



The Femen: Tactical Nudity

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Cities throughout Europe have become a battleground for female “sextremists” protesting bare-chested in their crowns of heroism. These women deliver their truth by writing on their naked bodies. Marching in the streets and in front of parliament buildings, these

protests call for rights for women. Yet they are also designed as tactical manoeuvres to provoke violence, craving mass media dissemination.

FEMEN describe themselves as “an international women’s movement of brave topless female activists painted with the slogans and crowned with flowers” (Femen, 2017). The main FEMEN tactic is to stage provocative marches and demonstrations, in this case in Ukraine against the established government and Russian occupation. The FEMEN claim that their goal is the freedom of women from patriarchy. Women in the group are trained to carry and disseminate their militant motto around Europe and the world, through their participation to many protests and events (for example, in Crimea against Putin’s War and more recently in France protesting against Marine Le Pen (Femen, 2017)).

Tactic, explains Michel de Certeau, has to operate within the space of the dominant other (Certeau, 1998). By protesting half naked during public events, FEMEN take advantage of their disruptive and highly visible presence to underline and combat gender discrimination. The method they are using to garner attention and ignite reaction is the naked female body and the power that it holds. In fact the FEMEN motto declares, “My body is my weapon!” (Ackerman, 2017). These actions are part of an overall strategy aiming to take their own body back from men and demanding to own control over it. In today’s technological society this strategy is highly reliant on social media for visibility, and relies on a power relationship between the participatory culture built through social networks and mass media. The real power of FEMEN’s public display of the naked female body indeed only becomes effective as their actions are replayed on mass media. FEMEN understands this interdependence between their movement and global media. They need the media to bring their message beyond the borders of Ukraine and the media needs high profile, theatrical sound bites to feed public interest and entertain the audience. The FEMEN set a stage on which men reacting to the FEMEN protesters are necessarily pictured through their coercive attitude. These men unwittingly become participants, essential actors of a drama designed by FEMEN to highlight the very nature of men responding to women. In these happenings creating calculated, hostile situations, the female body becomes a weapon to provoke hostile interactions between male and female, laying bare the asymmetric nature of their power relationship.

Alexander Nemenov's photograph of a man grabbing a FEMEN activist around the throat in front of Crimea's parliament is a classic example of this complex relationship between FEMEN and the media and the tactics deployed by the activist group to raise awareness on certain issues. The photographer, known for his work as a war photographer and his series on sport and politics in Russia, captures a FEMEN activist physically threatened by a man during an event against Putin's politics in Crimea. The photograph offers a mid shot of the event, allowing the woman's bare chest and the chaos of the scene to overwhelm the image. The woman becomes the focal point of the image. While her raised arms shield the identity of one of the aggressors, she stands slightly out of center frame, providing more visibility for the other men standing near her. Contrasting with the grey background and denim, dark colours sported by the men, the woman's naked flesh and splashes of red on her lips and head stand out. The Ribbon of St Georges on the man's black jacket also stands out. It clearly conveys his political beliefs as it acts as a mark of allegiance to the Russian State, calling attention to the sensitive issue of the Russian influence in the Crimea area. These details in the picture, both referring to the woman and the man, underline the political antagonism between her and the rest of the crowd surrounding her. The unbalanced physical power between her and the group of men suggest here the domination exerted by the Russian power over Ukraine – The Ukrainian territory of Crimea was annexed by the Russian Federation in 2014 (Larabee, 1994).

