

## Feminist Theory and Music Criticism: some notes

At the risk of the massive over-simplification, we can divide positions in feminist cultural criticism into three main categories: **Liberal** feminism, **Difference** feminism and **Anti-essentialist** feminism.

Broadly speaking, *liberal* feminism tries to confront the problems facing women without stepping outside the norms and assumptions of mainstream political liberalism [insert link], the dominant political philosophy of modern Western societies. From this point of view, as long as women are not discriminated against by powerful individuals and institutions, as long as men and women are all treated as individuals, regardless of gender, then sexism can be effectively neutralised.

The implication of this view is that gender differences are either arbitrary social constructs, or are simply completely irrelevant to social, political, and cultural life. The aim is simply to give women access to the domains of social life (politics, business, education, etc.) from which they have traditionally been excluded.

So what would musicians or critics informed by these assumptions be looking for in a 'feminist' practice of music? Well, broadly, they would be looking for evidence of their beliefs that women can do anything men can do. So the concern would be to give women the opportunities to compose, perform and record music such as men have been able to for a long time.

In terms of popular music practice, we might point to groups of artists like the Riot Grrrls, or more mainstream rocking women like Suzie Quatro and Joan Armatrading as exemplifying this kind of practice.

*Difference* feminism tends to see liberal feminism as ignoring the physical reality of gender and its social and cultural implications. From this point of view, women and men are not the same: femininity and masculinity are real things and the trouble with patriarchal culture is that it treats femininity as inherently inferior to masculinity. The role of feminist criticism and culture from this point of view is to celebrate femininity and to open up a space for the expression of feminine difference. This is a crude understanding of the 'difference' feminism derived from the work of writers such as Luce Irigaray. However, the matter becomes more complex when we consider the importance of the early ideas of Hélène Cixous to formulating 'difference feminism' as a recognisable position. Cixous, writing about literature, posited the existence of '*écriture féminine*', 'feminine writing', as a typical of certain modernist writers, the most notable of whom were men. Writers such as Céline and James Joyce were praised by Cixous for the playful, cyclical, non-linear nature of their writing, which often uses puns and wordplay to explore new ways of making meaning, and of using words in a way which is not just about making meanings. From Cixous' point of view, the fact that this was not writing by women was unimportant - it could still be thought of as an exploration of *femininity* in writing. By the same token we might say that the most 'masculine' writer in the English literary canon is George Eliot, who, although she was a woman, wrote famously precise prose, constructing well-ordered narratives with clear novels.

A similar position has been developed by some music critics. Susan McClary, the pioneer of feminist musicology develops a position in her book *Feminine Endings* which praises both male and female composers for their exploration of a feminine aesthetic in music. Reynolds & Press, in *The Sex Revolts* undertake a unique cartography of rock music in terms of its gender politics, from a position which, if only implicitly, is very similar to McClary's. Although they are reluctant to

commit themselves on the issue of whether any kind of rock music can ever be really 'progressive' from a feminist perspective, this was really the culmination of a period during which Reynolds championed the highly 'feminised', anti-phallic drone-rock of British indie icons My Bloody Valentine. Reynolds & Press seem to be more sympathetic to the tradition of 'psychedelic' 'oceanic rock' which includes music like that of the early Pink Floyd, Can, Miles Davis' electric music of the early 1970s, etc. etc. than to the 'sadistic' hyper-masculine tradition of heavy rock. However, in the third section of their book, Reynolds & Press also acknowledge the significance of female and female-led bands like The Raincoats who seem to have deliberately tried to get away from any fixedly masculine or feminine forms of musical expression, playing around with the possibility of mixing up these categories.

This kind of playing around is exactly what *anti-essentialist* feminism tends to be interested in. Anti-essentialism maintains that gender is a social category and a social experience, not the expression of some essential reality of the body. Most famously, Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* contends that even the material reality of the body can be conceived as the outcome of long histories and complex power relationships. The way we experience our bodies is itself dependent upon the habits of existence, of behaviour, of child-rearing, etc. which prevail in a particular culture. From this point of view, it is still possible to recognise masculinity and femininity as different ways of experiencing the world, which might be more typical of men's and women's experience respectively, without assuming that men can never experience 'femininity' or that women can never occupy the position of 'masculinity', and it is still possible to deplore the cultural hegemony of masculinity, while also trying to destabilise any fixed definitions of gender or sexuality. From this point of view 'feminine' forms of expression may be welcomed as strategic interventions, opposing the hegemony of the masculine, but we would also want to emphasise the significance of Cixous' idea that 'feminine writing' can be produced by men (and so presumably 'masculine writing' can be produced by women). In fact, it might be ultimately *more* important to emphasise this point, trying to displace all fixed notions of gender and sexuality. This 'anti-essentialism' has been explored by many writers, including Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, and is very close in spirit to the ideas of some of the key late-20<sup>th</sup> century French philosophers, such as Deleuze and Derrida.

In her essay 'same as it ever was', Susan McClary, while not referring directly to Butler, argues that music is a 'technology of the body' - an assemblage of techniques, practices and habits which helps to create, reproduce and fix both *ideas* about gender and actual bodily experiences of gender and sexuality. From the point of view of anti-essentialist feminism, this might lead us to look for musical forms which deliberately displace all fixed notions of masculinity and femininity. In fact, this is exactly what Richard Dyer argues that disco does in his famous essay 'in defence of disco'.

If you want to follow up some of these arguments then you should first read these two key essays by McClary and Dyer. There are a number of further readings suggested in the module guide, but another piece that you might like to look at is my [short article](#) which tries to make connections between Dyer and the ideas of Deleuze & Guattari, while explaining how D&G's ideas about gender might fit into this debate.

