



Figure 1. A square of nine posts related to the screening of *The Craft* (dir. Andrew Fleming, US, 1996) on the Drunk Feminist Film Instagram account

## **“All Your Faves Are Problematic”: The Performative Spectatorship of Drunk Feminist Films**

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During a December 2017 screening of *Die Hard* (dir. John McTier-nan, US, 1988) hosted by the Toronto-based Drunk Feminist Film (DFF) collective, an audience member tweeted: “You know it’s fiction because a woman is gaslighting a man #DFFDieHard.” This particular hashtag allowed the tweet to be incorporated into a live audience discussion unfolding on Twitter during the film screening. The simultaneous interplay between traditional film viewing and social media practices point to a mode of paratextual engagement that merits further analysis. The multiplatform hybridity of online and embodied participation within DFF screenings allows feminist audiences to engage with one another as a collective spectatorial community in real time. DFF audience practices center paratextual dialogue, altering audience relationships to dominant film texts by enabling the live screening community to reconstrue the narrative within twenty-first century modes of media consumption.

The Toronto-based DFF collective is made up of millennial

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feminists well versed in both social media and the heyday of post-feminist cinema from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Since 2012, they have hosted public screenings and a popular web series that offer critical readings of mainstream Hollywood films including *Burlesque* (dir. Steve Antin, US, 2010), *Crossroads* (dir. Tamra Davis, US, 2002), *Wild Things* (dir. John McNaughton, US, 1998), *Love Actually* (dir. Richard Curtis, UK, 2003), *Clueless* (dir. Amy Heckerling, US, 1995), and *Save the Last Dance* (Thomas Carter, US, 2001). They screen these films in midsize to large movie houses in Toronto to sold-out crowds of feminists that span several generations (largely Gen X to Gen Z). Acknowledging that “all our faves are problematic,” the DFF collective are self-described “feminists who would rather laugh than cry their way through representations of gender in Hollywood.”<sup>1</sup> DFF revels in the pleasure of mainstream films while also engaging in feminist conversations around heteronormativity, capitalism, the normalization of workplace harassment, abusive relationships, racism, cultural appropriation, and a range of other political issues that arise in these films.

During their live screenings, miked collective members positioned in front of the movie screen offer comedic, improvisational analyses of movie narratives while leading the audience in a drinking game whose rules correspond to specific critiques directed at each film. For instance, when viewing *Twilight* (dir. Catherine Hardwicke, US, 2008), one drinks every time Edward (Robert Pattinson) stalks, demeans, or gaslights his girlfriend, Bella (Kristen Stewart); in *Love Actually*, drinking is encouraged during any instance of workplace sexual harassment; in *Bring It On* (dir. Peyton Reed, US, 2000), you drink anytime the predominantly white cheerleading team uses their privilege to undermine others. Drinking alcohol is not a requirement for participation, however; mocktails and noise-makers enable alternative forms of participation in the drinking game portion of events. The events also include themed cocktails, contests for best in-character costumes, movie-themed photo ops, and printed programs that outline the DFF’s overall critical assessment of the film in question as well as the relevant drinking game rules. In these events, audiences are encouraged to participate in live criticism both by yelling out in the theater and by “tweeting the

shit" out of the film throughout the screening. The Twitter feeds activated during each screening allow people to follow at home while also creating a sense of camaraderie within the screening space as people quote, reply, and retweet other audience members' observations. They further provide an archival record of the live event and resulting conversations for future audiences.

The DFF drinking game and improv format use humor to encourage audiences to inhabit contradictory spaces of enjoyment and critical awareness when engaging with their so-called problematic faves, offering a space for feminist audiences to process the systemic sexism and other oppressions playing out on the screen. In foregrounding drunkenness, the feminist collective's moniker offers a tongue-in-cheek recognition of women's unruliness as a form of refusal. Within the long-standing cultural dichotomy between "good girls" who *don't* (drink, smoke, have sex, speak their mind) and "bad girls" who *do*, DFF reclaims the bawdy excessiveness tied to the drunk woman as a position from which to enact feminist critique, not only of the films themselves but also of gendered double standards and social expectations.

