

Reading People Watching Music: Feminism, Fandom, Trolls

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In titling this paper ‘Reading People Watching Music’, my initial intent had been to focus on the dialogical communities that are developed through the reception of music videos in online feminist and queer spaces. I wanted map open-ended communities than foster humour, contradiction, ambivalence, and a desire for further understanding, and within which a variety of feminisms might be included. Rather than consolidating shared ideological positions, online practices of collective reading can generate a cacophony of misrecognitions and mistranslations. In such contexts, only *generous* readings, and generosity in allowing oneself to be misread, is adequate for the reproduction of social and political bonds.

My would-be intellectual alibi in celebrating online discussions around music is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. It seems appropriate at a symposium on emotions and reading to acknowledge that Sedgwick’s own writing has moved me deeply. She is daring, eloquent, funny, offbeat, politically astute, and wary of clichés, even as she commands them to brilliant effect. In her essay, entitled ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You’, Sedgwick famously distinguishes between paranoid and reparative readerly dispositions.

The “paranoid position”, borrowed from Melanie Klein, “is a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one.”

The “depressive position” is “...the position from which it is possible in turn to use one’s own resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole... Once assembled to one’s own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn. Among Klein’s names for the reparative process is love.”



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The “paranoid position”, borrowed from Melanie Klein, “is a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one” (Sedgwick 2003, 128). Paranoia is “anticipatory”, “reflexive and mimetic”, a “strong theory”, a theory of “negative affects”, and “places its faith in exposure”. Paranoid modalities can easily be found within Marxist, postcolonial, and feminist cultural criticism. It would be unduly hostile to name names, but I’m sure you can think of some. By contrast, the “depressive position” is

the position from which it is possible in turn to use one’s own resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole... Once assembled to one’s own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn. Among Klein’s names for the reparative process is love. (128)

To put a point on it, even in a text that is demonstrably sexist, a feminist hermeneutic may be able to discover or invent unexpected moments of productivity, creativity or energetic counter-reading. Readerly generosity may point to new political pathways, or at least, registers of political communication, for those prepared to set aside the paranoid disposition that, in many academic disciplines, remains the privileged index of professional competency. As Sedgwick puts it, “Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates.” One can imagine a direct route from Sedgwick’s dossier on the reparative reader to the bubbling online communities associated with *Jezebel*, *Feministing*, and *everydayfeminisms* (among others). I’ve included here one among easily thousands of online discussions that fit the bill:



↑ 2158 ↓

 **TIL Lana Del Rey called feminism boring..** “For me, the issue of feminism is just not an interesting concept. I’m more interested in, you know, SpaceX and Tesla, what’s going to happen with our intergalactic possibilities.” (motherjones.com)
submitted 2 months ago by [cj_would_lovethis](#)
1599 comments share

[-] [RushroomedAnus](#) 574 points 2 months ago

As someone who thoroughly enjoys her music, I actually think most of the time she is trying to convey a message of how shallow and fake the whole Hollywood scene is. Almost as if she is trying to be a parody of all the superficial values that the media deem as important, which could actually promote a more positive attitude and values for young women to follow

permalink save parent report give gold reply

[-] [jarru38E7](#) 30 points 2 months ago

Kind of like the Comedian in Watchmen. A kind of parody of the world around us. I’ve always felt her music reflected the side of fame and power that people see, but also shows that there is a side that isn’t as glamorous as people think.

permalink save parent report give gold reply

[load more comments](#) (1 reply)

[-] [Irene](#) 33 points 2 months ago

I used to think the same thing of lady gaga before she kept basking in the success =D

permalink save parent report give gold reply

[-] [QuinkyGhana](#) 16 points 2 months ago

Me too :(ben a long time since anything good came from lady g

permalink save parent report give gold reply

[-] [thumex](#) 14 points 2 months ago

The Fame was such a good album.

permalink save parent report give gold reply

[-] [Ironburn](#) 15 points 2 months ago

Seriously? Have you heard her jazz collaboration with Tony Bennett?!

permalink save parent report give gold reply

Although taken from a notoriously volatile online space, *Reddit*, one can identify seeds of a critical discussion that, when cultivated in the more secure environment of *Jezebel* or *Feministing*, licenses its own reparative pedagogies.

