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“Work, Work, Work, Work, Work.” On the Aesthetic Production of Gender *in* and *through* Pop Music

Abstract: Karl Marx states that the previous materialism has a blind spot in the comprehension of the sensual, the physical, and the subjective on a practical level. Judith Butler agrees with this understanding of materialism by understanding practice as a socially transforming activity. The object – a body, name, gender – practices and produces itself, according to Butler. Gender, then, is not the effect of a simple practice of construction, it is the practice of production itself. If we understand gender in its discursive constitution as sensual, aesthetic, polymorphously perverse, that is, immensely-really material, then it is neither an effect of production nor its precondition; it is above all one thing: labor! “You wanna hot body? You better work bitch!” (Britney Spears). This article analyzes a queer aesthetic of the production of gender through gendered modes of labor in pop songs. Queer is understood less as an identity but rather as a practice that is able to produce gender differently than (hetero)normative production aesthetics can.

Keywords: Pop songs, music video, queer, capitalism, neoliberalism, labor body, gender, femininity, consumer culture

Britney Spears: “You wanna hot body? You better work bitch!”. Madonna: “Cause we are living in a material world and I am a material girl”. Rihanna: “Work, work, work, work, work”. All of these foreshadow what it means to have a gender in neoliberal capitalism: It means work. In other words, in order to have a gender, a desire, and a sexuality, work must be done – sex, gender, and desire are not just there. And although the thesis of gender as socially constructed seems to be philosophically and sociologically accepted on the one hand, many queer and feminist discourses regarding visibility and representation in aesthetic considerations currently often assume that when Britney, Madonna, and Rihanna perform in their videos or appear as characters, they already have a gender that can be assigned. What seems clear is that they sing, speak, rap there *as* women. These discourses group under the label Female Pop, Female Rap – the future is female as an aesthetic program. However, in my understanding, this does not say anything about the aesthetics of this pop music in general or the aesthetics of the production of gender in particular. For example, the discourse around Beyoncé’s song *Formation* from the album *Lemonade* revolved around a rhetoric – prominent in intersectional queer feminism – about the liberation of a woman as a woman. In the reception, something is already presupposed here that is first pro-

duced *in* and *through*¹ aesthetic and sociocultural practice. When Beyoncé sings and raps: “Ladies now let’s get in formation, ’cause I slay”² and occupies and appropriates various sites of colonization and racialization of female People of Color in the video, it is not only her womanhood and blackness or its representation in art that is shown off; rather, the conditions of production, the struggles for the materializing interpretive sovereignty over gender, sexuality, and the body are negotiated aesthetically. The ladies only become ladies *through* aesthetic and material formation, which is tied to a productive, appropriating activity such as work, according to the thesis developed in the following.

The meaning of “becoming gendered”, the question of which work processes precede this and at what limits queer-feminist representational politics first become apparent *in* and *through* the aesthetic form of art, for example pop music – not through the *correct* or *incorrect* representation of what is apparently already fixed in its material meaning. “Gender becoming”, for example “becoming-woman”,³ is a term by Deleuze (in the original French “devenir femme”), who thus explicitly focuses on gender becoming in the sense of producing and making. In the following, then, I am basically concerned with the materialization of gender *through* aesthetic modes of formation. With Susan Sontag’s *Against Interpretation*, the interpretation of art – pop music here – is not seen as a detective search for meaning in or behind the content of the object;⁴ rather, form or a particular aesthetic of production in this respect first determines the semantics of production: it (form) is prior to it in a fundamental sense. At this point, pop music, following Diedrich Diederichsen, means the “context of images,

