„As long as we can cry about the misery we can joke about it too“

An intersectional and queer theoretical analysis of a Swedish female-fronted humor series

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Indignation must always be the answer to indignity.
Reality is not destiny.

- Eduardo Galeano
“As long as we can cry about the misery we can joke about it too“  - An intersectional and queer theoretical analysis of a Swedish female-fronted humor series

The aim of this thesis is to use intersectional queer theoretical analysis in order to investigate if the Swedish female-fronted humor series "Mia och Klara" can be understood as feminist. Through semiotic analysis of discourses in the material, the appearance and non-appearance of different social location and the portrayal of these can be established. The social location-analysis coupled with the Bechdel test will show us that the show can be perceived as female-focused but that certain characters are paradoxical and challenge the primacy of the male gaze through storyline and camera angles. The TV-series can to the most part be seen as a liberal- and post-feminist storyline that reinforces and re-affirms a white, Swedish, femininity project.

Keywords: Feminisms, Mia & Klara, humor, female-fronted, intersectional.
Till syskonen grus, and to all the other crazy, beautiful and brave will-o'-the-wisps that touch my life. You are the lights in the darkness.

With love and rage. // F
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Introduction

Media is saturating our world glaring at us from TV's, screens and smart phones it is an almost constant influence in our daily lives. Comedy is usually perceived as a form of light entertainment and it is a powerful communication tool in an easy to digest and non-threatening form. “As long as we can cry about the misery we can joke about it too,” says actress Klara Zimmergren in the tv-series “Mia and Klara.”1 In the BBC documentary “Blurred Lines”2 in 2014, the subject of sexism and misogyny in contemporary mainstream media was investigated. Amongst others Dr Tomas Ford was interviewed on his research that shows that unchallenged misogynist and sexist humor encourages and empowers men with sexist attitudes to express and act according to these views. His research also gives examples of online feminism battling misogyny and sexism with the help of humor and parody. In the documentary, the effect of seriousness and the paradoxical nature of humor in contemporary society become apparent as the impact of comedy is relevant to changes in or re-affirmations of discourses, beliefs, attitudes and power relations. Research and analysis on the performance and function of “social locations”3 in comedy can thus provide important information on strategies of subversion and processes of reinforcement of power structures.

1.1 Contextual background

The world of comedy like most media fields is male-dominated.4 In Sweden, like in many other contexts, women have often been tokenized or used as supporting roles for male actors. And even though there have been many women successfully engaging in comedy they have seldom seen the starlight, as the common conviction still is that “[a]n

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1 [Translated by author] Nöjesguiden, “Döskalle & Mästerligt Möter Mia & Klara.”
'funny woman' can only exist as the object of humor, not its subject.” Maria Ohlsson has done research into gender ratio and representation in humor. Her findings show that there are prevalent notions stating that women are not funny and her research exemplifies how this discourse as a power tool excludes women from public life and the male dominated humor sphere. The power and status position of the protagonist affects if and how the joke is received as funny or not and Ohlsson claims that refusing women’s humor is a way to preserve social power structures between men and women. But during the last 16 years female-fronted comedy TV-series have reached great success and popularity in Sweden, an interesting shift for women in comedy. With shows like “Reuter & Skoog” (1999-2000), other series like “Mia & Klara” (2007 and 2009), “Högklackat” (2012) and “Full Patte” (2014) have made way for female-fronted, and to some extent, female-focused humor. And even though exclusion of women have continued in the fields of stand-up comedy and comedy media, a debate on how humor and the professional field of comedy in Sweden has been and is being gendered “male” has arisen. Is this type of female-fronted or femal-focused humor pushing new narratives and roles for women in media? Can this also mean that these type of comedies have the potential of being politically influential? As humor is created from certain social locations, with roles in certain social locations and for spectators in certain social locations, and is a communication tool that can affect social power structures I find it fascinating to analyse one of these female-fronted comedy TV-series “Mia and Klara” to see what it “does”. Specifically following the debate in Sweden about male-dominance in humor production, my investigation will attempt to answer the question can the series be regarded as feminist, and if so what type of feminism?

1.2 Aim and Query

5 Katharine Streip, “‘Just a Cérébrale’: Jean Rhys, Women’s Humor, and Ressentiment,” Representations, 45, 1994, p. 117.
The aim of this thesis is to investigate if the Swedish female-fronted humor series "Mia och Klara" can be understood as feminist, and if so, what type of feminism?

To answer this query I will raise the following secondary questions to the material:

- What discourses figure in the narrative, dialogue and imagery and how do these translate into portrayals of certain social locations (with regard to gender, sexuality, ability, class, age, race and ethnicity)? Are, for example, marginalized social locations according to class, gender, race and ethnicity necessary included, matching discourses of socialist feminism, queer-feminism and postcolonial feminism?

- How are these social locations represented, are they hegemonic or inventive, affirmative or subversive, inclusive or divisive? How does the humor function with regard to social locations? Does it make fun of, fun with, or is it resentment humor? This essay aims to investigate the way these characterisations make fun of, go beyond or neutralize normative conceptions of social locations, as well as if they exclude or include men in the narratives, correlate with discourses in different feminisms in their relationship to and strategies toward power structures in society.

- Does the TV-series pass the Bechdel test? As the Bechdel test can point out the focus of the narratives being framed within or transgressing the normative role of women in constant relation to males it can point towards differences in between feminist discourses. Liberal-feminism, for example, includes men while radical-feminism uses separatism as a strategy.

- How does the outcome of the analysis correlate with feminist discourses, such as liberal-feminism, radical-feminism, queer-feminism, post-colonial feminism, etc.?

1.3 Prior research

Mostly I took inspiration from an array of research on different forms of media analysis dealing with portrayals of social locations as well as texts on feminist media produc-
tion. In the end of my writing process I came across one dissertation about Swedish humor culture in regards to feminine characters “Allt annat än allvar: den komiska kvinnliga grotesken i svensk samtida skrattkultur” by Anna Lundberg but due to time pressure I have been unable to include it in this thesis (though it is referred to in Rosenbergs book). The research into feminist performance art and film, functions of gendered humor, forms of feminist humor and subversive possibilities in feminist performance art listed here enables us to discuss if the TV-series “Mia and Klara” can be seen as feminist.

Within the Swedish academic context I drew inspiration from Rosenberg’s historiography of feminist and female-focused performance art. Rosenberg specifically touches upon different feminisms’ usage of performance art as a strategy, and connects this to a Scandinavian context and debate. She draws on the theories of the “carnivalesque” by Bakhtin to show how feminist performers use grotesque realism to challenge power structures but also warns about the lacking solidarity with other struggles within certain feminist performances. Finally she sees potential in “multi-solidaric” feminist performances for creating a “militant optimism and a peaceful insurgency.”

Rosenbergs book is useful to investigate the female representations in the series and gives a queer-feminist definition of what feminist performance art should be (see Feminisms, chapter 3.2).

Teresa de Lauretis has investigated the feminist form of film and representation in analysing differences in form, storyline, portrayal, viewpoint and expected viewer as well as the possibility of going beyond the male gaze and creating subversive “codes of representation.” She argues that second wave women’s cinema has redefined public and private space and created a paradoxical form that goes beyond and contra “the traditional, classical and modernist, canons of aesthetic representation” to create “a new language of desire” and a “destruction of visual pleasures” that consists of the “deaestheticization of the female body, the desexualization of violence, [and] the deoedipalization of narrative.”

deaesthetic” and use her definition of “addressing the spectator as a woman” as a requirement for separatist feminisms as it necessitates that all points of identification in the film are constructed as female, feminine or feminist.