The tactical use of humor in their name and in the structure of events pushes back against equally durable tropes of feminists as humorless killjoys while simultaneously engaging in killjoy practices. As Sara Ahmed remarks of the killjoy, "*whose* joy she actually kills becomes the question."<sup>2</sup> The critiques made both in person and online at DFF events are a buzzkill to a certain kind of patriarchal pleasure in films that amplify structural inequities. As a place to launch critique, humor has historically allowed women to speak publicly about certain kinds of elided truths about misogyny.<sup>3</sup> In embracing humor as a means of resistance, DFF events are for feminist audiences who indeed may want to laugh rather than cry their way through negotiating cultural sexism and misogyny. Their focus on problematic faves allows audiences to collectively negotiate their own very real ambivalences about being embedded within and deriving pleasure from popular cultural forms that further white, heteronormative, neoliberal, and misogynist values.

What DFF events add to the already rich history of call-back film events are the distinctly online, digital extensions they

encourage.<sup>4</sup> Older cult film practices are expanded in the interplay between the theatrical screen, live performance, the audience, and their smartphones. This interplay offers a communal, real-time, paratextual environment that runs simultaneously to, and directly informs, the DFF audience's critical engagement with the Hollywood narrative projected on-screen. The performative modes of spectatorship at DFF screenings encourages feminist viewers to locate the counterknowledge made available by their favorite problematic movies.<sup>5</sup>

The interventions opened up in the DFF's hybrid viewing space—replete with drinking games, tweets, and live commentary on the gender dynamics of the screening—decenter mainstream films in favor of paratextual ephemera that negotiate the audience's pleasure in and critique of problematic favorites. The cultural hold of the film itself is undone in favor of an often ribald reconceptualization of how the narrative could and should go. This is what makes DFF so important as a site of study, troubling the standard differentiation in paratextual studies between certain “texts as central and others as peripheral.”<sup>6</sup> Problematic narrative elements tied to sexist, racist, transphobic, homophobic, or ableist ideologies are engaged in real time, as a community, and for the public record. This generates a digitally archived conversation of how audiences collectively critique and reimagine fraught yet popular narratives. In this way, paratextual ephemera in the screenings work against often-sexist Hollywood genre conventions, opening them up to rigorous and ribald critique. DFF events thus align with a form of fan-based hashtag activism wherein “fan-produced paratexts are weaponized to stage a broader feminist intervention.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, the “original” film does not matter as much as the counterstory collectively assembled by audiences on each event's specific Twitter thread.

### **Feminist Paratextual Audiences *Do Things***

In “The Perversity of Drunk Feminist Films,” Kristin Cochrane situates DFF as part of a growing “participaction culture” in the city of Toronto, building on Janet Staiger's previous employment

of the term *participaction* to describe traditions of counterdialogue and callback practices in cult film screenings at independent venues that enhance the live theatricality of the event.<sup>8</sup> She situates DFF events as a form of "performative criticism" that reflects Toronto's historically vibrant independent cinema scene, one that has developed a long-standing culture of participation in non-mainstream venues and community-based screening events.<sup>9</sup> For Cochrane, "participaction" names DFF's performative mode of spectatorship in that the dialogue, gestures, and social practices of the screening actively *do something*; that is, they change the discursive conditions of the space and screening context.<sup>10</sup> In moving between the large-screen theatrical viewing and social media commentary, audiences indeed *do things* as game participants, improv commentators, and live tweeters.

How can this notion of performative criticism be extended to the types of critical discursive interventions and hybrid spaces activated within a DFF screening event? As an example of "paratextual convergence," these performative events situate the film text "in dynamic conversation with a far wider array of texts, imbued with more intense emotional and economic investment by fans."<sup>11</sup> I would argue that another key aspect of DFF's paratextual convergence is found in the use of their DFF Twitter account beyond screening events to overlap with the politics of the collective in productive ways. The collective has from the start clearly advanced an intersectional feminist perspective that seeks to decenter whiteness in Hollywood and beyond.<sup>12</sup> For example, the July 2020 virtual screening of *Chueless* was turned into a fundraiser for the nonprofit CAFCAN (Caribbean African Canadian Social Services).<sup>13</sup> While DFF events bind in-person and online audiences in a shared critique of Hollywood representation, the Twitter account exceeds this by creating a long-term community of engagement that extends to political action. These two aspects—live screening events and social media activism—are crucially interrelated. DFF gains supporters from both spaces and this allows for a possible crossover for feminist film audiences who may also be looking to enter supportive communities focused on intersectional feminist activism.

