

Analysing Apathy:

Postfeminist Melancholia & Feminine Identities Online

Visual Culture

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**National College of Art & Design
Department of Communication Design.**

*Analysing Apathy:
Postfeminist Confusion and Feminine Identities Online.*

Anna Frizelle

**Submitted to the School of Visual Culture in Candidacy for the Degree of
BA (Hons) Graphic Design and Visual Culture, 2023**



National College of Art and Design

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Introduction

“What happens when women try to live according to an image that makes them deny their minds?”

This quote from Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) perfectly illustrates the dilemma facing women concerning the formation of their identities in the online environment. Young women today live in a world in which mass media, visual expression and information technology are embedded. Moreover, the rate of which this media is disseminated, reviewed, and reproduced is unprecedented. The emphasis of cultural construction and its analysis is a defining characteristic of contemporary girl culture, with a concentration on female icons, song lyrics, and beauty culture, rather than on traditional theory and politics. Moreover, the modern female experience, especially for that of younger women, can be described as being entrenched in a celebrity orientated, highly visual, and almost entirely digital media culture; which offers an insight into the curatorial and disciplinary techniques that are employed when she is online, and how young feminists communicate their values (Snyder, 2008; Handyside, 2017, p59; Barthes, 1972; Fisher-Quan, 2022a).

Snyder (2008) asserts that postmodern feminist theory is in fact required for social change, and rather than dismissing it as convoluted, we need to ‘re-understand’ how it presents itself in both social and political contexts. Building on the theoretical insights of Judith Butler, Munford (2007) contends that third wave feminists tend to utilise a performativity that depends less on a clash of anatomical sex and gender (e.g drag) but rather on a subversion of opposing ideas female archetypes that are presented particularly in media (e.g. Madonna/whore, girl/woman binaries). Icons such as Courtney Love, the Riot Grrrls and the characters of *Girl, Interrupted* occupy this dichotomy, and provide a freeing template for women to occupy both traditionally feminine and masculine spheres (Figs. 1 & 2). In this occupation of contradictory



Fig. 1. Courtney Love performing with Hole at Reading Festival in 1994 (British Vogue, 2020)



Fig. 2. Angelina Jolie in *Girl, Interrupted* (Mangold, 1999).

spaces, third-wave feminists disrupt absolutist ideas of dominant men and submissive women and form innovative identities within the clash of narratives. Snyder (2008) summarises: “*There is no one way to be a woman*”, however this presents feminism with an additional concern, that of individualism and division within the movement. This individualism can be analysed through the micro-identities and aesthetics observed online; as personhood is now marketed for consumption, due to the capitalist hunger for commodification.

This essay discusses postmodern feminism and its relationship with internet culture; and how young women present themselves online. Chapter one describes how the multiplicities of the online environment lend themselves to postmodern feminist thinking and the shortcomings of ‘choice’ feminism. Chapter two discusses the curation of online personas; women’s attraction to social networking sites; and the commodification of the self. Chapter three consists of a case study of the ‘femcel’ community; its origins and visual signifiers. Chapter four analyses the femcel in the

context of chapters one and two, discussing apathy as it appears pop culture and how it pertains to privilege; and finally, this essay discusses that despite the subversive nature of particular female communities online, they ultimately can only engage in this subversion under both the patriarchy and capitalism.

Chapter One: Postmodern Feminism as it Exists Online

Postmodernism, rather than simply being a chronological step from the modern, tends to be concealed within the modern in the form of interruption and obstruction to the societal norms that have been established in the past (Snyder, 2008). Ebert (1991) claims that a feminine text cannot help to be but subversive, as it is created it interrupts the masculine structures embedded in society. A feminine text will inherently “*smash everything, ...shatter the framework of institutions, ...blow up the law, ...break up the "truth" with laughter*” (Cixous, *et al*, 1976). Although it would be too concrete to label the movement as postmodern, third-wave feminism works well within the traits of postmodernity, and builds upon the postmodern discourse around ideas of multiplicity, ambiguity and contradiction. Embracing an ethos of non judgement, third wave feminists practice inclusion over uniformity; and imperative action over academic rationale. The most recent wave of feminists do not totally reject the ideals of second-wave feminism, they simply endeavour to shed feminist practice of its perceived ideological stiffness. However, the confusion of these postmodern qualities in third-wave feminism has brought many to reject it as politically stagnant and theoretically abstract (Snyder, 2008; Halberstam, 1991).

How the Internet Lends Itself to Postmodern Discourse

In the first line of her seminal book, *Sisterhood is Powerful*, Robin Morgan (1970) asserts that “*this book is an action*”; a statement that illustrates the significance of a text that is written, produced and distributed by women as a means of pursuing the women’s liberation movement. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical feminists published hoards of text manifestos, guides to raising consciousness, declarations of purpose and other political actions that were primarily written and published collaboratively through a collective volunteer effort. Similarly, the Internet has facilitated the networking and meeting of feminists on a global scale. However, unlike the underground network of the 60s, the Internet exists simultaneously as a writing technology and dissemination technology; a ‘*liminal space between production and reception, construction and reconstruction*’. This multiplicity has enabled feminist networking and writing to take many forms: from female only listservs and chatrooms two decades ago, to Twitter disputes and Tumblr blogs today. Literary critics have disputed the value placed upon multiplicity, nonlinearity and the complex web like nature that characterises both postmodernism and online discourse. Women’s counterculture online does indeed provide needed sanctuary and comfort; but its modern manifestation at times is abstract and unclear, which does not lend itself to the transfer of these discourses out of feminist cyberspace and into less idyllic and curated spaces, such as the classroom or to policy makers (Rhodes, 2002; Snyder, 2008).

