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The Well-Accessorized Philosopher

The Vincent F. Hendricks Debacle

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Abstract

A 2012 photo spread in a life-style men's magazine, featuring young women clad in sexualized pastiches of school uniforms, was used by a Copenhagen University Professor of Philosophy to create what he thought of as light-hearted publicity for his Logics course that semester. This article analyses the images of the photo spread (contextualizing them with insights from humour theory), their reception in the philosophy community and the public at large, and discusses the implications of the ensuing chain of events in a gender debate perspective.

Keywords Sexism, philosophy, feminism, humour, costume

Introduction

This article analyses the contents of and subsequent events and debates aroused by a 2012 photo spread featuring a professor of philosophy at Copenhagen University and minor Danish media celebrity, Vincent F. Hendricks, as "Man of the Month" for *Connery*, a self-billed "Life-Style Magazine for Men" (Connery, 2012). The magazine is an online publication specializing in stories about male ce-

lebrities within the Danish public sphere, international icons of cool masculinity, and events within sports, entertainment and other arenas where a display of male prowess is prized. *Connery* – which was described by Anglophone bloggers during the ensuing debate as basically a "lad mag" (Jezebel, 2012) – rarely misses an opportunity to illustrate its stories and profiles with scantily clad female models, and the Hendricks set is certainly no exception to the rule, containing as it does 25 photos of Hendricks and four young female models in school uniforms.

The present article commences with a detailed analysis of the staging of gender and sexuality in the photo series, proceeds to look at the subsequent critique of Hendricks' use of the images on his own website and the entanglement he created between them and the philosophy curriculum at Copenhagen University, and ends with a consideration of the larger gender debate issues, both those brought forth by his responses to the critics and those left open by the rather swift closure of the debate on the representation of women within the academic field of philosophy.

Analysis of the photo set

The *Connery* photo series (Connery, 2012) consists of 25 images – 11 of which are colour photographs, and 14 of which are black and white. (All photos can be easily viewed by following the hyperlink to *Connery* given in the references section, but individual photos that are discussed in-depth can also be accessed directly by following links in the endnotes provided.) Most photos in the b&w category are a species of behind-the-scenes candid shots, some showing the four female models getting dressed up for the shoot or fooling around with props or other items they have found lying about in the actual Copenhagen University classroom where the shoot took place. Hendricks is featured prominently in the first four colour shots, three of which also feature a number of the female models, dressed up in stereotypical sexualized school uniforms, of the variety that is often associated with pornography shoots. The female models have bared midriffs, show cleavage, and wear very short plaid skirts and full length stocking hose, leaving a few inches of bare skin between skirt and hose. The other seven colour photos are portraits of the four models in relative close-up, with each image dedicated to one model. The models seem to have been carefully

selected or accessorized to show a variety of girl types: one blonde, one brunette; one model with black hair, one with her hair dyed red. All the girls wear conspicuous make-up not usually associated with classroom activities but rather with going to a party or on a date. If indeed the main subject of the photo spread is the "Man of the Month", Hendricks, it is curious that the unnamed models take up almost twice as many of the colour shots displayed. One clearly senses that the models' visual attributes receive more than equal billing on *Connery*'s part.

In the three colour shots that show interaction between him and the models, Professor Hendricks maintains a serious, almost surly demeanour, sometimes folding his arms across his chest, sometimes wielding a black marker writing, or pretending to write on the whiteboard of the classroom. Hendricks is dressed in a three piece worsted suit, but does not wear the suit jacket, presumably having decided to get more comfortable working only in his shirt sleeves (an impression underscored by his having loosened his tie as well). Perhaps we are meant to infer that the hotness of the situation has mandated this dressing down of his otherwise formal attire, which incidentally seems somewhat archaic, involving as it does the wearing of sleeve garters and cufflinks. The costume Hendricks wears in this shoot is in fact identical to the costume he has been known to wear in one of his TV-shows, "Gal eller Genial" (DR2, 2010-11), a show where Hendricks decides, based on an inventor's pitch of his crazy/genius idea for a gadget or procedure, whether the candidate deserves encouragement to proceed into a development phase for his project. One might speculate why Hendricks needed to wear a costume that seems to be a pastiche of a 1920s outfit to adjudicate this show, and indeed also why he needed to wear that outfit at the shoot at Copenhagen University, but the obvious answer would be that his masculinity is thought to be accessorized and underscored by formal and archaic attire.

