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Can women's bare breasts disarticulate meanings? A look into FEMEN's street protests in Paris

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This article examines how a radical women's group, known as FEMEN, translate themselves in the public sphere, and what rhetorical elements they use to draw media's attention. In other words, this study questions to what extent a radical women's group can disarticulate mainstream discourses by exposing naked chests and holding scandalous street protest-performances in major European capitals. This contribution draws mainly on a view of translation theory developed by feminist scholars that see women's writings as a form of translation and transgression of meanings constructed within patriarchal traditions. Furthermore, it situates street protests as part of the anthropology of communication, in which participants interact face to face and exchange verbal and non-verbal cues that may or may not facilitate meaning construction.

Key-words: *visual rhetoric, feminist studies, anthropology of communication; invisible theater; street- protests*

1. FEMEN's life writing

Mythologies of unruly women have inspired artists, writers and filmmakers to translate 'scandalous' life stories into piece of arts, such as portrait-paintings, fictionalized autobiographies and bio-pictures. In opposition, conservative media have a tendency to translate those radical women's actions into 'dangerous' because they disarticulate the mainstream discourse in public sphere in the name of social justices.

Women's social movements at the turn of the 20th century had a catalyst effect to attract radical Western women who were not intimidated to challenge patriarchal rules and values. Propelled by the 1960's civil rights movements in the United States, some feminist groups in more democratic Western countries have decided to protest beyond words through their naked bodies. Following this trend, a current group of Ukrainian women, known as FEMEN, has drawn mainstream media's attention with their topless protests and outrageous actions against 'patriarchal institutions' in the streets of major European capitals.

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FEMEN uses controversial tactics at their protests along with a blunt and aggressive discourse in order to define themselves and their actions as outrageous. In 2014 FEMEN released a Manifesto included in their autobiography in which they self-identify as an "international movement of bold, topless activists whose bodies are covered with slogans and whose heads are crowned with flowers" (viii). Carrying slogans written on their naked skin and wearing hair flowers they create a visual carnival that merges sexuality and femininity with aggressive movements. To justify their radicalism the group uses *Sextremism* as a "non-violent but highly aggressive form of activism", "a super-powerful, demoralizing weapon" to fight foundations of patriarchal culture.

No doubt FEMEN's goals sound ambitious and their tools and ideologies are quite controversial, which raise their opponents' attention to issues of exhibitionism in their activism, frivolous feminist claims, and suspicious capital resources. Nevertheless, FEMEN also attracts sympathizers drawn by their theater-like protests, or by simply the women's naked fit body. Their actions are set mainly on the streets of major capital cities in Europe, such as Berlin, Madrid, Paris and Rome. Currently, the radical group is settled in Paris, with a leader from Ukraine. To better understand how FEMEN moved their headquarters from Ukraine to France, we should consider first their autobiographical accounts.

In 2012, FEMEN's autobiographical collaborator, Galia Ackerman, a Russian-French journalist, interviewed its main founders, i.e. Anna Hutsol, Oksana Shachko, Sasha Shevchenko, and Inna Shevchenko. According to Ackerman, FEMEN's actions started in 2008 in the streets of Kiev where the group debuted against prostitution by performing a non-naked protest called 'Ukrainian is not a brothel'. The idea of a topless group emerged after Oksana herself who exposed her bare chest carrying a Ukrainian flag during manifestations on Independence Day (Aug. 24, 2009). Her performance was an allusion to the French revolutionary Marianne, the goddess of liberty, who was said to have exposed her bare chest as a mark of rebellion. Their actions, as FEMEN usually names their protests, have taken more political shape after joining the Orange Revolution in 2009 against 'Putin's system' and the Orthodox Church. Because of their outrageous actions, the women ended up being banned from Russia (126), and eventually, had to close the office in Kiev for their own safety. They transferred the headquarters to Paris in September 2012, when Inna Shevchenko took the leadership amidst internal problems with former French members who decided to resign due to cross-cultural misunderstandings.