The Shortcomings of Choice Feminism

This contemporary rendition of feminism can be observed through the ideals of choice feminism. Choice feminists are primarily concerned with the expansion of the amount of choices available to individual women, meanwhile reducing judgments about these choices. Aligned closely with libertarianism, choice feminism acts as an ethical and

straightforward approach to feminist issues, however is it not an organised sect within the feminist movement, and the notion that feminists can do virtually anything as long as it is her choice can produce conflicting conclusions to specific topics, and reduce the significance of particular discourses (Kirkpatrick, 2010). For example, feminist scholar Jan Breslauer hails this laissez-faire approach to feminist issues in an interview with *Playboy*, wherein she claims that breast augmentation surgery is a feminist act. She asserts that a woman's choice to modify her body is a signifier of her autonomy and power and that *"even old school feminists, after all, would go to the mat for a woman's right to do what she wants with her body."* (Kirkpatrick, 2010). The fight for bodily autonomy has undoubtedly been at the forefront of feminism for decades, albeit with a more serious concentration on reproductive health and abortion rights, rather than the opportunity to have a smaller nose, or perkier breasts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the slogans "My Body My Choice", or "My Body Belongs to Me", moved out of the space of feminist reproductive justice, and into anti-mask and anti-vaccine protests, appropriated in order to repudiate healthcare measures and withdraw from a collective responsibility to protect the wider community. This co-opting of terms illustrates how fragile and ineffective a non-critical approach to feminism can be: Kirkpatrick explains: *"If everything is feminist, then perhaps nothing is"* (See Figs. 3 & 4). (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Voegele, 2022; Barthes, 1972).



Fig. 3. A Rally of abortion rights activists on the steps of the US Capitol, 1977. (ABC News, 2020)



Fig. 4. An anti-mask protester holds up a sign that reads "My Body, My Choice" at the Texas State Capitol, 2020, (NBC News, 2020)

This rooting in the fundamental rights of choice and individual expression results in scarce inquiry into how our external environment constructs desires and values, or acknowledges that an amalgamation of choices that only consider the self will ultimately have negative consequences for gender relations en masse. Certainly, it is a feminist triumph that women in the contemporary West have more choices than their mothers, however this poses the vital question: has this idea modified the crux of feminism from the freedom to choose work vs home to the freedom to choose to be concerned with only the self? (Wood, 2006, cited in Snyder, 2008; Handyside, 2017, p78; Kirkpatrick, 2010).

Although the ethos of inclusivity and non-judgement of choice feminism contributes to its popularity amongst young people, as does its straightforward principles, these qualities are not conducive to critical analysis. The unequivocal acceptance of every woman's choice as valid with no judgement blunts the critical edge of the long-term feminist movement. Critics of this approach to feminism query the capability of choice feminism to act as a unifier and promote a movement that is effective, dynamic and politically active. The ideas of 'multiplicities' allow for the individual self expression that is inherent to being human, but they do not lend themselves to a unified political movement. Political action is still required of feminists in order to progress the movement into the future, and to protect the milestones reached in the past. The overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* in 2022 is a prime example of how the emphasis on individualism that choice feminism endorses has, in part, weakened the movement and allowed for an overhaul of long-fought for rights and liberties. (Glenza *et al*, 2022) In the evolving social, economic, political and globalised context of the 21st century, whereby 'girl power' and 'girlboss' are a marketing tool and branding of feminism, it is vital to

analyse the relationship between third wave feminism and agency, power, and capitalism (Snyder, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Handyside, 2017, p42).

Chapter Two: The Curation of an Online Persona

The Benefits of Female Communities Online

In her 2015 study, Heath seeks to understand the dilemma of young women as they form their identities online. Girls and young women tend to be drawn to social networking sites (SNS) due to the ability to regulate the presentation of the online self and its perception by others. During this difficult stage in identity development, an online presence allows young women - teenage girls in particular - to venture outside of the limits they encounter in real space. One interviewee explains: *“It’s like, I don’t really care.... I find it’s almost like you have a split personality disorder. You have a Facebook person and you have a human person”*. As women have more control over the construction of the self online, they begin to present themselves in complex, creative and rhetorically impactful ways; and employ visual discourse to curate vivid and engaging personas (Le, 2021; Hawisher and Sullivan, 1999).

Differing from the simpler SNS of the 2000s, the exchange of insights, experiences and opinions underpin the online landscape that has come to the fore in the last decade. The formation of online communities has created a virtual ecosystem in which young women can express their innermost thoughts and experiences to likeminded strangers, all the while remaining somewhat anonymous. Blogging sites such as *Tumblr* are seen as more interactive, authentic and dynamic compared to personal page based SNS such as *Facebook* or *Bebo* (Fig. 5). Bloggers consider the open access to personal space and thoughts as a means to make one’s life meaningful through the affirmation, feedback and validation of readers. Moreover, research on this topic

confirms that social media use can be beneficial for those who use it as an extension of traditional social support (Belk, 2013; Le, 2021; Hawisher and Sullivan, 1999).



