

Smashing the Ideals of Docile Femininity

Humoristic Strategies of Feminist Resistance in Finnish Women's Comics Magazines of the 1990s and 2000s

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Abstract

In the 1990s and 2000s, three Finnish comics magazines were established for comics made by women. Drawing from a multidisciplinary framework of studies on feminism, gender and humour, this article argues that the magazines used the comics form to discuss feminist issues and to disrupt essentialist conceptions and expectations about gender. The common denominator for the magazines was the use of humour as a tool, although humoristic strategies and understandings of gender varied. This article gives an overview of the development of Finnish feminist comics by situating the magazines within the discussion of women's comics that was ongoing in Finland in the early 1990s and 2000s, and by reflecting on the magazines' impact on present-day feminist comics in Finland.

Keywords: comics magazines, docile femininity, feminist comics, feminist humour, Finnish comics

Naarassarjat [Female Comics] (1992–1993), a comics magazine for female cartoonists, was supposed to be a one-time publication, but an open call for comics got so many replies that the magazine lasted for seven issues. The success of the open call indicates that there was

momentum and a need for women to have their own comics magazine. Many of the comics were created by women who had never published comics elsewhere, and *Naarassarjat* provided a supportive publishing platform for them.

The magazine had a significant impact on the Finnish comics scene and inspired the emergence of two other women's comics magazines, *Irtoparta* [Detachable beard/Fake beard] (2001–2007, 8 issues) and a web-based magazine, *Nettinarttu* [Web bitch] (2004–2009, 17 issues). In each magazine, the comics varied stylistically and content-wise, but many of them discussed feminist issues, often using humour as a tool. This article reviews what kinds of humoristic strategies were utilised in the magazines and the subject of their feminist critique. First, the context of Finnish comics is introduced by describing the position of women cartoonists in the Finnish comics scene from the early 1990s into the 2000s. Next, the comics in the magazines are analysed using a multidisciplinary framework of studies on feminism, gender and humour. Finally, the results of the analysis are briefly outlined, together with thoughts about the impact of the magazines.

The cover of the very first issue of *Naarassarjat* from 1992 is a bold and humorous declaration that the era of female cartoonists had begun. By turning the traditional gender roles upside down, the cover seems to suggest that it is women's time to indulge in their artistic aspirations, while the role of emotional supporter and housekeeper is left to men (see Figure 1).

Until *Naarassarjat*, Finnish comics magazines were de facto, for the most part, produced and published by men.¹ In addition to comics magazines, women contributors were also rare in self-publications that, in the 1980s, flourished in the wake of punk culture's DIY mentality² and in comics competitions held at comics festivals.³ The rarity of women cartoonists was already a

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1. For example, during the 1980s, 84% of the content in *Sarjari* magazine ([Sequential] published by Tampere comics association, 1981–) was created by male cartoonists, and, in *Kannus* magazine ([Spur] published by Seinäjoki comics association, 1979–1989) the average during the same period was 86%. The magazines consisted mainly of comics made by local comics enthusiasts.

2. One of the rare self-publications produced by a woman was *Sarjakuvia!* ([Comics!] 1979–1982, 13 issues). Satu Toivonen made and published the small zine together with her brother Mertsu Toivonen who, in a later interview, stated that, for his sister, it was challenging and frustrating to get acceptance in the male-dominated field. See Juho Hänninen and Juuso Paaso, 'Mertsu Toivonen: Interview'. Oranssi ry database (2015–2016), https://oranssi.net/pienlehdet/haastattelut/toivonen_mertsu__sarjakuvia.pdf (accessed 5 December 2021).

3. For example, in 1984, only 7% of the total 156 participants in Kemi comics competition were women, a fact that comics journalists Heikki Jokinen and Kalervo Pulkkinen saw as a serious problem since, according to them, women cartoonists would 'apparently' broaden the

topic of discussion in the 1970s,⁴ and, in the 1980s, a comics magazine *Kannus* ([Spur] 1979–1989) compiled two special women’s issues, first, to prove that there had been women cartoonists in Finland since Tove Jansson, and, second, to increase the visibility of the few contemporary female comics artists the editors were able to find.⁵

<FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE.>

Figure 1. Kati Kovács, *Naarassarjat 1* (1992), cover.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the discussion on women’s position in the comics field became more heated when the number of women cartoonists gradually started to increase. Several cartoonists and critics working with comics criticised the attempts to group artists based on their gender and to label their work as ‘women’s comics’. In a broader context, ‘predetermined essentialism’ has concerned not only the comics scene but, as art historian Jo Anna Isaak notes, female artists have often been destined to represent their gender, whereas male

perspectives and topics in comics. See Heikki Jokinen and Kalervo Pulkkinen, ‘Kemiin’ [To Kemi], *Sarjainfo* 45 (1984), 4–5 (5).

