polletta 2006: 9)

Humour as an aesthetic principle – as Pussy Riot uses it – is an effective method for causing confusion and chaos, creating an open space for interpretation, highlighting contradictions, making them apparent, and playing with them (cf. Zijderfeld 1976). In revealing the arbitrary, provisional nature of the very categories of thought, humour can then be used in order to question the established order and suggest other ways of structuring reality; its potential as a subversive strategy then lies in emerging hidden and underlying meanings (Douglas 1968). But more often, humour that occurs as rebellious help to reinforce given hierarchies and serves possibly disciplinary functions (cf. Mulkey 1988). But taking the outcomes of Polletta's (2006) analyses and combining them with Plessner's (1982) theory of laughter as a sudden moment of deliberation, humour as a method for playing with contradictory statements, allowing for different interpretations, uncertain readings, and evoking ambivalent feelings – as Pussy Riot's humour has – is helpful in creating solidarity and political activism.

Polletta describes the specific moments of solidarity as those in which something "clicks". Moments of insight, in which the listeners or the viewers of a narrative of injustice understand that they are involved, that the issue concerns them, that they must take a stand. These moments follow an ellipsis, typographically typically expressed as three dots: ... – that is to say, a lapse of time in which the ineffable, the indescribable, the inconceivable, the unintelligible sinks in and the mind is running at full tilt. After spectators, listeners, or observers have absorbed a complex story – or in the case of Pussy Riot a performance that presents, reflects, and examines stories – what sets in is an openness, an ambivalence, a ... *and what now?* A change occurs in this lapse of time: "the transformation takes place in the three-dot ellipsis, where the resistant realises the potential of collective action" (Polletta 2006: Location 808). The more intense and difficult the phase of ellipsis, of indecision, of perplexity, of soul-searching, the more powerful and emotional the moment of clarity that follows: "... click, a moment of truth. The shock of recognition. Instant sisterhood." (Polletta 2006: Location 817). This moment is abrupt, it astonishes, and it resolves the contradiction. The oppressive indecision of the question *How is this to be understood?* is resolved, an involvement is recognised, and a decision is made.

Humour as a stylistic tool is – as I have stated above – a deliberately complicating method of portrayal and narration. The role and function of subject and protagonists being portrayed is unclear, thus leading to the ellipsis: ... *what does this mean? ... are they serious?* A concrete example during the "Punk Prayer" would be when the group invokes Mary Mother of God with the words "Virgin Mary, be a feminist?" We ask ourselves: *Is she being invoked or mocked? Confusion sets in: If Putin is being mocked, is the entire performance a mockery ...? Or is this actually a cry for help? ... Click!* – the moment of decision, the moment of recognition sets in. It is above all in light of Putin's truly aggressive behaviour that any ambivalence regarding the performance is dispelled and any doubts about the integrity of the campaign are quelled. And here it is irrelevant whether the video is seen

before Putin's reaction or after: the inhumanity and injustice of his system is laid bare and the indecision is resolved.

Merging this moment of the "click" with the moment of sudden, bewildered laughter – defined by Plessner (1982) as the recognition of the painful contradictoriness of the system – opens up new vistas in the argument of this essay: when these two moments coincide – meaning that humour is more than a stylistic device that creates ambivalence, as Poletta (2006) would have it, but can unfold its liberating and strengthening force in laughter – this moment, the "click", is, many times over, more intensive and effective. In his study, *Laughing and Crying*, the philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Plessner investigates the human being's relationship to the body – which is unique to our species in our dual awareness of having a body and being a body: "In this situation the human position reveals itself as an eccentric one" (Plessner 1982: 241). The world and one's own body allow themselves to be governed only when they enter into a relationship with the I; at the same time the I is bound and conditioned by the subsuming order of the body. In spite of this relatively polarising condition, humans are generally able to find a balance; in unfamiliar situations of crisis, however, they encounter problems. In situations where any sensible response through behaviour, gesture, language, or action is not possible, the bodily processes emancipate themselves, and laughing and crying are the resulting expression of a general relinquishment of composure (Plessner 1982: 275). The human does not lose his/her mind and does not capitulate as a person, rather s/he is the body that breaks loose from the body-soul entity, distancing itself, and responding independently. In this way it affords the I an autonomous glimpse of the unfathomable, confers power amid powerlessness and freedom amid coercion: "Humour belongs to that level to which all special kinds of normalisation refer back" (Plessner 1982: 304). Through laughter, the narrow perspective of these normalisations is broadened, boundaries are shifted, and, by means of distance from ourselves, we gain levity. Humour acquires true depth when the laughter is infused with "the triumph over pain" (Plessner 1982: 280). Laughter as a reaction *in extremis* helps to assert ourselves in and against the world, and to accept it as limited and open, familiar and alien, meaningful and absurd at once.