Fig. 5. Facebook Profile Page, 2006. (Time, 2014)

The Commodification of the Self

However, psychological studies have also shown that people can change after even a limited time of assuming a persona. There is substantial leeway in our visual presentations of self online, despite a high degree of likeness to our real selves. In video games, an elderly avatar makes people more frugal, a more attractive avatar increases people's social skills. The same can be said about the kinds of personalities we assume online - whether that be the Sad Girl, the Beauty Guru or the Clean Girl (Blascovich and Bailensen cited in Belk, 2013). Simultaneously, a disembodiment and reembodiment

of our ‘real’ selves, the curation of a persona online falls in line with Baudrillard’s (1998) analysis of the body as the “finest” consumer object that requires constant management. The neoliberal ideology of late-stage capitalism combined with the construction of persona online has normalised a kind of self-branding entrepreneurialism. The most distinct manifestation of this can be seen in the rise of the influencer in the last decade, wherein the persona acts as the consumable object: the person is now the product. (Figs. 6 & 7) (Faucher, 2018).

What is of intrigue in this phenomenon is how this manner of self-curation is monitored by way of the value given by other users, expressed as likes, comments, and followers - known in the industry as ‘engagement’. The pursuit of further engagement serves to inform what content is posted and what is not. By extending Baudrillard’s analogy to suggest that the online self is a body on display, it also infers a false sense of freedom and achievement, as the online self is reappropriated for capitalist purposes: *‘where it is invested, it is invested in order to produce a yield’* (Faucher, 2018). The most rewarded object within a capitalist system is one distinct, new and interesting enough to be sold, but not one so much so that it deviates too much from the demand of the consumer. In this context, aesthetic differentiation is not merely a virtue, but a necessity of capitalist production. The prioritisation of just enough uniqueness to be viable and consumable is the manner of cultivating individuality that thrives in the contemporary online environment. In the case of the influencer, tangible profit is received from the commodification of the self. Most often though, the majority of users reproduce the behaviour of those most popular online for less tangible, ambiguous profits, such as social capital or a sense of belonging. (Faucher, 2018; Fisher-Quan, 2023).

This constant revision of self and social contest on SNS is undoubtedly linked to the ease by which value is measured (i.e. engagement). Karl Marx (1967) asserted that, for as long as humans and their production were controlled by individualism and

competition for the motives of profit, exploitation and alienation would persist. Moreover, Baudrillard (1988) argued that each person exists within their own bubble; a self alienated from the natural world as the natural world becomes alienated from the self. A continuation of this claim can be observed in the highly curated and personal experience SNS users are accustomed to. This alienation contributes to the confusion and disconnect felt by many of those online - despite the aforementioned benefits of community and belonging (Dubord, 1970; Hawisher and Sullivan, 1999; Faucher, 2018; Heath, 2015; Barthes, 1972; Benjamin, 2008).



Fig. 6. 'Clean Girl Vibes', ch4zza on Pinterest (n.d)



Fig. 7. 'Clean girl aesthetic | clean girl | clean girl vibes | it girl | clean girl bedroom' MCHLMT on Pinterest, (n.d.)

Chapter Three: Case Study - The Modern Femcel

“The tropes of the toxic loner are not just for boys.” (Tiffany, 2022)

An iteration of a highly-curated persona online can be observed in the ‘femcel’. Drawing from the incel community (a portmanteau of involuntary celibate), the growing sub-community of ‘femcels’ online today have adopted the label not as an indicator of how much sex they are unable to have, but rather as a method of aligning their personalities with characteristics that are seen to be manipulative, pernicious, and destructive, ostensibly as a means of differentiating themselves from the neater, more traditionally feminine content seen on SNS. Described as hyperaware individuals, they callously romanticise these ‘femcel’ traits; and cultivate online personas that further aestheticise and cement their identities based on distinct niche interests (Lanigan, 2022; Le, 2022; Barthes, 1972).

Incel dialogue manifests as an outward projection of hatred onto society and specifically women, which often results in radical violent outbursts, alarming threats, and outlandish demands to “redistribute” sex. Originally, the femcel was more closely associated with her male counterpart: a femcel was defined as someone who had “defects” which had to manifest in an extreme form and surpass those of normal women, described in the now defunct Reddit thread ‘R/trufemcels’. They congregated online to lament the shallowness of modern dating culture and the privilege of attractive women; to share their experiences of navigating the world in an ugly body, which left them despondent and limited both romantically and socially (Cole, 2018; Le, 2022). In contrast to incels, femcels are largely nonviolent; the majority of content in femcel forums is concentrated on the internalised unhappiness of these women - a consequence of the way women are socialised to respond to their own perceived failure. Girls tend to react to this failure with self-doubt rather than anger; they assume the failure comes

from within. The femcel's pain and frustration is turned inward on the self, despite the fact that they deem society inherently "lookist", (maltreatment of those who are deemed physically unattractive), femcels do not see it as changeable, and thus internalise their grievances. (Lanigan, 2022; Tiffany, 2022; Handyside, 2017, p64).

The Femcel as Subversion

'Femcel' as a descriptor has been virtually divorced from its original meaning and curiously, and has been adopted by mainstream social media. Following a predictable, reductive, somewhat zany pattern of any word online that is used to imply esotericism, 'femcel' has become a convenient synonym for depressed, single, or both. It conflates a number of neuroses, images, habits and attitudes and tidies it into one 'aesthetic' (another word augmented by internet culture). For example, on Twitter, it might be paired with an obscure meme or photograph in which the user looks attractive yet indifferent (Fig. 8); on Tumblr, it's synonymous with the typical female user - a romantic loner who spends her time blogging; on TikTok the femcel tag is saturated with slideshows of the aforementioned memes as well as videos of various 'icons' of the femcel movement, all of which summarise the app's leaning toward semi-ironic takes on sex negativity, hyperawareness of neuroses and female despair (Google Trends, 2022; Lizzie!, 2022; Tiffany, 2022).