4. In the 1970s, American underground comics artists, women included, were introduced to the Finnish audience. Bold comics by female artists inspired the editors of underground comics magazines *Jymy* ([Rumble] 1973–1975) and *Nyt syömään!* ([Dinner’s ready!] 1981–1984) to notice the lack of women in the Finnish comics field and demand more ‘proper women’s comics’ in Finland (see *Jymy* 3, no.1 [1975]; *Nyt syömään!* 1981).

5. See *Kannus* 14, no. 1 (1983) and *Kannus* 38, no. 4 (1988).

artists have been granted more freedom and diversity to represent ‘universal humanity’.⁶ Frustrated with the essentialist grouping, some female cartoonists wanted to detach themselves from the label, which for them was a predetermined and defining term for comics that only addressed ‘women’s issues’, such as menstruation.⁷ Others embraced the term, noting that historically and culturally, comics culture had not been very welcoming to women: women and girls were not encouraged to make and read comics, they lacked female role models and comics did not provide particularly interesting or identifiable subject matter for them.⁸ For those

6. Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

7. A central arena for the critical discussion was *Sarjainfo* [Sequential information], Finland’s only journal on comics (1972–). See the critical article by Reija Nieminen, the editor of *Suuri Kurpitsa* [Great pumpkin] comics magazine, in Reija Nieminen, ‘Lyhyt katsaus naissarjakuvaan’ [Brief overview of women’s comics], *Sarjainfo* 70 (1991), 10–11; and the interview of script writers Sari Luhtanen and Johanna Sinisalo in Jukka Heiskanen, ‘Apinoista artisteiksi: Sari Luhtanen ja Johanna Sinisalo, kaksi käsikirjoittajaa’ [From apes to artists: Sari Luhtanen and Johanna Sinisalo, two scriptwriters], *Sarjainfo* 77 (1992), 10–13.

8. See the interview of Johanna ‘Roju’ Rojola, comics artist and primus motor of *Naarassarjat*, in Harri Römpötti, ‘Feminismin ryppyotsaisuus siliää sarjakuvalla’ [The seriousness of feminism is lightened with comics], *Sarjainfo* 74 (1992), 20; the reportage of a participant in a women’s comics drawing course in Nette, ‘Omia kuvia naisten kurssilta’ [Own images from a women’s course], *Sarjainfo* 73 (1991), 46; and a critical essay of representations of women in comics by

cartoonists, 'women's comics' was a positive label for a safe space where women could make comics on their own terms.

As we can see from the two differing reactions, essentialism is a double-edged sword that can be used for either ghettoising or empowering. When understood as a strategic choice instead of predetermined labelling, essentialism can work as a powerful yet risky tool to achieve political goals by enhancing unity at the cost of temporarily downplaying differences among group members.⁹ In the case of Finnish female cartoonists, the goal was to establish self-determined conditions for making comics. Indeed, *Naarassarjat* was the first comics magazine in Finland that was fully established, edited and published by women themselves. Later, two publications continued their legacy: a small press comics magazine, or zine, *Irtoparta*, and a web-based magazine *Nettinarttu*, which will be discussed below.

Women's comics were the subject of debate on several simultaneous levels: production, readership and representation. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the earlier male-dominated field had started to open up to female comics artists and readers who raised critical discussions of the sexist traditions of representing women,¹⁰ while also actively renewing the imagery by depicting

Anne Lagerstedt, 'Alaston ja sidottu nainen kaapissa' [A naked and tied woman in the closet], *Sarjainfo* 68 (1990), 3–6.

9. See Elisabeth Eide, 'Strategic Essentialism', in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. Wai Ching Angela Wong, Maithree Wickramasinghe, renée c. hoogland and Nancy A. Naples (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2016).

10. *Sarjainfo* magazine published several critical articles written by female comics enthusiasts who problematised the conventions of depicting women in comics (and in other popular culture)

‘microscopic and trivial but ridiculously important stuff’, as one participant in a women-only comics course put it.¹¹ Many female comics artists found their subject matter in everyday life, which was still relatively new in Finnish comics in the 1990s. Female artists, such as Riitta Uusitalo and Tiina Pystynen, were also bold innovators of the form; coming from outside of the comics culture, they resisted, for example, rigid layouts and conventional usage of speech or thought bubbles, which aroused debates on the formal qualities of comics storytelling.

