

# ThInGS to do wITh the The IRONic and UNruly

by Robyn Diner

*En examinant l'œuvre de deux musiciennes contemporaines, l'auteure découvre l'ironie et la grossièreté des jeux de mots à partir de la vie sexuelle des femmes, comme « chienne » « poule » « pute » « putain » qui sont l'apanage de la 3e vague féministe. L'auteure assure que ces musiciennes font des ravages dans les rangs d'un féminisme bien-pensant, autour des pôles vierge/putain et de la sexualité des hétéros.*

"Irony is risky business."  
—Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*

...risk is not a bad thing to be avoided, but rather, a condition of possibility produced in effect, by the normalization of the body...

—Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque*

In a recent interview with Kathleen Hanna and Gloria Steinem in *Bust*, Steinem recalls that two decades ago there was a quite sincere yet oh-so-unladylike sign in the office of *Ms. Magazine* that read, "It's 10:00p.m. do you know where your clitoris is?" (qtd. in Hex 56). She states that now the sign would not be necessary.

Rather, such seemingly outrageous, yet also unruly and ironic play with, and on, female sexuality via various verbal and often embodied twists on words like "slut," "bitch," "chick," and "whore" have now become staples of third wave feminists.<sup>1</sup> Ironic serious play with the norms that regulate femininity and female sexuality have now been thoroughly disseminated into the mainstream via the looks and likes of grunge/punk/pop icons such as

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Courtney Love and Liz Phair. A "dirty sluts are my heroes" poster, for example, would be right at home in any riot grrrl influenced punked-out squat in Seattle and it would also no doubt be highly welcome in a mixed gendered queer cool-kid loft in Montreal's Plateau district. Alternatively, it could grace the pink bedroom walls of a California teen in Beverly Hills; her walls painted pink in mock defiance and delicious defilement of the ideologies that govern femininity. In this context the poster would also serve as a tribute to her endless desire to terrify her parents and anchor her sense of identity as a Courtney Love—as opposed to a Britney Spears-wannabe. However, as long as her folks keep their eyes averted from the poster and focused on the pink walls, or on their daughter's sparkly barrettes, sweet little baby-doll dress and glittery nail polish—they rest assured that all is well in 90210-land.

In this paper, I wish to show how Liz and Courtney's witty, thought-provoking, and politically-evoking ironies are a powerful tool for political action. These icons of irony thus beg to be theorized in relationship to Linda Hutcheon's (1994) work on the politics of irony and risk in *Irony's Edge*. I also feel that they speak to ways in which irony can be understood as a seemingly contradictory political sensibility that can inform feminist theory/practice/aesthetics as articulated by Kathy Ferguson in *The Man Question*. Finally, Courtney is also walking, talking, screaming, wailing spectacular sight—one whose absence in Mary Russo's work on the unruly carnivalesque female grotesque body is understandable yet unfortunate.

In turn, this work highlights how Courtney's early career-oriented antics, as the lead singer of Hole, take risks, exceed norms, and strike the stage and the page in spectacularly unruly carnivalesque ways. I also suggest that three particular forms of irony are at serious play in very witty ways throughout Liz's first album *Exile in Guyville* (1993) and in the lyrics on Hole's *Pretty on the Inside* (1991), *Live Through This* (1994) and *Celebrity Skin* (1998).<sup>2</sup>

However, as I do so, I will show that the ironic and unruly displays associated with these musicians do not merely wreak havoc on the norms of appropriate femininity, the good girl/bad girl binary and straight female sexuality—they also reek of risk. In short, Liz and Courtney's lyrical and physical displays are, indeed, always open to recuperation, co-option, dismissal and/or domestication.

# "F" word Adventures of Liz Phair and Courtney Love

## Adventures in Irony

But, before I begin, let me backtrack into the chaotic and messy world of irony. As Hutcheon (1994) suggests, irony does indeed seem to be in the very air that we breathe today. But, what is irony? What can it do, undo, re-do and or fail to do? Most theorists who work extensively with irony begin their texts with the disclaimer that irony is incredibly difficult to define and describe. "Irony is the mother of confusions," writes Wayne Booth (ix). "If irony is, in fact, a thing," adds John Seery, "it is a thing that changes shape" (169). "Irony is a quasi-mythological, double-natured beast," suggests D. C. Muecke (13). Furthermore, Kathy Ferguson points out that there is no point in trying to set rules for irony, as its very role is to defy the rules. However, in spite of these sentiments, most of these theorists (among others) proceed to offer some sort of definition of irony, and to elaborate on the roles that it can play and the rules that it follows.