At the moment in which solidarity is triggered – through insight into and recognition of the pain and injustice of a complex, contradictory, ambiguous, or ironically portrayed situation – the psychological authority of laughter merges with the "click" that Polletta (2006) describes. The absurdity *per se* is revealed, the confusion dispelled, the injustice or brutality of the world is recognised, and suddenly an incredible sense of pain sets in unexpectedly, the intolerability of which is eased with bewildered laughter. It is this bewildered laughter, this return to oneself, this distancing from the issue at hand, which activates practical reason and this "click" – showing solidarity (which can happen in all different forms of networking, including "merely" following, liking, posting, and sharing in the new media) – is forced to be the only meaningful action.

This process is evident in the formative process of the solidary community around Pussy Riot, since the punk band works with a type of humour that – as I have demonstrated – plays with double, subliminal, concealed, and contradictory meanings on a staged level, that is, on a linguistic, body-language, musical, vestimentary level, and on the level of performance venues. This leads to complexity, which impedes simple explanatory models or linear narrative structures. However, it is precisely this intricacy and abstruseness that persuaded their viewers to think harder about the meanings concealed in their performances – for example, the allusion to the bigotry in the Orthodox veneration of the Virgin Mary that women, the "filthy" sex, are not even permitted to step into the altar room. As soon as a person with a sense of humour connected this dismaying truth to the punch line of the joke, "Virgin Mary, become a feminist" – articulated in a disrespectful and transgressive fashion –

laughter had to follow the perception of the comicality. The kind of astonished, frightened – perhaps also merely internal – laughter was able to ease the tension that preceded this perception. With this laughter, sympathisers and people involved were able to temporarily free themselves from both the tension generated by this seemingly blasphemous action and from the horrors and the pain caused by the particular Russian Orthodox brand of misogyny and bigotry and the oppression of women in general.

In exactly this moment, during which practical reasoning set in, it must have become clear to many viewers that something had to be done about this: an attitude of solidarity started to become noticeable. Subjective feelings of being overwhelmed or perplexed could not be resolved in the long run, but deficiencies in subjective insight may be interpreted as a trigger to hot-wire humour and solidarity – a trigger, then, which prompts individuals torn between involvement and keeping a distance to join a group in which they feel safe and which alleviate pain and doubt in the act of cooperation.

These groupings would eventually become “real” communities, where sympathisers were working in Pussy Riot’s interest – even physically by carrying out physical actions, such as protests or new performances. Initially, however, they developed on a merely virtual level, in different social media networks.

8. Humour and its emotional consequences

As discussed above, Pussy Riot’s use of humorous forms created an incongruity which threatened social reality, not only in the performance and the video itself but also in the course of the trial. For the spectators, be they reactionary conservatives or left-wing radicals, there is a painful and menacing relationship between desire and reality. The supporters, namely left-wing sympathisers, are driven by anger and rage in their consensus with Pussy Riot’s accusations of Putin and the Church. The orthodox community considers itself under attack, sees its faith threatened, and becomes fearful of a younger generation that has no regard for traditional values.

Pussy Riot’s goal was to strengthen the leftist youth that aligned themselves with Western values in the fight for self-determination, freedom of speech, the rights of sexual minorities, and feminist causes, for those young and angry people felt confirmed in Pussy Riot’s demands and could follow their activism.

At the same time, however, the sympathisers became painfully aware of the injustices of their extreme portrayal. The result might have entailed the sympathiser’s utopian hopes shattering at the hands of judicial violence, implying a sombre scenario: the sad nature of contemporary Russian life is laid bare; the fates of individuals are brought to light, the questions of those groups subjected to discrimination, persecution, and hatred are pressing for answers, and, at the same time, the situation on the ground offers no way out. All efforts are crushed during the trial, and the conservative majority triumphs once again, in turn giving rise to a doubly ironic situation in which the efforts towards emancipation only make matters worse, causing the liberal-minded minority to become more despondent or even adopt a humorous stance, distancing itself from its dashed hopes.