The publishing of *Naarassarjat* ended abruptly in 1993, when financial problems, such as a lack of funding and expensive printing costs, became insurmountable. Despite its brevity, the magazine succeeded in inspiring many female comics artists, and a decade later, two comics magazines were established to fill the void. Both *Irtoparta* and *Nettinarttu* worked on the same premise as *Naarassarjat*, wanting to welcome contributions by girls and women, both newcomers and seasoned artists. The makers of *Irtoparta* and *Nettinarttu* represent slightly different generations of comics artists than *Naarassarjat*, but all three magazines share the interest to engage in the Finnish comics field from a feminist standpoint. Feminist interest can be seen in the topics of the comics: appearance culture, feminine ideals, body norms, sexuality, relationships and bodily issues such as menstruation are repeatedly addressed.

as lightly clothed, passive sidekicks for male protagonists. See especially Johanna Sinisalo, ‘Seksi, erotiikka ja tasa-arvo supersankarisarjakuvissa’ [Sex, erotism and equality in superhero comics], *Sarjainfo* 51 (1986), 30–36; Anne Lagerstedt, ‘Alaston ja sidottu nainen kaapissa’; and Leena Peltonen, ‘Naisia ja naisenkuvia science fictionissa’ [Women and images of women in science fiction], *Sarjainfo* 68 (1990), 18–19.

11. Nette, ‘Omia kuvia naisten kurssilta’.

Although not all comics in the magazines used humour, humoristic strategies were an essential tool for their feminist critique. As several studies show, humour can be used as an effective tool to either maintain or disrupt conceptions of gender, such as notions of fixed (gendered) identity and codified gendered behaviour, and to create unconventional perspectives in order to imagine alternatives to the current state of things.¹² Humour is here understood as a broad term to refer to a wide range of visual and verbal strategies meant to ‘provoke an active response from readers who apprehend the incongruity, double-voicedness, absurdity, or hyperbolic nature of the articulation, utterance, or situation’, as Dianna C. Niebylski has proposed in her study of Latin American women writers.¹³ Feminist humour, like other kinds of humour, can range from aggressive punching-up humour to more self-reflexive, self-critical, and self-ironical humour.¹⁴ Similarly, feminist humour can utilise all kinds of humoristic strategies,

12. See Simon Weaver, Raúl Alberto Mora and Karen Morgan, ‘Gender and Humour: Examining Discourses of Hegemony and Resistance’, *Social Semiotics* 26, no. 3 (2016), 227–233 (227), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2015.1134820> (accessed 9 February 2022); Dianna C. Niebylski, *Humoring Resistance: Laughter and Excessive Body in Latin American Women’s Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 5; Helga Kotthoff, ‘Gender and Humor: The State of the Art’, *Journal of Pragmatics* 38 (2006), 4–25 (5), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2005.06.003>.

13. Niebylski, *Humoring Resistance*, 4.

14. Berenice Pahl, ‘Pussy Riot’s Humour and the Social Media: Self-irony, Subversion, and Solidarity’, *European Journal of Humour Research* 4, no. 4 (2017), 67–104 (70), <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2016.4.4.pahl>.

such as irony, parody, the grotesque and satire, as several studies on feminist comics have argued.¹⁵ The comics in *Naarassarjat*, *Irtoparta* and *Nettinarttu* used several humoristic strategies, but, as the analysis shows, slightly different emphases can be distinguished in how the comics discuss conceptions and expectations of gender, and especially femininity.

***Naarassarjat*: Everyday Examples of Gender Expectations**

In the tradition of Western patriarchy, women's bodies have often been represented and constructed as 'frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control', as feminist thinker Elizabeth Grosz writes.¹⁶ In this line of thinking, the coupling of women with their bodies has given justification for patriarchal oppression that restricts women's social and economic roles.¹⁷ Against this historical

15. See Mike Classon Frangos, 'Liv Strömquist's Fruit of Knowledge and the Gender of Comics', *European Comic Art* 13, no. 1 (2020), 45–69, <https://doi.org/10.3167/eca.2020.130104>; Frederik Byrn Kohlert, 'Female Grotesques: Carnavalesque Subversion in the Comics of Julie Doucet', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 3, no. 1 (2012), 19–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2012.703883>; Ylva Lindberg, 'The Power of Laughter to Change the World: Swedish Female Cartoonists Raise their Voices', *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* 2, no. 2 (2016), 3–31; Nicola Streeten, *UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics: A Critical Survey* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

16. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 13.

17. *Ibid.*, 14.

background, the name of the magazine *Naarassarjat* seems like an odd choice, since *naaras* (female) refers not to humans but to animals (*sarjat* refers to sequentiality). By connecting the gender of the artists with nature, the magazine's name brings forth the historical—and misogynistic—way of seeing women as 'somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men', as Grosz puts it.¹⁸ However, given the magazine's feminist ethos, the name is ironic in the sense that it demands the supplementing of inferred meanings. Through self-reflexive Othering, the magazine's name plays with the fact that, because of their minority position, female cartoonists were often subjected to close observation and wonder in the comics scene. On the other hand, in several editorials of the magazine, the name was modified into *Narttu* [Bitch], indicating that the editors had adopted the pejorative word for empowering purposes. This strategy continued in *Nettinarttu*, as I will describe later.