1 My use of the term pair *in* and *through* refers to a movement that I use as a code for a literary procedure of materialization following Judith Butler (among others) in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* and Michel Foucault (among others) in *Histoire de la sexualité* and *Surveiller et punir*. For Butler’s and Foucault’s theory of subjectivation, the subject is dependent on so-called submission to the dominant symbolic order in order to equally be or become a subject in the first place. This movement into and through the structure that the subject necessarily goes through in order to be a subject can be described as a movement of negative dialectics. For aesthetic procedures of producing gender, the code *in* and *through* stands for the mediating relationship between form and content, or aesthetic form and material object: both presuppose and condition each other, without a temporal causal logic. In addition to Butler and Foucault, this movement is equally found in Louis Althusser’s idea of invocation, explicitly in *Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’État*, wherein he describes the said double movement on the basis of the French *sujet* as follows: as subject and subject at the same time. Althusser’s invocation within capitalist orders thus means that the subject is/becomes in and through the invocation simultaneously free and subject (French *assujettissement*).

2 Beyoncé: ‘Formation’ from the album *Lemonade*, Columbia Records 2016.

3 Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [2005], trans. by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN / London 1987, 134, 248, 268, 272, 276.

4 Susan Sontag: “What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art”. In: id.: *Against Interpretation*. New York 1966, 8. For more recent connections to the queer theory used here in relation to pop and its genre-specific historicity, see especially Jack Halberstam: *Trans*. A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. Oakland, CA 2018.

performances, (mostly popular) music, texts, and narratives tied to real people.”⁵ How, then, does gender become what it apparently is: a given; something that seems fixed and rigid; something that seems unchanging and identical to itself? This question prefaces the aforementioned thesis that gender has no natural ontology (in the sense of *first nature*), that it is supposedly there unprocessed as mere passive matter, and that its existence in this or that way – that is, in a certain way – is dependent on cultural, social, and economic factors. Gender is, above all, a practice bound to certain conditions of production.⁶ For this reason, to ask how gender is made *in* and *through* a pop culture aesthetic is to ask about the means of this production. In what ways is gender produced, and with what aesthetic tools? Franco Moretti assumes, in relation to literature, that “[the story] speaks to us, only through the medium of form.”⁷ That is, the objects – for example, the feminine or the woman that pop singers like Britney Spears seem to appeal to – only produce themselves *in* and *through* their aesthetic formation. Silvia Bovenschen refers to the “feminine as a form”⁸ in this consequence. It is not, then, a pre-existing content to which one could simply refer in an aesthetic process, or which could be properly mapped, depicted, or represented. The matter of gender only comes to its social-real form or, in other words, to its material meaning in the formation of the same: *bodies that matter*.⁹

If a gender is a form, then it is a constantly producing, moving, something that is necessarily remade with every pop cultural staging and performance. Whether intended or not: it – the gender – is therefore the “production of production.”¹⁰

1 “I am a material girl”. The Relationship between Gender and Economy

They can beg and they can plead, but they can't see the light (that's right). 'Cause the boy with the cold hard cash is always Mister Right. 'Cause we are living in a material world and I am a material girl. You know that we are living in a material world and I am a material girl.¹¹

5 Diedrich Diederichsen: *Über Pop-Musik*. Cologne 2014, XI. “Zusammenhang aus Bildern, Performances, (meist populärer) Musik, Texten und an reale Personen geknüpfte Erzählungen.” [Own translation; F.H].

6 Judith Butler: *Bodies That Matter. On the discursive limits of “sex.”* New York, NY 1993.

7 Franco Moretti: *The Bourgeois. Between History and Literature*. London / New York, NY 2013, 15.

8 Silvia Bovenschen: *Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit. Exemplarische Untersuchungen zu kulturgeschichtlichen und literarischen Präsentationsformen des Weiblichen*. Frankfurt 1979, 56. “Das Weibliche [...] ist eine Form.” [Own translation; F.H.].

9 This formulation comes from Judith Butler's book of the same name *Bodies That Matter*.

10 Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari: *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [2000], trans. by Robert Hurley / Mark Seem / Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis 1983, 12.