Helga Kotthoff identifies four dimensions of function of gendered humor relating to “status, aggressiveness, social alignment and sexuality”. These functions will be used to investigate how the different social locations and the portrayal of them are used in the narratives. Just as Ohlsson claims in her text, Kotthoff argues that making people laugh requires and gives status to a person and “can affirm one's dominance in the hierarchical social structure” and that female jokes are traditionally on the expense of themselves, so called ressentiment humor. Aggressive humor, according to Kotthoff, functions as an indirect and humiliating attack that is hard to critique and can be used to distance oneself from normative expectations of feminine behaviour as it is considered male-coded. Social alignment humor, on the other hand, produces the effect of familiarity and group feeling through playing on shared experience, difficulties, and constraints in life is a female-coded type of humor. Teasing, on the other hand, can be seen as a combination of aggressive and social alignment humor that despite its aggressive tone functions as group reinforcing. Teasing can be on the expense or exclusion of an other alternately with the inclusion of playful cues toward an in-group member and signalling a stable relationship. However, it can also function both as policing of as well as distancing towards norms of femininity.

According to Kotthoff, most sexualized jokes are on the expense of women but the rise of equality has made sexualized jokes on behalf of men common in the western world. Sexualized jokes can be a refuge for sexual harrassment, can signal a high level of intimacy between people, and can unmask sexist assumptions and turn the tables. As a critique Kotthoff’s text is based on research using gender as a binary and stable category, this type of research is problematic as it does not question the “gender differences myth” discourse. Researching outside of categories can prove that differences within groups of people are more marked than differences between them. I will thus

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ignore how Kotthoff has gendered different types of humor and focus on the way the different types function.

Janet Bing\(^{15}\) looks into the contents and paradoxical function of feminist humor as subversive or divisive, as inclusion of men in jokes might exclude the female experience and applying a strong division between Male-Female reinforces prevailing ideas of gender binarism.\(^{16}\) She uses the terms “reinforcing”, “subversive” and “contesting” humor meaning humor that implicitly or explicitly: maintains power relationships, challenges power relationships, and humor used by marginalized people to contest power structures. Paradoxically subversive humor can have the effect of maintaining hierarchies by venting hostility in an acceptable way, for it to be subversive it also needs to include a challenging of the structure as well as suggesting alternatives. This is also true for humor that is based on shared experiences, and humor used to psychologically cope with oppressive situations. Bing means that the notion of feminist humor usually includes jokes that insult men, but according to her, it is only when women make jokes about shared experiences and make women the focus that it is truly feminist. Because “[b]y targeting men, disparaging humor ignores women, and makes women, their lives, their values and their interests invisible.”\(^{17}\) “Divisive humor” is attacking people while inclusive humor “makes fun of absurd attitudes, ideas, beliefs and systems that keep female at a disadvantage.”\(^{18}\)

Lesbian humor is according to Bing a form of feminist humor as it does not need to refer to a male sphere and instead takes up “shared experiences of women”; “menstruation, cramps, childbirth, child care, panty hose, hot flashes, fashion, low wages, beauty standards, housework, shopping, illness, old age, bad doctors, cooking, money, and of course, sex”. Even though Bing remarks that the list could go on, my critique is here first of all of the implication that all women “are in the same boat” erasing different experiences between women due to class, age, ability, sexuality, race and ethnicity. Her “female experiences” is also bordering on the essentialist, connecting them to the reproductive functions of a “normal female body”.

\(^{15}\) Bing, “Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?”
\(^{16}\) The idea of gender and sex being strictly male or female, where these are also naturalized as dichotomous and stable categories.
\(^{17}\) Bing, “Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?,” p. 27.
\(^{18}\) Janet Bing, “Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?,” p. 28.
Streip, on the other hand, sees a strategy for women in Rhys's “ressentiment humor”, where humorous and narcissistic self-deprecation creates a discomfort that mocks the spectator. “Women practice self-humor so that it becomes a way of laughing at other. The female ressentiment comic makes fun of you too, through your response to her self-humor.” This humor can also have a backlash by affirming a “prejudice norm” based on negative stereotypes according to Ford's research, which not only empowers those with prejudice but can make it more likely for them to act against stigmatized groups of people. This depends on the spectators’ preconceived ideas of the theme of the joke, for example, women over-eating or being overly obsessed with relationships to men can be perceived as performing ressentiment humor and satire only so far as the spectator does not connect the performance to internalized prejudice or perceives it as self-deprecating humor. It can thus be both affirmative and subversive, divisive and inclusive, as well as contesting depending on the contents and spectator, I will refer to ressentiment humor with regard to this paradoxical effect.

Shifman and Lemish has in their research on gendered humor on the internet isolated two themes of postfeminist humor: “Mars and Venus” adhering to gender differences in communication and needs, and “Girl Power” adhering to individualism and empowerment, as well as three forms of “traditional humor” topics; marriage, sex, and blondes. They use the terms “conservative” or “affirmative-sexist” humor and “rebellious/subversive” humor meaning; humor on expense of marginalized social locations that affirm power structures, and humor as a weapon against power structures and dominant groups used by marginalized social locations. Shifman and Lemish's definition of feminist humor necessitates that it is oppositional and critical of gender inequalities and hegemonic stereotyping, is an expression of empowerment referring to the ability to mock hegemonic masculinity, and that it has a medium through which it can be spread. Within the private sphere, the traditional humor focuses on marriage

22 Shifman and Lemish, “‘Mars and Venus’ in Virtual Space: Post-Feminist Humor and the Internet,” 253–73.
and the domestic while post-feminist humor focuses on “'maintenance' of heterosexual relationships.”

According to the authors structural factors of inequality were predominantly not referred to in the jokes, the discourse reinforced a gender binarism, and the empowering aspects where directed at individual self-satisfaction. Social issues regarding race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, ethnicity were not present and “the middle-class Western life styles are 'naturalized'. In the end these discourses reiterate universal assumptions about gender, only questioning the value judgements of them and do not make a difference to the gendered structures, as well as connecting gender to biology and positioning “self-directed humor as an indication of empowerment and coolness” which can dismantle earlier feminist achievements.

I will use the terms of affirmative, subversive and contesting humor as well as divisive and inclusive humor, and teasing and ressentiment humor with their paradoxical functions. I will use the term affirmative humor as a description for both Shifman and Lemish's “affirmative-sexist”or “conservative” humor, Kotthoffs “status” and gender norm reinforcing teasing humor, as well as Bings “reinforcing” humor. The term “Divisive” humor from Bing will include aggressive humor from Kotthof. And the “inclusive” humor will include teasing as group affirmation as well as “social alignment” humor from Kotthoff. Shifman and Lemish's definition of subversive humor will include Bing's critique of it merely being an acceptable form of venting about oppression without affecting the status quo unless it connects to structures of inequality or alternatives, if it includes these aspects it will be described as contesting humor.

Considerations must also be made when using research based on performance art or on internet material on TV-media, as the form differs when not including the physical presence of audience and actors (triggering intense affect and social group reaction processes). TV-media, as a massmedia form, is also more readily semiotically controlled (directing the gaze e.t.c.), is more prone to portray hegemonic norms to entice a

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26 Shifman and Lemish, “‘Mars and Venus’ in Virtual Space: Post-Feminist Humor and the Internet,” p. 270.
larger audience, and also has the possibilities of a longer span of impact on a broader population than performance art.

1.4 The Author

As an understanding of a performance is connected to the viewers’ “ideological self-understanding” perspectives are always bound to social locations. I will thus include myself in having such a position. As academics it is important to address “the view from nowhere/view from everywhere” (the extremes of absolutism and relativism) and admit that we are not calculators but beings with bodies, perspectives and experiences that see from “somewhere”, a specific social position in a specific time and place. But we must also face our social interdependence and empathically switch perspectives to reach “views from many wheres.”

I was born in Sweden into a working class (although at long times non-working) and conflict-ridden family with a history of dysfunctional relationships over generations. Growing up, I lived in a small industrial city riddled with social conflicts, unemployment, violence, immigration issues (due to bad integration structures), and at the same time it was also a centre for many extreme right-wing groups. During my childhood and teenage years, I gained a complex insight into the everyday struggles between people in different social locations from experiencing trauma, bearing witness and becoming an activist in the issues in my home town. Issues of class, gender roles, sexual preferences, race and ethnicity, politics of representation, religious belief and political ideologies have been constantly present in my life since and most of my time has been and is spent on acting for social change as an ally and activist in these fields.