The comics in *Naarassarjat* represent several genres and styles, varying from poetic and allegorical stories to gag strips, and from simplistic line drawings to expressive brush strokes in ink. In comics that depict the mundane lives of women, the focus is often on showing situations where women's bodies or behaviour are subjected to men's sexual or other needs. Several comics show a scenario in which a woman is being verbally harassed on a street or in a bar while trying to reject the man verbally by being witty.¹⁹ In Kaarina Löfgren's untitled story, a man asks

18. Ibid.

19. Tarja Niemi, 'Terapiaa' [Therapy], *Naarassarjat* 1 (1992), 37; Anne Sastis, 'Munaa vailla' [In need of a dick], *Naarassarjat* 2 (1992), 32; Maria Björklund, 'Pusu' [A kiss], *Naarassarjat* 2 (1992), 33; Kaarina Löfgren, [untitled] *Naarassarjat* 2 (1992), 35; Katja Tukiainen, 'Puhu kukille' [Talk to the flowers], *Naarassarjat* 2 (1993), 2.

a woman to dance to which she replies that ‘tough guys don’t dance’, a reference to Norman Mailer’s crime mystery of the same title.²⁰ The man insists that she is not a ‘guy’, which sets the woman into bewilderment about her gender: ‘Gosh, I have to start thinking in a totally new way... / Is my hair alright? / Need to shave my legs, yikes! I might start to menstruate anytime...’.²¹ Annoyed by her refusal to act according to socially assigned gender roles, the man calls her a ‘crazy bitch’, leaving her to snigger at her own wittiness (see Figure 2).

<FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE.>

Figure 2. Kaarina Löfgren, [untitled], *Naarassarjat 2* (1992), 35.

The woman’s reply may seem out of proportion in relation to a simple call to dance, but at the same time, her self-irony is a survival mechanism that helps her maintain active agency and refuse gender expectations. Her exaggerated reaction ridicules the culturally held belief that women should be preoccupied with their looks and constantly control their bodies in order to fulfil the rules of femininity. Ironically, the ideals of femininity are, according to feminist thinker Susan Bordo, ever-changing, homogenising and elusive, which means that to pursue them, women are required to ‘constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion’.²² In this pursuit, ‘female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are

20. Norman Mailer, *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* (New York: Random House, 1984).

21. Löfgren, [untitled], 35.

22. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 165–166.

habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, “improvement”²³ According to Bordo, this discipline and normalisation of the female body into a docile body is a form of gender oppression and social control that limits women’s possibilities, generates and focuses their energies and constructs commonly held conceptions of normality and deviance.²⁴ The protagonist in Löfgren’s comic refuses to play by the patriarchy’s rules.

Unlike many feminist comics nowadays, the comics in *Naarassarjat* do not situate the issues in theoretical discussions of patriarchy or gender hierarchy, nor do they provide didactic information about gender issues.²⁵ Instead, they rely on the reader’s abilities to recognise how gender hierarchy works in everyday values, attitudes and behavioural patterns that are normalised and idealised in society. The comics show situations where women’s opinions are ignored totally, regarded as overreaction, or belittled as ‘cute’ by men.²⁶ Many comics show how women have internalised the idea of pleasing men by trying to achieve a certain appearance or by

23. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 166.

24. Ibid.

25. An illustrative example of didactic feminist comics are comics by Swedish artist Liv Strömquist, who has also influenced Finnish contemporary feminist comics, such as Riina Tanskanen’s *Tympeät tytöt: Aikuistumisriittejä* [Typical girls: Adult rites], which began as an Instagram project, was published as a book and got a wide media attention in 2021. For Strömquist’s feminist critique of gender and her use of theory, see Frangos, ‘Liv Strömquist’s Fruit of Knowledge and the Gender of Comics’.

26. Anne Sastis, [untitled], *Naarassarjat* 1 (1992), 8–9; Johanna Pakkanen, *Avioliittokysymyksestä* [About the marriage question], *Naarassarjat* 1 (1992), 14.

staying in unhappy and even violent relationships.²⁷ In these cases, the comics illustrate how the internalised rules of femininity lead women into harmful results: a woman striving to fulfil beauty standards falls ill with bulimia, and a woman craving male acceptance is treated as a naive child. For women, the game is never fair, but it always results in ‘the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough’, as Bordo phrases it.²⁸ Although the comics show women in unhappy situations and quite often as helpless in the face of gender oppression, they are also humorous. The humour is built on recognising the absurdity of the patriarchal mechanisms, and this kind of humour can raise awareness, strengthen subversive agency and build solidarity and community, as Berenice Pahl suggests.²⁹ The critique became even sharper in *Irtoparta*, which used parody as a tool to highlight the idea of gender as a performance of repetitive acts.

