

Hearing Sexism: Gender in the Sound of Popular Music. A Feminist Approach

LJ Müller with Manu Reyes

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Feminists have long been worried about sexism in popular music. Lyrics of rock, hip hop and pop songs have been the focus of criticism, with charges of sexism and misogyny levelled at male and female musicians. However, as Müller (they/them) argues, less attention has been paid to the *sound* of popular music with regards to gender and sexism. Their aim, then, is to provide a language and methodological toolkit for musicological analysis of gender and sexism in sound. To do this, they closely analyse the vocals in six recorded popular songs in order to theorise how listeners hear gender in singing voices. Listening and hearing are the stated foci of the book, but it is close textual analysis of recorded songs that forms the evidence for their argument.

The toolkit itself is worth some explication, since it is the key to the book's contribution to feminist music studies. Fundamental to Müller's approach is music's relationship with the body when we listen, that is, what we hear of the singer's body and how our bodies respond to what we hear. Müller outlines the following theoretical frameworks for analysis:

- Music as sign—we interpret music as a set of connotative signs, the meanings of which we have learned over time. When listening we should examine how we come to know these signs.
- Homology—the sociocultural environment of the music's creation, and how the listener might identify with it (or not).
- Genotext—the non-semantic aspect of the vocals, 'associated with femininity and a pre-linguistic corporeality' (63).

- Auditory pleasures—the concept of ‘visual pleasures’ taken from feminist film studies and applied to music, e.g., pleasure in identifying with the male hero, or woman’s body as an object of voyeuristic pleasure.
- Social body—we learn how to listen through how we feel the sound in our own body.
- Vocalic body—voices are never ‘natural’ (84), but always the sum of learned singing techniques, which produce a fantasy of the body.

This toolkit provides a set of approaches to complement other musicological methods, and it is notable that Müller has looked to alternative disciplines, such as film studies, to fill in what musicology misses.

Müller’s six examples to demonstrate the toolkit are two songs sung by men and four songs sung by women. Müller develops a new theoretical concept, the ‘real’ voice, a voice that sounds like the natural voice in the body of the singer. However, it is an ideological construction that conceals the technical work (vocal training) that goes into creating the (white male) rock voice. The two men’s songs (‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ by Nirvana and ‘Feel’ by Robin Williams) are analysed in light of this concept, through close attention to the sound of the body. In ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’, the rasping voice sounds painful to Müller’s ear. It is therefore heard as ‘real’ because the singer injures himself in the sounds’ production. The ‘real’ voice is related to white hegemonic masculinity because it indicates the ‘unity of body and subject transported in voice’ (121). The singer knows what he is doing is worth listening to. This is a position of unacknowledged privilege. Note that the ‘real’ voice is something we imagine we are hearing when listening to white men singing rock.

Following on from this, Müller analyses four songs sung by women to evidence their claim that the ‘real’ voice is not available to women. ‘Feel It’ is analysed in light of Frith and McRobbie (1990 [1978])’s claim that the song places the listener in the position of a voyeur, belying (what they imagine is) Bush’s seductive intention for the song. Müller counters that the song is a complex piece of music that is the sum of careful aesthetic choices by Bush. The timbral shifts, melodic swoops and unexpected rhythms, all work to create a sense of a mask, which hides the singing subject. ‘Feel It’ is a song of incredible vocal playfulness. The body is *used* and controlled by Bush, not inhabited by her, so the body is an object, not a subject. Thus ‘Feel It’ cannot be said to be a ‘real’ voice.

Müller argues that ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head’ reproduces the patriarchal objectification of the white female body. The different sections of the song use different vocal sounds which are, theorises Müller, like masks: childlike La’s; mechanical doll fry in chorus; the slight opening of the vocal folds which erotically give a glimpse of an inner self. The vocal sounds are not linked to the lyrics and so the voice is used as an object and fetishised, i.e., it is not the ‘real’ voice. Because the eroticisation of the vocal body relies on the denial of the subject, ‘we are thus dealing with a deeply hurtful representation of (White) femininity’ (p.146).

Björk’s ‘All is Full of Love’ is, analyses Müller, phantasmagoric due to the processing on the vocals. The song has a hypnotic feel, but the voice is disconnected from Björk’s body; instead, it embodies its environment. Müller applies Kristeva’s chora idea to argue that the song is soothingly maternal because

the voice merges with the instrumentation, the bass is like a heartbeat, and this lifts the listener. Björk as a subject is lost and becomes a fantasy maternal deity, without a body. Thus, the subject is not important, as the idealised feminine voice is all. Because there is no subject, there is no 'real' voice.

Müller asks, can 'People Help the People' by Birdy, a song in which we can hear how the sound is made in the body, be considered a 'real' voice? The vocals are breathy and trembling with vibrato that creates a sense of sobbing, the body is not under strain like Cobain's voice; it is out of control. In the song's final section, Birdy's voice merges with the backing and so she becomes emotionally without need, which enables her to comfort the audience. The song comes to a resignation with grief. Resignation is associated with feminine virtues of endurance, but Müller argues that resilience is a neoliberal reframing of accepting patriarchy, rather than fighting it.

Finally, Müller contends that the four women's songs make audible clichés about women, in which they are regarded only in relation to their orientation to the listener: femme fatale (seducing); sex object (exciting); mother (comforting); and victim. This makes them 'insignificant others to the listener in the implicit center of the song' (p.175). i.e., women can never be subjects in their own songs; their voices are always objectified and hence can never be the 'real' voice. Thus, these analyses, which articulate how music works differently depending on the gender of the singer, indicate a broader pattern of how listeners understand masculinity and femininity in music. Yet, for all that women cannot escape the trap of the voice being heard as an object, it actually offers opportunities for women musicians to explore aesthetic possibilities which are not 'trapped in the apparent naturalness of the White male 'real' voice' (182). Müller argues that as listeners, instead of trying to listen for a natural body, we must recognise how our listening history shapes our listening present, but it does not have to shape our listening future.

In its aim to provide a language and methodology for musicological analysis of sexism and gender in sound, the book achieves its aims. Müller's variety of theoretical approaches offers a few routes 'in' to the analysis, making this book accessible to scholars of media, gender, as well as music. This also makes the book a worthwhile addition to feminist work on music. It is not without criticism (what book is?): the close readings of the six songs are centred on the song text itself, additionally drawing on Müller's bodily response to the songs. Given the importance of the listening body stated in the toolkit, and the assertion that our listening history shapes our listening present, I would have liked to have understood more of Müller's position as a gendered person in the world. What has shaped their listening experiences and how has that contributed to their analysis? This would have illuminated the path for the reader's better understanding of their own song interpretations. Additionally, more about the production and its context would have been advantageous. Müller argues that Kate Bush's 'Feel It' is a feminist song which critiques society's voyeuristic approach to women; but Kate Bush (not known for her feminism) uses cinematic and stage frames for a number of her songs which suggests to me that the song is like a scene from a film, rather than a societal critique. For all that, the toolkit is a valuable methodology for analysing songs beyond just the lyrics. I will certainly be trying out the toolkit in my own work.

Reference

- Frith, S. and McRobbie, A. 1990 [1978]. Rock and sexuality. In S. Frith and A. Goodwin Eds. *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*. London: Routledge: 371–389.