I am grateful to the dis-privilege I have experienced living under the poverty limit most of my life, being a female and being a trauma survivor for the understandings that can only grow from experiencing life from the bottom. I also acknowledge and am

grateful for the privileges I was born with: being able-bodied, being white with a Swedish passport, and being cis-gendered for the possibility to achieve a level of higher education and a voice. Since I read “The Daughters of Egalia” by Gerd Brantenberg when I was fourteen, I knew I was a feminist. I hope to one day be able to help transform the world a little through as affectionate writings as hers, giving voices and faces to the stories that are muffled by the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” I believe empathy is the key to unlocking the world.

Methodological Considerations

2.1 A queer theoretical, intersectional and ethnographic method

Queer theory in analysis stands critical to naturalized ideas regarding heterosexuality, gender binarism and heteronormativity in representation. In this critique lies that all such systems are social constructions, as such, the differences we adhere to bodies in the social process of gendering have less to do with “natural” sex division than with a current societies’ ideas about the meanings and values that should be attributed to different physiques. The effect of using a queer theoretical perspective is then to view the “normal” as foreign and see how it is semiotically constructed, what discourses are constructed and what they “do”. Hegemonic gendered constructions in societies of today are for example: binarism, cis-genderism and heteronormativity. These beliefs must be investigated as they give rise to oppressive ideas, norms and social systems relating to gender, such as homo- and trans-phobia, cis-sexism, sexism etc. The material will be analysed through this emphasis on the gendering process.

Cisgender means that the sex or biological categorization of the person matches their gender identity.


Binarism means assuming and naturalizing two stable oppositional sexes and genders that align. Cis-genderism means assuming that the gendered physique, gender identity and gendered behaviour corresponds the biological determined sex within a binary gender system. Heteronormativity assumes and naturalizes binarism and heterosexuality as the norm.
As an analytical tool intersectionality challenges bearing social categories - primarily race, gender and class – as social constructions are multiplicative, meaning that they should always be treated as prevalent in all situations and for all people unless they can be dismissed. Ideas about race, gender and class exist as norms and social structures through repeated discourses. Categories within these structures intra-act in social contexts and translate into personal social locations that are fluid. As such the focus lies on what social categories are present in the social interaction within a certain context, how the social actors’ social locations become determined through the intra-acting of these categories, how norms regarding social locations are created, maintained or challenged. In this thesis I look at the how categories like gender/sex, ethnicity/race, class/education, body types, ability, age and sexuality together with the context synthesize into social locations, as well as what social locations are present, referred to and silenced, and what this “does”.

As western feminist theory has been, and still is, critiqued for color blindness, essentialism, and queer exclusion, it is important to include an intersectional and queer theoretical perspective in the method. These perspectives are also vital as “the lack of non-white visibility on stage and film is not perceived as a problem” in Sweden.

My methodological inspiration comes from Barnum and M. Zajicek’s intersectional content and structuralist/semiotic analysis on Diesel advertisements. In their critical reading they read “against” dominant ideologies such as the “white heterosexual capitalist patriarchy” and analyse bodies within the symbolic environments they are placed within. In analysing a TV-series we can also add spoken discourse, sounds and

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33 That social categories are multiplicative instead of additive means that they are not added to but “maintain each other”, that they constitute both “oppression and opportunity”, and that they are interactive in a conditional relationship instead of linear. See Bart Landry, Race, Gender and Class (2007), p. 12f.
34 Intra-acting is a concept developed by Karen Barad and means that objects do not exist independently and influence each other, as in an interaction, but emerge through and therefore partly constitute each other.
35 See Reyes and Gröndahl, Framtidens Feminismer - Intersektionella Interventioner I Den Feministiska Debatten; Rosenberg, Ilska, Hopp Och Solidaritet; Gemzöe, Feminism; Rydström and Tjeder, Kvinnor, Män Och Alla Andra.
37 To do a semiotic analysis means to view all representation as “text”, with a structural focus it also calculates in the relations between the symbolic meanings in the text and the cultural norms and power structures in the context it was produced within attempting to figure out what it “does”.
gestures to the semiotic data that is being analysed. They also use three steps through literal, interpretative and reflexive reading to analyse this data in a holistic way. Due to a lack of time and space my literal analysis conducted during watching the TV-series will not be included here. Instead a critical, interpretive and reflexive reading will make up the analysis. Keeping in mind that humor is constructed within a certain context, by people in certain social locations and directed toward certain spectators.

My reading of this “text” is also auto-ethnographic as it is based on my perception of the material and what is being “done”. Ethnographic method entails alternating between a distanced and intimate reading of the material where the investigator can never be fully separated from the subject. Hence, as I become the tool used to create the material, my social location and the affect that is created in the meeting with the material is important in regard to the affective turn in ethnography. The affective turn includes how we are moved and changed by unruly bodies, experiences, feelings and objects that create affects in us. Instead of seeing we are “touched.” As “no seeing is neutral” traditional methods of “disembodied” knowledge production risks neutralizing the male-dominated western canon of scientific knowledge. Within ethnography the idea of exact objectivity is challenged by regarding research as what I would call an “intra-subjective” process. Intra-subjective, inspired by Barad's concept of “intra-acting,” means that the researcher as well as the subject are not stable entities but are fluid and changing, and the research process thus involves a “meeting” between ever-changing entities that gives birth to a research material. The results of ethnographic research are thus not possible to scientifically validate by repetition according to traditional reliability methods as they are processes within specific moments within specific contexts and through fluid entities. The goal of ethnographic research is a processual increase of understanding of the social worlds we inhabit, not a search for an unattainable, universal and stable “truth”.

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39 The affective turn critiques the dominant ocular centric idea of “seeing” the world as the way to knowledge. Instead it is argued that the material world around us intra-acts with us, and that it can push us through affective experiences that are emotional rather than logical.
40 Jonas Frykman, Berörd (2012).
42 “Intra-actions are causally constraining nondeterministic enactments through which matter-in-the-process-of-becoming is sedimented out and enfolded in further materializations. Material conditions matter, not because they “support” particular discourses that are the actual generative factors in the formation of bodies but rather because matter comes to matter through the iterative intra-activity of the world in its becoming.” Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” Signs, 28/3 (2003), p. 823.
2.2 The Bechdel test

The Bechdel test is inspired by Alison Bechdel's comic strip “The Rule” that was released in 1985. The requirement for a movie to pass the Bechdel test is that two women speak to each other about something else than a man. In some altered versions it is required that the women have names and are thus actual characters in the plot, or that they speak for longer than one minute. There is also a difference between versions allowing men to be referred to while not being the topic of conversation, and the exclusion of all topics that even refer to men, such as romance or marriage. The Bechdel test was included into the “gender equality rating” introduced into four Swedish theatres in 2013, which is supported by the Swedish Film Institute. The usage of the Bechdel test is often motivated by a will to further the inclusion of women and focus on women's experiences in movies by highlighting the exclusion of them within male-dominated media. Movies that pass the Bechdel test are not by default feminist as they can still portray female stereotypes in the narrative without referring to or engaging with men. But the test does show where the focus in the storyline and characters lie within the narrative; is it on women and female experiences or are women only important in the narrative as support roles for men and a male-centered storyline? Although the actual media that passes the test is not necessarily feminist, the test can in itself also be seen to further equality through a demystifying impact on the gendering process within media.

In my usage of the Bechdel test I will not allow conversations relating to heterosexual romance or relationships pass the test as a queer theoretical and intersectional analysis needs to take into account the naturalization of heteronormativity. Even if these portrayals are satirized they will still count as the focus of the narrative still is on men or heterosexual relations. I will also require that the characters are named, as they are then part of the plot.
2.3 Material

The first season of the TV-series “Mia and Klara” was produced by Lars Säfström ("The Fifth Woman", 2002) and broadcasted on SVT (the Swedish national television service) in 2007. The script was written by the actors Mia Skäringer and Klara Zimmergren in cooperation with the director Dan Zethraeus ("Dolly & Dolly", 1998). It was based on the actresses’ prior radio humor show, “Roll on”, and included some of the same characters. The show has been described as a type of “twisted everyday realism.” This specific series was chosen due to its popularity and availability. The second season was not included in the thesis due to page and time restriction. The material consists of season one from the 2011 DVD box-set of the TV-series, eight episodes of about 30 minutes each. (Sadly there are no subtitles available in other languages than Swedish).