The femcel community, in both the original and newly popular senses, serves as a contrast to the previously discussed faction of third-wave feminism known as choice feminism. This genre of feminism justifies women's choices because they are an exercise of her authority and individuality, not because they benefit the collective. (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Tiffany, 2022; Handyside, 2017, p78). It becomes obvious then, how easily some became exasperated by the girlboss, as she prioritised her own individual gain at the

expense of others, particularly people of colour, people of low-income, or in this case, women with low social currency - ‘ugly’ women. The liberal-feminist rhetoric of ‘hustling’, ‘girls support girls’ and self-improvement as a mode of social justice felt insincere to traditional femcels (Fig. 9); combine this with the fact that today we are exposed to more images of beautiful people than ever before, and therefore it is easy to feel deceived, or to become dejected. It’s this disdain that defines the new femcel, she does not view herself as ugly, but as an attractive woman who is maladjusted in some way that impedes her from being romantically or sexually desired. New femcels have thrived on social media platforms, where they can express their apathy and contempt not through anguished posts about being excluded from modern dating culture, but rather utilising a post-ironic, self aware embodiment of feminine toxicity, cultivated through imagery, playlists, memes and other aesthetic signifiers (Fig. 10). Roisín Lanigan summarises, “*It’s not femcel for these women, it’s femcelcore.*” [sic] (2022; Hagan, 2022; Barthes, 1972; Handyside, 2017, p78-79; Muskaan, 2022).

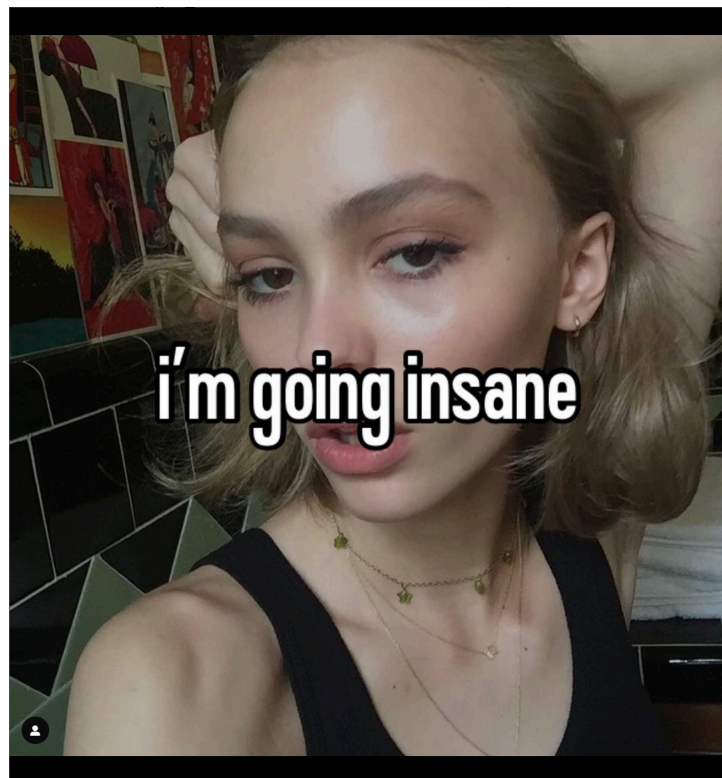


Fig 8. *ibark4badbeeches* on Instagram (2022)

The ‘Femcel Aesthetic’

‘Femcelcore’ can be described as the visuals or aesthetics that relate to or embody the femcel’s outlook on life. The suffix ‘-core’ has been widely adopted in recent years on social media to denote an aesthetic (e.g. normcore, cottagecore). The word ‘core’ singularly means the centre-most, vital part of something; therefore it can be said that all of the different -core variations are named in a manner that indicate what the trend or aesthetic is centred around (*Dictionary.com*, 2022; *Slang.net*, n.d).

The femcel’s newfound prevalence on social media is undoubtedly a reaction to other feminine identities that have been fostered online. Femcelcore is, in part, an acceptance of some of the messy and abject elements of being a woman; pushing back against highly curated lifestyle content that endorses the joys of being a #TradWife, the orderly morning routines of the domineering ‘Clean Girl’, and other identities defined by wholesome femininity (Handyside, 2017, p 75, Hagan, 2022). Much like this content however, ‘femcelcore’ is more excited by aestheticism than having, or not having, sex with men. There is sparse reference to celibacy, as for this new iteration of femcels, their discourse has simply surpassed this issue. The label has even been adopted by many women in relationships who wish to articulate some kind of discontent with prescriptive heteronormative societal structures. The repackaged femcel is more engaged with the aesthetics of toxic anguish, curating an identity of a beautiful yet troubled and neurotic young woman, enduring an unsympathetic world. This persona is reflected via the media they have selected to represent themselves: these visuals often suggest a level of capricious instability, shrouded by delicate beauty; recurring motifs include ripped tights, cigarettes held in manicured hands, red lipstick, lingerie, spilled red wine, pills and pill boxes (Figs. 11 & 12). “*Teetering between beautiful and macabre*” one could contend the aesthetic is an elevated or intellectualised version of femininity; wherein a woman’s torment can at least be alluring. For a community that deems itself unattractive, the