FEMEN's life narrative is characterized by paradoxes and so are their street protests. For example, their blunt agitation against monotheistic religions is marked by a rhetoric of intolerance and bigotry. For example, FEMEN's protests against Muslims usually hold islamophobic slogans such as *Muslim woman, take off your niqab!*. Inna Shevchenko explains that "the naked woman is the absolute symbol of disagreement with Islam, a total revolt against submission" (2014, 157).

Nevertheless, FEMEN trains their members as if they were part of an urban guerilla. They are addressed as 'girl soldiers' or 'soldiers of feminism' ready to take extremist actions against patriarchal institutions. Controversially, Inna Shevchenko defines FEMEN's activism as "peaceful terrorism [in which] we have no blood on our hands, but we are true radical activists. We do indeed want to terrorize the enemies of women" (2014, 159). In this account, the leader compares FEMEN's protests as terrorist acts that do not blow bombs, but attempt to threaten established institutions. Doubtless, her language is framed within a guerilla mindset which is paradoxically a patriarchal construction.

FEMEN's appropriation and adaptation of a religious rhetoric to introduce their Manifesto is also paradoxical. The text is a remixed discourse with twisted meanings that attempt to parody John's Book, which introduces FEMEN's goals in the autobiography; moreover, the Manifesto is also available on their website[2]. The Manifesto begins with the following paragraph: "In the beginning was the body, the sensation the woman has of her own body, the joy of its lightness and freedom. Then came injustice, so harsh that it is felt with the body…" The original term 'Word' that holds abstract connotations in the sacred book is translated as 'body', a material concept, incarnated in woman's flesh. In this sense, FEMEN's translation and parody can be read as an act of subversion of the Divine creation. FEMEN founders remark that they were inspired by the Amazon warriors, mythological figures that were located in the geographical region where Ukraine is situated nowadays. Furthermore, FEMEN's Manifesto is an act of a subversive translation of the 'creation story', which in this case situates women as the first inhabitants who used to live freely until patriarchy took them over. In their mythological view, patriarchal values were set and consequently women were punished and transformed into a 'docile body' susceptible to manipulations.

Today, FEMEN runs its own 'activism business' through personal website, where they sell 'home-made' products such as 'riot shirt', caps, cups, and of course, their specialty, the famous 'boobsprint'. Hence, another paradox emerges here. While they brand themselves, and manage their website as an emergent global corporation, their street protests are marked by anti-capitalist rhetoric.

2. Some key concepts

This study situates street protests as part of an anthropology of communication approach centering on interpersonal interactions that rely on verbal and non-verbal signs (i.e. "contextualization cues") at the level of dialogic inferences. This notion is present in the work of sociologists, anthropologists and sociolinguists such as Bauman, Goffman, Gumperz and Ochs. According to Gumperz (1995)

[2] See website: femen.org

communication becomes more efficient when interlocutors exchange contextualization cues that hold similar cultural values; otherwise, misunderstandings may occur during interaction. He mentions that a "lack of shared background knowledge leads initially to misunderstandings" (1995, 120). In this sense, FEMEN members' street protests are characterized by multi-sensorial cues that employ verbal and non-verbal signs such as bare breasts, slogans on their backs and shouts to deliver their protest messages. The problem with naked body as a cue is that it breaks established social norms for human behaviour in the public space, and challenges Western communicative culture. Or better, exposing women's naked breasts in public urban sites, such as government buildings, churches and streets, is not allowed, and whoever attempts to break the rules will be immediately punished. By performing topless protests in public sites FEMEN violates social norms, subverts authority, and breaks communicative rules. Hence, there is no doubt that FEMEN members' corporeal cues are misinterpreted and misunderstood by interlocutors (i.e. mostly media) and considered disruptive for the 'social order'.