While viewing the TV-series, notes were taken on dialogue, movement, environment, sounds, camera angles as well as social location-imagery and discourse (skin tone, manners, names, clothes, age, sexuality etc). The series was then re-watched and the Bechdel test was applied.

3 Theoretical Framework

“[Knowledge] itself is always situated and framed and what is excluded from the borders of the image is as significant as what is included.”

3.1 Humor and social locations

Humor is an effective interactive communication tool that can challenge and establish power. Its power lies in it being able to articulate views and realities that are socially problematic, tabooed or silenced in society, as social sanctions against these transgres-

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sions can be escaped by merely uttering the magic words; “it was just a joke”. Furthermore, humor is especially apt for boundary crossing and agitation because it is “disarming [...] communicative and makes the audience engaged without it feeling accused.”

For a narrative to be accepted as humorous in a social interaction it requires a cue, a specific form and for it to be received with laughter. The successful performance of humor depends on the quality of the performance in itself as well as the social location of performer and audience. Different people hence find different humor entertaining depending on their experiences and social locations, determined by for example class/education, ethnicity/race, gender/sex, age, ability, sexuality etc. Humor is constructed by people in certain social locations and with a certain spectator in mind, which leads us to investigate how the humor in “Mia and Klara” is constructed and if this correlates with feminist discourses.

Narrowing down the terms in the prior research I will use the terms “affirmative” humor for such humor that reinforces social hierarchies, status and gender norms, “divisive” humor for such humor that attacks and excludes, and “inclusive” humor for such humor that is group or affinity creating. Sexualizing jokes will also be examined for examples of naturalizing sexual harassment, denoting intimacy or unmasking sexism by turning the tables (according to Kotthoff). “Subversive” humor will include humor that challenges power relations, hierarchies and norms through teasing, turning the tables, satire and irony. Bings “contesting” humor will be used for humor that not only challenges power relationships but includes a critique of structures as well as suggesting alternatives. Finally “ressentiment” humor stands for a highly satirized form of self-deprecating humor that through its extreme presentation seems to direct the laugh at the spectators’ own reactions. But depending on how it is perceived by the spectator it can be both affirmative and subversive, divisive and inclusive. I will refer to ressentiment humor with regard to this hypersymbolical and paradoxical effect.

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46 “Affirmative” humor will include “status” humor and teasing that polices gender behaviour from Kotthoff, “conservative humor” from Shifman and Lemish, as well as “reinforcing humor” from Bing. “Divisive” humor includes “aggressive” humor from Kotthoff, and “inclusive” humor includes “social alignment” humor and in-group “teasing” from Kotthoff. “Ressentiment” humor will be used as possibly paradoxically, as it has the possibility of fitting into all these definitions.
3.2 Feminisms

Rosenberg describes feminism “as a tradition of a number of mutual questions that do not always result in mutual answers and strategies.”

White claims that feminism is not one single notion, and de Lauretis calls feminisms “passionate fictions” and stresses that “feminist specificity lies in a 'subjective' way of knowing.”

Drawing on the books of Gemzöe, Rydström and Tjeder, and de los Reyes and Gröndahl, I will delineate a few of the most influential strands of feminisms that will be important in the analysis of the material.

Liberal feminism is one of the oldest strands of feminism becoming influential around the world in the mid 19th century. In Sweden this ‘first wave’ was fronted by the women’s rights movement, by amongst others Ellen Key and Fredrika Bremer. The liberal feminists were usually white, middle-class women who aspired to gain full citizenship and equal rights as men through the law and the political system. Some of the liberal feminists such as the suffragettes in England were militant, but most of the liberal feminists of the Women's movement were pacifist, such as in Sweden. The movement predominantly consisted of bourgeois women who organized educational and charity projects, fought for the right to education and the right to vote and made alliances with men in political parties to further their cause. Early liberal feminists, such as Margaret Sanger, have been accused of racism, ableism and classism because of supporting eugenics ideas. Eugenics was also supported by feminist Elise Ottesen Jensen (one of the leading characters in the Swedish organisation for sexual education and planned parenthood, RFSL) in Sweden during the 1920's, who argued for forced sterilisations of “lesser” people.

49 See Lena Gemzöe, Feminism (2006); Jens Rydström and David Tjeder, Kvinnor, Män Och Alla Andra (2009); Paulina De Los Reyes and Satu Gröndahl, Framtidens Feminismer - Intersektionella Interventioner I Den Feministiska Debatten, ed. by Paulina de los Reyes and Satu Gröndahl (Hägersten, 2007).
Today liberal feminism is still critiqued for being dominated by white middle-class cis-women, as well as focusing on reaching equal economic and status positions as men through the system, not aiming at dismantling it. It is also critiqued for not having a theory of the basis of women's oppression, as well as rarely including history and other structures of oppression or global contexts into the analysis. In Sweden, biological feminism can also be tied to liberal feminism as well as the “equality movement”. Critique against liberal feminism has also come from Black feminism and socialist feminism for its positioning of a white bourgeois western “Woman” as the norm, and through this positioning oppressing women in other social locations. Critique also came in a similar fashion from lesbian feminists and queer fractions regarding hetero- and cis-sexism.

Postfeminism is a description by critiques of a current strand of feminism that can be connected to a liberal feminist discourse of fighting for “inclusion into the system” an aspiration toward “Girl Power”, that is, to be “feminine” (a traditional role focusing on looks, emotionality, consumption) and “feminist” (equal opportunities, legal rights), and the pursuit of this life-style through the consumerist system. According to Shifman and Lemish, the attributes of postfeminism is the “intertwining of feminist and anti-feminist backlash ideas,” focusing on choice and empowerment for women and in the same time directing this power toward consumerism, the perfect body and “the beauty myth”, as well as focusing on “natural” biological differences between men and women. Their “Mars and Venus” as well as the “Girl Power” theme will be used to indicate postfeminism.

Radical feminism was the so called ‘second wave’ of feminism, occurring around the 1960's in the western world. Sprung out of a critique of a male-centered socialist analysis, emphasis was shifted from economic classes to women as a class. Radical fem-

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51 Biological feminism focuses on biological “facts”, often of the brain and hormones, to neutralize perceived differences between “women” and “men” in personality and skill differences. See Sara Arrhenius, En Riktig Kvinna - Om Biologism Och Könsskillnad (Stockholm, 1999). They especially emphasize and glorify motherhood as the core experience of being a “Woman”. They also have a tendency to position women as the more gentle and fair “mother of humanity”. They propagate for the fact that women should be supported in “their specific qualities”, for example by getting a salary from the state for being stay-at-home mothers.

52 See Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish, “‘Mars and Venus’ in Virtual Space: Post-Feminist Humor and the Internet,” (2010).

Feminism viewed society as inherently patriarchal and oppressive to women; they saw women as a group connected by experiences of oppression, connected the 'personal' to the 'political', and fought for the dismantling of the societal system instead of inclusion into it. Their focus was on the economic exploitation of women's reproductive skills (childbearing, home-making, prostitution, service and care), women's confinement to the private sphere, issues of male (often sexual) violence, women's right to their bodies, sexuality and the public sphere. The strategies employed by radical feminists were separatism from men, lesbian lifestyles, awareness-raising activism, highlighting women's everyday experiences, sabotages and attacks on businesses profiting from the exploitation of women etc.

Critique against radical feminism is that it is gender essentialist, divisive, grouping “all men” together as contributing to patriarchy and dominant over “all women” creating two power position without considering contextual factors. Early radical feminists were predominantly white but with the influence of Black Feminisms race analysis, some women of colour later became active in the movement. In the 1980's the feminist sex wars also split radical feminists into anti-porn and sex-positive fractions regarding the issues of pornography, sex-work/prostitution, sexual practices like penetration and BDSM, and the issue of trans-inclusion. Radical lesbian feminists are also still critiqued for excluding trans-women and for connecting feminine experience with a biologically female body. Anarcha-feminism, lesbian feminism, marxist-socialist feminism and cultural feminism are some of today's feminisms that have drawn upon this legacy and that are still struggling with some of the same critique. During the analysis of the material I will especially look for De Lauretis “feminist deaesthetic” and the “addressing the spectator as a woman” as a requirement for radical feminisms as it embraces separatism by making all points of identification in the film female, feminine or feminist.

