

# CACKLE

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MAGAZINE

Balancing the  
Message With The  
Laugh Track

An essay on the role  
audience plays in  
composing a  
feminist comedy

Totally Like  
Whatever -

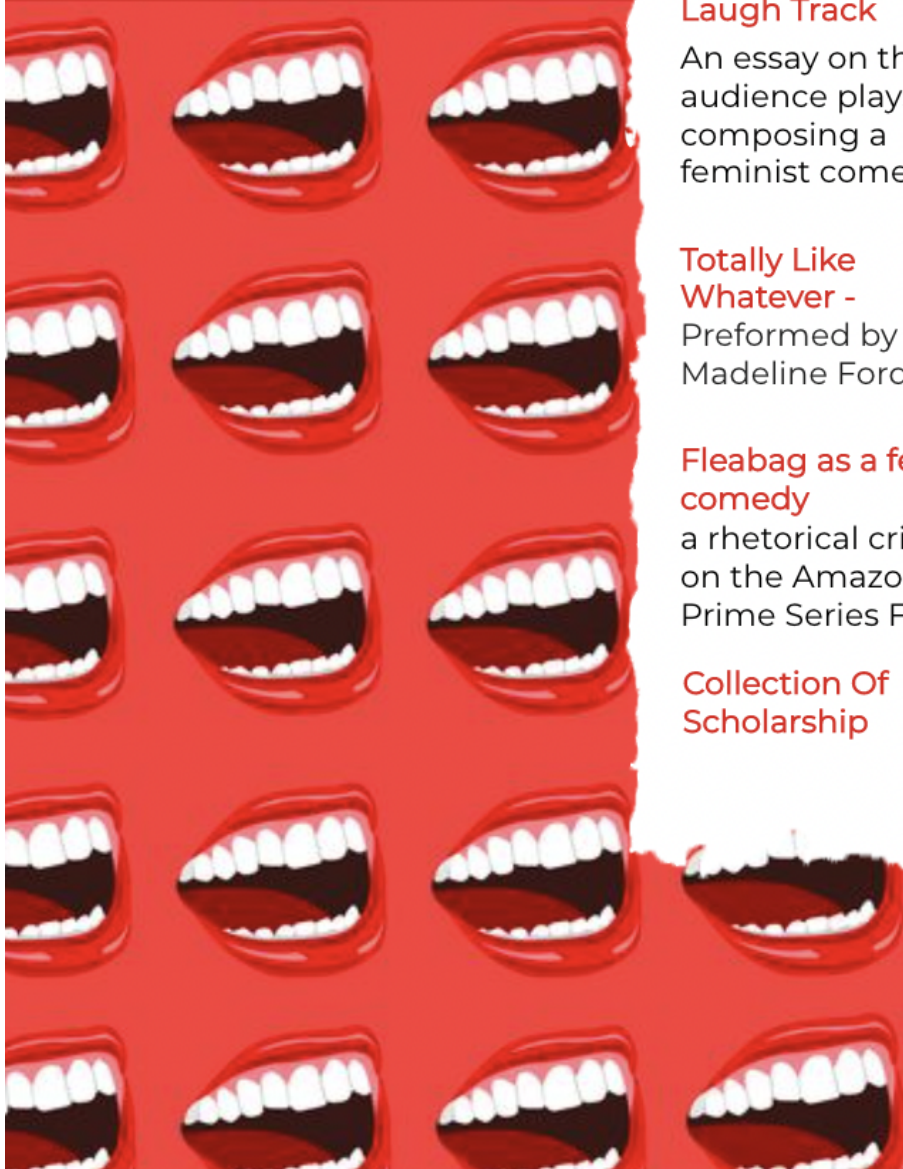
Performed by  
Madeline Ford

Fleabag as a feminist  
comedy

a rhetorical criticism  
on the Amazon  
Prime Series Fleabag

Collection Of  
Scholarship

WRIT - 5340 MULTIMODALITY



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# Balancing The Laugh Track :