Feminist Parody of Women’s Magazines in *Irtoparta*

27. Anne Sastis and Jenny Eräsaari, ‘Bulimiapäivä’ [Bulimic day], *Naarassarjat* 1 (1992), 10–11; Kata Koskivaara, ‘Espressomies’ [Espresso man], *Naarassarjat* 2 (1992), 23–30; Anne Sastis, ‘Saunojat’ [In sauna], *Naarassarjat* 3 (1992), 26; Netta Böök, ‘Onnen salaisuus’, [The secret of happiness], *Naarassarjat* 3 (1992), 28; Liina Tamminen, ‘Nenä’ [Nose], *Naarassarjat* 3 (1992), 34; Tuula Pystynen, [untitled], *Naarassarjat* 3 (1992), 39; Pakkanen, ‘Avioliittokysymyksestä’, 14; Kati Kovács, ‘Kotoisa kahvitaukio’, [A cozy coffee break], *Naarassarjat* 2 (1992), 20–21; Riikka Söyring, ‘Strippejä’ [Strips], *Naarassarjat* 2 (1992), 31.

28. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 166.

29. Pahl, ‘Pussy Riot’s Humour and the Social Media’, 72.

Irtoparta was an A5-sized zine collected and edited by Tampere-based comics artist Tiitu Takalo, and the print run was four hundred copies per issue.³⁰ Issues 2 and 3 collected comics under a certain theme, ‘travelling’ and ‘teenage’, respectively, but most issues were not themed, in addition to having variability in the style of execution. Most of the comics conformed to the traditional format of comics, with clear panel division, whereas others experimented with layouts and the placement of words and images. Many of the contributors were art students at the time and later continued their careers with comics or other forms of art.

The turn of the millennium did not end the discussion of female cartoonists in the Finnish comics culture as exceptions to the male norm, as can be seen in the title of *Irtoparta* [Detachable beard/Fake beard], which implies that female artists should wear a disguise to blend in.³¹ The name of the magazine can be read as a critique of essentialist thinking. The idea is illustrated on the back cover of issue 4, which imitates an advertisement in an old-fashioned women’s magazine (see Figure 3). Portraying an image of a very feminine woman whose face is

30. In the first issue, the print run was three hundred copies, but, as it was sold out quickly, the publishers decided to print another two hundred copies. The first issue was edited and published collectively but, from the second issue on, the editor-in-chief was Tiitu Takalo and the zines were published by her small-press publishing activity Hyena Publishing. See Tiitu Takalo, [Editorial], *Irtoparta* 8, (2007), 1.

31. The same year, in 2001, the publishing house Sarjamaania began publishing comics by women in a series called *Parrakas nainen* [Bearded lady], stating that ‘female comics artist is sometimes a similar cause for astonishment as a bearded lady’ (anonymous motto in the title page).

distorted with a beard, the cover promotes an innovation: a detachable beard. The reasons for acquiring such a product remain unclear, but maybe, as a disguise, the beard is meant to resolve the woman's desire to blend in, the better to navigate the masculine world. However, as the crude contrast between her feminine traits and the roughly drawn beard illustrates, the woman's efforts are doomed to fail, since she is always predetermined to be seen foremost as a representative of her gender.

<FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE>

Figure 3. Tiitu Takalo, *Irtoparta 4* (2003), back cover.

In feminist terms, *Irtoparta* introduced the idea of femininity as a construction of socially sustained performances and repetitive acts, not as a direct result of a certain gender identity or of being a woman.³² Often, the construction of gender was highlighted in the magazine's comics, covers and other paratexts by using a parodic repetition of the imagery and discourse of (old-fashioned) women's magazines.³³ The feminist critique was not aimed at women's magazines per se but at the culture that encourages women to position themselves in relation to men, needing to please and get acceptance through a certain womanly behaviour or look.

32. For performativity, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 180.

33. For parody as a polemical allusive imitation of another cultural text, see Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London: Routledge, 2000), 9.

The comics in *Irtoparta* did not settle for ridiculing the pursuit of ideal femininity, but they often provided an alternative for the reader by showing women who resisted conventional beauty norms, for example, by refusing to control their weight or shave their body hair. For example, in A-K Laine's strip 'Joka-aamuiset toimet' [Every morning routines], we see a person sleeping in her bed while a text narration beneath each panel gives tips about beauty care (see Figure 4).³⁴ The tips are quoted from an old text advising readers, for example, to start the day with a short gymnastic exercise wearing an 'elastic hairband and a loose shower cap'.³⁵ In the strip 'Elettävä siivosti' [To live a decent life] by Tiitu Takalo, each of the sixteen panels includes an image of a woman and a text box with tips for how to live a decent life (see Figure 5). The images specify that the advice, such as 'Demand perfection from yourself', 'No sex before marriage' and 'You can never be too skinny', particularly refers to women. In the last panel, we see the artist sticking her tongue out at the reader, a reminder that the feminine ideals are 'mostly rubbish'.³⁶ While the text narration imitates the language of women's magazines, informing the reader how to exercise self-control in regard to appearance, body, sexuality and emotions, the images in both Laine's and Takalo's comics form a stark contrast to the narration.³⁷

<FIGURE 4 NEAR HERE.>

34. Anna-Kaisa Laine, 'Joka-aamuiset toimet' [Every morning routines], *Irtoparta* 1 (2001), 2–4.

35. Laine, 'Joka-aamuiset toimet'.

36. Tiitu Takalo, 'Elettävä siivosti' [To live a decent life], *Irtoparta* 6 (2005), 4–7.

37. See also Henna-Leena Kallio, 'Meikkipää' [Make-up head], *Irtoparta* 4 (2003), 42; Tiitu Takalo, 'Elettävä siivosti', 4–7.