The Black Feminism movement starting in the 1970's in the U.S. has been greatly influential in the feminist debate. As the theories of black feminism saw race, gender and class as inextricably connected they gave birth to the concept of intersectionality. They also directed strong critique towards the grouping together of women's experiences and the critique of motherhood from other feminists. Famous theorists include Alice...
Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis and bell hooks. Feminisms bearing on similar issues are Chicana Feminism, Postcolonial feminism, Transnational feminism and Third-world feminisms. Black feminism has only recently come into the feminist debate in Sweden, led by for example Victoria Kawesa, Fanna Ndow and Alle Eriksson. These branches of feminist thought are extremely influential in today's global feminist debate and for them to be included in the narrative several different social locations (with regard to class, race, ethnicity and gender) are required as characters to identify with.

Third wave feminism can be seen as beginning sometime in the late 1980's inspired by post-modernism. It consists of a mosaic of different feminisms, often drawing on the lessons and issues within the conflicts of earlier feminisms. Pro-femininity fractions on the ground proclaimed “girl power” for a younger generation, “femme revolution” in the queer fractions and “riot grrrls” subverted and challenged the image of passive femininity still inherent in left-radical politics. In the same time queer theory and postcolonial feminism took great strides in the academic arena de-constructing dichotomies within gender and colonial thinking, creating theories taking into account the global complexities of different contexts, different social locations and the social constructedness of the world. Well known queer theorists are for example Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam amongst others. Postcolonial feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty joined black and chicana feminism in critiquing the white supremacy but also the euro-centricity in feminist theory. Queer-theory also merged with different feminist theories, for example, Tiina Rosenberg is a famous queer-feminist. For queer-feminism to be visible in the narrative it is required that social locations are present that point toward the constructedness of gender, as well as a critique of heteronormativity and gender binarism.

In recent days feminist activism and theory has virtually exploded and with the help of the internet feminists and people across the globe are connecting and conflicting in their struggles. Third wave feminism led from 'Woman' and 'feminism' to “women and feminisms.”

4 Analysis of Mia and Klara – female-fronted humor

4.1 Semiotic positioning of the narrative and the gaze

In the TV-series there are semiotic cues to where the narrative is positioned. What struck me the most was the affect created by the brown brick apartment houses that are used as crossovers between sketches. Not only are they a distinct part of the infamous 1970's style of architecture in Sweden but they carry subtle semiotic signals of class and are connected to specific characters in the series. For example, the crossover tracing a brown brick façade from a metal gate entrance up onto a roof with square protruding metal-cased windows relates to a middle-class or family-house standard which is connected to the narrative of the character of Viveka. The character of Rolle's narrative has a crossover showing a similarly coded front while Tabita’s character show the typical brown buildings built for working class families during the urbanisation projects in the 1970's, big square complexes with playgrounds enclosed in the middle of them. In this case both the building style and the satellite dishes affectively pull me back in time to the neighbourhood where I grew up, these semiotic signs signal a working-class and multi-cultural neighbourhood, places that are often deemed “problematic”. In contrast to this we notice that the psychologist that the character of Gulletussan starts to see in episode eight is introduced with the façade of a white classic building front of the inner big cities, signalling upper-class professionality.

There are also examples of how a specifically Swedish national context is encoded into the narrative. The red wooden vacation house with white corners in episode six represents a type of buildings that are strong national symbols (typical for the Swedish country-side where most of my family live). The famous building the “Turning torso” located in Malmö in Sweden that shows up in episode seven is as well an architectural sign of a Swedish national context. In episode eight two musical jingles are hummed by Mia and Klara in the wedding scene that affectively connected to memories and a nostalgic feeling from my own childhood. When I located the jingles they turned out to be famous intros for the children programs “Boktipset” (1976–1989) and “Sagostunden” (1978 and 1984) produced by the Swedish national TV-station SVT.
The camera directs our gaze and in the series this gaze constantly and efficiently cuts out most characters that can be read and are named male. The communication and gaze is predominantly fixed on the characters of the show, of whom most can be read and are named female. This ratio also responds to the dialogue in the series. A good example of this is in the case of the narratives of Viveka, where the camera angles cut out eir\textsuperscript{55} child Stefan from the talk at the kitchen table even though he is sitting right next to eir partner who is in dialogue with Viveka. It creates an annoyance at first as we want to see “all characters” involved, but it also raises questions on how common place this camera erasure is for female support characters. Despite this visual erasure of men, issues of heterosexual and heteronormative relations are almost constantly in focus within the discourse. The environment for the jokes is predominantly in a private sphere (Ansi and Mona treat the shop as their private sphere and make the space ambiguous), or female sphere (service jobs, hairdressers etc).

The series does pass the Bechdel test on several occasions, but as the majority of the dialogue is centred around men or/and heterosexual romance, this becomes the dominant focus. This means that the narratives are predominantly focused on women's life experiences in relation to men. According to Bing\textsuperscript{56} a dominant focus on men in the narrative makes women's experiences invisible.

4.2 Character analysis - social locations and intersections

Establishing a social location requires noticing semiotic signs signalling age, gender, sexuality, ability, class, race and ethnicity. We will examine each characterisations social location through the way they are described on the back of the DVD, their names, behaviours, clothing style, accents, cues in the imagery, etc.

On the back of the DVD-box it says: “Mia and Klara [also] play their own alter egos. They rehash and stalk old boyfriends, arranging what clothes they will wear when and

\textsuperscript{55} As I have not yet proceeded with the gendering discussion of the social locations I am using the LamdaMOO gender neutral pronouns invented by Michael Spivak in 1991: e/em/eir/eirs/emself.

where, navel-gaze themselves and others." Mia and Klara wear feminine clothes, have feminine names, voices and use feminine pronouns. As such they can be considered gendered as women. They also have what is considered to be traditionally Swedish names and speak fluent Swedish. They spend all their time in cars or at dates planning schemes and different roles to get partners, with the outspoken intent of getting married. Next to their strong friendship their romantic pursuits seem to just be means to an end – a respectable femininity that should have been reached in their age. They attempt to manipulate how they are conceived through clothes, ways of moving, eating and talking in order to catch different types of men that they expect will be attracted to these types of people. Their strategy according to Mia is “being registered in people’s subconscious in different ways and to appear unexpectedly.” They read into things and convince each other of their success in pursuing men as love interests, but whom they actually stalk or confuse. When they indeed seem to have the interest of the men they pursue, they escape to share each others company. They are sceptic against children and motherhood, and we never see them in a work related context. In episode eight they finally catch two men who are willing to marry them but the outcome is ambiguous as the last scene is of them handcuffed together driving away from the rehearsal at the church. Their social location is middle-aged, blatantly heterosexual, able-bodied, white, Swedish, middle- or upper-class, cis-gendered women.

Ansi and Mona: ‘the bitch clerks’, hate their customers and do not think twice about humiliating and mocking them in every possible way. They readily invite different guys, party and dance in the store." Moreover, Ansi and Mona are portrayed in feminine clothing, with feminine names, voices and pronouns and as such are gendered as women. Their names are also typically Swedish and they speak fluent Swedish. In the women’s clothes store Ansi and Mona are acting like they are in their private home, sleeping on the floor, telling personal stories over the intercom, having sex with men, treating the clients like disobedient children and being in general un-service minded. We always see them in work related situations and most of their dialogue consists of nasty comments toward or about their clients and work. Ansi has an affair with a married man while Mona calls booty-calls (several of them being firemen apparently).

57 [Translated by author] Dan Zethraeus, Mia Och Klara (Sweden, 2011).
58 [Translated by author] Zethraeus, Mia Och Klara, s. 1, ep. 7.
59 [Translated by author] Zethraeus, Mia Och Klara.
Their social location is middle-aged, heterosexual, able-bodied, white, Swedish, working-class, cis-gendered women.