## The role of the audience in composing a feminist comedy

In their article titled "Audience Addressed/ Audience Invoked", Lisa Ede and Andrea Lundsford discuss the role audience plays in composition theory, presenting two diverging theories through which composition studies have previously defined this role (Ede & Lundsford, 1984). Ede and Lundsford address almost immediately their opinion that neither theory accurately highlights the relationship between audience and composition, claiming that a more accurate relationship would exist somewhere in the middle (Ede & Lundsford, 1984). A true example of this can be seen in the role audience reception plays in the composition of feminist comedies. The first of the two theories is defined as the practice of placing the audience at the center of the writing process and allowing this imagined audience to mold the writing process and thus the end product. The latter is defined as the opposite, in this case,



the audience is informed/conceptualized by the writer's use of specific language and markers. In other words, the audience is considered as coming after the fact, being created by the writing instead of the other way around. Ede and Lundsford claim that both of these theories overemphasize the role of at least one participant in this process (Ede & Lundsford, 1984). Audience addressed seems to place too much agency on the audience, taking away some of the critical authorship that belongs to the writer. Similarly, the audience invoked theory places too much agency on the author, devaluing the role of the audience in the inception of a piece. An accurate relationship between writer and reader emphasizes both roles without isolating one or the other from the 'rhetorical situation' while also highlighting the clear back and forth that exists between the reader and the writer in any composing process.

**"feminists are typically represented as grumpy and humorless"**

This kind of composing process that Ede and Lundsford imagine is crucial for feminist comedians to exist in the sphere of comedy, the imagined viewer taking the place of the 'reader' as the audience in the equation. Feminist comedians must balance the critical aim of the intent of their message alongside the importance of audience reception. This binary is made even more complex by the sense that their humor is 'charged' a term coined by Rebecca Krefting in her article titled "All Joking Aside; American Humor and Its Discontents" (Klien, 2015). As is the case with any piece of work, audience reception is crucial to the success of the piece, this is compounded in the case of the feminist comedy by the stereotype that feminists are, as Sarah Amed, quoted by Klien, states "feminists are typically represented as grumpy and humorless," (Klien, 2015, p.672). To successfully present their activism under the guise of a comedic line, feminist comedians -

must place audience reception at equal importance, to the composing of their message to avoid overvaluing one or the other at the expense of their success as comedians.

Klein's criticism of Rebecca Krefting's piece can be seen as an example of the dangers of not balancing this binary. In response to Krefting's use of personal interviews as evidence of comedians' activism instead of direct quotes or scenes from their performances, Klein states this "shifts attention from what the material itself is doing—what the audience sees and hears and the meanings that attach to those things," (Klien, 2015, p.676). In other words, in over-highlighting, the aim behind the composition of the message Krefting devalues the audience's perception of that message. To this point, she states "putting too much stake in comedic intent gives performers themselves the final word on what their work does, what readings of it are valid, and even to whom it belongs," (Klein, 2015, p.676), falling into the same trap that Ede and Lundsford addressed as a result of audience addressed.

### **Feminist comedians must not overvalue their activism at the expense of the audience's experience, as to do so would be to forfeit the audience's reception**

In most cases, audiences aren't looking to be fed politically charged commentary when viewing media meant to be humorous. With this in mind, feminist comedians/comedies must make their activism and their feminist characters digestible enough for audiences to positively receive such activism as being comedic instead of overtly political. In a study on audience reception of feminist characters by Robyn Swink, it was found that when presented with several tv shows depicting feminist characters, both male and female audience members preferred the characters that presented more desirable characteristics; "Notably, the participants gravitated towards the more positive and traditionally successful Leslie Knope while expressing dissatisfaction with the more failure-prone Liz Lemon. While both characters entangle feminist and post-feminist characteristics, Leslie Knope seemingly appeals to the empowerment and "girl power" narratives characteristic of postfeminism," (Swink, 2017, p.25).

Feminist comedians must not overvalue their activism at the expense of the audience's experience, as to do so would be to forfeit the audience's reception, and in much the same way, to overvalue the audience reception would be to relinquish the importance of their activism as a penalty. Ensuring that the line between writing a comedic feminist narrative, and the audience perceiving such a narrative as comedic, is walked successfully is the very real struggle that feminist comedians willingly uptake in their craft. And it is this line, that when navigated successfully resembles the model that Ede and Lundsford imagine in their piece.



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# Like Totally Whatever

A poem in response to Taylor Mali

Written by Melissa Lozada-Olivia

Performed by Madeline Ford

In case you haven't realized it has somehow become necessary for old white men to tell me how to speak (?)

They like, interrupt a conversation that isn't even theirs, and are like "speak like you mean it" and like "the internet is ruining the English language."

And they like, put my "parentheticals," my "likes" and "ums," and "you knows" on a wait list.

Tell them no one will take them seriously in a frilly pink dress. Or that make-up.