11 Madonna: “Material Girl” from the album *Like a Virgin*. Sire / Warner Brothers Records 1984.

... sings Madonna in 1984 and thus shows that capital and labor are not only somehow connected with love, sexuality, and gender but are in a necessary relationship of dependence.¹² Because even within the heterosexual romantic understanding of love of the one “mister right,” which Madonna sings here, the capitalist production relation seems to find itself necessarily also in *sexus* and love: In a “material world” lives a “material girl” and therefore the “mister” with the “cold hard cash” is also the right one.¹³ The “mister right” is therefore not simply the perfect man but must first be produced in a process of normative manhood. Thus, in a tightly woven syntax, the “boy” from the beginning of the sentence becomes a man through “cold hard cash” at the end of the sentence; the “mister right.” The truth about being a man is thus derived here from having “cold hard cash.” Or to put it another way: to be in possession of the means of production, to have capital, means here to be a real man, the “mister right”.¹⁴ The capitalist production process and gender, in a sense, produce each other at this point. The material world of “cash” and that of material masculinity as such exists only when it is worked out, that is, when it is in the permanent process of production.

The production of economic commodities in the contradiction between capital and labor is thereby not prior to the production of erotic/sexual commodities in the contradiction of the sexes. In this, only the “production of production”¹⁵ is initial or original. If the beginning and origin of each sex is production, this negative-cyclic movement abolishes primordality as the possibility of the one, single beginning. Thus, with these examples, the talk of major and minor contradictions is already mistaken in the beginning. When Judith Butler determines gender as a way of mattering in which “matter is always materialized,”¹⁶ Butler thereby marks a specific characteristic of Marx’s understanding of materialism – namely that matter is always historically concrete, that is, it has become, it has thus been made, produced, and elaborated. Part

12 What is interesting at this point is the interpretation of the public discourse: instead of recognizing that “Material Girl” is an analysis and illustration of material conditions in capitalism, the press portrayed Madonna as the female embodiment and advocate of hypercapitalism, which is why she herself later regretted the song. Similar misinterpretations can be found in anti-capitalist songs by, for example, the Pet Shop Boys (for instance with “Opportunities” or “Shopping”). Following on from this, it could be examined here whether there is a difference in the interpretation of anti-capitalist pop songs and artistic expressions depending on the gender of the artists.

13 What is striking here is how the attributes of “cash” (“cold” and “hard”) also gender (in the sense of an active verb) the economic, in that not only is being a man determined by the possession of capital, but also, conversely, capital is determined by adjectives with masculine connotations.

14 Compare the movement of how the “boy” uses his “cold hard cash” to buy labor power and the accompanying transformation into a man with the movement of the “transformation of money into capital” described by Marx and Engels in: id.: *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*. Vol. I, Book I, MEW 23. Berlin 1962, 161–191. [Own translation; F.H.].

15 Deleuze / Guattari: *Anti-Oedipus*, 12.

16 Butler: *Bodies That Matter*, xviii.

of the social enforcement of gender relations in everyday capitalist life is that the status of the procured is aesthetically invisibilized in everyday processes of production and reproduction. Thus, the point of the fetish character of the commodity, according to Marx, is that the specific social relation of the capitalist mode of production appears as a “social natural property”¹⁷ of things, matter, bodies, etc. Capitalist everyday life is characterized by the aesthetic experience of gender as a self-contained natural property rather than the aesthetic experience of the social productions of gender.

2 The Aesthetic Procedures of Gender Productions

Pop music is a good entry point to being able to grasp the aesthetic and normative production of natural properties in their essence as produced; this is due to the fact that it consists – as Diedrich Diederichsen states in *Über Pop-Music* – of heterogeneous “products (or product parts)”¹⁸ that “do not [form] the environment or the decor of pop music, but are part of it.”¹⁹ For it is precisely as “indexical art,”²⁰ as an art that must permanently negotiate the dialectic of aesthetics and reality *in* and *through* its media-specific indexicality, and as an art that visibly consists of queer principles of form such as sampling, mixing, repetition, rearrangement, collage, appropriation, etc., that pop music can be used to trace the process of production, manufacture, and compilation. It becomes clear that the body or sexual identity that appears as given in relation to gender is produced through processes of repetition and appropriation that have to be permanently generated. Because in pop music, a certain sound, a suitable body, a certain makeup, and the like exist only in and through an infinite intertextual context of reference. And even if the product of pop music exists as an object/matter in its own right, the “unity of pop music is a combination of heterogeneous media, archives, and distribution channels that are localized and localizable in different ways. This unity is [...] not addressable as an institution, but is handled in the life-world as if it were one.”²¹ The unity of pop music, then, is its multiplicity of aesthetic productions. In this, it shows how many places are produced and worked in order to