When presenting this as an example of reparative work, what is clearly absent is the social aspect of this environment. Indeed, it is unclear in Sedgwick whether the paranoid/depressive distinction describe hermeneutic modalities confined to a subject-object relation – say, the text and the reader – or whether they describe *collective enunciations*. For example, rather than saying that an individual is a paranoid or reparative reader, might we not say that the website, *Jezebel*, affords a certain *kind* of dialogic practice that enables music to be digested according to parameters that accommodate paranoid readings in some directions, and reparative exchanges, in others. Here we could follow the well-established sociological literature on context-bound online expectations for etiquette, disagreement, personal accountability, and so on.

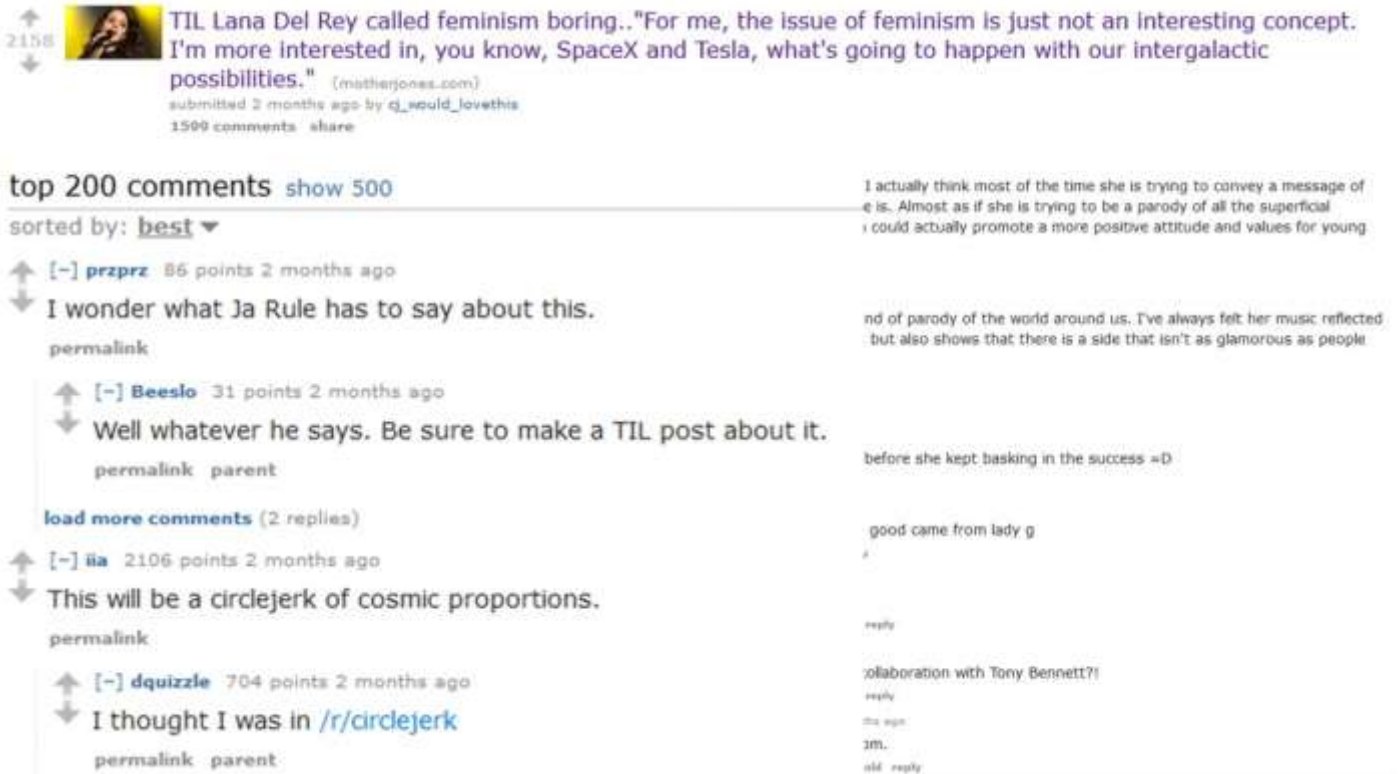
However, in translating these terms to paranoid communities or reparative communities, the specificity of reading as a *social* activity acquires a political dynamic that is interesting from a feminist perspective. Isn't it too easy to say that reparative readings produce reparative communities, as if community formation itself did not include hazards specific to the identities, competencies, and motivations of those who read?¹