Generally speaking, irony is associated with contradiction, double vision, fluctuation, and oscillation. Ferguson writes that it makes its entrance in the gap between what is said and what is meant; what is indicated and what is implied, and in the dynamic space between stability and motion. It also tends to make its mark via overstatement, understatement and the representation of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. Hutcheon calls it the mode of "the unsaid, the unheard, the unseen" (1994: 2). And, like Hutcheon, I believe that irony ricochets in the "dynamic space"

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between a performer's intent, her content, the context and the eyes, ears and thoughts of the interpreter (1994: 58).

Although a myriad of often quite dull and deadly irony typologies circulate and continue to proliferate in the realm of literary studies and in connecting and contrasting corridors—I wish to suggest that irony can be understood in three specific interconnected ways.<sup>3</sup> Simply put, instrumental ironies refer to those where one says something opposite from, other than, and/or in addition to, what one means, as in "Oh what a beautiful day" when it is in fact raining (Muecke 16). Observational ironies relate to unlikely, unexpected and/or strange turns of events or states of affairs (Muecke). A recurring example in the literature on irony revolves around the tale about the young man who sold his pocket watch to buy a comb for his wife's long beautiful hair which she just had cut

off and sold in order to buy her husband a chain for his pocket watch. Finally, following Ferguson, I wish to suggest that what I call a provisionally ironic sensibility encourages one to step back from a fixed position, in order to be attuned to the "many-ness" of things (154). In turn, it is about deploying double—or multiple—visions in order to allow contradictory views to co-exist, critique and inform one another. (Ferguson).<sup>4</sup> Or, to quote Donna Haraway:

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically about the tensions of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play. (149)

Such a sensibility thus helps to ease the angst generated by conflicting claims toward sensing, seeing, knowing and doing.

## Phair Play?

But how may it be seen to be working in the works of Liz and Courtney? Liz, as she sings, is indeed "whipsmart" as well as beauty-myth-sexy, hopelessly het and hyper-aware of the contradictions that drive her desires.

In "Exile in Guyville"—a track-by-track response to The Rolling Stones' *Exile on Mainstreet* Liz shows how het chicks can deploy instrumental irony in politically promising ways. Many of her songs seem to suggest that instrumental irony is not merely about ludic or

aesthetic play with words as various ironologists suggest—it is also a play with power relations. For instance, when Liz sings, “I wanna be your blow job queen, I wanna be your blow job queen,” to an invisible yet inescapable Mick Jagger in *Exile’s* “Flower,” I sense that she hardly covets Jeri Hall’s old job. Rather, I hear her words as a mock cock rock anti-salute to the rampant sexism that still continues to regulate life in Guyville way post and past The Rolling Stones’ heyday.

Yet, as Hutcheon (1994) points out, in instrumental irony the literal meaning is not completely negated. It remains alive and kicking—even and especially—as one calls it into question. This is what makes irony so particularly risky. Hence, once again, when irony enters the picture—intent, content, context, and intertext are crucial. It is in relationship to these factors that, as Hutcheon writes, “irony happens” (1994: 58). And the process is a dynamic—as well as—unpredictable one.<sup>5</sup>

I may deduce from Liz’s blowjob song that she doesn’t necessarily dream of “sucking you until your dick turns blue...” and “...fuck(ing) you and your minions, too” as she sings, for a variety of reasons. In terms of intent, I have read interviews with Liz in which she talks about the way women have been “dicked around for the past 20,000 years” (Mom’s the Word).

I also situate her in the context of a variety of grrrl grunge/pop/punk bands that have a crush on irony in a big way. Finally, I have the necessary knowledge to make the intertextual reference to The Rolling Stones, cock rock, and the unfortunately all too ever present sexism in many contemporary recent indie/alternative spheres. In turn, I deduce that Liz doesn’t necessarily want to be on her knees or under Mick’s thumb.

