

Book Review

Doris Leibetseder: *Queer Tracks: Subversive Strategies in Rock and Pop Music*

Translated by Rebecca Carbery. Ashgate popular and folk music series. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. (2012), 236 pages, \$89.96 (Amazon.com). ISBN 978-1-4094-3702-4 hardback; ISBN 978-1-4094-3703-1 ebook–PDF; ISBN 978-1-4094-7203-2 ebook–ePUB

This is a revised and translated version of Doris Leibetseder's doctoral thesis in philosophy, *Queere Tracks: Subversive Strategien in Rock- und Popmusik*. Leibetseder will be with the Beatrice Bain Research Group at UC Berkeley from 2013 to 2014 working on "A queer-feminist ethics of gender and sexuality," while previously she was associated with the Women's and Gender Studies Centre at the Alpen-Adria-University in Klagenfurt, Austria. The translator, Rebecca Carbery, herself a genderqueer scholar, is credited in the acknowledgments for her insights into the current trans* movement, which Leibetseder says helped form her thinking on that topic. As the title suggests, and as is made explicit in the closing chapter, Leibetseder is not interested in looking at feminist messages in rock and pop music; instead, she is looking for messages that challenge the heterosexual hegemony, the binary construction of gender, and fixed gender identities, an approach that is termed genderqueer.

Over three-quarters of the book is dedicated to a critical review of the literature on gender construction, drawn from a variety of fields including philosophy, psychology, literary theory, feminist theory, cyborg theory, and genderqueer theory. The remaining quarter of the book is dedicated to the musical examples, which are relegated to the end of each chapter. The examples themselves are primarily drawn from visual representations in music videos, performances, and album covers; a few examples also include lyrics. Discussion of musical style is limited to genre classifications. The examples are chosen to illustrate the points the author has made earlier in each chapter; they are not themselves analyzed in depth.

The book is written in dense, academic style; it is sometimes difficult to locate Leibetseder's own ideas within the discussion of the literature and the profusion of quotes from the literature. The language is occasionally awkward; this may be due in part to it being a translation. The later chapters (Cyborg, Trans,* and Dildo) are more engaging because Leibetseder seems more excited about the possibilities they present.

The book is divided into ten segments: "Introduction: Historical Prelude," eight "Tracks," and a final closing chapter, "Fade Out: Looking Forward," which briefly reiterates the arguments made earlier in the book. She explains her use of the word "Track" as referring most obviously to the idea of a musical track, but also more meaningfully to the words "traces" and "paths," as she is tracing alternative paths that deviate from hegemonic gender concepts. Each chapter begins by tracing the historical roots of the term and then explores contemporary definitions. Most critical to Leibetseder's argument, however, is the question of whether each strategy can work subversively to challenge normative gender roles.

"Track 01 Irony – The Cutting Edge" concludes that: "for subversive irony a cutting edge with a political message is essential, but it bears the danger of being insulting or offensive, which is why subversive irony is difficult to find in mainstream popular music (for example Madonna). In subculture, strong political meanings are transmitted more often and therefore easier to find in the queer-feminist works of the Riot Grrrls and Angie Reed..." (33) In "Track 02 Parody – Gender Trouble" Leibetseder argues that for parody (defined as a repetition with a critical difference) to be subversive it must have political sharpness and there can be no original behind the copy. She says, "The most appropriate example for gender parody in rock and pop music is the singer Peaches, who in many ways on many levels manages to imitate male musicians" (54), although she mentions that Peaches' work includes an ambivalent pornographic content and that by her third album her sound has softened.

