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New Challenges for Feminist Stylistics.
The Case of *Girl with a One Track Mind*

In this essay I argue for the ongoing potential of feminist stylistics, demonstrating that its critical and contextual nature is well suited to explore the complex gender politics that operate in online texts. The text under scrutiny is *Girl with a One Track Mind*, the sex blog which is authored by Zoe Margolis under the pseudonym Abby Lee and has formed the basis of two books (2006; 2010). *Girl with a One Track Mind* embodies many of the contradictions typical of post-feminist writing. On the one hand, the author declares a feminist stance for her writing, but close attention to the language she uses to represent sexual experience and an empirical account of the online contexts of use suggest that there are limitations to the form this feminist stance might take.

Margolis claims a feminist status for her blog and books on the grounds that they challenge the heteronormative conventions that prevent a woman from narrating sexual experiences in positive terms. However, a textual analysis shows that the gender politics of her writing are problematic for a number of reasons. First, an analysis of the verbs associated with sex acts indicate that instead of representing a shift towards feminine agency, the verbal constructions either depersonalise the sex acts (for example through nominalisation or use of non-finite verb forms) or continue to represent the woman as the ›acted upon‹ participant where sexual activity is something one person does to another. Second, Margolis' discourse of feminist emancipation is limited to a private sphere of personal pleasure, and fails to engage with the many real world sexual practices that directly oppress women of many kinds. The ›self-help‹ advice genres embedded in both blog and books reinforce a binary view of gender, and perpetrate stereotypes of idealised heteronormative femininity.

An analysis of the new media contexts of use surrounding the blog further underscores the problematic status of the text as ›feminist‹. The links on *Girl with a One Track Mind's* blog roll include male-authored erotica, suggesting that Margolis' writing might not be treated as a feminist gesture of emancipation but as further material to be objectified and consumed by a sexualised gaze. Although Margolis defends herself against the charge of writing erotica by constructing an idealised female readership who express support for Margolis and construct her as »normal and not alone«, an empirical account of the commenting behaviour on the blog suggests that the demographic profile of the actual readers might be somewhat different.

To understand the gender politics of *Girl with a One Track Mind* more fully, feminist stylistics needs to move beyond the analysis of representation and engage with the social contexts in which the text operates. The power of these social conventions was most apparent when the mainstream media outed Margolis as the real author of the blog and book in 2006. I distinguish between the structural and social meanings of narratives of »being outed« and the more well-documented genre of »coming out«. Although »being outed« marks a liminal moment of social transition, multiple retellings of this moment and its later consequences can unfold over time as part of the speaker's life history (Linde 1993). Margolis' retellings of »being outed« occur diachronically and across different media. Through these stories, she negotiates the transition between the authorial identities of »Lee« and »Margolis«. Ultimately, while she recoups a coherent, transformed identity as an assertive woman author, gaps and inconsistencies in the narrative logic in her most recent retelling published in her 2010 book suggest that there are still points of instability that make it difficult for a woman to talk about sex in a positive, agentive manner.

The analysis demonstrates the advantages of feminist stylistics as a method for analysing gender in contemporary popular fiction. First, a systematic, empirical analysis of the text's language (here verb choices for penetrative sex acts) brings to light patterns of representation that would not be apparent if isolated examples alone were taken as a basis for interpretation. Second, online evidence of patterns of textual production and consumption can be useful as a means of comparing actual and idealised readerships. Although *Girl with a One Track Mind* is only representative of one specific genre, these aspects of analysis are useful for the study of other literature studies too. They draw attention to the importance of defining and negotiating what is meant by ›context‹, and of using tractable data sources rather than relying on intuitions about contextual reception. Finally, this study has shown that while feminist stylistics continues to negotiate tensions and multiplicity of current gender studies, the work of feminism is by no means over and that we will need to contest practices which work against those outside heteronormative paradigms for some time yet to come.

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