Jennifer Samuelsson or “Gulletussan, [is] the hairdresser and mother of two children that constantly talk about herself and her 'hockey-pro on elite level'-guy. She talks everything and everyone into pieces, and is an expert in making life cosy – both at work and at home.”\(^{60}\) Gulletussan is gendered female through clothes, pronoun and name but in an over-aesthecized way that brings ones mind to a middle aged “girl” rather than “woman”. For Gulletussan children are the meaning of life and divorce is horribly sad; she is completely focused on her family life and seems to only have her customers and colleagues to speak to outside of the home. Her first line to most customers is “do you have children” and she draws parallels to mother-child relationships in her work and toward her husband. Gulletussan is constantly over-enthusiastic and happy but makes worrying references to a bad situation at home in between the lines which makes one think that she is overcompensating in order to avoid her reality. We mostly follow her on her workplace. Gulletussan’s real name has Swedish connotations and she speaks fluent Swedish but with an accent from the area of Värmland and according to the radio program “Roll on” (where she first appeared) she is supposed to be from Karlstad (a typically sized town in Sweden of around 90 000 people). This together with Gulletussan’s constant references to her pro-hockey player husband and likening herself to Victoria Beckham turns into a contrast that reflects her girlish life illusion. Her social location is middle-aged, heterosexual,\(^{61}\) able-bodied, white, Swedish, working-class, cis-gendered “girl” and mother from a medium sized town.

“Viveka Andebratt, the 70 year-old horror mother-in-law that has lived alone for twenty years and never processed the divorce from her Torsten. She is an expert at putting others down and giving them a guilty conscience, always with a fake smile on her lips.”\(^{62}\) Viveka is through her clothes, name and pronoun gendered as an older woman. Viveka seems to be a horrible and lonely person, she is completely self-centered and as soon as she can takes over her sons new “working-class” girlfriend, Kristina. When she does not make prejudiced comments on differently-abled people or make jokes

\(^{60}\) [Translated by author] Zethraeus, Mia Och Klara.

\(^{61}\) But perhaps with lesbian desire or a tendency toward auto-eroticism due to the dream of being in an intimate relationship with herself in season one, episode six

\(^{62}\) [Translated by author] Zethraeus, Mia Och Klara.
about Auswitsch she forces Kristina to give her pedicure. expressing desire of becoming a grandma, she nevertheless reacts to her grandchild with indifference and does not do much to help the new mother out even though this means they are now “sisters”. Her son Stefan that would not have been born if Viveka had not punched a hole in the pessar is almost never around and the narrative is focused on Viveka and Kristina in her son’s apartment. She seems to be retired and her class is hard to determine but she applies a specific tone and pattern of pronunciation that signals upper-class distinction, and her speaking badly about the “working class” could be an indication toward having made a downward class-trip or having a class-climber type mentality. Viveka’s social location is an older, heterosexual, able-bodied, white, Swedish, cis-gendered and divorced “lady”. Kristina is conveyed as a middle-aged, heterosexual, able-bodied, white, Swedish, working-class, cis-gendered woman and mother. Stefan is working all the time, where and with what we do not know but he is conveyed as middle-aged, heterosexual, able-bodied, white, Swedish cis-gendered man.

“Rolle, the network technician dressed in ergonomic sandals. He lives for and with his computers, is square and emotionally immature. His humour is dry and his relation to sex is anything but sexy.” Rolle is dressed in men’s wear but we sometimes hint the shape of breasts filling up his shirt, but the voice, pronoun and name are male. He cannot be read as transgender as there is emphasis on him trying to conceive by having sexual intercourse with his partner. This effectively also genders the partner’s representation, including voice, clothes, pronoun, as a cis-gendered woman. Rolle is the token male character in the show and he is the essence of co-dependency, being socially incompetent, with low empathy, sexually awkward and childlike. His partner tries to mould him, taking him shopping clothes, doing meditation exercises and suggesting sexual adventures. But Rolle manages to ruin it all and when they try to have children and it does not work straight away as “explained in the biology book,” he compulsively keeps track of his girlfriend’s fertility days and menstruation. Rolle also has a small crisis when he falls in love with an elderly colleague at work because they both love chimpanzees, but in the end episode he is back together with his girlfriend. We most often see Rolle in his home speaking with his girlfriend. He speaks with a

63 [Translated by author] See Zethraeus, Mia Och Klara, s. 1, ep. 2.
64 Zethraeus, Mia Och Klara.
65 See Zethraeus, Mia Och Klara, s1, e. 4.
Gothenburg dialect which has working-class connotations (the history of Gothenburg is closely connected to industries and working-class struggle). Their social location is middle-aged, heterosexual, white, Swedish, middle-class. The girlfriend is convincingly female cis-gendered and able-bodied but even though Rolle portrays a “nerdy masculinity,” he is more complex as a gendered character, something we will explore closer in the discussion below.

“Tabita, a major smoker white trash-mum who have three kids with three different dads. During her unemployment insurance periods she sometimes works extra as a tattoo artist. She diverts the kids nagging with water ice, brings home new men every night and believes that ‘You have to be allowed to treat yourself with something good everyday’”. Tabita’s name, voice and pronoun gender her as a woman; as she has children she can be seen as cis-gendered. But her 80's rock hair in black and white and out of style, tight-fitting clothes remind one of teenage girls’ wear as well as subcultural ties. Her kids run wild and unattended while she multi-tasks speaking on the phone and with the neighbour while tattooing, cooking or cleaning. The three fathers of her children never show up in the series but she describes them as “great network” for the kids. She is unabashed and does not hesitate to take state compensation for her children being “sick” for any little thing. Tabita is portrayed as promiscuous but also starts a relationship with a bouncer and tattoo artist who moves into her flat, even though he is the father of her neighbour’s child and has probably given them both an STI. She lives in the now and gets by in any way she can. We always follow her in her apartment and her narrative is mostly spoken into the phone except for in episode seven where she instead addresses the spectators. She has a strong accent and her character (already created in the radio program “Roll on”) is living in Skrantahöjden in the city of Karlskoga, that during the 2000’s was publicly debated due to high rates of child poverty. Her social location is working class, heterosexual, able-bodied, white, cis-gendered single mother. She has an alternative aesthetics with piercings, tattoos, rocky hair and it seems as if she never grew up. The name Tabita comes from Hebreic and less 150 women in Sweden carry the name, it can therefore be a cue for ethnic influences other than Swedish and adds to her low working-class status.

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Other social locations that are included in the narratives are amongst others: the transvestite or transsexual husband still in the closet, the sexy fire fighter, the unfaithful and self-victimizing older man, the manipulable male boss, the butch dyke, the “gay” massage therapist, the woman with burnout syndrome, the punk with bad childhood, the divorced woman, the female psychologist etc.

Silenced social locations that are present but not engaged into the dialogue are: male supporting characters such as the one-night-stands of Tabita, most of the romantic pursuits of Mia and Klara, and Viveka’s son Stefan, but also the children, their fathers, and the (only) person of colour, a waiter in an Indian restaurant. In Viveka’s narratives differently-abled and the old in need of assistance also figure, but these social locations are not involved or visible in the series. There are no non-white characters involved in the narratives and no non-white women visible or referred to in the entire course of the TV-series.

5 Discussion: Mia and Klara - feminist humor?

Subversive roles play with or satirize the expected norms of behaviour for example femininity and masculinity to expose the normal as constructed and/or present new configurations of social locations. Affirmative roles on the other hand naturalize and reinforce norms. As we are using an intersectional framework the process of socially locating the character requires dynamically intra-acting with categories such as sexuality, race/ethnicity, gender, ability, class etc. as seen in the material analysis.