Fig. 9. *thesavvygal* on Instagram (2022)

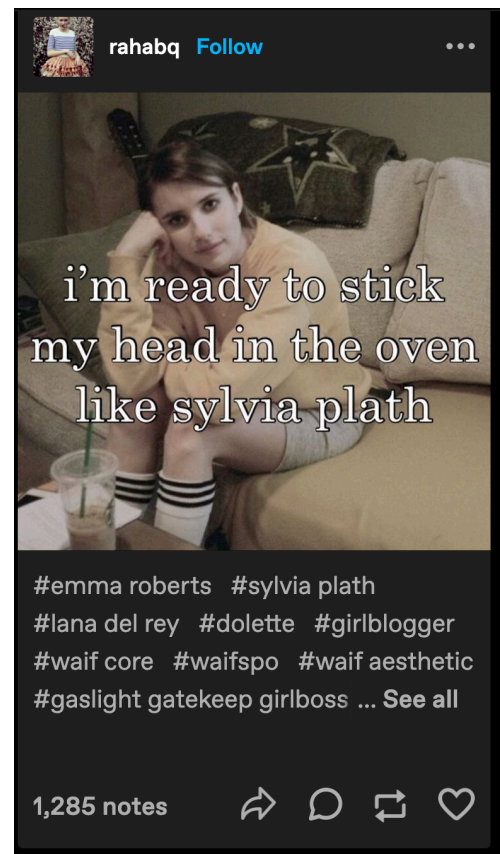


Fig. 10. *rahabq*, Tumblr (n.d)

irony and even the hypocrisy of how heavily these aesthetics are relied upon must be highlighted, principally because they depict the very things that traditional femcels critique. However, it is important to note that this mode of constructed identity is vital in formulating a sense of community online, and the intensity to which these identities are curated, (a form of 'spectacularisation') is a digressive and lucrative strategy of contemporary celebrity culture that has now permeated the internet (Figs. 13 & 14) (Hagan, 2022; Gawker, 2022; Dubord; 1970).

The 21st century girl is an adept consumer, curating her image not just through cosmetics and fashion, but through a tastefully tailored list of things she consumes or aspires to consume. Rayne Fisher-Quan (2022a) explains:

*“if i can compare myself to just the right amount of things — place myself at the nexus of enough edgy,
vaguely feminist media properties — will that eventually start to feel like actualization?”*

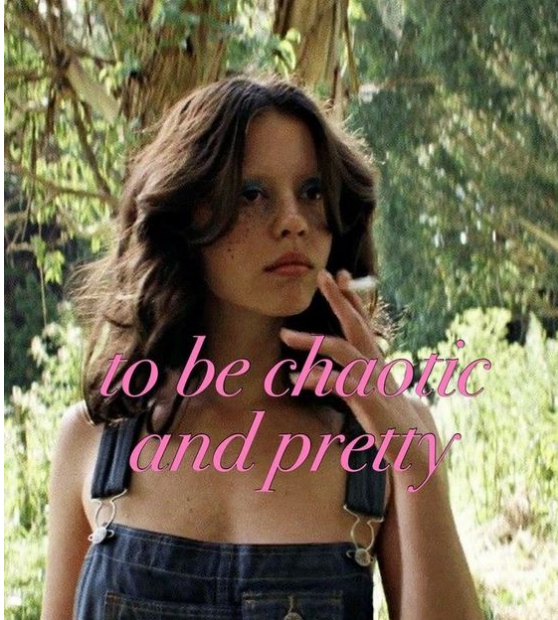


Fig. 13. ‘mia goth tumblr core maxine pearl tumblr core era girlblogger dolette lana del rey vibe aesthetic ballerina femcel’ (Carlin, Pinterest n.d.)



Fig. 11. waifbambi222 on Tumblr (2022)



Fig. 14. ‘Sam Casper outtake for “Red as Love” shot by Cybelle Corwin’ (2-dreamy, Pinterest n.d.)

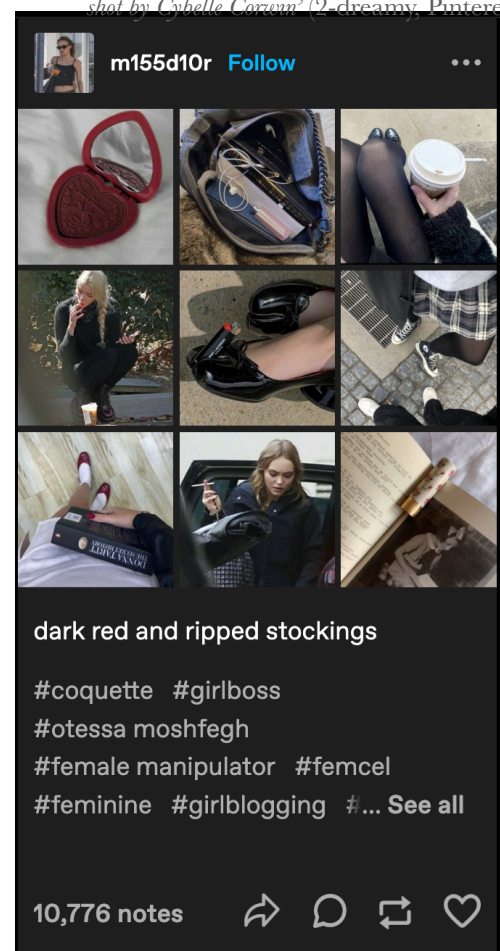


Fig. 12. m155d10r on Tumblr (2022)