Figure 4. A-K Laine, 'Joka-aamuiset toimet' [Every morning routines], *Irtoparta 1* (2001), 2–3.

<FIGURE 5 NEAR HERE>

Figure 5. Tiitu Takalo, 'Elettävä siivosti' [To live a decent life], *Irtoparta 6* (2005), 6–7.

Humour that introduces unconventional perspectives, such as resistance to norms, can be liberating and empowering. Humour researcher Helga Kotthoff argues that humour has the potential to influence norms by communicating 'sovereignty, creative power, and the freedom to intervene in the world'.³⁸ While the comics of Laine and Takalo ridicule the ideals and norms of femininity, they also show alternatives. In another comic by Takalo, called 'Tanssiaiset' [The ball], the text narration describes a conventional ball where the dancing partners gather on the floor, gently touching each other, dressed in whirling skirts and high heels, whereas the images show people at a punk gig, drinking beer, pushing each other in a mosh pit, laughing and smiling.³⁹ The pairing of a conventional ball and a punk gig illustrates that there are alternatives to a heteronormative system that celebrates a certain kind of appearance, behaviour and interaction between people. To free oneself from conventional gender norms can be liberating and even fun.

After eight issues, the magazine folded in 2007, when Takalo decided that women cartoonists no longer needed their own publication. The gender of the artists as a common denominator did not seem meaningful at a time when more women and girls had started making

38. Kotthoff, 'Gender and Humor: The State of the Art', 5.

39. Tiitu Takalo, 'Tanssiaiset', [The Ball], *Irtoparta 3* (2002), 25–29.

comics and found their own publishing channels, for example, on the Internet.⁴⁰ The Internet was also the home of *Nettinarttu*, a Helsinki-based web magazine born in 2004. In the beginning, the premise was to continue the legacy of *Naarassarjat* in order to encourage women and girls to draw comics. However, gradually the magazine—and the collective around it—started to move away from the essentialist inclusion of only female cartoonists towards a more inclusive and diverse take on feminism.

***Nettinarttu*: Anyone Can Be a ‘Bitch’, from Gender Difference to Inclusiveness**

By taking the word *narttu* [bitch] to describe the magazine and, more broadly, the community around it, the creators of *Nettinarttu* [Web bitch] followed an old feminist tradition of reclaiming derogatory and misogynist language.⁴¹ Whereas in misogynist language, ‘bitch’ is a negative word for loud, stubborn, or otherwise transgressive women, for the creators of *Nettinarttu* it became a positive word for making comics on their own terms without needing to please anyone else. Being a bitch also meant feelings of pride, joy and togetherness: anyone with the right attitude could be a bitch, the magazine declared, regardless of their gender. As a result, a few

40. See Takalo’s interview in Jenny Kangasvuo, ‘Tiitu Takalo: Hyeena’ [Tiitu Takalo: Hyena], *SQS* 1–2 (2010), 36–49 (42–43).

41. As Nicola Streeten remarks, this reclamation strategy was common in many zines and women’s publications in the 1990s, although the strategy itself had already been used by the suffragettes in the early 1900s. See Streeten, *UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics: A Critical Survey*, 15, 182.

men also answered the call by drawing, for example, personal coming-out stories or self-reflexive comics about masculinity.

Nettinarttu was an ambitious project since comics magazines were traditionally published in print, and it was the first comics magazine in Finland to explore digital possibilities. It was executed as a web page with hyperlinks and several sections for comics, reviews, editorials, artist introductions, link lists, publication advertisements, a comics-related blog and a place to upload the readers' own comics.⁴² From issue 6 onwards, each issue had a specific theme that was announced beforehand. The first theme was menstruation, which was followed by the themes glass ceiling, tights, 'my struggle', hair, teenage, shame, bimbo, limits, cunt, penis and 'once upon a time'.⁴³

42. In *Irtoparta*, the low-cost print form dictated some of the technical features of the comics, such as the colouring (black and white) and size, whereas *Nettinarttu* had more freedom to experiment. Although the producers of *Nettinarttu* were free from the print costs and technical restrictions of paper publishing, they soon discovered that the digital platform and their inexperience of publishing comics online brought about other challenges: the readability of the comics made by pen and paper suffered, the colours changed, and the layouts appeared clumsy on-screen. See Warda Ahmed, 'Löydä sisäinen nettinarttusi!' [Discover your inner web bitch!], *Sarjainfo* 134 (2007), 10–12.