Along those lines, the present contribution argues that FEMEN'S corporeal cues, mainly their bare chests, lack discursive representation to disarticulate meaning; however, their bodily cues work on a symbolic level that allows more flexibility of the communicative functions the naked skin might serve. In other words, a bare chest does not carry propositions or arguments, but it adds lines of inferences and visual rhetoric to FEMEN's theatrical protests. In this regard, Sonja Foss' work on visual rhetoric can complement anthropology of communication. Foss (2004) advocates a rhetoric theory that includes visual images in opposition to a classical rhetoric which is usually verbally oriented. She conceptualizes visual rhetoric as a communicative artifact that holds 'tangible evidence' for two or three-dimensional images. In other words, visual rhetoric offers an incarnated view of contextualization cues. Nevertheless, she advises that not every visual object is visual rhetoric, and in order to be considered one, it needs to fulfill the following requirements: 1- be symbolic; 2- involve human intervention; and 3- be presented to an audience for communicative purposes (2004, 144). Hence this paper argues that topless cues can meet those requirements, and therefore, can function as visual rhetoric on the level of pathos in communication. Nevertheless, those cues become gender specific, as they are based on female sexual organ. In this sense, the topless cue becomes FEMEN's identifiable signature that paradoxically offers them some agency and vulnerability in public spaces.

Metaphorically, FEMEN's members write their street protests topless in order to contest and disarticulate mainstream discourses and institutions. They subversively translate hegemonic discourses into parody and sarcasm that are to be performed during their theatrical protests. Their bare chests and backs are used as a medium for drawing and writing slogans against institutions. They translate their

anger and frustrations into aggressive acts and vulgar language which traditionally have been characterized as male features. Moreover, FEMEN plays with conventional forms and structures that are dominant in a patriarchal realm.

To understand FEMEN's subversive translation of themselves we draw on a Canadian feminist scholar, Louise von Flotow. The author examines women's writings under the category of translation, because, according to her, "translation has long served as a trope to describe what women do when they enter the public sphere: they translate their private language, their specifically female forms of discourse, developed as a result of gendered exclusion, into some form of the dominant patriarchal code" (1997, 12). Historically, the public sphere has been considered a male environment that excludes women (Cameron 2006); consequently, women have lacked opportunities to practice public speaking skills. On the other hand, the domestic space has been entirely women's dominion, shaping their private language to sound feminine. Women's social movements have shown that to conquer public spaces, women have to speak tough, assertive and 'like a man'. To gain access to a public sphere, women must translate their feminine discourse into conventional forms that have been shaped by men's lives and man-made artifact (von Flotow 1997, 11). FEMEN's street protests work within this mind frame. They have to translate their private language and adopt male communicative skills (i.e. leadership, aggressiveness and bluntness) to access public spaces; however, choosing to do so while topless betrays the foundational meanings of their social activism.

Their radical actions are experimental per se, as writing "through a body" may not be immediately culturally transferable to other contexts, therefore, their social activism becomes restricted to very few 'safe' public spaces. The mobilization of their protests restricted to safe places may be a drawback for their goals of becoming a global movement (which might be only achieved virtually). In this way, translating FEMEN's activism to other cultures is a risk to be faced as their actions in other countries have been either banned or censored, A possible strategy to overcome the perilous of translating FEMEN's activism to another context, culture or medium would be adaptation (see Hutcheon 2006). Adaptation works contrary to the notion of equivalence in translation, and for Canadian feminist scholars, equivalence should be avoided as it implies the idea of sameness. For Barbara Godard (1989), the notion of equivalence should be rejected as it relates to translation as a simple activity of transcoding. The author argues that feminist translation has deeper functions, and one of them is its transformational capacity. Godard remarks that "translation is one among many ways of rewriting within literary systems pushing them in a certain direction through canonizations" (*Tessera*). Hence, FEMEN's self translation and translation of FEMEN to other cultures should not be based on equivalence, but on creative ways to transform their activism into meaningful experiences.

3. FEMEN's street protests and invisible theater

FEMEN's activism is viewed as a street performance similar to street theater art. First, FEMEN members, who are usually physically fit, rehearse their moves, and train to run, jump and resist against police's forces. Second, they are well scripted and orchestrated. Third, they have leaders who are the directors and sponsors who run the budget and do the public relations. FEMEN activists are the actors, and the setting is often the public buildings such as religious sites, government offices and city squares in major European capitals. Nevertheless, to make their performance successful they need audience's participation. In this case they need to rely on two types of spectatorship: one is the media that witness their protest by filming, taking shots and narrating the spectacle. The other is the police that constitute an interactive audience incited to intervene whenever FEMEN actors trespass borders; in this way, they end up joining the performance.