Yet, this is not what occurred. Instead of capitulating, the performers themselves greeted the state authority with their self-assuring laughter, thereby asserting that the act of judicial violence against them could not break their convictions or their human dignity; on the contrary, it underscored the need for civil disobedience and encouraged their international supporters – who stayed informed through the band’s website¹⁰ and could and still can participate via Facebook¹¹ – not to give up the fight for justice.

Ultimately, the forced irony of the event reflected the ambiguity and contradictory nature of Russian reality: a country which presents itself through the veneer of European modernity, erects commercial skyscrapers, creates wholesome green spaces, constructs modern museums, promotes internationally renowned artists, makes the internet accessible, imports Western means of communication, guarantees the freedom of religion, and does not officially prosecute people for unconventional sexual practices, has, at the same time, gradually instituted an autocratic style of leadership over the years that might be termed neo-feudalist, under which civic liberties are frequently crushed by miscarriages of justice and by ignoring, concealing, and denying unlawful state practices, as Artem Demenok impressively demonstrated in his 2014 documentary.

And it is this absurd situation that is taken into account by Pussy Riot's actions: Humour becomes the only possible aesthetic organising principle simply because it is the only adequate response available. Using the method of live performance and its subsequent media exposure, reality and creative drive are merged in an inscrutable manner (cf. Ficher-Lichte 2004; Goldberg 2011). It is no longer possible to distinguish between what is true and what is false, what is genuinely intended and what is meant as a joke or irony, what is conviction and what is deception. In this manner, utopia, desire, naked reality, and brutal honesty interweave and offer a unique glimpse of the depths of Russian reality.

If one interprets laughter as an act of self-affirmation like Hobbes proposed (1959), it is laughter with regard to the errors and inferiority of others. Seen in this way, the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, personified by Patriarch Kirill, has cause to feel ridiculed, degraded, and humiliated. This renders the disproportionate punishment imposed on the two members of Pussy Riot understandable on an emotional level, but at the same time points to incapacity on the part of Kirill and his faithful followers: the incapacity to see one's own transgressions and the relativisation of someone who sees him/herself embodied in the institution. In short, what is revealed is the complete lack of a sense of humour.

The method of attacking power by ridiculing it was legalised in the Middle Ages but it was then limited to the figure of the court jester, who, disguised with a mask, was allowed to utter unpleasant truths at a specific time and place. However, this form of political protest had always a forced and fragmentary legal status and was fraught with struggles and bans. In this respect, hardly anything has changed today. The function of the court jester has been taken over by the political stand-up comedian, and political satire is allowed on stage or in film but not at uncontrollable times or in uncontrollable public spaces. And yet, activist artistic groups like Pussy Riot align themselves with this tradition.

What power can humour still exert in our times of entertainment culture? Schümer (2002: 852) suggests that "[t]he mockery of sanctified rulers, which under the reigns of Stalin or Hitler were still punishable by death, appears in the context of the so-called entertainment culture as a superfluous ritual". Finding a niche in which humour and the ridicule of power still has a genuine effect is all the more difficult in a society in which hierarchies and networks of exploitation have become increasingly impenetrable. Whom should the Bakhtinian carnivalesque be aimed at? Does not popular culture make fun of itself in a lot of ways? In our Western, post-Fordist system it seems to be the case that a perfectly engineered entertainment industry ensures the perpetuation of privileges and enormous wealth disparities: ridiculously unjust conditions are not only acknowledged, but also laughed off and then codified. However, Schümer (2002) argued a notable point in his considerations of the political impact of medieval laughter: only power that is sure of itself and knows its subjects' need for diversion, factors laughter into its program; only a state that has predetermined spaces for laughter functions relatively smoothly. In light of these reflections, however, the question that Pussy Riot raised is: How sure are Putin and Kirill of their power

if they find it necessary to react so forcefully? And is this not a sore point onto which fighters for freedom and justice should put their fingers?

9. Humour as a mindset

In order to distinguish between pacifying, disarming public entertainment and humorous, artistic-political exertion of influence, I should clarify that there is a discernible form of humour in the actions of Pussy Riot, the efficacy of which resides in short-term levity through liberating laughter. This coping mechanism intends to render the dismal, irremediable daily life of social injustice more bearable; it is humour that is itself a mindset aiming for a longer-term shift in values and norms and does not shy away from personal involvement in painful predicaments, be they physical or mental. Pussy Riot works with more subtle forms of humour than those who simply aim to parody the powerful for public amusement or political satire that even downplays potentially precarious or exploitative social structures. The Pussy Riot activists may indeed try to obstruct those in power – Putin and Kirill in this case – by shedding light on their violations of the divisions of power, on lobbying, unlawful personal enrichment or influence peddling (that is, in the form of laughter as a limitation or setting of boundaries). That is not all: Pussy Riot members deploy their bodies and lives in real locations and thereby stand up for new ways of life and social conditions, as witnessed in the course of their imprisonment. They embody a *politics of aesthetics*, as Rancière (2006: 77) would have it, in that the spaces and times where their art organises itself and the way it shapes those spaces and times coincide with the organisation of spaces and times, subjects and objects, and private and public spheres in which the body politic is defined.