Hendricks is featured solo in one colour photo[1], where he sits at the classroom desk, hands folded in front of the lower part of his face, hiding his mouth. The photo displays a fashionable, large men's watch quite prominently, presumably in an instance of product placement; whether initiated by the magazine or by Hendricks himself is hard to guess. This shot is also one of several to feature a whiteboard in the background, containing elaborate reams of logics

formulae, written by Hendricks during the shoot (as documented in one of the black and white shots), giving the classroom an authentic university ambience. Again the careful accessorizing of Hendricks elevates his status as a person of authority. He not only masters time and timekeeping, but also the intellectual discipline of formal logic. Here masculinity, teaching and scientific rigour are connected in one semiotic chain. His portrayal of himself as a self-made man bears resemblance to well-known American rags-to-riches figures such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's Gatsby. Perhaps Hendricks has even borrowed his costume ideas from just such jazz age masculine, successful role models.

The lone solo image of Hendricks referred to in the above shows him as a stereotype of the serious professional philosopher. He gazes into the distance (as opposed to one of the interaction images where he gazes sidelong at one of the models' *derrières*), apparently lost in thought, having "forgotten" the presence of camera and photographer. His glasses are casually placed on the desk in front of him, showing us that he no longer needs to gaze outward, but is communing, without need of further sensory input, with his inner man. Two of the shots that feature both Hendricks and the models have Hendricks occupy the foreground of the picture, looking directly at the camera, with the models forming the backdrop to his large, masculine frame. He is not in any way registering their presence or behaviour (the blonde model is wielding an iPhone in one shot[2], texting or perhaps taking a selfie), but one senses that Hendricks realizes the display behind him and how his body is aligned to dominate the composition as a whole, but not hide the amount of unclad skin displayed by the models. In these photos, the male gaze[3], directed straight at the reader, organizes the entire image and sorts out the foreground/background distribution.

The third colour shot[4] that Hendricks shares with the models is the most provocative of these group shots. As mentioned, Hendricks' gaze targets the behind of one model, while he simultaneously wilfully avoids acknowledging another model's attempt to hand him a red apple. His black marker is pensively poised at half-mast and paused an inch from the whiteboard, no writing issuing forth in the moment of the shot being taken. The presence of the apple is of course a play on the temptation of Adam by Eve in the Garden of Eden, the apple being the forbidden fruit of the tree of

knowledge. Here ironically, the already knowledgeable professor is impervious to the offer of more knowledge, instead preferring the rather more carnal roundness of Eve's rival's buttocks. One feels that the marker will soon symbolically rise higher. In this shot the male gaze of Hendricks didactically shows the reader how to navigate the positioning of female bodies in a specific space – that of the classroom – objectifying them in the process.

The black and white shots are not exclusively candid behind-the-scenes shots (although nine of them are), as indeed five of them are posed shots of the models alone (two photos) or Hendricks and the models. Of these latter three shots, two are variations on the Eve and the apple theme already discussed, but with the significant difference that these are apparent outtakes, deemed unsuitable because Hendricks breaks pose and laughs in one of them, and in the other cannot quite control his smirk as he glances at the blonde model's bottom. These shots can therefore be read as showing a) how much fun Hendricks and the models were having, or b) how casual Hendricks was concerning his self-staging, or his taking directions from the art director or the photographer (both shown in one of the behind-the-scene shots). This adds an important narrative layer to the shoot – one that Hendricks made recourse to in his later justification of the shoot – namely, that the images were always intended to be playful and tongue-in-cheek. The photos, however, only manage show the nature of the sense of humour that Hendricks subscribes to – one that is parallel to his use of off-colour race humour mentioned earlier.