Hence, it seems plausible to claim that FEMEN's theater like protests resembles Augusto Boal's *Invisible Theater*, which is a type of performance staged outside the theater and usually set in public spaces such as subways, parks, malls and streets. According to the Brazilian dramaturge, "when the play is ready, it will be performed in a place which is not a theater and for an audience which is not an audience" (Boal 2002, 277). Boal's *Invisible Theater* is an organized form of making theater with a script based on a burning social issue, and with actors performing as if they were on a conventional theater stage. The performance engages with the audience in a provocative manner, which Boal calls 'spect-actors' as they might shortly intervene. In this case, FEMEN's corporeal cues and slogan shouts incite the police to take action. The police attempt to catch the topless women who bravely resist against their enforcement's tactics. As if it were in a narrative, the story reaches its climax when FEMEN members run away from the police. For example, during their protests against Christmas, Inna Shevchenko, FEMEN's media protagonist, attempted to escape from the police with all her force, in a running performance à la 'run Lola run' which occurred outside Saint Peter's Square in the Vatican (December 19, 2013).

FEMEN's members are usually caught despite their feral resistance that includes kicking, wrestling and shouts. As in a trance, their bodies are in convulsion, shaking and twisting in complete spasm. Some would report they are 'hysterics', others would witness the show flabbergasted. The resolution of the story happens when they are finally caught and sent to a police station. Their story ends for the public who returns back to their lives, with the exception of the actors who have to face fines and short imprisonment. As Boal reminds us, *Invisible Theater* is not "realism, it is reality", therefore, actors are also trained to deal with the police and with possible arrests.

4. FEMEN in Paris

One of the main criticisms against FEMEN women is the exhibitionism they express during street protests; some would merely see them as a provocateur that uses a carnivalesque visual and corporeal rhetoric to disarticulate hegemonic discourses. For this reason, the corporeal translation they support to disarticulate meaning is simply done the rhetoric of persuasion. Hence, this contribution examines one of FEMEN's street protests to discuss how they translate themselves, and to what extent the rhetorical devices they use can disarticulate patriarchal meanings in order to support their 'causes'.

To guarantee a successful performance, FEMEN strongly relies on visual image, however, the fact of revealing their bare chests as a visual proposition to support their causes might be questionable. To respond to it, this article examines one of FEMEN's political protests, the 'Fascist Epidemic' action due to its historical allusion. Since FEMEN moved to France, the group has shifted its protest agenda. Their new target is the National Front, a far-right party with its current president Marine Le Pen. In April 22, 2014, twenty-two FEMEN members across Europe participated in a performed protest-march towards *Maison des Centraliens* where Marine Le Pen would launch her party's election campaign. They shouted the slogan in English 'Fascist Epidemic' in an orchestrated choral, despite their target audience being French. FEMEN's members had the slogan "Fascist Epidemic" written in black across their bellies and back. On their bare chests, they had a Nazi symbol, the swastika, in the colours of the European flag, and they wore a Hitler moustache on their faces. Their motto "Fascist Epidemic" could be heard throughout the streets until they gathered in front of building shouting, also in English, "Marine Out" while knocking at the door against the security guards. FEMEN's choice for English as the 'official language' used in their protests fails to recognize the local audience that is French, and, therefore, the motto loses its locutionary force, which audience may easily ignore. In other words, their failure to translate their protest into French leads to a failure to be heard.