### Critical Mimesis as Paratextual Decentering

DFF collective screenings enact a counterhegemonic mimetic discourse of paratextual viewing. DFF's critical imitations of Hollywood films function as mainstream cinema's "fake offspring."<sup>14</sup> The collective and their audiences mimic the original text in an irreverent and formally distinct manner as a means of decentering the dominant narrative's ideological focus. This exploration of counterspectatorship as mimesis offers DFF audiences a long-denied intimacy and agency vis-à-vis heteronormative texts we both love and love to hate.<sup>15</sup> With DFF screenings, Hollywood "chick flicks" are reimagined and reengaged by paratextual practices that mimic and reframe their outmoded sexist, racist, homophobic discourses. This is only possible through the interface between the DFF collective's more structured improv and the fans' spontaneous, platform-based interjections.

This is seen clearly in a DFF screening of *The Craft* (dir. Andrew Fleming, US, 1996) that I attended in October 2015. *The Craft* follows teenager Sarah (Robin Tunney) as she joins three other girls, Bonnie (Neve Campbell), Rochelle (Rachel True), and Nancy (Fairuza Balk), to form a witches' coven at her new school. After dedicating themselves to the "power of Manon" during a ritual ceremony, cracks begin to form within the coven as the witches negotiate their competing desires for power. These include takes on specific themes of cultural marginalization: Bonnie's experiences with slut-shaming and rape culture, Rochelle's experience of racism, and Nancy's experiences of poverty. The film ends with a power struggle between Sarah and Nancy; Sarah comes into her full powers while Nancy is institutionalized. It is indeed Nancy's position as lower class that *others* her the most within the coven and sets the stage for her narrative punishment as the one who ends up confined to a psychiatric ward in response to her unbridled desire for power.

The DFF's screening of *The Craft* exemplified feminist audiences' practices of paratextual critical mimesis. Many audience members dressed up as one of the four protagonists and professed allegiance with them in person and online as the event was getting started. In this and other DFF screenings, cosplay reflects a form

of feminist camp that collectively rewrites fraught texts. For Caryl Flynn, the "unruly bodies" enacting camp "undo myths of the unified subject and its supporting fictions of integrity, order, and stability . . . [and] moreover, are associated with laughter and the sadistic, exuberant, seditious power emerging from this laughter."<sup>16</sup> Performing and identifying with the witches onscreen are camp practices that highlight the power of the teen sorceresses' excessive bodies; DFF audiences' bodily mimesis blurs distinctions between (often problematically imagined) onscreen characters and their feminist reappropriations. This results in a critique of gendered representation via impersonation and humor. The audience's embrace of camp as a viewing position brings with it, as Flynn notes, "the power to force attention onto bodies in a culture that seems increasingly interested in burying, suppressing, or transcending them."<sup>17</sup> This is made clear at one point in *The Craft* when the main characters exit at a rural bus stop and are warned by the older male bus driver to beware of potential "weirdos" they may encounter. The angsty, rebellious leader of the foursome, Nancy snarks back, "We are the weirdos, Mister." This early scene provoked a raucous set of campy audience reactions both in the theater and online. Audiences loudly screamed Nancy's line along with her, refusing the bus driver's (and the film's) reading of the characters as helpless girls. A GIF of this moment in the film was circulated many times throughout the night by audience members on Twitter and later became a T-shirt for sale by the DFF collective. A DFF collective member tweeted that the live audience screaming this line of dialogue gave her an affective chill. She tagged the actress in the tweet and got an immediate "thank you" in reply. This set off a short dialogue where the main DFF account praised Balk "for giving us something beautiful & complex to identify with as teen witches," to which the actress expressed surprise at the impact of her performance and again offered her thanks.<sup>18</sup> Additional audience members joined in the dialogue, suggesting a *Craft* sequel where the character of Nancy "battles a warlock who represents the patriarchy."<sup>19</sup> In this brief exchange, the DFF audience's suggested sequel imagines a recuperative feminist counternarrative that pushes back against the at times overly sexist constraints of the original film.