That is why Pussy Riot – despite using irony as only one of their stylistic humorous devices – personify the liberal ironist, which in this context I prefer to call the *liberal humorist*: she is – in consensus with Rorty's (1989) prototype of her – the one who shifts focus to change the essential questions – private ones concerning the meaning of life and public ones regarding the possibility of pain avoidance – and still looks to integrate them within herself. And for this, she needs humour. To embrace contingency while still upholding a sense of utopia and to fight against indignity and atrocity appear as impossible as a doomed revolution and seem to render everything and nothing possible at the same time – and yet they remain a manifesto against moral relativism. After all, what are we left with when faced with absurdity? *We simply have to laugh! We can do nothing but laugh!* But how can this laughter be viewed in the spirit of *humour is laughing in spite of it all* without the bitter aftertaste and finality? And how can we avoid succumbing to despair when private and public interests cannot be reconciled – when the attempt to uphold our aspirations and values and share them with like-minded people, clashes with the solidarity, the anguish and indignity of the unlike-minded? How can we avoid violence when our self-definition and our personal worldview seem to have failed? In order not to only endure this condition but also regain some perspective, it seems necessary to specify the notion of humour. What I call *horizontive humour* is enmeshed in self-irony, accepting fallibility and contradiction as profoundly human traits and separating humour from the act of defamatory, marginalising ridicule, running in a vertical direction.

By using a different kind of laughter – an inclusive, strengthening, knowing, painful but liberating laughter, be it resounding, quiet, or soundless – one defies the danger of resigned withdrawal. With this laughter, the body gives the overwrought mind the possibility to recover, so that one may remain faithful to oneself but retain one's ability to act in the public arena. Through this private laughter one continues to communicate, for this rhizomatic

laughter radiates outward and shifts perspectives. It is a laughter that wishes to hurt no one, but rather acts as a balm for all wounded souls and bridges differences and fosters community, at least for some time.

The performers were once again able to prove their self-ironic sense of humour during the trial. Julia Ioffe (2012) refers to the trial as Act II of a typically Russian black comedy that illustrates the absurdity of the mechanisms of suppression. All three accused often burst into loud laughter during the trial, which was infectious, as the reporters, the defence team, and the public joined in the laughter, so much so that the judge asked the accused if they found the situation amusing. Maria Alyokhina replied, “No, it’s actually pretty sad” (Ioffe 2012). Is laughter not the only possible reaction to the outrageous absurdities of the situation? Is it not an apt reaction to the outlandish injustice and the resulting pain produced by this system, those responsible for it, and those blindly following it? With their laughter, which spread into the Western world with the help of online newspapers, diverse social and image-centric media networks, and blogs, Maria Alyokhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, and Yekaterina Samutsevich were – according to Ioffe (2012) – reacting to the farce that was this trial, which in its grotesque aesthetic did not even merit the name “show trial” but was simply an extravagant, tragicomic spectacle for which these women served as protagonists.

The consoling and unburdening purpose of humorous distance was evident: The accused succeeded in freeing themselves from the pain and misery, which they and their family members suffered through the charge and sentence. Their bodies reacted with laughter and thus unburdened an overwhelmed psyche trapped in a hopeless situation (Figure 17). Put to a severe test, Pussy Riot’s comicality attained true greatness: we saw them rise above the punishment imposed by a humourless system.



Figure 17. Tolokonnikova laughing in court

10. Final thoughts

Starting from the question of how humour, new media, and solidarity protests in the Pussy Riot case are connected, I have investigated how the band members stage their performances and public appearances and themselves and which media and means they use. On the one hand, I have explored the normative and stylistic quality of their humour and have put it in the context of various humour theories – most prominently at the intersection of gender and humour in queer feminist theories. On the other hand, I have discussed the type of communication that led to a rapid dissemination of the band’s activist ideas and their

subsequent global visibility, which resulted in a powerful movement of solidarity. Finally, I have arrived at the question of the extent to which the convergence of humour and new media served the social, political and feminist interests of Pussy Riot.