The Reception

Having analysed the images and some of their connotations and potential story lines, we now turn to the reception of the spread. Here we are not concerned with how the images were read in their original context within the frame of *Connery*, but rather in how Hendricks himself employed the images on his personal website (Hendricks, 2012-4) (which at the time served as a form of dynamic online CV) and linked the images to an announcement of an official course Hendricks was about to start teaching at the Copenhagen University Philosophy Department.

It was the latter use that caused the most immediate stir and led to severe criticism of Hendricks' judgment and etiquette. The an-

nouncement on the page was quite terse: "The undergraduate course in Argumentation, Logic and Philosophy of Language starts February 7, 2012", immediately followed by a link, presumably to the official Copenhagen University page announcing the course with more information. The accompanying image was the group shot of Hendricks in front of the four models, and possibly several of the other Connery shots (the page was removed, so we only have surviving screen shots to go by, viewable at Flickr, 2012). Hendricks was quickly accused of sexism and improper use of suggestive images in a teaching context.

The initial response came from a blog entitled *Feminist Philosophers* (Feminist, 2012) which reported on February 22, 2012 that Professor Hendricks was using the *Connery* pictures "apparently [on] the webpage for Vincent Hendricks' logic course", and that this fact left the blogger virtually speechless: "Wow. Just ... wow." The blogger however, quickly recuperates and waxes quite lyrical in her condemnation: "Now go put on your schoolgirl outfit and hand your manly logic teacher an apple. You are a sexy accessory to his awesomeness." The post quickly garnered over a hundred comments, rather uniformly condemning Hendricks' action as inappropriate, unintelligent and ill advised.

Other professional philosophy blogs such as *Leiter Reports: A Philosophy Blog* (Leiter Reports, 2012) and *ReadMoreWriteMoreThinkMoreBeMor*e (ReadMore, 2012) followed up on breaking the news of Hendricks' latest transgression (he was already on some of these bloggers' "watch-list" for an earlier infraction involving his editorship of the influential journal *Synthese*, where it seemed to these bloggers that he had been swayed by Intelligent Design lobbyists to request rewrites of already published articles). Professor Leigh Johnson, who blogs as Doctor J. at the latter of the blogs mentioned, went as far as to draft a protest letter, which she urged Copenhagen University students of both the female and male sex to sign (or modify and sign) and send to Professor Hendricks, expressing – among several other points – the following sentiments:

> I assume you are aware that the images you posted in your advertisement were manifestly and overtly sexist. Those images simultaneously objectified, infantilized, depersonalized and dehumanized the women depicted in them.

> Although I am aware that such images are standard fare in the larger world of advertisements, I am deeply disappointed to see you appropriate them so uncritically.
>
> I assume you are also aware that the profession of Philosophy is grossly underrepresented by women. Less than 1 in 5 tenure or tenure-track professional Philosophers are female. If you wonder why students like myself-- i.e., female undergraduates interested in Philosophy-- depart from the discipline in statistically significant numbers, I suggest that you take a critical look at your course advertisement. (ReadMore, 2012)

This blast from Doctor J. frames the use Hendricks put the images to in two distinct ways. First, she accuses him directly of sexism, not only through his act of disseminating the photos, but also stating that the photos *per se* were inherently sexist in their objectification of women. Secondly, she points to a larger problematic, namely the gender inequality that still persists in the philosophy field, and which is only exacerbated by acts such as Hendricks'. This analysis nowhere considers that humour might have been intended on Hendricks' part, nor does it seem likely that a humorous intent would have ameliorated the criticism offered by this blog.

