

“These things happen”: Hashtag activism and sexual harassment in the South African film and television industries

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Abstract

In August 2017, the South African advocacy group Sisters Working in Film and Television (SWIFT) launched the #ThatsNotOk campaign, which has to date produced six episodes of short films (one episode in two parts, making it seven in total) elucidating the different forms sexual harassment takes, and the different scenarios in which it occurs, in the South African film and television industries. This profile engages with SWIFT and the Public Service Announcement (PSA) films as discursive sites and texts respectively, and provides textual analyses of the PSAs in the context of digital feminism and feminist activism against sexual harassment in the film and television industries. The profile motivates that as expressions of digital feminism, the PSAs critique the pervasiveness and normalisation of sexual harassment, while failing to engage with or critique the neoliberal logic and structure of the film and television industries.

Keywords: South African film and television, #ThatsNotOk, hashtag activism, digital feminism

Introduction

Sisters Working in Film and Television (SWIFT) was conceptualised and established as a not-for-profit organisation (NPO) during the Durban International Film Festival in 2016.¹ SWIFT positions itself as an advocacy group working towards gender and racial equality in the South African film and television industry (SAFTI). As part of its focus on sexual harassment in the film and television industry, SWIFT produced and launched a series of Public Service Announcement (PSA) films titled #ThatsNotOK in 2017. These films are available for viewing on the SWIFT YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6GZSLip_A2oUVwAYfpoX7A.

This profile engages with both SWIFT and the seven PSAs, first, as feminist discourses articulated in the context of broader structural and systemic gender inequalities and sexual violence and/or harassment experienced by women in the film and television industry. Secondly, both SWIFT and the PSAs are historicised and discussed as part of a global trend of what has variously been termed as ‘fourth wave feminism’, ‘hashtag feminism’ and ‘digital feminism’.

The fourth wave?

Scholarship, theories and consensus on whether feminism has evolved into a fourth wave are sparse, but Baumgardner’s claim that the Fourth Wave exists ‘because it says it does’ is enticing, if not entirely helpful in understanding its constituent elements (Baumgardner, 2011). However, social media and online platforms seem to be crucial to a resurgence of feminism, particularly feminist activism – hence the deployment of ‘hashtag feminism’ and

‘digital feminism’ interchangeably with fourth wave feminism. Both SWIFT and the PSAs are read and analysed as feminist discursive spaces and texts respectively, which rely on social media and online platforms for awareness campaigns and consciousness-raising.

Whether contemporary feminism can be defined as fourth wave (Baumgardner, 2011; Munro, 2013; Cochrane, 2013), digital and/or hashtag (Baer, 2016) or popular feminism (De Benedictis *et al*, 2019), the internet and online platforms play a central role in the articulation of contemporary feminist ideas and feminist activism. Online feminist blogs (browngirlmagazine.com, msafropolitan.com, gendermatters.in, amongst others), social media campaigns (#MeToo, #TimesUP, #HeForShe and others) and PSAs such as #ThatsHarassment and #ThatsNotOk on online platforms such as YouTube, provide instructive examples of the ways in which the internet and social media are used in contemporary feminism to raise awareness, campaign and engage in debate and exchange.

A conscious limitation of this profile, determined in large part by scope, is the lack of substantial discussion of the contemporary debates within feminist scholarship regarding the issue of defining and characterising contemporary expressions of feminism. Nicola Rivers (2017), for example, appropriately addresses some of the key issues, most especially the debate(s) on points of convergence and divergence with what has been termed postfeminism and fourth wave feminism. My aim here is to situate SWIFT and the #ThatsNotOk campaign within the contemporary trend of feminist digital activism that includes, amongst others, #ThatsHarassment (a series of PSAs from the United States (US) directed by Sigal Avin) and #MeToo.



SWIFT and the #ThatsNotOk campaign

The #ThatsNotOk campaign is one expression on a historical continuum shaped by refutations of gender equality (as proclaimed by postfeminism) and continued experiences of sexual violence and harassment by women more generally, but particularly in the film and television industry. This process and placement of the #ThatsNotOk campaign make possible a more global perspective, which is alluded to by the campaign itself. Each of the SWIFT PSAs begins with a short acknowledgement of a similar set of PSAs conceptualised by US filmmaker Sigal Avin.