Irony as a Tool

Femcels also shield themselves behind a front of irony. Beuer (1980) defines irony as recognition of the gap between oneself and the world, and when a person can no longer tolerate this gap, they seek to reestablish the departed feeling of unity by repressing their awareness of this gap and numbing themselves by disconnecting from reality. Furthermore, Renegar and Goehring (2013) advocate for the use of irony, as it allows for the emergence of contradictions. Multiplicities thrive when identities or definitions change; irony is about humour just as much as it is about seriousness. As a perspective, it allows individuals to partake in serious discourses without taking themselves too seriously, and charmingly, “recognises the humour inherent in the human condition”. Irony and humour in the femcel community are best illustrated through its memes, which nearly always feature a background picture of a thin white woman, or frames from a favoured film, on top of which lies a self deprecating thought. Although they hold an amusing, slightly absurd quality, over time they have diverged from their original comedic intent, and have evolved into a kind of visual expression of the femcel’s serious thoughts, reframed for an online audience for whom everything is ironic anyway (Fig. 15).

From this point of view, it is easy to understand why the femcel utilises irony and sarcasm so well, because she is the embodiment of a contradiction: beautiful and troubled, self-aware and delirious. Feminist scholars have debated that contemporary feminism must allow for a diverse range of contradictory identities, and enable women to fully embody all of their identities at once. It is possible that our multiple online personas exist parallel to our multiphrenic selves, and that irony enables us to reconcile this contradiction by acknowledging the tensions and contingencies between utopian theories and the complexities of everyday life. Living the human experience while constantly criticising it can leave one feeling despondent, whereas adopting an

ironic perspective can be consciously utilised as a device for individual autonomy (Dubord 1967; Belk, 2013).

However, Purdy (cited in Renegar and Goehring, 2013) argues that the presence of irony is void of community engagement and lacks hope. This could be argued in the case of online forums and blogs, whereby the internet evolves from a safe space of like-minded people into an echo-chamber in which no one is challenged with alternative viewpoints. Femcels have built a community bonded through this hyper-aware self-deprecation laden with self-reflection and irony. There comes a point at which self-awareness is no longer helpful, and allowing oneself to spiral into dialectical mental chaos, self-mythologising to justify the anguish becomes a romantic performance of the “Mad Woman” trope (Fig. 16 & 17) (Hagan, 2022; Le, 2022). Another excerpt from Fisher-Quan’s (2022a) blogpost illustrates:

“but, oh, it feels so good to be understood, even when it’s only as a caricature. this feeling is real because i have something to compare it to. i am in my fleabag era. i am in my yellow wallpaper era. i am in my phoebe bridgers era. i am fiona apple, i am eternal sunshine of the spotless mind, do you get it now, do you get it now.”

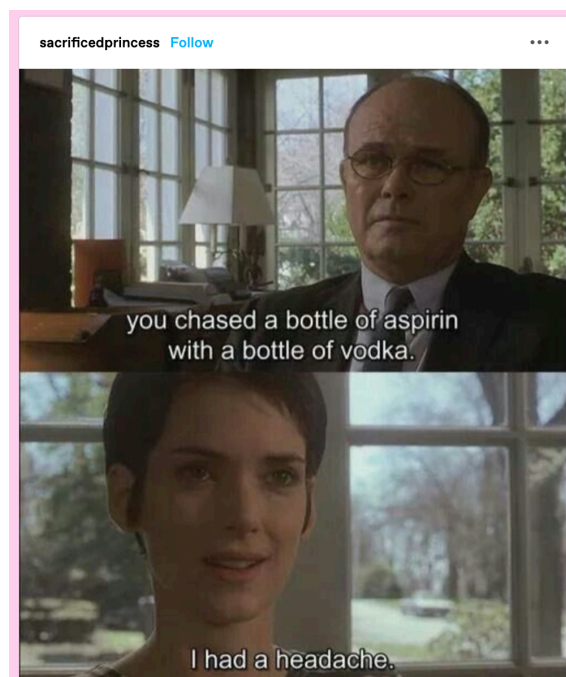


Fig. 15. *sacrificedprincess* on Tumblr (2022)

The conduct of the femcel online can be compared to someone suffering from post-traumatic shock; apathetic, passive in languor. Handyside (2017, p102) views this as the feminist awareness that experiencing life as a woman weighs heavily upon her shoulders; and the realisation that although we live in a 'post-feminist' society, there are many cases in which women are not deemed equal to their male counterparts. Thus, irony and humour are also employed as a tool to rationalise these contradictions that exist externally, that are out of one's control. The ironic aestheticisation (that the femcel has become so adept at) is a way of visualising her post feminist melancholia, to condense her sorrow into a pretty, consumable package; sharing her pain instead of merely living with it (Fisher- Quan, 2022; Handyside, 2017, p103).