Within a day of the issue causing a stir in rather insular and specialized philosophy publics, a much more damaging type of website picked up on the issue, no doubt fuelled by the inviting visual material the case involved. The gossip blog *Jezebel* brought a brief *précis* (Jezebel, 2012) of the case with one illustration borrowed from the *Connery* site. This blog reaches an estimated 10 million readers pr. month, and therefore the mention of the Hendricks case in this setting meant that the issue had left the narrow confines of academic spheres and become a matter of more general interest, turning Hendricks into a potential target for universal ridicule. After the case had received this exposure internationally, i.e. particularly in the U.S., where the philosophy blogs all originated and chiefly were read (after all they were in English), Danish media began slowly reporting the issue, led by tabloid press papers, which generally are anti-intellectual whenever they deign to report on academic matters at all, but also in quality dailies such as *Politiken* (Politiken,

2012). Suddenly Hendricks found himself dealing with newspaper placards and front pages (further fuelled by the C-list celebrity status his numerous TV appearances had already ensured him).

Hendricks attempted damage control from the minute the case first broke within the philosophy blogosphere. He removed all images from his own webpages as a first move, but bloggers had already taken screen-shots and posted them to image repositories such as Flickr, where they can still be accessed. However, he did not initially remove all connection to the *Connery* site, but simply used a text link to the article instead. As the scope of the outrage he had caused began to dawn on him, he, however, also quickly removed this link from his website. Of course *Connery* has only been pleased by the extra exposure for their article and the site in general, and the story and accompanying picture gallery is still publically available from their site. Hendricks was pushed onto the defensive by continuing exposure and ridicule and, as a next line of self-defence, attempted the "humour" excuse. He posted a public apology on his website where he basically rolled over and exposed his throat to the attackers, hoping that they would be swayed by his argument that he had learned his lesson, but that he really had not meant (and therefore probably still could not see) any harm to be done:

> To the Philosophical Community
> Some recent pictures on my website have caused some debate. The intention was that the pictures, as a cover on a forthcoming magazine, might be used to view logic from a somewhat humorous and untraditional perspective appealing to larger audience which the magazine covers. However, it had the opposite effect offending various parties in the philosophical community. I truly apologize for this and I stand completely corrected. I have removed the pictures from the website. (cited at ReadMore, 2012)

This excuse, of course, did not placate most of Hendricks' critics. After all, it only raised more questions about his judgment, if indeed he seriously could entertain the thought that most people would be amused by the images, and in fact had originally imagined that they might attract more people to the subject of logic. This further criticism meant that Hendricks pulled another "excuse" out of his arse-

nal of legitimizing discourses; one that was particularly designed to silence his American critics: he had done the whole thing for charity in the first place, and he appealed that critics cease and desist before they ruin his charity efforts completely. This stratagem was largely successful. Most sites presumably felt the case had run its course anyway, and it was hard for most American sites to counter the charity argument, since the so-called charity Hendricks claimed his appearance on *Connery* benefited only had a website in Danish. The site in question, Youmeshopping, is an outfit that sells goods and services at discount prices, advertising that a portion of the proceeds will go to the charity of choice of their so-called ambassadors – celebrities that lend their name to these products that the site markets (Youmeshopping, 2012-4). This scheme is thus perhaps more accurately labelled product endorsement rather than a charity, but no one in the blogosphere or in the Danish press followed up on this. Hendricks was let off the hook in the public sphere without further exposure (after all he was only a philosopher, not a politician, and only a minor celebrity at that).

Underlying Issues

The issues behind the Hendricks case do remain salient, however, and are prime material for teaching and researching gender issues. Two of the larger questions raised by the photos and their reception were: can humour be a mitigating circumstance in connection with the presentation of sensitive image material that minority groups perceive as insulting; and were the images in fact demeaning of women, as feminist bloggers were quick to claim? Copenhagen University's student magazine (University Post, 2012) interviewed a number of female and male students in connection with the case. Many students offered the opinion that the feminist critics were devoid of a sense of humour and were missing the point that all that took place during the photo shoot was obviously harmless role-play by all parties involved. A majority of the students expressing this point of view were male, but not exclusively so. Other commentators expressed viewpoints to the effect that these images were pale in comparison with true pornography of the costume play or indeed of any variety. And finally the argument was forwarded that all commercials routinely tend to objectify female bodies in order to

sell products, whether these are related to the female body or not, ranging from soft drinks to automobiles.