In doing so, I am adopting what Fraser (1997) has identified as the pragmatic method of deploying discourse theory in analysing the SWIFT collectivity and its hashtag campaign against sexual violence and harassment experienced by women in the SAFTI. In her essay on the merits of structuralist discourse theory for feminist theorising, Fraser (1997) identifies four broad areas of feminist theorising where discourse theory would be essential. Fraser (1997) motivates that structuralism offers limited tools for engagement with and understanding of social identity formation and evolution, group and collective formation, and understanding processes of social cultural hegemony and its contestation. Instead of a structuralist discourse theory, Fraser (1997) suggests a pragmatic model which gives cognisance to historical context, thus rendering discourses as contingent, shifting and changing over time. From this perspective, the emphasis is less on the sign (abstract language and representation) and more on the speaking subject 'doing' language as a social practice. This broadens the terrain of study to include society, particularly the ways in which the speaking subject engages with society.

At the most prosaic level, both SWIFT and the #ThatsNotOk campaign are direct responses to a particular social, economic and cultural context. SWIFT's founding moment at the 37th Durban International Film Festival (DIFF) in 2016 came fast on the heels of debate about the DIFF's decision to screen *The Journeymen* (Sean Metelerkamp, 2016) as the opening night film. The debate centred on the issue of South African culture industries' valourising and endorsing sexual violence against women. Sipho Mpongo, one of the co-creators and cinematographers of the film, was found guilty of sexual harassment and sentenced to 65 days of community service while he was a student at the University of Cape Town (Klein, 2016). Despite the anger and outrage on the part of many women, the DIFF decided to go ahead and screen *The Journeymen*, arguing that it was an important step to generating debate. In this context of debate, anger and outrage, filmmaker Sara Blecher convened a meeting of women working in the SAFTI to discuss the founding of an organisation for women (Blecher in conversation with the author, 2019). According to Blecher, 60 women attended and decided to establish SWIFT: "We gave ourselves a year (to make it operational) and elected two representatives from different cities to embark on a process of consultation" (Blecher in conversation with the author, 2019). This led to the establishment of regional chapters in Cape Town and KwaZulu-Natal, with the headquarters based in Johannesburg. Blecher served as Chair from its inception until August 2019.

The response of the wider industry to SWIFT has been largely positive according to Blecher, to the point that SWIFT has now become a 'verb' on production sets, as in 'we will SWIFT you' (Blecher in conversation with the author, 2019). The organisation sees itself as an advocacy group for women in the SAFTI, paying particular attention to issues of gender and race equality, sexual harassment, mentoring, and showcasing what it terms "sisterhood

cinema” (www.swiftsa.org.za). SWIFT has also established links with NGOs that offer legal advice as well as arbitration and counselling services.

The organisation undertook an online survey between January and April 2017 in order to collect empirical data around which it could shape its advocacy campaigns. The results of the survey, collected and analysed in a report titled ‘A SWIFT Mission: Tackling the Gender Disparities in South Africa’s film and television industries’, revealed that 66.7% of women feel unsafe and demeaned in the SAFTI as a result of sexual harassment and gender discrimination. These manifest as leering (often) male gazes, directives to wear tighter, more revealing clothes, and being called ‘princess’, ‘honey’, ‘sweetie’ (Ntoele and Atouguia, 2017:9). Furthermore, 64.5% of respondents reported that non-consensual sexualised touching is extensively normalised within the SAFTI: “Inappropriate, uncomfortable and unsolicited hugging, butt-slapping, brushes or other ‘accidental’ contact (including that of genitals)” is a common occurrence (Ntoele and Atouguia, 2017:9). Sexual harassment is also reported to go beyond the production set, with ‘wrap’ parties being seen as “predetermined site(s) of sexual contact”.

The data generated from this survey served as the basis for and shaped the nature of the PSAs that formed the #ThatsNotOk campaign. According to Blecher, who directed the majority of the PSAs, SWIFT put out a call for personal experiences of sexual harassment and respondents were requested to write short scripts (Blecher in conversation with the author, 2019). Working with a selection of these scripts, the #ThatsNotOk PSAs offer a variety of scenarios in which different forms of sexual harassment occur within the SAFTI. These scenarios range from informal production discussions (*The Line Producer*), casual conversation (*The Actress Part 1*, *The Graduate*) to on-set production (*The Camera Operator*) and formal meetings (*The Partner* and *The Actress Part 2*). The total of seven PSAs range in duration from 5 minutes and 14 seconds to 2 minutes and 30 seconds.