Chapter Four: A New Feminine Mystique

Women utilising intellectualised apathy to numb pain and avoid emotion isn't a recent phenomenon. In her seminal book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan conducts research into the widespread unhappiness of suburban housewives in 1950s America. In an interview with a professor at her former Smith University he discusses the tactical detachment of his female students: "*They're bright enough, they have to be to get here at all now, but they just won't let themselves get interested. They seem to feel it will get in the way when they marry the young executive and raise all those children in the suburbs.*" Seniors at the university who had previously mislead Friedan in interviews about their career prospects explained: "*We don't like to be asked what we want to do. None of us know. None of us even like to think about it. The ones who are going to be married right away are the lucky ones. They don't have to think about it.*" (p52, 54, 1963; Clein, 2019).

This genre of ‘dissociative’ feminism can be attributed, in part, to a sense of widespread weariness about feminism in its current form. According to de Beauvoir, our entire culture induces passivity in women, destined to abandon freedom, freedom which gives life its meaning. The ‘fight for freedom’ as it has manifested in third wave feminism, fails to be as interesting to women as it once was. Viewed as demand too much change from the world too quickly, the hyper-optimistic, #girlboss, overzealous rhetoric that has dominated the digital sphere is now deemed somewhat embarrassing, desperate, and passé. This swing of our social pendulum has resulted in a deadpan, flat at times, darkly comic discussion about women’s position in the contemporary world. Online, the sentiment of the seniors at Smith University is echoed, a cohort of women ceasing to shout and complain, no longer interested in feminist or intellectual pursuits. They seek something more comforting than thinking about contemporary issues, relief



Fig. 16. *notagirblogatall* on Instagram (2022)

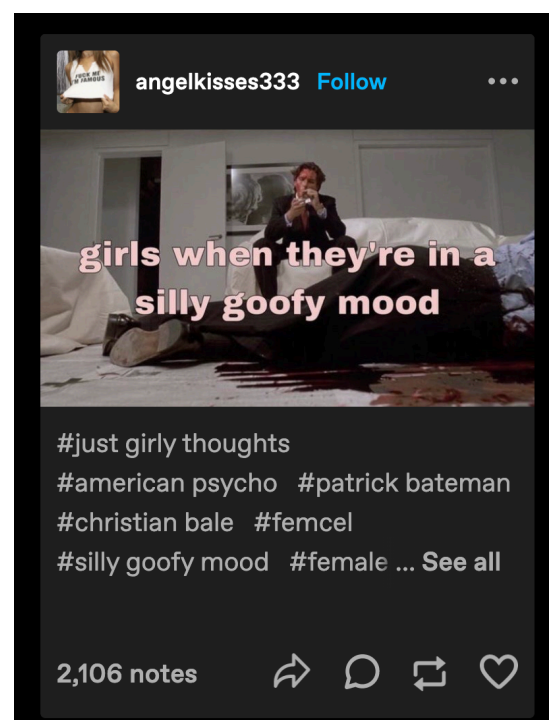


Fig. 17. *angelkisses333* on Tumblr (2022)

from the grind of capitalism and the pervasiveness of the patriarchy (Fisher-Quan, 2022b; Petterson, 2008; Davis, 2022; Clein, 2019; Fraterrigo 2015).

Some view this detachment as a feminist act in itself. Artist Audrey Wollen, who coined ‘Sad Girl Theory’, argues that a girls’ sadness is a manner of reclaiming authority over her life, body and identity; however the notions of agency and exercising control make up the foundations of third wave choice feminism, and hence the argument can be deemed not only invalid, but also somewhat contradictory.

Apathy and Detachment in Pop Culture

This increase in apathy has been reflected in media and popular culture in recent years, and a shift in the way women portray themselves is evident. On Instagram, what has been dubbed the ‘dissociative pout’ is the default pose for the detached feminist (Fig. 18). Self-aware in the most literal sense, selfie poses require a level of consciousness from the user, as they are in control of how the image is perceived - however the aim of the dissociative pout is to deflect this consciousness, and filter it through a lens of dour detachment. It is vital to note that this detachment is shrouded in irony, the user still cares about being perceived as attractive, but she is also aware that there is nothing attractive about caring too much (Davis, 2022; Fisher Quan 2022b; Barthes; 1972).

Another variety of the aloof, ‘dissociative woman’ is portrayed in *Fleabag* (2019), the title character of Phoebe Waller’s Bridge’s acclaimed series. Throughout the series, Fleabag engages in selfish, destructive and immature behaviour, but in lieu of confronting the consequences of these actions, she simply dissociates (Fig. 19). Leaving her body during times of discomfort (sex, arguments and breakdowns), she turns to the viewer with cynical and somewhat audacious commentary on whatever it is she’s avoiding. It is possible that this is the reason Fleabag remains a beloved, sympathetic character; she rarely feels sorry for herself, but instead ridicules herself from a distance: coy, clever, and most importantly, self-aware (Fisher Quan 2022b; Klein 2019).

As previously established, irony and humour are methods of dealing with serious issues, without becoming overwhelmed or burdened by the topic. However, it can also be argued that this nihilistic yet level-headed approach to feminist discourse online appeals to the male gaze, and caters to a patriarchal convention of the docile female. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey explains that pleasure in viewing has historically been divided between active/male and passive/female. She also explains how traditional cinemas embody the idea of voyeuristic separation, as the contrast between the bright screen and dark auditorium not only detaches the audience from the screen, but the audience from one another. By extending this theory into the 21st century, the concept of voyeuristic separation can be applied to SNS on both smartphones and personal computers: an isolated viewing experience severed from the maker of the content and from other viewers; shrouded in a distorted sense of connectedness (Renegar and Goehring, 2013; Mulvey 1999).