To these critical voices one must of course first point out that it is not acceptable to mix academe or aspects of higher education with pornographic image codes, unless they themselves are the objects of study. In other words, if Hendricks needs to bolster his masculinity or general public image via the representation of models in school uniforms, that is his problem, but the second he tries to indicate that such discourses are legitimate in the classroom, or even in connection with marketing philosophy as a study programme, he oversteps a boundary that should not be crossed.

The largest of the contextual issues could be summed up as follows. Can and should humour be allowed to transgress good taste and decency in general, even if it offends minorities and special interest groups– or are these areas also off limits in general for humour? I am inclined to cite Bergson's tenet that humour always creates a dichotomy between target and perpetrator, and that all humour is a form of violence and creation of a hierarchy. To quote Bergson: "You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Our laughter is always the laughter of a group" (Bergson, 1911). However, humour does not solely and innocently create an in-group feeling bolstering identity, but also creates a distance to others (the targets of the humour in question) who then function as an out-group formation. In other words, one group laughs together at non-members, or at other groups that therefore are Othered by the first group's practice of humour. For a discussion of ingroup/outgroup dynamics, see the ground-breaking work of Henri Tajfel, "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination", in which he states succinctly: "Intergroup categorizations of all kinds may bring into play what seems to the individual to be the appropriate form of intergroup behavior. […]Whenever we are confronted with a situation to which some form of intergroup categorization appears directly relevant, we are likely to act in a manner that discriminates against the outgroup and favors the ingroup" (Tajfel, 1970: 98-99). In sum, humour is often an aggressive speech act directed against a perceived other, whether individual (as presupposed by Bergson) or an outgroup (as stated by Tajfel)

That being said, humour also has a liberating potential among the ingroup that laughs along with a humorous representation, so the issue is thorny and not easily resolved. Perhaps the safest policy is to not humorously target groups that cannot speak or write back with equal force and institutional platform access. Feminists have certainly demonstrated that they can fight back ably in most discursive settings, but their point remains that many male discourses are blind to their own sexism and that there is a risk that institutional sexism has repercussions in real life. Philosophy as an academic discipline is to this day marred by under-representation of female students (in 2012 only 140 out of 517 undergraduates at Hendricks' own department in Copenhagen were female (University Post, 2012)), teachers and canonized figures. One concrete outcome of the Hendricks issue was a movement to combat institutional gender bias against women within the field of philosophy, a movement that among other things called for a guarantee that philosophy conferences include female keynote speakers, or else open themselves to the risk of boycott. (See Inside Higher Ed., 2012 for more.)

In summary, the Hendricks debacle taught us the following: Some male, privileged professors still have blind spots as to the limits of humour and acceptable self-staging within the academic public. The boundaries between private and public are still in place to an extent that is surprising to some, when it comes to mixing academic and pornographic discourse codes. Feminist interventions are still serving an important purpose in calling foul on sexist practices inside and outside the academe.

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Notes

1 https://connery.dk/image/box/221577/1440/10000.jpg?oversize=1
2 https://connery.dk/image/box/221578/1440/10000.jpg?oversize=1
3 This term is borrowed from Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytically informed film analyses in which '"the controlling male gaze" (Mulvey 1999:841) is theorized as tending to objectify women ("woman as image") and cast males as "bearer of the look" (837). This dichotomy neatly divides the gender roles according to agency: men do the looking and are active agents; women are there to be looked at and thus rendered agency-less objects. While this article treats still images and not film, as Mulvey's theory was designed to illuminate, the idea of the male gaze has frequently been applied to photography by contemporary scholars.
4 https://connery.dk/image/box/221576/1440/10000.jpg?oversize=1