The Line Producer (Dir. Nelisa Ngcobo and Natalie Haarhof) opens with a voyeuristic gaze, with the camera peeking into a room where Zandi and Gavin are sitting side by side at a table, working on their laptops. The conversation is work-related, until Gavin gets up and returns with a couple of beers, and perches on the table rather than sitting back down in his chair. This position has him physically towering over the still sitting Zandi. An innocent remark by Zandi about getting a colleague to do anything by buying him coffee is given a sexual subtext when Gavin asks, “Anything?”. The camera forces a concentrated degree of voyeurism as we see Zandi and Gavin through the slats of the window blind. The audience learns that Gavin is powerful, physically and in terms of his status on set. Remarks such as “you wanted to impress me:”, and “the channel asked me to replace you but I fought for you” not only establish his status but also set Zandi up in a position of inferiority and obligation. Obligation and obedience arising out of Zandi’s perceived ‘subordinate position’ eventually force her to concede to Gavin’s several quasi-requests to pack up work and sit beside him on the sofa. Zandi’s insistence on keeping it professional, by continuing to talk about work, angers Gavin who casually reaches over and rubs her shoulder. A visibly uncomfortable Zandi tries to put more physical distance between them, but the two-seater sofa offers very little distance. Gavin eventually closes her laptop and leans in to stroke her cheek and neck. A visibly uncomfortable Zandi brings up her boyfriend waiting for her as a defence mechanism, which has the desired effect. She gets up and begins packing her bag in preparation for departure. Gavin is unabashed and says “You can’t really blame a guy, hey”. Zandi leaves and the camera, still filming through the blinds, lingers for a moment on Gavin’s unrepentant face, which seems to follow Zandi’s movements in a leering manner.

The Line Producer raises a number of issues that are reportedly pervasive in the SAFTI. One of these is the racialised gender hierarchies of white, male superior and black, female subordinate. The SWIFT report mentioned above as well as a 2018 report produced jointly by the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) and SWIFT titled *Gender Matters in the South African Film Industry*, confirm a strong masculine gender bias in the film industry, which is a ‘boys’ club’. While the SAFTI has democratised significantly since 1994, as confirmed by these reports and Sara Blecher (in conversation with the author), this is misleading in that women are significantly underrepresented in key production roles such as director and cinematographer. A positive female gender bias of the SAFTI is further evident in the strong representation of women in wardrobe, design and production (NFVF and SWIFT, 2018) functions. The gender imbalance and discrimination faced by women becomes hugely problematic when linked with the structure of the industry, which creates conditions of job precarity for women.

Studies of the film industry in the United Kingdom (UK) (Wing-Fai *et al*, 2015; Wreyford, 2013, 2015) and New Zealand (NZ) (Handy and Rowlands, 2014; Jones and Pringle, 2015) underscore and parallel numerous discriminatory practices, which supports the argument for globally neoliberalised film and television industries. This is in contrast to the ‘Gender Matters’ report, which argues that historically apartheid restrictions on women’s participation in the broader economy (rather than only the SAFTI) have been and continue to be barriers to women’s full participation. The ‘Gender Matters’ report pays no attention to the manner in which neoliberal emphasis on the ‘entrepreneurial spirit’, deregulation, labour casualisation and freelancing, as well as individualisation have exacerbated historical ‘inequality regimes’ (Handy and Rowlands, citing Acker, 2014; Wreyford, 2013; Conor *et al*, 2015). As with the UK and NZ examples, the SAFTI is ‘project-driven’, with an emphasis on freelance labour in which ‘job security’ is contingent on networking (Wreyford, 2015). The ‘Gender Matters’ report cites a mere 15.78% of women in the SAFTI being in full-time employment, with 37.66% freelancing (working from one project to another), while 25.70% are ‘self-employed’ and own production companies. Again, the report falls short of a nuanced analysis of these statistics. While 25% of women may own production companies, this is no guarantee of a steady income, as they would still be working on a project basis. The vast majority of women in the SAFTI – 63.30% – are therefore casual, freelancers working from project to project.



South African filmmaker Sara Blecher, former Chairperson of SWIFT. Photo courtesy of SWIFT.