Kristina, Viveka’s son’s girlfriend, can be seen as a character that is affirmative, as we are directed at focusing on Viveka as the funny problem and not on Kristina’s double-work nurturing her entire surrounding as well as working and eventually taking care of a child. Stefan is almost never around, and when he is, he is not supporting her in these tasks or with Viveka. Stefan’s lack of taking responsibility over the caregiving functions in the family is never complicated and not specifically a theme in the narrative. Viveka’s role as the crazy mother-in-law instead becomes “the” focus and the role that
Kristina carries becomes naturalized. Only in regards to Viveka’s horrible care-taking of her and Stefans’ child is Kristina’s position portrayed as problematic, but not in the sense that Stefan is drawn into the narrative but more as a sentiment that it’s “too bad” her mother-in-law is so useless at taking care of children. It can be that this humor still functions as inclusive for women who have experienced this situation of having to nurture a partner’s family. Viveka’s character also makes fun of the single older woman who lives in the past and who has no other relation to the outside world than through her child. This is reinforcing a narrative that is a feminine horror scenario of growing old, needy and isolated, not having a place in the world anymore.

Rolle is a convincing male gendered character, even though we sometimes see the shape of Klara’s breasts under the shirt. By portraying a voice, demeanour and outer attributes that are male, and without turning it into a drag performance this character can show that “it is not the biological body but the cultural attributes that create [masculinity and] femininity.” As such Rolle can be seen as a subversive character. But Rolle's type of masculinity can be considered more of the “nerd man” lacking the masculine libido and social skills. The reasons for Rolle's behaviour are ambiguous and even if it fits into a “nerdy” masculinity, there is sometimes a feeling that he could just as likely have been a differently-abled person. Rolle's failed attempts at creating an adult relationship, his own codependence and lack of social skills coupled with the energy his girlfriend wastes on “changing him” form the theme of the humor. The character of Rolle's girlfriend is not satirized and as such does not include a problematization of her role in the codependency. Her character thus does not critique this very common denial of women’s own needs to “keep peace”, the molding of their partners to be better people and the attitude of “I am stuck with what I have”.

The sketches with Rolle can be seen as divisive humor on the expense of the “nerd” stereotype of un-masculine men and it risks reaffirming hegemonic masculinity norms. It’s a typical “mars and venus” theme where the characters are incapable of communicating with each other and live in different worlds, and a major focus is on absent children. As the narrative fits with a post-feminist Mars and Venus storyline, Shifman

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and Lemish have pointed out that the risk is that the female character appears as a sexist image of being “obsessed with appearances and romance.” A description that tends to fit on the humor narrative constructed around these characters.

The characters of Mia and Klara subvert the normal by explicitly showing the “double vision” (the way women watch themselves being watched and apply the male gaze to each other) through a hyper-satirized performance of femininity. They hysterically try to “make” themselves specific women through role play, trying to fulfil hegemonic expectations of a heteronormative life project while we laugh at their self-humiliation in embarrassment. The policing of adherence to gender norms and roles is a common component in most of the characters as they comment on each others feminine behaviour, dress etc,. This can be seen as inclusive humor relating to common female experiences and making fun of the disadvantages of being a woman. Gulletussan’s character, in the same way, turns the middle-class family and mothering-focused femininity project into a horror illusion, turning her into a superficial, babbling person devoid of reality and a life truly her own. Gulletussan’s also faces the collapse of her illusion in the end of the series. “Mia an Klara” constructs this type of project as doomed, thus questioning it effectively. Tabita's let-loose lifestyle mocks concepts of working-class, single mothers by over-emphasizing her promiscuity, lack of responsibility, style, presence and sense of hygiene. These kinds of performances function as a hypersymbolic satire of stereotypes and can be subversive as they show the absurdities of certain conceptions of people and roles.

But these performances are also a form of ressentiment humor, performing overinflated self-deprecating stereotypes, treating oneself worse than anyone could do. This humor can also have a backlash by affirming a “prejudice norm” based on negative stereotypes according to Ford's research, which shows that it not only empowers those with prejudice but can make it more likely for them to act against stigmatized groups of people. Thus the process of making sexist, racist or ableist jokes can encourage op-

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pressive behaviour, regardless of intent. The hypersymbolical satire function, or the empowering ressentiment humor, thus requires that the spectator is already somewhat aware of the fact that it is satire and stereotype, and not true to life. Alternatively, the spectator needs to be a person who has experienced the stereotype as false. Characters based on ressentiment humor can thus have paradoxical functions.

Tabita's character is one that can be seen as paradoxical. She can be read as the “grotesque heroine,” as “[the] female grotesque is clever and sassy and she dares to indulge her wild appetites shamelessly and in public. She enjoys shocking people.” We feel empowered by her ability to work within the confines a certain social location to further her own life, or laugh at the satire, or we laugh in horror at an image of the “white trash mom” - a stereotype we suspect is true. But Tabita can also be seen as laughing at the spectator who is horrified at her reality and her relaxed, untroubled acceptance of living day to day. Confines such as being a single mother here is portrayed as positive in the sense of being able to play the system for her own benefit, but the system itself is not scrutinized, and thus it is possible that a negative assessment instead is attributed to the character through the stereotype of the working-class single mother who scams the system. But Tabita's story does not lead to disaster such as Gulletussan's, which portrays Gulletussan's “girl-wife-mother” life project seem more precarious than Tabita's “happy-life-in-the-gutter”. Tabita can be seen as both inclusive and divisive, both subversive and affirmative.

When it comes to non-normative social locations, there is a situation in Ansi and Mona’s narrative in season one, episode five, where they out a male-coded character as a transvestite, simultaneously confusing this with transsexuality. The humor is based on the horrible behaviour of the clerks but has undertones of the fear and uncomfortability of men to be seen as transvestite or transsexual while buying pantyhose. One can also assume that a situation such as this is hard to take as humorous by people subjected to the fear, violence and discrimination of being outed by people in public. Thus the joke assumes the spectators to be cis-gendered and can be said to be divisive.

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and affirmative, as it is problematic in regards to respecting trans-identities. Thus this
is also a joke for people who define contrary to these descriptions and become a joke
on the expense on people who identify with them. Viveka also makes jokes by infantil-
ing old people who are in need of assistance as well as differently abled people. She
also makes a joke with reference to Auschwitz in connection to getting a stamp with
numbers on her wrist when entering a nightclub. In Viveka's case the joke is directed
at her conservative ideas and lack of understanding of appropriate response. But as the
people and situations she makes jokes on the expense of are marginalized and ex-
cluded from the narrative and the imagery these jokes become more of shock-value
jokes that are divisive. Even though these jokes differ, all these jokes have similar
problematic tendencies toward excluding and alienating certain spectators.

Gulletussan engages in similar joke narratives when it comes to probing into people’s
sexual identites, with the lesbian woman having a haircut and assuming the male mas-
sage therapist is gay. Both of the jokes focus on Gulletussan’s inability to read and
handle the situation which can be seen as subversive as it critiques common stereo-
types of homosexual men and the confusion when dealing with people outside of a
heteronormative lifestyle.

Sexuality and especially women's liberated relationship to their sexual needs is a reoc-
curring theme in the series. Sexually liberated discourse in connection to women is not
something revolutionary and new in the context of modern white Swedish femininity
as this includes liberated “Swedish” sexuality. This only comes with repercussions
for Tabita with STIs and several children with different fathers and even though this
is not perceived by her as a problem it can be seen as a negative outcome and prob-
lematic when it is connected to promiscuity and a low working-class position, and
hence affirmative.

Mia and Klara and Ansi and Mona seem equally sexually active but do not face reper-
cussions. Instead Ansi and Mona gain from sexually manipulating their male boss for
work benefits. This situation can also be seen as turning the tables as the clerks are the
one's sexually transgressing the relationship to their male boss. Many of the characters
in the series also actively sexualize and objectify men, turning the table on sexual viol-

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75 Bäckman, Lundström
ence, as desire is coded masculine and the desired feminine.\textsuperscript{76} Here the women stalk, pass judgements and hunt for “prey”.\textsuperscript{77} Even though this act of turning the tables shows behaviour that is unacceptable and that can be recognized more easily by reversing the roles, these boundary crossing actions do not foreground the most vital part of the issue for most feminists which is acknowledging the harm it creates. Hence it becomes problematic that most of the supporting male characters are either de-personalized means to an end, lousy partners or absent fathers that do not have proper roles in the narrative. This is so because the reversed roles would necessitate the inclusion of the negative effect on those subjected to this treatment. Also, Ansi and Mona sexually manipulating their boss (by forcing him to pick his post out from Monas breasts while she is on all fours) is portrayed as unproblematic and a situation that is not connected to sexual harassment. As such situations like these can be seen as subversive but are also in fact neutralizing sexual harassment through sexualized jokes.