After several years of discussing Sedgwick's essay with students, I've found myself having to make facile apologies for the final pages. In a 25 page chapter, a first example of reparative reading is offered on the 24th, and is grouped under the umbrella term of the "camp" reading. To this Sedgwick attaches a list of names notable for their interventions into modernist movements within literature, film and performance: Ronald Firbank, Joseph Cornell, Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, John Waters, Holly Hughes, Marcel Proust, and so on (Sedgwick 2003, 150). Most of these figures are casually nonchalant towards the youth-based popular cultures that I'm trying to redeem for my students using Sedgwick's argument. The question of cultural capital and canon formation is a fraught one that I do not have space to discuss here, and I certainly do not want to indict Sedgwick by trading one-liners from Pierre Bourdieu. Nevertheless, this list makes me less persuaded by this figure of the virtuous, reparative reader, as distinct from the communities that make reparative readings possible. I therefore want to ask, in my intellectual tantrum, whether anybody could be *against reading*, given the right circumstances? My mind wanders to a friend who decided not to read a volume by Proust set on her French course because, in that particular year, she was only reading books by women. Her subsequent presence in the tutorial could probably have been characterised as unreaderly and thus divisive: why do we always read male authors? Seriously, though, *why do we always read male authors?*

¹ See Tkacz (2013)

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In the case of online reading and writing practices, we encounter a distinct personality that marks the pivot between three kinds of reading: reparative, paranoid, and the kind that Sedgwick never discusses – the person who refuses to read, for whatever reason. This personality is the “troll”. In casual online interactions there are, of course, many mundane exchanges that indicate somewhat sloppy readings.



The screenshot shows a Reddit post and its top comments. The post is by user 'matherjones.com' and discusses a critique of Lana Del Rey's feminism. The top comment is by 'przprz' (86 points) asking for Ja Rule's opinion. A reply by 'Beeslo' (31 points) suggests making a 'TIL' post. The second-highest comment is by 'äa' (2106 points) calling the thread a 'circlejerk'. A reply by 'dquizzle' (704 points) agrees, mentioning the subreddit /r/circlejerk. To the right of the comments, there is a vertical list of replies to the 'przprz' comment, including one that says 'I actually think most of the time she is trying to convey a message of...' and another that says 'nd of parody of the world around us. I've always felt her music reflected...'

The most positively endorsed comments on this *Reddit* thread produce no strong indication that the article about Lana Del Rey has actually been read. But this example is hardly representative of the most well-known trolling practices.

The troll has become politically conspicuous as an antagonistic figure shaped by misogynist and racist cultures of online harassment that have now been documented across a range of wide-reaching studies of social networks (see Fichman and Sanfilippo 2014, Jane 2014, Mantilla 2013) (Lumsden and Morgan 2012) . Firm definitions of the term are hard to come by, although one psychological study of trolling is indicative of how the “trolling” is often used: “[trolling is] deviant and antisocial online behavior in which the deviant user acts provocatively and outside of normative expectations within a particular community; trolls seek to elicit responses from the community and act repeatedly and intentionally to cause disruption or trigger conflict among community members” (Fichman and Sanfilippo 2014, 163). Taking this normative psychological definition with a grain of salt, the figure of the troll interests me for two reasons.

Firstly, I wonder how the “troll” might be defined in relation to the politics of reading. Does the troll read badly, or does the troll not read at all? How many times have online users identified trolls merely through the fact that the troll produces a non-sequitur? The sudden turn to personal insults, for example, is also a turn away from the generosity of reading what someone else has written. From this viewpoint, the troll could be understood minimally as the person who writes but does not read, who speaks but does not listen (I should add that academic conferences also have their versions of such a troll).

Secondly, the troll has become most visible as a gendered, sex and raced figure. The most commonplace and visible trolls are the abusive white heterosexual male on *reddit*, the #gamergate “activist”, the creator of rape joke memes, and the person who accuses feminists – and indeed, given the opportunity, all women – of “playing the victim card”.

An example of this can be found beneath an article that considers precisely this problem of online harassment.

The screenshot shows a magazine article page with a comments section. The article title is "Gender Block: Why i love to target feminis" by Hillary Di Menna. The comments section shows several trolls using personal insults and accusations.

Comments

8 Comments This Magazine Blog Login

Recommend Share Sort by Best

Join the discussion...

Guest - 8 months ago
LOL somebody got paid to write this? I have more twitter followers than this author - you are doing a great job of.. Nothing...