Tell them they have a confidence problem. That they should learn to speak up, like the hyper-masculine words were always the first to raise their hands.

Invisible red pens and college degrees have been making their way into the middle of my sentences. I've been crossing things out every time I take a moment to think.

Declarative sentences, so-called, because they declared themselves to be the loudest, most truest, most taking up the most space, most totally white man sentences.

Have always told me that being angry has never helped like, anybody.

Has only gotten in the way of helping them declare more shit about how they'll never be forgotten like, ever.

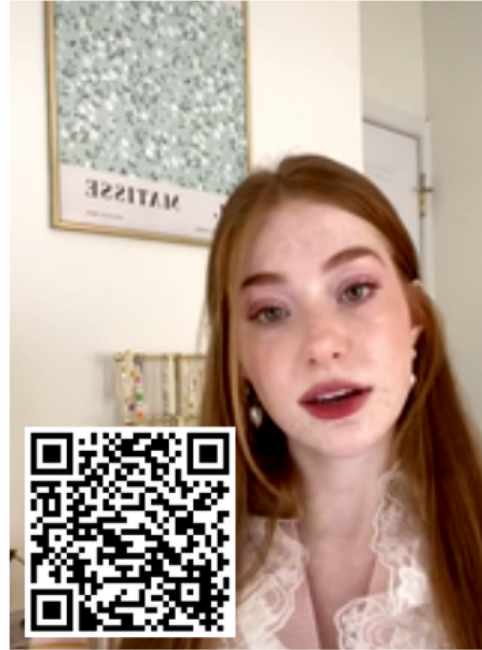
It's like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were geniuses for turning women into question marks.

It's like rapes happen all the time on campuses, but as soon as Jon Krakauer writes about it, suddenly it's like innovative nonfiction, and not like something girls are like making up for like attention.

And it's like maybe I'm always speaking in questions because I'm so used to being cutoff.

Like maybe, this is a defense mechanism: Maybe everything girls do is evolution of defense mechanism.

Like this is protection, like our "likes" are our knee pads.



Our "ums" are the knives we tuck into our boots at night.

Our "you knows" are best friends we call on when walking down a dark alley.

Like this is how we breathe easier.

But I guess feelings never helped anybody. I guess like, tears never made change. I guess like everything girls do is a waste of time (?)

So welcome to the bandwagon of my own uncertainty.

Watch as I stick flowers into your "punctuation mark" guns, 'cause you can't just challenge authority. You have to take it to the mall, too.

Teach it to do the "bend and snap."

Paint its nails, braid its hair, tell it it looks like, really good today.

And in that moment before you murder it with all of the poison in your like, softness, you let it know that like this, like this moment is like, um, you know, me using my voice.

# A Look at Fleabag as a Feminist Comedy

Fleabag, a one-woman live show, turned comedy/drama television series, situates itself perfectly between the genres of comedy, and feminist criticism providing audiences with an intimate view of the relationship between both the tragedy of human existence and the humor in the human demise. Phoebe Waller-Bridge heads the show as the lead character Fleabag, while also being responsible for writing both the stage show and television series. Waller-Bridge intelligently leans into the format of the British comedy, paying an intentional head to the features of the genre that elevate her storytelling while simultaneously pushing against its constraints in a way that is deliberate and obvious.



The female voice in comedy is one that is frequently dismissed as being overly charged, and overwrought with serious critical undertones. Yet despite this, Waller-Bridge is successful in bridging the gap between comedy and feminist criticism while also redefining how these genres work together in a way that produces a realistic and still hilarious portrayal of one woman's exhaustive life. By situating herself in the medium of a British television comedy, Phoebe Waller-Bridge uses the applications of such genre to create what appears to be both a successful and funny, feminist criticism, and does so while still existing within the boundaries of the 'comedy'.

**"The female voice  
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Waller-Bridge places Fleabag, the unlikeable and incredibly fallible main character, as the crux of the storyline. Grappling with the death of her best friend/business partner, and her own personal involvement in such, Fleabag defines herself as a "greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, mannish-looking, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist" (Fleabag). Waller-Bridgers's character recognition of her own role in the comedy as the 'oversexualized lass' or emphasizes her use of the genre to her benefit.