Other structural challenges women face in the SAFTI include shrinking budgets, single parenting and male-dominated networks essential to securing project work (Blecher in conversation with the author, 2019). These are similar to challenges in the UK and NZ industries. A UK Skillset report for 2010 highlighted that a mere 14% of women in the film industry have children as opposed to 40% of men (Wreyford, 2013). Mothers (whether single or with partners) with childcare responsibilities have limited opportunities and face greater employment insecurity due to the neo-liberalised and decentralised nature of the film industry (Wreyford, 2013).

Rozanne Engel (2018) provides empirically grounded research on the under-representation of women in the SAFTI. Engel's study identifies funding as the single most important barrier to women's greater participation in the SAFTI, which is not entirely surprising given her focus on representation of women directors in film festival programmes. As important as studies such as Engel's are, they provide an incomplete picture in that they do not address issues of systemic and structural forces that structure gender inequality and job precarity for women in a neoliberalised industry. It must be acknowledged that job precarity affects both men and women in the SAFTI; however, women bear the brunt of this when jobs are linked to gendered, sexualised expectations from male co-workers and, in particular, male superiors, as presented in *The Line Producer* and *The Partner*.

The Partner (Dir. Sara Blecher), portrays a scenario in which Zanele is not only exposed to a sexualised conversation between two males (one her business 'partner' and the other a client)

discussing female butts and butt implants, but also requested by her ‘partner’, Mandla, to be ‘nice’ to the client, to go for drinks but not to go home with him, as he clearly likes her and is a ‘real man’, according to Mandla. This PSA offers a critique of the manner in which women and women’s sexualised bodies are used to secure clients (and by implication jobs) and to keep them ‘happy’ within networks of sociality and patronage. Patronage and networks of sociality are crucial in an industry that hires ad hoc, informally and based on industry word-of-mouth. Here also, the ‘boys’ club’ character of the SAFTI means that women have to ‘perform’ and ‘behave’ in particular ways to be recommended for projects. Within these ‘reputation economies’, as labelled by Wing-Fai *et al* (2015), women have to tread a precarious line to secure future work, as the risk of being identified as the “girl who can’t take a joke” (*The Camera Operator*) could limit future prospects.

Furthermore, the concept of ‘partner’ has to be interrogated in the context of this PSA. ‘Partner’ implies parity and equality, yet what becomes clear in this PSA is that despite parity in principle, in reality men’s sexualised expectations of women continue to subordinate them and increase gendered risk; in this instance, the partner’s insistence on being ‘nice’ to the client and ‘going out for drinks’. Consequently, women in the SAFTI become “iconic exemplars of a group that lives individualized ‘risk biographies’” (Wing-Fai *et al*, 2015:51).

Risk biographies and job precarity are also the focus of *The Graduate* (Dir. Sara Blecher), in which two females (one older and one younger, the graduate of the title) in wardrobe discuss a sexual relationship between an older man and younger woman. From the conversation it is apparent that job security is central and predicated on the woman in the relationship acquiescing, and the ‘graduate’ in wardrobe keeping quiet about the older man’s predation on her colleague. The conversation between the two women in wardrobe refers to a bedroom on set where the ‘dalliance’ is taking place even as they speak. On-set locations as sites of sexual exploitation, violence and harassment is one aspect of the structural violence women experience in the SAFTI. Another locus of violence is much more passive, insidious and technologically enabled, with off-set voyeuristic longevity and persistent degradation. According to the SWIFT Mission report (Ntoele and Atougua, 2017), a number of respondents listed incidents where cell phones were used to film scenes of nudity or sexual intimacy without the permission or knowledge of women actors. This sneaky practice ensures that on-set, once-off voyeurism is transposed into serial voyeurism, thus prolonging violent degradation beyond the moment and ensuring multiple moments of futuristic violence and degradation.

Technology-enabled passive violence is also highlighted in *The Actress*, Part 1 (Dir. Sara Blecher). As with all seven PSAs, *The Actress* begins with an acknowledgement of the #ThatsHarassment set of PSAs by Sigal Avin, fading to an acknowledgement of the KwaZulu-Natal Film Commission on a black screen. This is accompanied by an audio track of a woman’s voice, which is audible while her words are not entirely distinct. The sound of ‘running water’ drowns out her voice and the visual shifts to the interior of a set, where a young man with headphones is leaning against a wall, smoking. The sound of a flushing toilet brings with it the realisation that the sound of running water was someone urinating. A young woman emerges from off-camera, presumably the bathroom, and asks him for a drag from his cigarette. This initiates conversation between the two. He leans towards her and tells her that she should switch off her body microphone since he can hear everything; it is evident that she is inexperienced. It is only at this point that the audience realises that the audio track emanated via his headphones; the body mic on the actress and the headphones enable audiences to become auditory voyeurs to an intimate, private act. This realisation is a moment