FingerMcGee → Guest - 7 months ago
Your Twitter followers mean exactly dick. Just like your uneducated or supported opinion on the matter. Or did you think putting "LOL" at the beginning of your phrase like a 12-year-old made you credible?

T.O. - 8 year ago
Playing the victim as usual.

FingerMcGee → T.O. - 7 months ago
Shaming the victim as usual.

Notice how quickly this discussion departs from any reading *whatsoever* of the article in question. Online harassment is a serious problem, and trolling not only produces direct harassment, but also crowds out spaces where discussions of harassment could otherwise progress. In this context, how would we go about reading violently gendered or raced insults in a reparative mode? Is trolling an

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irreparable form of speech? It may be that the troll does not intend to be read, in the sense that Sedgwick uses the term, as much as experienced through negative affects – frustration, anger, fear, anxiety, and so on.

The troll also raises a parallel set of questions that relate to important tensions within feminist cultural theory. On the one hand, there is an important emphasis, found in Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, on the fundamental *interdependency* of persons, and the need to enlarge collective capacities for inclusion and participation. On the other hand, there is Sara Ahmed's more recent argument about the political situation of what she characterises, in a non-pejorative way, as the "feminist killjoy" (Ahmed 2010). This killjoy may have to repeat the same concerns over and over again in the same setting, even if they cause discomfort, even if they do not uphold the cordial climate of, say, a family gathering or workplace corridor chat.

In this context, consider the collective enunciations generated around this extremely popular music video from 2013.



Besides the video, an uncensored version of which featured naked women dancing around suited men, controversy also erupted around what have been frequently described, in Internet parlance, as "rape lyrics".

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Responses to Robin Thicke's video can be mapped according to Sedgwick's schema. There are what could be considered reparative readings, although I'd also want to suggest that their intention is less to recover possible meanings, than to make an original text unreadable, or at least, less desirable as an object to be read:



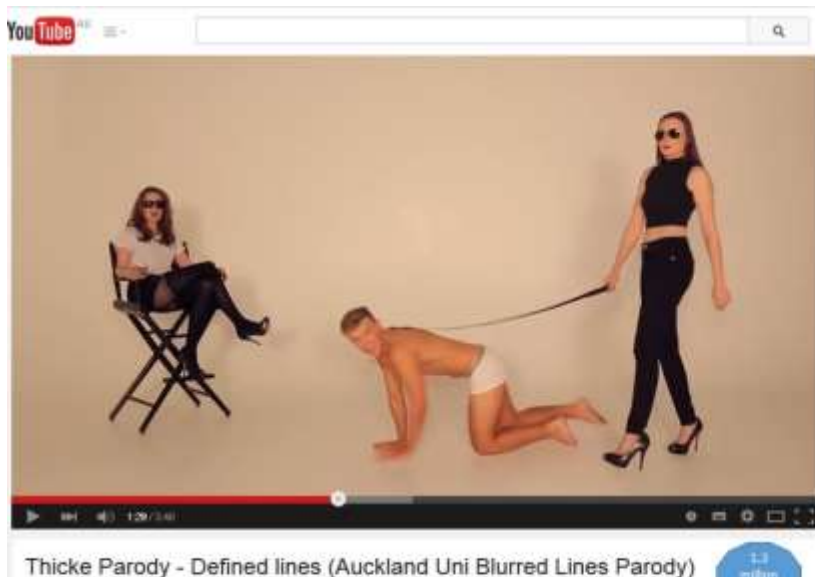
...now he was close, tried
to domesticate you
But you're an animal,
baby, it's in your nature
Just let me liberate you...

I hate these blurred lines
I know you want it...

But you're a good girl
The way you grab me
Must wanna get nasty

'Blurred Lines', Robin Thicke ft. T.I. & Pharrell, 2013

Then there are responses that might fit into the "paranoid reading" mode, insofar as they endeavour to demystify the rhetoric of 'Blurred Lines'. The urge towards demystification is, of course, not unwelcome in Sedgwick's essay, and is certainly apt as a response to Thicke's video and lyrics.



...now he was close, tried
to domesticate you
But you're an animal,
baby, it's in your nature
Just let me liberate you...

I hate these blurred lines
I know you want it...