However, it would also come as no surprise to me if the average 15-year-old boy took Liz’s words to heart—and to bed—at night. In other words, irony’s duplicity is often very much

about a complicity whose effects and interpretations cannot be controlled. In short, instrumental irony can backfire and miss its mark. It risks underlining that which it could be undermining. Indeed, as Lori Chambers writes,

Between the intended irony that

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goes unperceived and the unintended irony that becomes perceived, there is room for many kinds and degrees of misunderstanding, misfire and fizzle, as well as of understanding. (14)

Yet as Seery notes, and as the early riot grrrl movements show, since irony (ideally) calls oppressive conventions into question, it also helps breath fresh and witty life into familiar political statements, slogans and sentiments that are themselves always in danger of becoming stale.<sup>6</sup> In turn, he suggests that irony is worth the risk. Yet, one could also argue that the sly slogans, seriously playful posters and the fuck you/fuck me clothing associated with hardcore grrrl movements and their offspring also risk becoming the new grrrl norm; and can themselves also all too easily be dot.commed/calmed.<sup>7</sup>

But to return to Liz’s case, the instability of her instrumental ironies are also heightened by the way her work is ripe with provisionally ironic re-presentations and reflections on the seemingly irreconcilable contradictions that many het girls like Liz find themselves juggling when they love to hate the indie boys that populate Guyville. Throughout her songs, Liz suggests that although she knows that most guys are assholes—she wants one of her own anyway. She can cop an attitude, she’s got an edge and she can swear like nobody’s girl; but if she’s not going down for Mick *et al.* the chances are you’re not gonna get anywhere near her. But then again, maybe you’re the guy who can save her/have her/do her/love her? In other words, she straddles the good girl/bad girl binary like a pro. In fact, the mainly male mainstream critics who love to hate Courtney can hardly resist Liz. Indeed, as Kim Nicolini writes:

Everyone loves to love Liz Phair. Blow-Job Queen or no, she is rock’s little darling. Why is little Liz so successful, so popular? She seems to have struck the perfect balance to please all—the perfect virgin/whore, the dirty-mouthed girl next door. She has the ability to sing lyrics like “I’ll fuck you ’till your dick turns blue...” and still come off as coy, innocent and nice ... while on the one hand, her songs seem liberating and confrontational—the fact of the matter is that Liz is still confined to the very gender system which she is trying to escape. (3)

Yet in keeping with postmodern theory/practice, the question becomes: is such escape really possible?<sup>8</sup> And if not, might Liz’s ironic stance speak more loudly to kick-ass yet always already confused het girls/grrrls who are hot for boys than a more purely radical riot grrrl-inspired early Kathleen Hanna-esque “Just say No to male sexuality” mentality could

hope to accomplish?<sup>9</sup> As a friend of mine said in excited astonishment upon hearing “Fuck and Run” for the first time, “It’s like she read my diary!” I feel the same way. On the other hand, is Liz’s back and forth, edgy yet still ambivalent and at times ambiguous, her sensibility simply too co-optable, consumable, and all too enjoyable to the powers that be? For now, I’d like to leave the answer(s) to that question up to you as we move over, through, and to Courtney.

### Too Much Love?

What can one say about Courtney Love that hasn’t already been stated, unstated, restated, and debated? She is the ultimate Queen of Contradictions: both the hypocritical and the more sincerely ironic kind. Love is thus a mistress of instrumental irony *par excellence*. When vilified by the press for her bad mothering techniques, she responds in “Plump” by singing “...I don’t do the dishes, I throw them in the crib.” Upon ranting, raving, and raging against music biz sexploitation, the beauty myth, the norms surrounding traditional motherhood and the cult of femininity in both *Live Through This* and *Pretty on the Inside*—she goes on to sing “I Think that I would Die” which comes with the wailing refrain “I am not a feminist.” But, what does Courtney mean? Is Courtney a feminist? Is she not a feminist? Or is she simply pissed off about being associated with an “F” word that isn’t fuck? Indeed, the answer ultimately lies in the eye of the beholder.

To make matters messier, Courtney also couples her instrumental retakes with the observational. Prior to the release of *Celebrity Skin*, Courtney toned-down, tuned-up, aerobicized, and plastic surger-ied. *Celebrity Skin* is pure pink pop with a hidden edge—but you really have to be both “in the know” and listening carefully. Here, irony and complicity meet duplicity in a big way. Yet this

is also the very same album in which Courtney, paradoxically, wails against the cult of the celebrity, as well as against the effects of the big bad media machine. For instance, in “Awful,” she sings “...and they royalty rate little girls like you/ and they sell it out to little girls like you/ to incorporate little girls like you...”