While the original stage play was designed as an extensive hour-long monologue with dialogue breaks, the television series does the opposite, positing the monologues as small but frequent fourth wall breaks where Waller-Bridge cuts away from a scene of dialogue sometimes in the middle of a sentence, to address the audience directly. By doing so Waller-Bridge highlights her character's self-hatred, and her family's utter disapproval and disappointment in her, in a way that is still reminiscent of comedic relief. Her failure and disdain for those around her remain the butt of the joke, however, her self-awareness highlighted by her personal delivery of these asides, spoken directly to the audience, prevents her character from fully hiding behind the guise of humor. By allowing the audience this intimacy they are made aware of the trauma responses and emotional breakdowns that Waller-Bridge's character attempts to disguise with sarcasm and deflection. Fleabag's delivery of her quippy asides and isolated monologues allows for her character to remain situated in the humorous rhetoric at play, while also inviting the audience to experience her trauma on a more intimate level.

Laraine Porter and I.Q. Hunter describe the British Comedy as "a comedy of class, social and sexual embarrassment, thwarted ambition and a love-hate relationship with convention, conformity, and the Establishment in all its forms." (Porter & Hunter, 2). The chief reason that Fleabag thrives within the genre, is Phoebe Waller-Bridge's attention to these characteristics and their expectations. Fleabag remains on the surface, a show about a sexually deviant, struggling middle-class woman, grappling with both 'convention and conformity, by all accounts, a British comedy by definition.

In her essay titled *Tarts, Tampons, and Tyrants: women and representation in British comedy*, Laraine Porter examines the inclusions of these expectations and their factor on the successfulness of the humor in a comedy. She states "comic pleasures associated with the recognition of certain stereotypes in humor cannot be disavowed. Often it is the recognition of the stereotype that elicits a comedic response at the outset." (Porter & Hunter, 66). To dismiss these elements would be to place



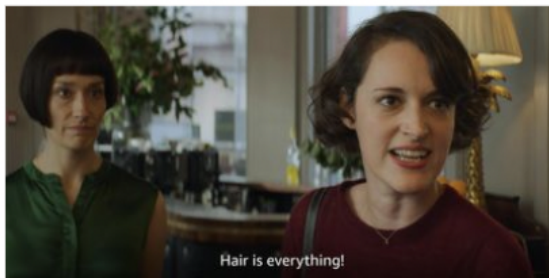
The artifact outside the realm of the genre deeming it unsuccessful as an artifact of that specific genre. In such a case, it would be unwise to expect the same results or as Foss put it, the same 'expectations'.

Fleabag leans into such stereotypes, the character remains situated in these overly sexual stereotypes, as Porter says, "Such overt sexual stereotypes have specific functions within the comic universes in which they operate and often work within the comic mode precisely because they are sexist and objectively insulting. Comedy is essentially an anarchic form that consistently resists notions of political correctness and polite behaviour" (Porter, 66). Where many female comedians fail in the eyes of the audience for being overzealous in their denial of these tropes, specifically that of the male audience, the unique structure Waller-Bridge employs also allows Fleabag to critically comment on her place there as a woman. Fleabag's inability to be what she deems a successful feminist is in many ways what promotes the presence of the topic in this comedy, allowing for it to be a relatable shtick, something many will find humorous and relevant instead of a politically latent statement.

In one scene Waller-Bridge's character makes the statement, "I sometimes worry that I wouldn't be such a feminist if I had bigger tits" during a group confessional in a religious meeting room. Her self-actualization and the situating of such charged language at such an inopportune time allows her to successfully comment on feminism and its implications on the female body image while still remaining the funny, sexy, lead that she knows she's operating as. In another scene, Waller-Bridge's character proclaims "we are bad feminists!" to her sister after being the only two women in a room to raise their hands to the question "[would] you trade five years of your life for the so-called perfect body" (Fleabag) at a feminist seminar. It is these moments that comment on the role of feminist body politics in women's lives that elevate this show as both a successful comedy and a successful feminist critic

In her essay titled *Recovering Our Sense of Humor: New Directions in Feminist Humor Studies*, Kathryn Kein explains "...the root of the gender imbalance in mainstream comedy stems from the disproportionate number of women performing charged humor. Charged humor is not as marketable to the mainstream, thus when television networks and major club owners aim to appeal to the broadest audience possible, they exclude charged comedians who run the risk of alienating market segments and upsetting viewers," (Kein, 674). What Phoebe Waller-Bridge does that many fail to do, is disguise her politically charged statements as a sense of comradery between the sexes.

