MUS4605
Gender & Performativity in Pop Music
The Game
Jayceon Terell Taylor (1979)
Analysis

- masculinity presented as a performance
- anxiety is exaggerated, hints of self-parody
- self-fashioning (influences Dr. Dre, Tupac) - Stephen Greenblatt’s term for constructing a public persona according to acceptable social standards. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1990)
- gangsta rap: hard manhood reinforced by stereotypical alliances to class, ethnicity & gender
• music boosts street cred, and authenticity

• vocal style, production, compression of the bass, urban soundscape, subtle markers of R&B and hip-hop

• Marita Djubvik identifies the aspects of Otherness and even queering in hip-hop
‘Welcome to the candy shop! Conflicting representations of black masculinity’
Marita B. Djupvik
Popular Music / Volume 33 / Issue 02 / May 2014, pp 209 - 224


• McClary, Susan. 1994. “Same as it Ever Was: Youth Culture and Music”, in Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture, A. Ross and T. Rose (eds), pp. 29-40


Gender?
Gender definitions

- the cultural differentiation of females from males
- characteristics pertaining to femininity and masculinity
- can include biological sex, sex-based social structures, and gender roles
Gender Identity

- subjective experience of one’s own gender
- primary acceptance of being included in the groups male or female
- formation of a social identity
- many factors influence its development
- children are shaped and moulded by imitating people around them
- before 20thC, a person’s gender was determined by their genitalia
Distinction between sex and gender?

• one’s sex is biologically determined
• gender is culturally and socially constructed
• gender roles: women expected to be passive and emotional, while men assertive and rational
• Judith Butler claims the biological cannot be easily separated from the social
• **exscription** – no girls allowed because of male bonding;
• **misogyny** – anti-women strategy which involves women appearing in videos as mysterious or dangerous;
• **romance** – a cultural strategy where love and fantasy provides an escape from everyday life; and,
• **androgyne** – an ambiguous and contradictory strategy – using feminine clothes, rock musicians assert their heterosexuality, anxious that their androgyne does not lead to ‘wrongly’ evaluating their sexuality.
Eddie van Halen
‘Eruption’ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s17Xi1gt0vY
Performativity?
Performativity

norsk: *Performativitet*

- interdisciplinary term
- Butler: gestures, speech, sounds do NOT express an interior identity - they perform the assumed quality of that interiority
- problematises notions of agency and intention
- complicates the constitution of gender and subjectivity
Theories of Performativity

- J.L. Austin (language philosopher) - most influential work, *How to do Things with Words* (1962)


- Jacques Derrida (dispute with Searle over speech act theory) in 1970s

- Jose Esteban Munoz - *Disidentifications* (1999) - performances by queers of colour

Judith Butler (1956)

US philosopher and feminist, established as one of the most foremost writers about sex/gender, subjectivity and identity.

Her main project involves the deconstruction of the compulsory gender matrix, and she has quoted drag as a parodic form that can destabilize gender norms. ALL identity categories are necessary fictions that have to be interrogated. Read: Bodies That Matter (1993)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLnv322X4tY&feature=related
Butlerian approach

• focus on gender performativity

• *Gender Trouble* - focus on ‘surface politics’

• questions the ‘naturalness’, causal privilege, and stability associated with stable bodies

• hetero-homosexuality are never fixed - people ‘do straightness’, do ‘queerness’ - self-making has strategic interests
Gendered identity is.....

- about sameness and difference, about the personal and the social, about what you have in common, about what differentiates you from others
Music Research

• McRobbie and Frith ‘Rock and Sexuality’ in Screen Education (1978)

• Laing and Taylor ‘Disco Pleasure-Discourse’ in Screen Education (1979)

• ‘Cock rock’ - feminists 1970s - Jagger, Plant & Daltrey

• ‘teenybop’ - exclusively girls - ballads, schmalz, female fantasies about being the lover who has their babies

• Rob Walser - Running with the Devil (1993)

• Sheila Whiteley - Sexing the Groove (1997)
‘I Fink You Freeky’ - Die Antwoord
Principal argument

- how to theorise gender subjectivity
- needs to be anti-essentialist – why?
- gender has NO essential or universal qualities. It is a discursive construction – a regulated way of articulating the self.
- Gendered identity is constituted, made by representations, especially through music.
Susan McClary (1946)
Feminist criticism

• What do feminists do?

• Strong emphasis on the ‘constructedness’ of femininity, and the influences of images and representations in culture. These formulations are ways of avoiding ‘essentialism’, which is the contrary view that there is something natural, and essence that is universal and unchangeable.

• ‘anti-essentialism’ is a dominant concept in critical theory, but this leaves us with difficulties because it makes it hard to generalise and even politicise women.
Feminist criticism

1. Rethinks the canon – rediscover women’s roles
2. Revalues women’s experience
3. Examines representations of women in literature/ music
4. Examines power relations and breaks them down
5. Recognises the role of language
6. Questions if men and women are ‘essentially’ different because of biology, or are they socially constructed differently
McClary’s best known work is *Feminine Endings* (1991) "Feminine ending" is a musical term once commonly used to denote a weak phrase ending or cadence. The work covers these topics:

2. Gendered aspects of traditional music theory.
4. Music as a gendered discourse.
5. Discursive strategies of women musicians.
Pop Performativity

• pop songs are facets of spectacularity
• problematics of authenticity
• pop is ongoing process of transformation
• how does performativity inscribe patterns of subjectivity in pop?
Dandyism as performativity

• a cultural construction
• a person who fashions his identity
• poise - high visibility of the body on display
• subject continuously redefined by discourse - the ‘discursive moment’
Charles Pierre Baudelaire
(1821-1867)
Fashioning Britishness

- Mod identity
- Ray Davies of The Kinks
- The song ‘Dandy’ (1966) says everything about Mod culture
- historic links back to 1830s with music-hall traditions
- George Leybourne ‘Champagne Charlie’ (1867)
- Britpop - boy icons
- social class and musical performativity?
- boy bands - Take That
Robbie Williams
(1974)
http://
www.youtube.com/
watch?
Final points

• methods should be acquired for extrapolating musical details in relation to gender constructions

• theories should be studied for understanding how popular music operates as a mediator of gender

• gender performativity alerts us to the technologies that reduce the distance between us as listeners and the artist we are listening to or watching