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as she graces the cover of *Spin* a lot more prettier in pink. In other words, it is ironic that Courtney critiques the corporate capitalist co-option of grunge/punk/pop at the very moment that she is selling herself as the ultimate new and improved—and much easier to swallow—ideal product. Furthermore, Courtney’s own provisionally ironic stance on her multiple seemingly contradictory identities make her myriad of messages even messier.

“I fake it so real I am beyond fake” sings the queen of grunge in “Doll Parts.” And, indeed, the identities: whore/ junkie/ grunge queen/ yummy mummy/ kick-ass bitch/ stripper/ mom-on-the-edge/ intellectual/ sell-out/ anti-establishment punk chick/ celebrity slut/ that run through all three of her albums and her endless array of interviews in magazines from *ROCKRGRL* to *Rolling Stone*—are enough to make your head spin.<sup>10</sup>

### Courtney the Carnival

But what truly renders Courtney fascinating to me is her early incarnations popularized by *Live through This* and *Pretty on the Inside* in which she embodies the figure of the female carnivalesque grotesque. The figures of such unruly female bodies transgress, trouble, and make an ironic mockery out of the disciplinary norms of appropriate femininity in seemingly scandalous ways. Like Russo’s feminist reformulation of Mikhail’s Bakhtin’s carnivalesque grotesques, these bodies are “open, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing” (Russo 8). They are inevitably associated with excess; with the lower body and with too much sex, sweat, food, drink, cum, and so on (Russo). In other words, these unruly female bodies refuse to stand still, sit down, shut up, smile politely, and worry about whether or not their bra strap is showing. Instead, they flaunt and flirt with overabundance, with chaos and with danger. Their power and promise resides in the risks that they take and the rules that they break (Russo). Furthermore, they can also be linked to social transformation.

In other words, the figure of the unruly female body can make a potentially politically promising spectacle of herself. Or, as Russo writes:

Within the expanded spatial dimensions of late twentieth century spectacle, the female spectacle which emerges as a deformation of the normal suggests new political aggregates—provisional, uncomfortable, even conflictual coalitions of bodies which respect the concept of situated knowledges and refuse to keep every body in its place. (16)

But the question remains: to what extent has Courtney been able to make such a spectacle? As Courtney does kinderwhore (now brought to

you by Versace), and sends her shrieks, moans and cries cartwheeling across the stage as fuck you slides into fuck me and back again—she certainly embodies the carnivalesque female grotesque. The early Courtney's campy combo of excessively garish make-up, baby doll dresses, ripped black stockings and little pink barrettes certainly seem to confound the norms of appropriate femininity—and the good girl/bad girl binary. Her much meditated former flirtations with heroin abuse, drunken stage diving, sex work, and self-mutilation also mark her body as the ultimate site of excess. And her ironic rantings—no matter how open-ended—certainly more than resonate with a loud feminist-oriented “fuck-you” to those who make the rules and set the acceptable roles for the girls who ultimately cannot transcend life in Boyland. But again, to what effect?

The sight of the strategically staged spectacle of the figure of the unruly female body is also open to many of the concerns that irony evokes. Unfortunately, writes Nicolini, Courtney Love's “out-of-control-sex-slut shtick” is often dismissed with disgust as the incoherent antics of a pathetic junky bitch. In turn, the good girl/bad girl binary that she seeks to disrupt, remains rooted in place (4). “How many people,” asks Nicolini, “can see through the surface of Courtney's display and understand the pro-feminist context in which it takes place?” Her response is an unfortunate “Not many” (5). The nice girls and boys might be looking and listening, writes Nicolini, but what are they getting? Such stagings are also vulnerable to recuperation and co-option. Indeed, bad girls like Courtney have become hot commodities. As Russo wonders,

Are women again so identified with style that they are as estranged from its liberatory and transgressive effects as they are from their own bodies as signs in culture generally? In what sense can women really produce or make

spectacles of themselves? (60)

In other words, to what extent may the devouring and/or dismissive power of the patriarchal gaze—not to mention the capitalist marketplace—complicate the potential that these women have to truly make body trouble?