My final thoughts in this essay will evolve around the fulcrums, intersections, and coalitions that are produced by using humour and comedy in social network communication. I shall analyse the medium of communication and its special forms as strategies that have propelled Pussy Riot's intent to gain a large number of active supporters to help them to identify social grievances, corruption, and misuse of power.

The stylistic device of humour and its carrier, new media, share two essential aspects: their change of perspective and their virulence. As I have put forth in section 3 in my discussion of Pussy Riot's staged performances, the production of comedy is always based on incongruity that undermines existing thought patterns and allows for new ways of perception to occur. Internet-based new media, in turn, allow their users to change and disseminate contents in a way that they become unhinged from their original contexts and create new realities when perceived from a different perspective (cf. Yacub & Silova 2015). Laughter is contagious, and humour produces humour; call causes response – either consent or dissent – a statement aims to be “liked,” “shared,” or “disliked” and verbally or visually attacked. It is hard to leave anything without a comment on the internet; new opinions are continuously generated that await replies: communication in social networks is contagious and addictive (cf. Epstein 2015). The combination of humour and new media facilitates a potentiation of the perspectival change and of the virulence, which is to say the largest possible dissemination of the changing, developing, or new ideas.

Two individual tenors have emerged from the use of a certain kind of humour: that of humour as a stylistic device and that of the normative quality of humour. The stylistic device of ironic or parodistic exaggeration or alienation – which Pussy Riot have used – produce distortion and a perception that is incongruous with the expectations of the viewers. Whether it is the image of a punk band or the use of places, Pussy Riot perform in an unconventional way, put traditional processes and thought patterns up for discussion, and challenge their audience – conventional orders lose their validity for a moment, new narratives emerge, shared in social networks by Pussy Riot and rapidly disseminated. New media work in large measure via the distribution of images, be they videos, documentary photographs (or snapshots), or memes – they all allow for a quick reading, a fast, joyous appropriation, personal adaptation, and prompt distribution (cf. Shifman 2014). Viewed and heard by a myriad of people Pussy Riot manages to get attention for their causes. People who, in general, share their world view and values feel invited to participate and publicly show their solidarity with the performers.

However, humour as a stylistic means not only breaks with thinking patterns, but also exposes gaps and contradictions. Complex narratives challenge the viewer's intellect. The moment of sudden and disturbing intellectual insight, the “click”, is followed by a laughter that, for a moment, restores the shaken emotional equilibrium (cf. Poletta 2006). This moment is what triggers the necessity to actively change the present sociopolitical situation – that is, to participate. In reference to Deleuze & Guattari (1987), I have called this process *rhizomatic laughter*, a metaphor for the continuous cross-referencing of collapsing meanings, power relations, and thinking patterns where transformation occurs. New strands of awareness, new coalitions, new social networks are created; their formation and formats spread in the constantly reconfigured tubes of the global internet and create solidarity. That is the first level.

The second level that comes to bear in the reception of comedy is the normative quality of the humour producing it. Whether laughter occurs in solidarity and fosters group identity or manifests as spiteful derision of those who are to be excluded from society; whether it is

subversive and attempts to oppose someone's claim to power or humiliating and cements one's claim to power – in short: whether it is exclusive or inclusive, humour, laughter, and comedy are never free of values and always produce, negate, change, or reinforce emotions.

Pussy Riot have a sense of humour that has certainly incited strong emotions – be they negative or positive. The directness of new media and their narrative structure allow recipients to feel as if they were on location, even if they are physically far away. Viewers experience the protagonists' feelings as though they were there; they identify with them, and their emotions are transferred. The audience is affected and reacts with fervour. The structure of social networks thus triggers affects that are then acted upon and result in solidarity and action (cf. Papacharissi 2015).

In conclusion, I reiterate that the combination of new image-based social networks and humour can generate solidarity. Both humour as a stylistic device and the normative quality of humour can evoke increasingly activist or participatory reactions. The traits shared by humorous or comedic behaviour and new media networking – adaptation, creation of new meanings, perspectival shifts, and their virulence – create the conditions for successful calls for solidarity.