17 Karl Marx / Friedrich Engels: *Das Kapital*, 86. “gesellschaftliche Natureigenschaft” [Own translation; F.H.].

18 Diedrich Diederichsen: *Über Pop-Musik*, xx. “Produkten (oder Produktteilen)” [Own translation; F.H.].

19 Diedrich Diederichsen: *Über Pop-Musik*, xx. “[...] nicht etwa die Umwelt oder den Dekor der Pop-Musik [bilden], sondern [...] ihr Teil [sind].“ [Own translation; F.H.].

20 Diedrich Diederichsen: *Über Pop-Musik*, xix, “indexikalische Kunst.” [Own translation; F.H.].

21 Diedrich Diederichsen: *Über Pop-Musik*, xxi. “Einheit der Popmusik [...] [eine] Verbindung aus heterogenen und auf unterschiedliche Weise lokalisierten und lokalisierbaren Medien, Archiven und Distributionskanälen. Diese Einheit ist [...] nicht als Institution adressierbar, wird aber in der Lebenswelt so gehandhabt, als wäre sie eine.” [Own translation; F.H.].

produce products such as the following songs, which also negotiate on the level of the phenomenon of work and gender: Missy Elliott *Work it* (2002), Kelly Rowland *Work* (2007), Ciara *Work* (2009), JME *Work* (2013), A\$AP Ferg *Work* (2013), Iggy Azalea *Work* (2014), Omarion *Work* (2014), Stella Mwangi *Work* (2016), Rihanna *Work* (2016), Fifth Harmony *Work from Home* (2016), Britney Spears *Work B**ch!* and many more. The latter expresses in her song *Work B**ch!* what it means to come into the world today: That is, to become a commodity through work, ergo a physical/sensual subject:

You wanna hot body? You want a Bugatti? You want a Maserati? You better work bitch! You want a Lamborghini? Sip martinis? Look hot in a bikini? You better work bitch! [...] Ring the alarm. Don't stop now. Just be the champion. Work it hard like it's your profession [...].²²

Here, it is not only the imperatives (“you better”) that make it clear that it takes work to be a woman. The aesthetic linking of work and gender in the video also does not follow an antecedent logic of identity but rather exposes the production process of gender identity itself. For example, in the line that accompanies “You wanna hot body? [...] you better work bitch”, the body is first trained in fitness movements in order to be able to advertise it later in the video as an erotic commodity (“hot body”) in a red-tinted small room with the neon sign “Bitch”. By presenting herself as a dominatrix (she has three different whips and several types of whips with which she chains other women), Britney Spears also shows herself as a capitalist (“be the champion”) who can dispose of the labor of others because she has worked hard to achieve the status of “fancy living in a big mansion” with Bugatti and Maserati. Through the suggestion that her chained subordinates can only free themselves from their state of bondage through work (“work it hard like it's your profession”), she embodies the capitalist production process in neoliberalism per excellence (“be the champion”) because all the work is also supposed to be fun (“Sippin’ martinis. Party in France”).

3 Work Hard, Play Hard

David Guetta's, Ne-Yo's and Akon's song *Play hard* – as a remix of the 1999 Euro dance hit *Better Off Alone* by Alice DeeJay – also talks about how the production of gender, especially masculinity, works in capitalism: “We work hard, play hard. [...] keep partyin’ like it's your job.”²³ The video tells of the classist, racist (e.g. a stereotypical image of Mexicans), and sexist lines along which the production of gender in neoliberal labor processes is arranged. Contrary to the seemingly primitive text, the aesthetics of the video are surprisingly unavailable, even exaggerated, and a bit queer. The simultaneity of different scenes in which work and celebration take place (money

²² Britney Spears: “Work B**ch” from the album *Britney Jean*, RCA Records 2013.

