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Hiding in plain sight: The 'irony' of sexism

Amy Beddows

Popular culture shapes us in many ways and concerns have been raised about 'sexualised' messaging in TV and film, advertising, magazines, gaming, music videos and social media. In mainstream media, women are often depicted as submissive objects for heterosexual male consumption and regular exposure to sexist stereotypes has been linked to depression, low self-esteem and eating disorders, as well as sexualised attitudes and behaviours in young people, primarily girls. Sexualised media maintains gender inequalities by objectifying female bodies and showing sexual relationships as naturally adversarial and that violence against women is acceptable. With the rise of online and streaming services, audiences are bombarded by so many images that we may not notice or question potentially problematic content.

However, audiences do not consume media without question and several concepts have entered mainstream discussions around restrictive gendered representations. Film theorist Laura Mulvey highlighted the 'male gaze' of products and creators which frame women as objects to be looked at by heterosexual men. Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed gave us 'abjection' and 'the monstrous feminine' respectively, to highlight the ways women are rendered dangerous or repulsive through their biological differences to men (see *Alien*, *Psycho* or *Carrie* for compelling examples in popular film). More recently, we have terms like 'manic pixie dream girl' to describe female characters who only exist to be pursued by male protagonists (think Marla in *Fight Club*, or Ramona Flowers in *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*). Women are often 'fridged' - threatened, raped or murdered – to further the narrative or motivate men: superhero fans might recall Natasha's sacrifice in *Avengers: Endgame* or Vanessa's unironic death in *Deadpool 2*. Alison Bechdel's eponymous test (and its adaptation into the 'sexy lamp' test) has become a benchmark for assessing gender bias in media and highlighting superfluous and superficial female characters.

While these concepts enable us to call out tired, sexist tropes that might otherwise go unnoticed, some of the misogynistic messages infiltrating our screens are harder to identify. A concept which has received less mainstream attention despite its relevancy is ironic sexism.

Ironic Sexism

While there have been some strides in tackling gender inequalities, sexist messages are still prevalent in popular culture under the camouflage of humour, satire or irony. Such tongue-in-cheek ironic sexism is particularly prevalent in advertising, music videos and comedies which send up traditional gender stereotypes whilst still presenting them to audiences. This "sexism with an alibi" is a tricky notion to untangle, for while media can be useful for presenting prejudicial attitudes in ways which denote them as socially undesirable, there is a danger that TV shows and films merely replicate troubling messages. Think of Michael Scott, the hapless protagonist of widely popular US sitcom *The Office*, who is mocked for his abhorrent behaviour towards women, queer colleagues and people of colour but is also centred as a character to root for, thus encouraging us to overlook his discriminatory treatment of others.

This evolution of sexism is particularly insidious as it is harder to recognise sexist messages which appear to condemn the content they replicate. The often-irreverent nature of such media shoots down any concerns about underlying hostility as humourless, uptight or a threat to free speech. And these messages are not just aimed at men; they encourage women to enjoy being objectified and frame self-sexualisation as empowerment, whilst dismissing feminism as outdated and unattractive.

Another concern is the way that alternative media products incorporate ironic sexism, as they are often suggested as the 'solution' to sexualised popular culture. A notable example is musician Marilyn Manson, who is known for savagely critiquing heteronormative portrayals of gender and sexuality to the point that some have labelled him 'feminist.' His videos and performances often feature gothic versions of typical portrayals of women, as dancers and sexy set-dressing, alongside violent and misogynistic imagery. One of his best-known songs, *Tainted Love*, mocks American high school dating culture by turning cheerleaders and schoolgirls into gothic strippers – yet is this less sexist because the (young) women have black hair and dog-collars? Under the guise of 'edginess', artists like Manson merely offer up the same harmful product in different wrappings. This is particularly troubling considering the allegations of sexual violence against Manson; if ironic sexism can sit comfortably in our daily media background, does it enable abusers to hide in plain sight?

This issue is wider than gender discrimination. **Ironic racism** is also prevalent in popular media and comedy shows like *South Park* and *Little Britain* have been revaluated in light of their use of racist tropes. Again, Manson's 'goth thug' crew in *Tainted Love* (sporting bandanas, grills and flashy jewellery) may be mocking the white co-option of hip hop but are still playing with stereotypical markers of black culture from their position of white privilege. Mainstream artists like Miley Cyrus and Lily Allen have come under fire for racist imagery, especially of black women, under the guise of satire; however, female artists may be more frequently called out for problematic images which suggests that a complex intersection between structural inequalities exists. As with sexism, drawing attention to the gross reductiveness of racism whilst still giving discriminatory views a platform requires more nuance than most music videos or comedies can accommodate.

The slippery nature of ironic sexism and ironic racism maybe difficult to grasp but we can still interrogate the so-called satirical media we consume. Who is framed as the butt of the joke? Is the humour 'punching down' onto people in marginalised positions, and who holds the power, privilege or central narrative? And ultimately, does the product replicate the very thing it supposedly condemns? As with fridging and the male gaze, these concepts are valuable for interrogating and demanding more from our media and give our time, money and views to creators and products which reflect the world we want to live in, rather than those who reinforce societal inequalities in favour of satire, edginess and irony.

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