But you're a good girl
The way you grab me
Must wanna get nasty

'Blurred Lines', Robin Thicke ft. T.I. & Pharrell, 2013

For my purposes, though, the most interesting interactions were those that did not fit easily in either camp. Consider this article about the song on *Jezebel*:

JEZEBEL

+ Follow

Pharrell Has a Lot of Thoughts on 'Blurred Lines' and They're All Dumb



Madeleine Davies

Filed to: BLURRED LINES 2/18/14 3:20pm

5 ★



Now consider this comment:

JEZEBEL

+ Follow

How self-righteous of you.

Posted by Anonymous (not verified) on August 9, 2013 - 9:07pm

I love when women like you decide for the rest of of what is and is not ok. Thank you for appointing yourself the authority! If you don't like it, don't watch it. I think if you were truly, brutally honest with yourself, you might have a chance of someday realizing that the isn't videos like this- the problem is the overwhelming insecurity inside of you that makes a rage well up when you see hot women sexualized, and the lengths you'll go to to denounce the video as evil, rather than ever admit that the women in the video make you feel threatened.

YOU are the oppressor, women like you.

Signed, 38 year old confident woman, and owner of three businesses with 45 employees.



Reply



This appears to be an indictment of those who *read into* a text, in the pejorative sense of drawing conclusions beyond the available evidence. It has a similar logical structure to claims elsewhere that only those who believe in racial essences would be able to “read” a racial politics into popular texts. In a peculiar way, this discourse *accommodates* a claim central to cultural studies – namely, that the reading is the place where meaning is made – but individualises and pathologises the reader on a scale of emotional virtues or failings. This is most evident in claims that, seemingly unaware of their weak causal logic, instruct people not to expose themselves to things they do not like.

I want to return to these examples, as I think they do contribute to a culture of trolling, but I also want to consider this third statement.

Is Robin Thicke Trolling Feminists?

Music post by Marinda Valenti on July 31, 2013 - 4:34pm; tagged media sexism, objectification, robin thicke.

When the interviewers press further, asking if he could understand people’s criticisms if he looked at his own video, Thicke quickly claims that all this sexism talk is really just a misinterpretation; the song is “actually a feminist movement in itself.”

I think Robin Thicke must be trolling us. No one is that ridiculous. Right? Please tell me he’s trolling. No one would go this over the top in all sincerity.



What is at stake, when Robin Thicke describes ‘Blurred Lines’ as a feminist movement in itself? Surely, the problem cannot be one of simple misinterpretation, either of feminism or of Thicke’s video. The problem is both more complicated and much more simple. More complicated, because there are many different feminisms, including a certain libertarian feminism that frames its claims in direct opposition to what is now characterised as “sex-negative” MacKinnonism. But it’s also more simple, because the key term, “feminism”, is just being used to exhaust and thus make redundant the critical language at play. If Robin Thicke uses this word carelessly and often enough, we’ll simply have to stop talking about it. He is able to profit from the *structure of implication* common to paranoid readings – from local text to global reality.

To do this – and this is where the relationship to trolling becomes important – Thicke also mobilises a claim to ignorance. As Sedgwick (1990) and, more recently, Jack Halberstam (2011) have argued, ignorance is not always a lack of knowledge, but can also be a well-developed subject position. The history of feminisms in popular culture is linked, at least in part, to the history of what its critics have been able to claim that they *don't know* about feminism. This logic links both Robin Thicke's claim to the *ad hoc* – but I think, widespread – suggestions that one is entitled to be ignorant of a sexual assault (“rapey lyrics”) subtext. Trolling in such instances can be understood as a deliberate expansion of the space available for culturally sanctioned not-knowing. The politics of reading online may involve not only ideological combat over what people do read, but also a struggle over what people can legitimately claim *not to have read*.

In framing the issue in this way, I want to avoid any moral indictment of online cultures as less reliable places for the development of reading practices. If the existence of the troll teaches us anything about reading, it might be less about the necessity of reading properly, and more about the structures of obligation that make certain readings necessary, or that enable individual reading practices to open onto, and provide resources for, community based practices.

I do not think, however, that the paranoid/reparative distinction is sufficient here. It retains the normative presumption that people read before they write, or listen before they speak, and this doesn't adequately capture the diversity of communicative situations that shape the circulation and reception of texts. And this is where I do want to finish on a Bourdieu-inspired note, and suggest that the normative *valuation* of reading isn't sufficient for thinking through the politics of community formation in relation to literacy, reading competencies, and the articulation of taste. The troll, although often a despicable figure, is just one way of thinking through this problem.

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