Pussy Riot have managed to make their message heard over the new media – a message that resonated worldwide and created solidarity – with a kind of humour I call horizontive. Despite or because of the self-irony of their humour, the performers managed to have the audience laugh with them and not at them. The consoling, reinforcing function of humour therefore acted as a social glue for cohesion, sympathy, and solidarity, spreading in the hierarchy-free channels of the new media, where it disrupted traditional dichotomies, shifted perspectives, broadened horizons, and created new alliances that manifested anew and in ever-changing form on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest and led to real actions on the street.

Pussy Riot performers included themselves in their humour – they mocked themselves, exposed themselves to public ridicule, and reacted with humour and self-irony in court. In doing so, they clearly demonstrated how humour can help to endure humiliation on different levels. The manner in which the performers bore up against the court proceedings and imprisonment paradigmatically showcases humour as an anti-depressive tactic. By laughingly distancing themselves from their own mental state, the life-affirming force prevailed over defeat and the danger of falling into a pessimistic political anthropology (cf. Berger 1998).

As a successful strategy in their feminist battle, Pussy Riot made use of an inclusive, horizontally aligned, playful, self-ironic, and, at the same time, relieving and transgressive humour, which was a considerable factor in the participation Pussy Riot generated. However, only through communication on social networks the worldwide activist participation was possible.

Notes

¹ This does not imply that there is a biological explanation for different humoristic behaviours or usages. Accordingly, Chiaro & Baccolini (2014: 2) introduce their anthology *Gender and Humour* with the central question: “How natural is the way we laugh and the way we do humour, and how far has it become part of our gendered performance?” They argue that “nowadays boundaries have become fuzzier and gendered behaviours are no longer so clear cut and as classifiable as they once may have been” (Chiaro & Baccolini 2014: 10). Kotthoff (2006) and Milner Davis (2014) also assume that by now there are more similarities than differences in men's and women's humour.

- ² All lyrics quoted from
http://www.songtextemania.com/pussy_riot_songtexte/alpha.html.
- ³ This translation can be found at
http://www.songtextemania.com/pussy_riot_songtexte/alpha.html.
- ⁴ This translation by Sasha Dugdale can be found at
<http://www.mptmagazine.com/poem/virgin-mary-mother-of-god-591/>.
- ⁵ The video can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALS92big4TY>.
- ⁶ The Riot Grrrl manifesto can be found at
http://onewarart.org/riot_grrrl_manifesto.htm.
- ⁷ Pussy Riot supporters in China: <https://de.pinterest.com/margiemirage/future-past/>.
- ⁸ Cf. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2014/aug/15/chinese-facekinis-in-pictures>.
- ⁹ See <http://wearepussyriot.tumblr.com/>.
- ¹⁰ See <http://freepussyriot.org/>. This page has been closed since summer 2015.
- ¹¹ See <https://www.facebook.com/freepussyriotorg-395771127128284/>.

Image Credits

The free floating of images and memes on the Internet is part of the guerrilla communication strategy. It was therefore impossible to trace the authorship of the photographs and memes cited in this paper. Here is a list of links where I found the images:

Figure 1: <https://de.pinterest.com/pin/218987600601986107/>.

Figure 2:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pussy_Riot_at_Lobnoye_Mesto_on_Red_Square_in_Moscow_-_Denis_Bochkarev.jpg.

Figure 3: <http://www.bellenews.com/2014/02/20/world/europe-news/pussy-riot-members-beaten-by-cossacks-in-sochi/>.

Figure 4: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pussy_Riot_-_Denis_Bochkarev_4.jpg.

Figure 5: <https://theincredibletide.wordpress.com/2012/08/02/crime-and-punishment/>.

Figure 6: <https://de.pinterest.com/pin/488077678347431617/>.

Figure 7:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152908609052988&set=o.325926194122033&type=3&theater>.

Figure 8: <https://twitter.com/freepussyriot>.

Figure 9: *Böcklin* (I could not find the source anymore).

Figure 10: <https://de.pinterest.com/pin/558164947536718110/>.

Figure 11: <https://de.pinterest.com/pin/218987600605154230/>.

Figure 12: <http://chieforganizer.org/2012/08/14/who-is-that-masked-woman---and-why/>.

Figure 13:

https://www.facebook.com/amnestyni/photos/?tab=album&album_id=321885651240188.

Figure 14: <http://wearepussyriot.tumblr.com/page/7>.

Figure 15: <http://wearepussyriot.tumblr.com/page/11>.

Figure 16: <http://www.gagdaily.com/facts/4099-pussy-riot-band-member-tolokonnikova-denied-parole.html>. Photo by Mikhail Metzelski/Associated Press.

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