In the case of Liz and Courtney there is no all-purpose feminist answer. So much depends on the year, the sphere and who is doing the sightings and re-citings. However their similarly different yet interconnected travels through indie to mainstream spheres helps flesh out both the political efficacy and the limits associated with irony, as well as an aesthetics of the grotesque in relationship to the norms that govern appropriate femininity, female sexuality and/or the good girl/bad girl binary. At the risk of getting personal, I love Liz. And Courtney's antics and lyrics continue to amuse and amaze me. Furthermore, judging from both of their record sales, I sense that lots of grrrls, as well as girls and boys feel something similar. Hence, it would be too easy to simply blame or dismiss them for selling out by cashing in on dirty words and things. Rather, I believe that their ironic and unruly adventures are certainly worthy of further feminist inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup>For more on the notion of “third wave feminism,” see, for example: Steenbergen.

<sup>2</sup>Although this paper keeps its eye on Courtney's trajectory from *Pretty on the Inside* to *Celebrity Skin*, for a

variety of time and space constraints, it limits itself to Liz's *Exile in Guyville*. However, like Courtney, Liz's image and lyrics have undergone substantive, main-streamed and much celebrated changes since her first major record release (see Gorbani).

<sup>3</sup>For the least of the “dull and deadly” of these texts, see my bibliography. For the best of the bunch, check out, Ferguson, Wilde, Hutcheon (1994), and Seery.

<sup>4</sup>Ferguson does not use the term provisional irony as she does not differentiate between different forms of irony. However, according to Hutcheon's (1994) framework, the type of irony that Ferguson is focusing on can be considered “provisional irony.” Yet, Hutcheon does not associate this type of irony with feminist theory/practice. Hence, I have used Hutcheon's term to help specify and elaborate on Ferguson's notion of irony. For Hutcheon's schema, see *Irony's Edge* (51-52). For more on Ferguson's notion of irony, see *The Man Question* (30-32).

Furthermore, as Allan Wilde points out, an ironic sensibility need not necessarily be provisional. Rather, it may take many other forms. Simply put, it can be used to attempt to transcend the contradictory and/or paradoxical, as many modernist writers sought to do. Or, it can gesture towards the endless deferral of any and all claims to meaning in a radically postmodern fashion. For a multiplicity of other historical possibilities linked to irony, see Wilde's full schema in *Horizons of Assent*.

<sup>5</sup>For a richer and more complex picture of how irony “happens” see Hutcheon's “Frame-ups and their Marks: The Recognition and Attribution of Irony” in *Irony's Edge* (141-175).

<sup>6</sup>For more on riot grrrl see Kearney, and Leonard.

<sup>7</sup>For instance, a recent article in *Shift* magazine, titled “Grrl, You'll be a Cliché Soon,” begins by stating, “once a cry of rebellion, riot grrl is now used to sell everything from lipstick to web ventures” (Goldberg 88). The

article goes on to cite Ani DiFranco, who quite succinctly sums up this phenomena by stating, "You have this cheap, hideous 'girl power' sort of fad, which I think is pretty benign, at best. But at worst, I think it's a way of taking the politics out of feminism and making it some kind of fashion" (Goldberg 88).

<sup>8</sup>For more on postmodern feminism, see for instance: Hutcheon (1989); and Nicholson.

<sup>9</sup>Here, I am thinking specifically of Kathleen Hanna screaming "Don't need your dick to fuck" on one of Bikini Kill's earliest albums. While such a sentiment is no doubt true, I simply wonder where it leaves girls/grrrls who may want to fuck with the boys.

<sup>10</sup>For a few examples among a myriad, see in particular: Weiss; Raphael; and Fruchtman .

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## KRISTY MCKAY

treasured glass marbles  
are her eyes when she  
smiles with  
the sun laughing through

*Kristy McKay's poetry appears  
earlier in this volume.*

## ANNA PANUNTO

### Le Langage

Au fur et à mesure  
que je prononce  
des mots intelligibles,  
ma langue me trahit.  
Ma bouche, faisant les gestes  
appropriés,  
me trompe.

Emprisoné par mon propre  
langage,  
j'en entame un autre.

Maintenant

il est facile de réfléchir  
aux polémiques du monde.

Ma muse me permet  
d'engager  
toutes formes de discours  
Des paroles délivrantes  
s'échappent  
de ma voix éclairé

Cependant, d'une manière  
ou d'une autre son génie  
m'a ébloui jusqu'à  
l'immobilisation.

*Anna Panunto's poetry appears  
earlier in this volume.*