Figure 2. Drunk Feminist Films tweet from their Twitter account with a reply from Fairuza Balk's Twitter account

Audience members participating in this real-time exchange, experiencing a close brush with a celebrity they may have admired when they were younger, adds yet another paratextual level to the viewing experience. What this screening also reflects is the audience's nostalgic relationship to the "witchy" protagonists, activating certain associations within contemporary popular feminism and offering identification and validation with characters who diverge from the hegemonic postfeminist ideals more regularly circulated by Hollywood narratives.

In this and other DFF screenings, the paratextual mimesis of the film text called out different types of diegetic oppressions while also providing space for a shared identification with more resistive moments in the film. The interplay between role play, live improv, and social media dialogue was central to how this collective critical analysis played out. This is especially clear in the forms of narrative rewriting that occurred in the audience's relationship to this scene and to the character of Nancy, who is punished in the

end for turning to the "bad side" of witchcraft. In the DFF screening, the audience perceived Nancy's character as constrained by misogyny and class elitism, reading the narrative closure in which Nancy is institutionalized in an asylum as a punishment for wanting too much power. *The Craft's* masculinist cautionary tale was critiqued during the DFF screening as a narrative pathologization of femininity that doesn't "fall in line." As a member of that night's live DFF audience, I found our shared identification as weirdos profoundly meaningful—we performatively identified as collective cinemagoers who resist the containment of women's ambitions.

### Notes

1. "About," Drunk Feminist Films, 2016, [drunkfeministfilms.com/about/](http://drunkfeministfilms.com/about/).
2. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 253.
3. Cynthia Willet and Julie Willet, *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
4. Historically, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (dir. Jim Sharman, UK/US, 1975) exemplifies cult film practices at live screenings. See Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Reading Rocky Horror: The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Marisa C. Hayes, ed., *Fan Phenomena: The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2015); J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The Birth of *Rocky Horror*," in *Midnight Movies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 1–14.
5. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 17–19.
6. Mia Consalvo, "When Paratexts Become Texts: De-centering the Game-as-Text," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 2 (2017): 178.
7. Suzanne Scott, "#Wheresrey? Toys, Spoilers, and the Gender Politics of Franchise Paratexts," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 2 (2017): 142.

8. Kristen Cochrane, "The Perversity of Drunk Feminist Films," *Canadian Theatre Review* 168, no. 8 (2016): 63; Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
9. This includes not only a robust group of long-running independent and experimental film and video festivals (Images, Inside/Out, Reel Asian Film Festival, Regent Park Film Festival, Hot Docs, to name a few), but also, as Cochrane points out, many other contemporary callback events in the city by collectives like Retropath, Robots vs. Unicorns, and Screen Queens; see Cochrane, "The Perversity of DFF," 64.
10. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).
11. Scott, "#Wheresrey?," 139. Here Scott is discussing transmedia franchises, but I want to extend the argument to the paratextual convergences that occur within a DFF screening outside of marketing and franchising parameters.
12. As Cochrane notes, the DFF collective espouses a fourth-wave feminist perspective that encourages reading films through an intersectional lens. Cochrane, "The Perversity of DFF," 64.
13. See, for example, Drunk Feminist Films (@DrunkFemFilms), Twitter, 15 July 2020, 8:55 a.m., <https://twitter.com/vmochama/status/1280285378457546753>; Vicky Mochama (@vmochama), Twitter, 6 July 2020, 7:30 p.m., <https://twitter.com/vmochama/status/1280285378457546753>.
14. Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), xi.
15. For an extended discussion of proximity, distance, and agency in relationship to Hollywood representations of women, see Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
16. Caryl Flinn, "The Deaths of Camp," *Camera Obscura* 12, no. 2 (1995): 70.
17. Flinn, "Deaths of Camp," 77.

18. Drunk Feminist Films (@DrunkFemFilms), Twitter, 15 October 2016, 9:32 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DrunkFemFilms/status/787466243720810496>.
19. Johnny Walker (@handsomejonnie), Twitter, 15 October 2016, 10:26 p.m., <https://twitter.com/handsomejohnnie/status/787479731130236928>.

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Figure 3. GIF/Meme template from *The Craft* (dir. Andrew Fleming, US, 1996)