A Modern Male Gaze

As objects of the male gaze, women's place in patriarchal culture is that of a bearer of meaning, rather than a maker of it. A vessel of male desires and fantasies, she learns to



Fig. 18. 'A pet is a person that moves in with you @igirl', Chloe Cherry, @perfect_angelgirl, Instagram (2022)

observe herself early, usually in adolescence, stepping outside of her body in in order to view it unhampered; and thus begins her ambivalent, tense relationship between image and self-image (Mulvey, 1999; Clein, 2019). Novelist Margaret Atwood (1993) illustrates this contradiction:

Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur.



Fig. 19. Phoebe Waller-Bridge breaks the fourth wall in *Fleabag* (2019)

In the case of the ‘dissociative woman’ it can be argued that despite her status as an object of desire, a recognition of this fact is an effort to exercise a level of control. It has been said that to analyse beauty, or pleasure, is to destroy it. In the acknowledgement of the male gaze, and an ambivalence toward it, she tries to ruin the socially constructed image of who she is. Even so, ambivalence and passivity operate in the same manner,

and result in the same inaction - regardless if the woman is aware of it or not (Mulvey 1999; Handyside, 2017 p91).

Apathy as a Form of Privilege

The aestheticisation and commodification of the ‘dissociative woman’ has resulted in disdain for particular characters and for this branch of feminists in general. The types of women portrayed in *Fleabag* or Sally Rooney’s novels, the films of Sofia Coppola, or Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) are typically pretty, white and cisgender, troubled enough to be engaging but not so much so as to be abject. Simultaneously beautifully constructed and poignantly intelligent comments on the pressures and pleasure of womanhood, they are also symptoms of feminism’s ingrained exclusions of race and class. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan overlooked the lives of working-class women and women of colour: she offered middle-class solutions to a limited interpretation of middle-class problems and yet spoke, in absolutist language, of the plight of “the American woman”. Similarly, while Coppola carves out a space for feminine expression, her films are blind to the extent to which apathy and boredom are privileged positions to occupy. The women that can afford to adopt this apathetic view of feminism are also the women who do not stand to be at the same disadvantage as other women who disagree with aspects of third-wave feminism (1963; Fraterrigo, 2015; Clein, 2019; Handyside, 2017, p41, p35).

These depictions of women are simultaneously comforting and discouraging, to see complex female characters actualised and admired widely has been vital in the progression of female depiction from the flat, sexualised women described by Mulvey. However if *Fleabag* and *Normal People*’s Marianne Sheridan are this afflicted, what hope is there for women who do not fit their beautiful, white, privileged mould? The arrested development that seizes these women is not a novel concept: the elite, disillusioned

woman can be found in Pre-Raphaelite paintings of weeping girls, or in the tragic plays of Shakespeare (Figs. 20 & 21) (1999; Klein, 2019; Rooney, 2018). The apathetic manner in which some women have responded to the nature of third wave feminism is understandable, yet not completely permissible. In its current manifestation online, an infinite scroll into nihilism and irony, the femcel and her mascots are stripped of context and nuance. This can be attributed in part to the fleeting nature of our attention economy, and the short-form content that is so prevalent in the current online environment. Moreover, in line with the construction of the online self, the fine curation of an identity with the goal of popularity and engagement over critical analysis of third wave feminism results in a hollow parody of sincere emotion, a stereotype and commodification of female intelligence and sadness (Faucher, 2018; Belk, 2013; Devcollab 2017).



Fig. 20. *Ophelia* (Millais, 1852) .



Fig. 21. Cecilia Lisbon Mirrors Ophelia in *The Virgin Suicides*, (Coppola, 1999)

Conclusion

Although the social support observed in the virtual world is beneficial in the formation of communities and like-minded individuals; it appears as though semiotics of the build identity online are becoming increasingly niche and convoluted. It can be concluded that one constructs an online persona not to perform their identity, but to signify how similar their identity can be to that of who they admire. The aesthetics of consumption

have, in their own way, become a channel to make the self more consumable. In the case of the femcel, a list of 'femcel things' gives an insight into which pieces of media they align themselves with, and how they wish to be perceived: e.g. The Virgin Suicides, Lolita, Vivienne Westwood, and Sylvia Plath. The built identity online is no longer concerned with whether you have genuinely read *The Bell Jar*, or wear Vivienne Westwood, but rather if it appears as though you are the type of person who would. However the rate at which images and information are now disseminated online has increased dramatically as our virtual and actual lives merge, and the inundation of visual media results in the reduction of its value. In the struggle to navigate the world and find one's identity whilst remaining popular, multitudes of women are observed endeavouring to differentiate themselves within an algorithm that exists to perpetuate their own commodification. Projansky cited in: Handyside, 2017, p59, p93, p144; The Water Won't Turn Off, 2021).

Today, aligning oneself with fragments of media are utilised to rationalise the gap between the actual self and the self reembodyed online, along with humour and irony. The use of humour although amusing, has malign undertones, and self-awareness doused in sarcasm have birthed an apathetic and detached attitude to the issues of contemporary world. Moreover, the anonymous nature of the internet is advantageous, one can present as their most extreme, if not invented self. This intense apathy as a female identity is vindicating and disturbing, which promotes a nihilism exists somewhere between complacent and genuinely dangerous for the future of feminism (Baudrillard, 1988; Belk, 2013; Hagan, 2022; Barthes, 1972).

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