The script for this action seems less interactive and carnivalesque than previous ones, which restricted audience's participatory activity to the local media that witnessed their protest. In a press interview, Inna Shevchenko warned against the spread of Fascism in Europe, and in front of the camera, she delivered a script full of clichés affirming that fascism is a European disease that needed to be eradicated. In a preponderant tone, Inna Shevchenko mentioned she had the pill to fix it; however, she did not mention what type of pill could work this magic. In 1944, Orwell wrote a famous essay on defining Fascism, in which he warned the audience not to overuse it; otherwise it would sound completely meaningless or degraded to the level of a swearword. It seems FEMEN has ignored Orwell's advice. Their overuse of the word "fascism" in their protests to simply grab media's attention seems deliberate, and its meaning gets lost in empty clichés. The 'Fascist

Epidemic' performance seems to break with some of FEMEN's usual protest conventions. First, it is not organized as in the form of an *Invisible Theater*. Second, the corporeal cues (naked breasts) which are usually the mainly corporeal cue to draw media's attention seem to compete with the visual cues that allude to the Nazi symbol and to Hitler's Regime. Third, their bare breasts seem to lose visibility and status when compared to the swastika that chastely camouflages the women's naked skin. In this regard, the topless cue in the Fascist Epidemic street protest seems to be less persuasive than the Nazi symbol, and perhaps it becomes even meaningless in order to validate their fight. In other words, the bare breasts as communicative cues lose their perlocutionary force which weakens FEMEN's primary intentions, that is, to decentralize and disarticulate Marine Le Pen's political platform. Furthermore, translating themselves into a historical figure that holds European traumatic narrative overshadows women's naked breasts and the parody effects that they have intended to cause.

5. Can FEMEN disarticulate hegemonic discourses?

FEMEN has used toplessness as a corporeal cue to communicate and translate their protests into actions which are carried out singularly by young attractive women. Moreover, the bare breasts represent their signature that authorizes and holds ownership to the street protests; however, the visual and corporeal rhetoric devices they have chosen might not create enough illocutionary forces to support their arguments. Consequently, their actions fail to disarticulate mainstream discourses which they denounce as patriarchal. The corporeal cues seem to be misunderstood and their self-translation as political actors can get lost among other identities that journalist media usually assign to them (e.g. exhibitionists, agent provocateurs, puppets).

It seems though that the FEMEN project is in line with the French feminist Helene Cixous (1976), who urges the woman to speak out and 'write her self'. As she remarks,

> women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence," the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word "impossible" and writes it as "the end (1976, 886).

To put it differently, FEMEN believes that to break women's silence and to demystify their position as the "Second-Sex" and to gain public space can be achieved through the exposition and exploitation of their naked breasts, that is,

"writing through their bodies". Their choice to subvert hegemonic discourses through toplessness is however paradoxical, since woman's bare breasts have been confiscated, objectified and obsessively capitalized in Western society. Yet for FEMEN, bare breasts neither represent a maternal organ nor an erogenous zone, but weapons, which set them free from oppression and submission. In their autobiography, FEMEN explains that their bare breasts hold deeper meanings (2014, 64), and refers to them as a 'weapon', a metaphor that betrays Cixous's advice; instead, FEMEN opts for an instrument used in warfare, which is seen as a male realm.

The implication of violence in FEMEN's Manifesto and protests may not surprise the audience, since the word 'weapon' is also used as a psychoanalytical metaphor to refer to the phallus, or better, to the male sexual organ that identifies masculinity in Western society. In this vein, FEMEN's bare breasts are translated into a masculine organ, a 'weapon' that can be coercive, as Butler remarks "to reflect the power of the Phallus" (1999, 59). The lack or absence of a phallus situates women as the Other, or an object of the masculine desire. To compensate the not-having, women place themselves as 'being the phallus', a paradoxical position that confirms a dialectic of identity. Yet, de Beauvoir understands the phallus as a historical cultural symbol of male violence. According to her, violent and aggressive behaviours are culturally acceptable in the formation of manhood (2011, 343) since boys usually get access to the universe of violence at a tender age, contrarily to girls whose the access is denied.

Hence, this might lead us to paradoxically conclude that FEMEN's aggressive discourse and actions comply with a 'patriarchal' agenda that capitalizes on their bodies, mainly on their naked breasts that serve to brand the radical group. The paradoxical compliance with a patriarchal agenda works against FEMEN's goal, that is to disarticulate hegemonic meanings; and instead, FEMEN's radical women become merely street agitators, who perform to please the 'male gaze'.

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