43. Unfortunately, the web page (<http://www.narttu.net>) is no longer available and very few of the comics have been published elsewhere. For this article, I was able to access the comics via a copy of a DVD kindly provided by Femicomix Finland. The numbering of *Nettinarttu*'s issues

Although *Nettinarttu* began as a women's comics magazine, it soon started to rethink its premises. By 2008, more than half of comic art students in Finland were female, and the artist's gender had become a less relevant issue: many male artists had adopted topics traditionally thought of as feminine, such as family life and relationships, and the intimate form of the diary comic.⁴⁴ The Finnish comics scene had also diversified in terms of influences: the younger generation was interested in manga, and comics blogs were becoming a popular and easily accessible tool for tackling autobiographical themes. Thus, the essentialist exclusion of male contributors in *Nettinarttu* no longer seemed like a justifiable strategy.

One of the participants in the discussion was Hannele Richert, who was active in the *Nettinarttu* collective and an aspiring comics artist. She tackled gender essentialism self-ironically and self-reflexively in a comic called 'Kuutio' [A cube], where the protagonist brainstorms what to draw in a women's comics magazine: 'Pink! Flowers! Barbies. Menstruation!' (see Figure 6). A man interrupts her by saying that the topics sound a little stereotypical, and she irritably replies, asking how she could know what women are interested in and continues brainstorming: 'Chocolate... Perm! Ruffle. Menstruation! Diet! Tights! High heels.

changed over the years but, for the sake of clarity, the issues are here renumbered starting from 1 and continuing from there (2, 3, 4 etc.).

44. See *Kotimaista naissarjakuvaa: Marginaalista maailmankartalle* [Finnish women's comics: From marginals to the world map], ed. Miia Vistilä (Helsinki: BTJ Kustannus, 2008), 8–9, 12, 18; the interview with artists Johanna 'Roju' Rojola and Anne Muhonen in Saara Oranen, 'Ihanat naiset sarjakuvissa' [Lovely women in comics], *Kulttuurivihkot* 3 (2006), 46–47; Ahmed, 'Löydä sisäinen nettinarttusi'.

Relationships...’ In the end, she finds herself trapped in a glass cage of a zoo where she is labelled a ‘typical woman’. The zoo’s guide instructs her to stay in the cage as long as it takes to ‘get in touch with her femininity’.⁴⁵ The self-reflexive laughter of the comic is not targeted at the woman but more at the traditional gender expectations that society—herself included—has internalised.

<FIGURE 6 NEAR HERE.>

Figure 6. Hannele Richert, ‘Kuutio’ [A cube], *Nettinarttu* 7 (2007).

None of the magazines—*Naarassarjat*, *Irtoparta* or *Nettinarttu*—portrayed femininity as the problem, but rather the expectation of a certain kind of docile femininity, as described earlier. Many of *Nettinarttu*’s comics celebrated feminine aesthetics and, for example, deconstructed the stereotypical connection between beautiful looks and IQ. Growing up amongst the girl-power phenomenon of the 1990s, the artists had been imbued with the idea that girls are allowed to enjoy femininity and yet be active, independent, strong, visible, wild and brave.⁴⁶ Most visibly, girl power was manifested in Hannele and Heidi Richert’s photo novels that parodied the Barbie doll and her adventures in photo novels published in *Barbie* magazine (1961–). The comics

45. Hannele Richert, “Kuutio” [A cube], *Nettinarttu* 7 (2007).

46. For the Finnish context of girl power, see Aino Tormulainen, Heta Mulari and Myry Voipio, ‘Explosive Self-confident Femininity: Experienced and Remembered Girl Energy’, *Nordic Girlhoods* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 49–72, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65118-7_3.

portray seemingly light-hearted stories that under the surface comment on sexism and the belittling of women in an empowering way. In one story, Daisy doll learns to speak for herself, and in another, the dolls embark upon a quest to find their missing genitals.⁴⁷ The latter story is a celebration of both feminine aesthetics and female sexuality, showing the dolls exclaiming ‘pussy is a fun thing’ in the group shot of the last panel (see Figure 7).

<FIGURE 7 NEAR HERE.>

Figure 7. Heidi and Hannele Richert, ‘Fotonovelli “Iloinen asia”: Kansantaruun perustuen!’

[Photo novel ‘A fun thing’: Based on a folk myth!], *Nettinarttu* 15 (2008).