“Track 03 Camp – Queer Revolt in Style” divides camp into two types: a subversive Camp that has political content and is situated in gay/lesbian/feminist and queer culture, and a derivative pop-Camp that is used as a marketing strategy. Musical examples focus on visual elements in Madonna (who is categorized as pop-Camp), Annie Lennox and Grace Jones (Female Camp Androgyny), Fangoria (Aesthetic Camp), Lady Gaga (Monster-Camp), and Screaming Queens (Anarcho-Camp) in Leibetseder’s opinion, the most effective example because they incorporate “empowering feminist-queer elements” (80). “Track 04 Mask/Masquerade – Transforming the Gaze” begins with an analysis of the gaze, which is prerequisite to understanding the purely visual strategy of masquerade. Masquerade can be subversive because it illustrates that there is no original—or essential—femininity or masculinity. To illustrate this chapter she describes gender performances by a variety of artists, including Peaches, Annie Lennox, Yo! Majesty, and in the queer music burlesque *Orlanding the Dominant*.

“Track 05 Mimesis/Mimicry – Poetic Aesthetic” shows that a copy, made with a slight difference from the original, reveals that the idea of an essential nature or self is false. She illustrates postcolonial mimicry (“almost the same, but not white”) (120) by using exotic visual images of Grace Jones and Bishi. The more interesting examples—both of which show the ability of Mimesis to bring together different worlds—are Lesbians on Ecstasy (electronic mimesis linking older and newer generation lesbian listeners), and MEN (dance music with lesbian political lyrics bringing together a diverse audience). “Track 06 Cyborg – Transhuman” describes how the joining of human and machine subversively disrupts all binary classifications, including those related to gender.

“Track 07 Trans* – Border Wars?” illustrates a similar subversive strategy “because it challenges this rigid binary gender system (i.e. a life-long and unchangeable identity as a man or woman).” Cyborg is illustrated with Björk’s music video featuring cyborg lesbian lovers. Trans* includes a summary of topics discussed by trans* artists in the film *Riot Acts: Flaunting Gender Deviance in Music Performance*, and lyrics by Katastrophe. In “Track 08 Dildo – Gender Blender” Leibetseder discusses several music performances that include dildos, or references to sex toys, by artists as varied as Peaches, Lady Gaga, MEN, and the hip hop artists The Lost Boies. In her closing chapter, “Fade Out,” she exclaims, “The dildo brings the idea of a queer strategy vividly to life. First of all the theoretical background to the dildo [is] based on a queer strategy: parody. Secondly, merely its presence disrupts the binary gender system and the traditional heterosexuality in the sex act itself. The dildo forms the culmination of my analysis of subversive strategies of queer genders; it is a queer magic wand, a queer bender.” (183)

The strengths of this book are that it draws on critical theories from a variety of fields, and it clearly defines a variety of possible subversive strategies that can effectively challenge the heteronormative binary construction of gender. Its weaknesses are that the discussions of the music examples are shortchanged, and the author does not draw on writings about women in music. In her introduction Leibetseder categorically dismisses studies on women/gender in rock and pop music, saying that they do not draw on theoretical cultural studies work; in the closing chapter, she mentions how difficult it was to find examples of queer strategies in works by musicians of various racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds. I would argue that there are a number of authors not listed in her bibliography (Frances Aparicio, Mavis Bayton, Norma Coates, Angela Davis, Cheryl Keyes, Lisa Lewis, Denise Noble, Tricia Rose, etc.) who do discuss examples of subversive gender performance strategies from a cultural studies perspective, and some of those same sources could have provided her with musical examples by musicians of various racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Leibetseder’s book would serve as a useful literature review and introduction to feminist theory and genderqueer for someone who is interested in the topic but has not read the original sources. It could also be used in a graduate class on gender and popular culture. The music examples do illustrate her arguments and could provide readers with a place to begin their own

analyses. It would not be as useful for a class focused on music because it contains primarily visual and textual analysis. It would have been a more interesting book if she had restructured her arguments to begin with the musical examples, doing in-depth analyses as a way to illustrate the points made in the theories, rather than making the points through pages of academic arguments before tacking on examples that seem an afterthought.

*Trans** is an umbrella term that refers to all of the identities within the gender identity spectrum.

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