The woman's gaze is taken from us as she clenches her eyes closed and screams out. This scream could simply be a blunt expression of her anger and suffering at the hands of the men. Her reaction seems to be a genuine response to the actions her behaviour has provoked, yet it should be seen as a symbol of the oppression of all women by men. Indeed, the woman stands amid a group of men. Several hands attack her, one man grasping her neck while another arm coming out of frame places his hands near her ear. A third man, while not physically threatening the activist, appears to be holding a camera to film this expression of domination over her. The only gaze visible in the photograph refers to man looking at her with a smirk. Just like the individual filming her, he does not physically engage with the woman but participates through this look to this coercive act. The man's direct stare increases the overwhelming power exerted by the men upon the woman. A step

further, it infuses the storyline with overpowering Russian presence in the Ukraine. The man standing behind the woman, his hands clasped across her neck is mostly shielded in the shot. Yet his arm, entangled with hers, becomes a powerful component of the photograph revealing a clear need to block her body and conceal her words, marked on her bare torso with the clear writings: STOP PUTIN'S WAR. This attack, resulting in the partial concealment of her words reinforces the urgency of the message. The men surrounding the woman thus threaten her femininity, claimed through her bare chest, red lipstick and headpiece. These elements act as a powerful symbol in the FEMEN movement, as they represent femininity and disobedience (Ackerman, 2017). Femininity, though, is claimed here as an act of war, marked by the harsh black letters written on her chest and her chipped tooth emerging through her scream. As she resists the attack, she grips onto her crown of flowers, salvaging her femininity and reclaiming her power. As a member of FEMEN this woman represents the female warrior, scarred by battle but grasping onto her crown of heroism, playing her role bravely.

Images and representation can define social events. This image is powerful because it brings to light and makes visible the very violence the women are denouncing through their march. This photograph chooses to shed light on this moment, thus defining the march as one of power relations and violence for the women. Thomas Watkins, a Pentagon correspondent and one of the community managers for The Agence France-Presse, explain the decision to select this pictures from thousands others through its relevance on social networks: the naked body of the attacked woman symbolizes the sense of empowerment and struggle of women in the political world, telling a different story than a photograph of a FEMEN activist marching with the other women, untouched by men and directly looking at the camera. The fact that the background includes no other bodies but rather only the pavement of the street makes the woman stand alone. This moment, depicting something violent and degrading was selected to represent the movement, which Watkins describes as outrageous, displaying the interdependence between FEMEN and the media (Watkins, 2014).

The dissemination of the message conveyed in this picture relies on social media platforms. These platforms take advantage of stage-managed nature of the FEMEN marches, providing outrageous material likely to be shared on their platforms and disseminated through the

world. The FEMEN motto, “my body is my weapon!” (Ackerman, 2017), implies that the marches are their battlefield. However their actual battle is twofold. First they wish to provoke men, who usually become the protagonists – and often, enemies – of their staged-managed events; second, they attempt to produce images to provoke the reaction of viewers on social media, who will spread their message. The fact that they value social media such as Facebook – which paradoxically censors their pictures by masking their nipples – suggests that their weapon is the media. Their naked bodies are ~~the~~ tactical tools employed to get them there.

The cameraman puts his own body at risk to capture the moment. However, it is important to consider the extent to which the photographer was, in fact, at risk. The men in the group appear oblivious to the camera. It is interesting to consider the role of a photographer and the notion of what should be captured and what should not. This photographer had the opportunity to depict a moment of violence during a march showing the realities of the tensions in the country, between pro-Russian and individuals fighting for the country’s unity, as well as gender inequalities. The photograph showcases a woman participating in civil unrest and having her rights violated. The main objective of FEMEN is to provoke a situation that will cause outrage and provoke the audience’s indignation on the various social media platforms conveying their actions. A complexity is formed, evoking within the viewers a fear for women who stand against the regime while also clearly depicting the inequality, enticing those to further combat inequality and power relations. The symbol of the nude body is essential to the FEMEN movement. The body acts as a poster and the truth is expressed through the nudity and the signs drawn on it (Ackerman, 2017). This woman forcefully parades her nudity and message written in English. This decision to use English at a Russian protest, demonstrates an awareness of the women marching of the power the words have when photographed and reproduced by mass media. This language represents interests and visions that contradict Putin’s Russia and FEMEN go against them, especially in the case of Ukraine. Iconic images have a direct and powerful impact on the different ways in which people understand events. This image is not just an image but is ~~rather~~ an idea (Salmon, 2017). The photographer who stands in the midst of this violence chooses not to intervene. He places his body at risk not to protect but to tell the story.

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