Using feminism as the butt of the joke is how feminism and feminist criticism found their way onto the screen in British comedy in the first place. Shows like *The Two Ronnies*, and *Scott On...*, used feminism as the object of derision more than once across episodes (White). In a time where feminism was under negotiation in mainstream media, White explains that "Despite the conservative frame of these narratives, *Scott On . . .* and *The Two Ronnies* stage feminist ideas and images in the 1970s and early 1980s, bringing feminism into family living rooms during the analog era, when fewer channels and less distraction from other media meant far higher viewing figures" (White, 3). Regardless of the specific discourse, the use of comedic rhetoric brought feminism to the forefront of the public mind in a way that had not been done before, and succeeded in being humorous and digestible for broad audiences in a time when "feminism was a "discursive context for television talk at this time" (White, 3)



Waller-Bridge does the same thing these comedies from the 70s 80s did, they just didn't realize they were doing it. Waller-Bridge poses herself as a kind of understanding failing feminist, who recognizes her own shortcomings, and in doing so, is able to remain a comedian in the eyes of the hyper-critical audience who would typically find such statements 'overcharged'. By appearing to be just as exhausted as her audience might be with the tiresomeness of feminism, she employs the same kind of rhetoric they use to make fun of feminism while succeeding in making the same 'overcharged' statement they would reject if they knew better. A good example of this is when she states "Hair is everything. We wish it wasn't so we could actually think about something else occasionally. But it is. It's the difference between a good day and a bad day. We're meant to think that it's a symbol of power, that it's a symbol of fertility.

Some people are exploited for it and it pays your fucking bills. Hair is everything." This is what Kathryn Kein calls "comedy as a Trojan horse for feminist and queer politics," (Kein, 678).

Phoebe Waller-Bridge retroactively created a television show that exists within both the genres of British comedy and feminist criticism while only slightly redefining them. By intentionally situating her show where she does, instead of creating an entirely new genre, Waller-Bridge effectively avoids alienating either genre from its own expectations and audience and is successful at appealing to both. Her attention to detail locates this show between the two genres, as they are, merely stretching their limits slightly to promote her own goals while still upholding the values of the genres themselves. By generically analyzing how the show *Fleabag* operates between these genres we may consider how using the rhetoric of that which defines and limits our expectations may also aid us in redefining such boundaries in our favor.

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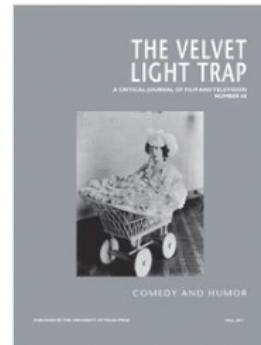


# Collection of Scholarship That Informed This Research



## “Have Women a Sense of Humor?”

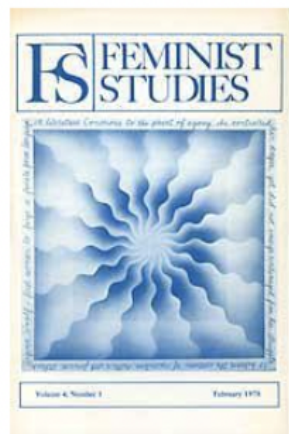
Comedy and Femininity in Early Twentieth-Century Film



“Have Women a Sense of Humor?”:  
Comedy and Femininity in Early  
Twentieth-Century Film  
Kristen Anderson Wagner  
The Velvet Light Trap, Number 68, Fall  
2011, pp. 35-46 (Article) Published by  
University of Texas Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.2011.0012>

## Recovering Our Sense of Humor:

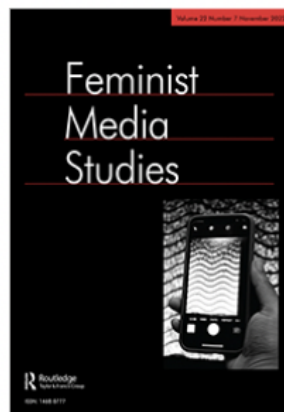
New Directions in Feminist Humor Studies



Review by: Kathryn Kein  
Source: Feminist Studies , Vol. 41, No. 3,  
Gendering Bodies, Institutional  
Hegemonies (2015), pp. 671-681  
Published by: Feminist Studies, Inc.  
Stable URL:  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.41.3.671>

## Lemony Liz and likable Leslie:

audience understandings of feminism, comedy,  
and gender in women-led television comedies



Robyn Stacia Swink (2017)  
Lemony Liz and likable Leslie:  
audience understandings  
of feminism, comedy, and  
gender in women-led  
television comedies,  
Feminist Media  
Studies, 17:1, 14-  
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