²³ David Guetta: “Play Hard” from the album *Nothing But the Beat*, Virgin Records 2012.

deals in prison, beauty contest, housewives who don't do housework, rodeo on Warhol's banana, pink horses, money games, etc.) first of all shows in how many places supposedly "only" working takes place. And on the other hand, demonstrates in how many places where supposedly "only" partying takes place that work is also represented in the classical sense and vice versa (exemplified by the scene in a traditionally pastiche living room featuring a man ironing in his underpants with a poodle on the ironing board, a gender-unassignable person dancing in a tiger body, and a person with pointy boots chilling in an armchair).

A similar parallelization of work and sexuality or the production of goods and bodies is pursued in the song *Work* by Rihanna (feat. Drake). In it, work is paralleled with a sexual or erotic sensation in that "working" and "being dirty" take place simultaneously: "He said me haffi work, work, work, work, work! He see me do mi dirt, dirt, dirt, dirt, dirt!"²⁴ "Work" and "dirt" not only rhyme (impurely), they later even blur into a new word. Thus, "work" and "dirt" are eventually followed only by a merged "uaäh". Linguistically, what already functions together visually in the video in the form of the simultaneity of a party in the club, flirting, erotic dancing, and the designation of this as work, comes together in the song. Drake asks Rihanna: "You need to get done, done, done at work, come over, we just need to slow the motion" to which she replies: "he said me haffi work, work, work, work, work."²⁵ In the song it is sung in endless repetitive figures that work is being done (the word "work" occurs 80 times).

Work in the sense of recognizable wage labor, however, is not to be seen – except for one person who works in the kitchen of the club but dances and laughs even there. Not only dancing in the club is aesthetically described as work here but above all the mode of producing gendered bodies: "You see me doing dirt" means here, you see me doing my gender, producing my desire through practice ("doing"). The bodies – read as female or male – are only produced by repeating in a producing way what already seems to be present: the gender of *the* bodies. In the case of both Rihanna and Britney Spears, these repetitions in the video are also performed in front of a mirror. Looking at oneself in the mirror while working could here represent the self-reference of pop, that is, the identification of art as work. This stands in contrast to an autonomy-aesthetic conception of art, which precisely veils or denies its status as work, or must deny it in order to function.

At the same time, the neoliberal ideology of the subject that is necessarily permanently working on itself is also always negotiated. In Rihanna's repetitive movements, in dancing and performing ("doing work"/"doing dirt"), the body itself becomes active: the object becomes a "transformative activity",²⁶ as Judith Butler states in their queer

24 Rihanna feat Drake: "Work" from the album *Anti*, Westbury Road/Roc Nation 2016.

25 Rihanna: *Work*. The word "haffi" is Caribbean/Jamaican slang, which Rihanna uses throughout the song, for the English "have to".

26 Butler: *Bodies That Matter*, 192.

understanding of materialism. Thus, following Karl Marx's Feuerbach thesis, they define materialism as something "[...] which can affirm the practical activity that structures and inheres in the object as part of that object's objectivity and materiality."²⁷ Marx states that "[t]he main defect of all materialism up to now [is] that the object is reality, sensuousness, conceived only under the form of the object *or of the Anschauung*; but not as *sensually human activity, praxis*; not subjectively."²⁸ Judith Butler prescribes to this very practical and producing activity when she describes performative language processes as well as bodily processes of working on the body as somatically materializing. Therefore, "[...] for to be material means to materialize [...]"²⁹ in the constant process of "transformative activity":