In the series, sexual violence is also covertly touched upon when Gulletussan jokes in the parlour about how she will have to “defend” herself with her nails when her husband comes back from work. But this comment gets swallowed in the narrative and is not problematized. The only issue that was connected to a greater structure was Gulletussan (in episode eight) admitting to her therapist how sexual norms and porn influenced her sexual behaviour. But even though this does critique a gendered structure in society and can be seen as subversive it still does not present alternatives and as such can not be seen as contesting humor. The jokes, besides from that, are not connected to an understanding of the characters’ roles or situations within a greater context, historically, geographically or culturally.

The humor hence touches upon oppressive structures of sexualized violence but does not portray its effects, as each character seems faced with their own de-contextualized individual difficulties.

\textsuperscript{76} Tiina Rosenberg, Ilska, Hopp Och Solidaritet (2012), p. 148.
\textsuperscript{77} Mia and KLara
6 Conclusion

6.1 Feminist discourse

I would argue that Mia and Klara is a TV-series that “addresses its spectator as a woman” where “all points of identification (with character, image, camera) [are defined] as female, feminine or feminist.”\(^78\)

The series takes up the daily bombardment of judgement on women's gender performance as well as their active participating in surveying adherence to gender roles and norms, such as Gulletussan, Mia and Klara, as well as Mona and Ansi. Another issue is co-dependent relationships with immature un-masculine men, such as Rolle, and also the caring- and image-services for the family provided by women when men are absent such as in the characters of Gulletussan and Tabita, as well as the conservative older woman with no life purpose other than her grown child. The hegemonic cis-feminine project requires successful (marriage, family etc) relations to men, and obsession with this goal can lead to drastic self-deprecat- ing behavior and ultimately self-delusion, obsessions and disaster, as in the case of Gulletussan. But these issues are not connected to a greater context historically or contextually, and do not include many different social locations. The narrative is predominantly reflecting a middle-aged, white, Swedish, middle-class, femininity project.

The series does not portray the effect on people being in a situation of sexual violence (being stalked or sexual harassed) as the men who are subjected to this violence are mostly absent from the narrative. In general, men are portrayed as absent, unreliable, co-dependent and socially incompetent. With the exception of homosexual support roles, referring to stigmatized or minority social locations within jokes is made with a feeling of shock value and when seeing the jokes from another perspective, it is likely that the jokes are on the expense of these social locations. These jokes are problematic as critique against them from a stigmatized position is difficult because of repercussions when outing oneself in a debate over a TV-series and/or because of the lack of a voice. They are also seemingly jokes on the expense of “others”, not realities within

the writers’ own experiences. The lack of leading characters who are not white, Swedish, able-bodied, portrayed as cis-gender or heterosexual also constructs a narrow view on the Swedish context. This is worst in the case of women of color, who are non-existent in imagery and narrative.

The social location analysis coupled with the Bechdel test shows us that there is focus on female-coded experiences and characters that do engage in other topics than men or heterosexual relations. Through storyline and camera angles the series challenges the primacy of the male gaze as well as the woman as passive. It portrays subversive humor playing on women's double vision, turning the tables in heterosexual relations through liberated and aggressive sexuality, and by including a paradoxical “grotesque heroine”.

Kristina, Rolle's girlfriend, and Viveka function as affirmative of female norms and stereotypes while Mia and Klara and Gulletussan can be seen as subversive. Mia and Klara are also inclusive playing on “shared female experiences” in reference to feminine representations and life projects. Rolle can be seen both as subversive by showing the constructedness of gender, and affirmative as well as divisive as a stereotypical un-masculine man. The relationship between Rolle and his girlfriend is also a “Mars and Venus” narrative that plays on the distinctiveness between men and women in communication and need. Rolle’s girlfriend is also connected to a sexist image of the overbearing and controlling woman. Tabita is a hypersymbolical and paradoxical character that can be both inclusive and divisive, subversive and affirmative depending on the spectators’ own reading of her. The sexual behaviour in the TV-series can be seen as subversive by turning the tables on sexual harassment but remains problematic as it neutralizes such behaviour. Jokes referring to marginal or stigmatized social locations are in the case of homosexual people subversive as they are directed against stereotypes and the uncomfortable way heteronormative people try to respectfully deal with those. But in the case of transgender people, differently-abled people and people who are too old to be of service to society the humor is problematic as it seems to exclude these social positions as spectators. Hence it is divisive and affirmative.
Thus, there are humor and characters that can be seen as subversive and therefore as
challenging power relations, norms, hierarchies and stereotypes. There is inclusive and
divisive characters and humor that relate to women's experiences but exclude certain
social locations, including certain women. There is paradoxical humor and characters
that can be read in different ways by different spectators. But the main part of the
humor and characters function as affirmative of gender norms and social hierarchies.
There is also no contesting humor or characters that relate to oppressive structures nor
strategies or alternatives to these realities.

The social location that the spectator is directed to identify with throughout the show
is a middle-aged, white, middle- or working-class, heterosexual, cis-gendered woman.
Thus the series reinforces and re-affirms a white, Swedish, heterosexual, femininity
project as well as a gender binarism. As liberal feminism is critiqued for focusing on
white, western and middle-class cis-women, and not having a theory of the basis of
women's oppression, as well as rarely including history and other structures of
oppression or global, the storyline can be seen as liberal-feminist. As well as
influenced by some of the postfeminist themes, such as the “intertwining of feminist
and anti-feminist backlash ideas”79, the “Mars and Venus” theme, adhering to “the
personal instead of the political”80 by focusing on personal issues and goals. And as
Shifman and Lemish also points out; “They do not point out more serious domestic
inequalities or connect domestic problems to deeper social and political structures.”81
The imagery and narratives also connect to a Swedish national context without
referring to marginalized social locations, erasing these realities within the Swedish
society of today.

Therefore, it can be perceived as a liberal- and post-feminist storyline within a
Swedish context. However, I should add that Swedish comedy is predominantly cis-
gendered, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and male as well as the roles portrayed,
and that female-fronted comedies are seen to be making a change in that landscape.

79 Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish, “‘Mars and Venus’ in Virtual Space: Post-Feminist Humor and
the Internet,” (2010), p 255.
80 Teresa de Lauretis, “Rethinking Women’s Cinema,” in Figures Of Resistance: Essays in Feminist
Theory, ed. by Teresa de Lauretis (Champaign, 2007), p. 38
81 Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish, “‘Mars and Venus’ in Virtual Space: Post-Feminist Humor and
6.2 Further Research

The results of the thesis stress the necessity and importance of more research on discourse within contemporary comedy and humor to gain insight into covert and complex power struggles within society.

More of female-fronted humor TV-series should be comparatively analysed to investigate if the discourses and narratives within the shows differ from the male-dominated humor canon. This could also give us insight into changes in gendered power structures in societies and their progression. Popular male-dominated humor should also undergo discourse analysis to investigate dominant themes and discourses relating to norms and power structures in societies. This research could be fundamentally important as accompaniment to research on comedies influences on changes in norms and oppressive social behaviour (as for example demonstrated by Ford\textsuperscript{82}).

Further work should be made in creating and researching comedy with wider perspectives “[as] radical change requires a delineation and a better understanding of the differences of women from Woman, and that is to say as well, the differences among women,”\textsuperscript{83} as well as the perspectives from other marginalized social locations. As professional comedians are predominantly white, cis-male, middle-class and heterosexual, comedy’s form and discourse can be expected to be influenced by the experience of the world from that specific social location. For this reason, it is important to investigate if the change of perspective to a slightly different social location is a change and challenge to the canonized form of comedy. The effect of critical comedy on people’s behaviour and worldviews could also be conducted in a fashion similar to Ford’s research on sexist humor.


\textsuperscript{83} Teresa de Lauretis, “Rethinking Women’s Cinema,” in Figures Of Resistance: Essays in Feminist Theory, ed. by Teresa de Lauretis (Champaign, 2007), p. 36.
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