of violent shock for the audience, although the young actress laughs it off and apologises for not switching off the mic. In the wake of the immediate shock, the violence of the man's intrusion is compounded by his evident pleasure in the auditory voyeurism and his comment that she took as much pleasure in urinating as she would in "having a good round with your man". The actress, Neo, continues to make light of the conversation, although her discomfiture is becoming increasingly visible on her face. To her comment that she does not have a man, his response is to proposition her. He continues to push the boundary, even when she confesses to having a girlfriend, stating that he has many lesbian friends whom he has helped with experiencing the "real thing in bed". By now Neo's light, humorous attitude has been replaced by discomfort, and she walks off with an excuse that they are being called on set.

The Actress, Part 2, also directed by Sara Blecher, takes the viewer to a 'closed' meeting between Neo and her immediate superior, also a woman. Neo has apparently reported Siphon, the perpetrator, and she is following up on the measures taken to address the sexual harassment. While her superior utters platitudes such as that it is "disgusting" behaviour and "from now on I will have a woman mic you up", she also tells Neo not to report or talk about it, as it will make the situation worse. She furthermore states that "these things happen" and calls Siphon to join them in order to "squash this as soon as possible". Neo's third violation is captured by a static camera, which lingers on her face as Siphon enters the office and is told by their superior that she finds the "situation pretty distressing".

In these two PSAs, Neo, as a young actress is violated three times, twice by Siphon and a third time by her female boss, who is dismissive of the experience of sexual harassment. The point is not that perpetrators of sexual harassment can be both men and women, but rather that the violation resulting from betrayal is more profoundly disturbing, as is evident on Neo's face. This betrayal by an older woman, who appears to recognise the vileness of Siphon's behaviour but nonetheless attempts to normalise it by claiming that "these things happen", breaks the male/perpetrator, female/victim polarity. According to Blecher, breaking polarities was a conscious choice, as was the decision to cast some of the actors in different roles in different PSAs (Blecher in conversation with the author, 2019). The incredibly talented Hlubi Mboya, for example, is the victim in *The Partner* and the betrayer and ally of the perpetrator in *The Actress, Part 2*. Blecher's bigger point is that victims frequently become perpetrators.

The #ThatsNotOk campaign has attracted a modicum of public interest, with very little online traffic to the YouTube channel. *The Line Producer* and *The Partner* have been the most viewed, at 2695 and 1447 views respectively. A possible reason for the limited public interest could be because the PSAs are very industry-specific. According to Blecher, this was again a conscious decision, given the availability of resources. The aim is to expand the campaign beyond the industry. In this regard a second set of PSAs has been commissioned by MNet. The reception from the SAFTI, however, has been generally positive. According to Blecher, SWIFT is frequently invited on set to screen the PSAs and facilitate discussion. A frequent response from (particularly older) men, Blecher says, has been ignorance that aspects of their behaviour constituted sexual harassment (Blecher in conversation with the author, 2019).

While the #ThatsNotOk campaign provides nuanced, complex and creative critique of sexual harassment in the SAFTI, it does not, however, critique the broader structural and systemic conditions that permit sexual harassment and violence against women. In this regard both SWIFT and the set of PSAs offer limited counterhegemonic discourses and critique. As a discursive site, SWIFT offers women in the SAFTI a platform for collaboration, solidarity,

advocacy and positive affirmation through mentoring and training. As discursive texts, the PSAs function primarily at the level of consciousness-raising and awareness, evidenced by the invitations to screen and facilitate discussion on sets. Both SWIFT and the #ThatsNotOk campaign can, however, be read as instances and expressions of digital feminism and feminist activism which, in the words of Baer (2015:19) are “redoing feminism for a neoliberal age”.

Additional information

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Notes

¹ The Durban International Film Festival (DIFF) is South Africa’s longest-running festival. Established in 1979, the DIFF provides a platform to showcase South African, African and select international films. It offers a variety of workshops and master classes and post-1994 it has significantly broadened its exhibition reach by screening festival films in a number of community centres.

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