To prove the point of the ridiculousness of gender essentialism, the theme of *Nettinarttu*’s second to last issue (#16) was ‘penis’, which both utilised stereotypical ideas about men’s appearance and behaviour and managed to discuss painful and somewhat silenced features of Finnish masculinity, such as timidity, use of alcohol and (self)-violence.⁴⁸ Masculinity was further deconstructed in *Perämoottori* [Outboard motor] (2009–2013), an ironic web-based

47. Heidi and Hannele Richert, ‘Ainool Deisil ei oo helppoo’ [It’s not easy to be the only Daisy], *Nettinarttu* 9 (2007); Heidi and Hannele Richert, ‘Fotonovelli “Iloinen asia”: Kansantaruun perustuen!’ [Photo novel ‘A joyful thing’: Based on a folk myth!], *Nettinarttu* 15 (2008).

48. See Emmi Valve, ‘No, mitä minä tiedän... miehistä.’ [Things I know about... men], *Nettinarttu* 16 (2009); Janette, [untitled], *Nettinarttu* 16 (2009); Rami Rautkorpi, ‘Logistiikka’ [Logistics], *Nettinarttu* 16 (2009); Marko and Amina, ‘Mies meni saunaan’ [A man went to sauna], *Nettinarttu* 16 (2009).

comics magazine, founded and edited by female cartoonists working under male pseudonyms.⁴⁹ Wanting to ridicule gender roles and essentialist thinking, the editors and invited artists from all genders to draw comics with stereotypically masculine themes, such as cars, moustaches, technology, sports, fatherland, booze, and sauna, until the magazine folded after thirteen issues. By this point, gender essentialism as a topic for a joke was dated, since the Finnish comics scene had irreversibly diversified.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that humour was an essential, if not the only, strategy for these magazines to discuss problems about normalised and internalised gender expectations. The humour in *Naarassarjat* was both based on recognition and empowerment; on the one hand, the comics showcased the harmful results of the internalised ideals of femininity and, on the other hand, showed examples of resistance. The empowering aspect was even stronger in *Irtoparta*, which used parody as a tool to ridicule essentialist assumptions and introduced powerful female characters who boldly resisted the norms. The comics in *Nettinarttu* continued to ridicule gender essentialism, but they also celebrated girlhood and femininity in the spirit of the girl-power phenomenon.

49. *Perämoottori* was edited by cartoonists Milla Paloniemi (as Tapio R-N), Hanna Sirola (as Heikki S.) and Kati Vuopala (as Kari) (personal communication with Milla Paloniemi, 2 September 2021). Unfortunately, the web page (<http://www.peramoottori.net>) is no longer available.

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The debate on the necessity of the term ‘women’s comics’ continued until the 2010s, but as time has passed, the Finnish comics culture and conceptions of gender have changed. First, women artists have moved away from the minority position. Second, many comics artists and people working in the field have abandoned the idea of gender as a binary system and adopted more nuanced views that take into consideration non-binary and trans people, sexual minorities, as well as intersectional ideas of gender as one part of oppressive structures. In the wake of international influences, the term ‘feminist comics’ has become more common and has replaced the essentialising term ‘women’s comics’. In particular, the impact of Swedish feminist comics has been significant and inspired Finnish artists and activists to build the network Femicomix Finland (2013–), that—similar to its Swedish sister Dotterbolaget (2005–)—enables collaborative and supportive work among feminist-minded artists and activists.⁵⁰ Although the network does not have its own publication, the members have published feminist comics, for example, in shared anthologies and magazines.

Despite the fact that the world in general and Finnish society in particular have changed a lot in the last thirty years, many of the comics in *Naarassarjat*, *Irtoparta* and *Nettinarttu* still

50. About the Swedish context of feminist comics, see Kristy Beers Fägersten, Leena Romu, Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Victorin, ‘Feminist Comics: An Expanding Field’, *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Kristy Beers Fägersten, Anna Nordenstam, Leena Romu, and Margareta Wallin Victorin (London: Routledge, 2021), 4–5; and Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Victorin, ‘Women’s Liberation: Swedish Feminist Comics and Cartoons from the 1970s and 1980s’, *European Comic Art* 12, no. 2 (2019), 77–105, <http://www.doi/10.3167/eca.2019.120205>.

seem topical. As a result of the #MeToo movement, sexual objectification and harassment are topics of broad cultural conversations, and this is also the case in Finland.⁵¹ As part of the discussion, artists have shared their experiences of internalised misogyny and problems of docile femininity in the form of comics. Other topical issues discussed in the current feminist comics are, for example, mental health, sexual and gender identity, and the precariousness of an artistic career. While many artists still publish their work in print, either as books or zines, the Internet and social media have also proven to be successful platforms for publishing and promoting feminist comics and, thus, to continue the legacy of *Naarassarjat*, *Irtoparta* and *Nettinarttu*.

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51. For the representation of sexual violence in Finnish comics, see Leena Romu, 'The Narrative Complexity of Showing and Telling Sexual Harassment and Violence in Kati Kovács's Comics', *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Kristy Beers Fägersten, Anna Nordenstam, Leena Romu and Margareta Wallin Victorin (London: Routledge, 2021), 195–214.