If materialism were to take account of praxis as that which constitutes the very matter of objects, and praxis is understood as socially transformative activity, then such activity is understood as constitutive of materiality itself. [...] In either case, according to this new kind of materialism that Marx proposes, the object is not only transformed, but in some significant sense, the object is transformative activity itself [...]. The materiality of objects, then, is in no sense static, spatial, or given, but is constituted in and as transformative activity [...].³⁰

Thus, by attributing changing activities to the objects themselves, Karl Marx and Judith Butler deconstruct the materiality of biological gender, which appears as static, as changeable. At the same time, they point to the dialectics of a social practice in capitalism that produces the appearance of gender as unchangeability, rigid etc. Last but not least, they thus open up a view of materiality that makes it possible to think queer interventions and subversions into what *has always been there*, because matter that is processually determined has gaps and ruptures. Those gaps and ruptures could become usable for a subversive intervention into the matter of gender, which appears to be fixed and unchanging.

For a queer feminist aesthetics and a queer reception of pop music, this could mean that it is not enough as queer feminists to aim at the recognition of identities, their participation, and the *right* representation. The logic of recognition by the *Big Other* (see Jacques Lacan) always implies an affirmation of the power of the *Big Other*.³¹ The *Big Other* is the other of the subject. The *Big Other* is the non-self (in German the so-called *Nicht-Ich*), which, however, always already structures and aligns this subject. Certain identity politics strategies, as popular in parts of queer theories and movements

²⁷ Butler: *Bodies That Matter*, 191.

²⁸ Karl Marx / Friedrich Engels: *Thesen über Feuerbach*. MEW 3. Berlin 1958, 5. "Der Hauptmangel alles bisherigen Materialismus [] ist, daß der Gegenstand die Wirklichkeit, Sinnlichkeit nur unter der Form des Objekts oder der Anschauung gefaßt wird; nicht aber als sinnlich menschliche Tätigkeit, Praxis; nicht subjektiv." [Own translation, F.H.].

²⁹ Butler: *Bodies That Matter*, 7.

³⁰ Butler: *Bodies That Matter*, 191–192.

³¹ Matthias Haase / Marc Siegel / Michaela Wunsch (eds.): *Outside. Die Politik queerer Räume*. Berlin 2005, introduction.

aim to create ever new categories for “erotic identities”,³² as Sedgwick puts it, into the aesthetic regime of representation. They come much too late, should they aim at subversive entries into and accesses to the dominant order. For they can only criticize at the point where production has already taken place and subsequently demand that the regime of production now also include other, better, supposedly non-normative and exclusionary positions. They thus always remain a critique in the Future II (Simple) tense. By Future II I mean that this critique behaves as if the gender of the present and future is already completed or finalized. Such an identity-political conception of aesthetics has no concept of the aesthetic procedure as a production procedure of matter in general and gender in particular.

4 Conclusion

Accordingly, aesthetic procedures are not only part of the production process of gender, they are themselves genuinely producing in their forms as well as, in the best case, aesthetically reflecting on their own production. However, this can only be understood with a precise and detailed look at the aesthetic form of production. If queer strategies look exclusively at the fact that bodies in videos or advertising are “misrepresented” and not diverse enough, they do not change the aesthetic and political structure that is supposed to *correctly* render these non-normative bodies. On the contrary, the likelihood is high that the queer that is fought to be included in the representational regime becomes identical to the existing. For “society in its existing form”, sociologist Karin Stögner aptly writes, “is [...] not a good place for those who represent the non-identical. [...] Identity compulsion and total integration are predominant.”³³ For this very reason, then, the question should be asked whether the queer fight against ideologies of origin of the self-identical is not the essential starting point for a better understanding of the fight against a conservative, heteronormative aesthetic – that is, one that is hostile to everything queer.

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³² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Epistemology of the Closet*. California 1990, 81.

³³ Karin Stögner: “Jenseits des Geschlechterprinzips”: Zum Problem von Gender und Identifikation in der Kritischen Theorie. *sans phrase. Zeitschrift für Ideologiekritik* 9 (2016), 130. “Gesellschaft in ihrer bestehenden Form ist kein guter Ort für diejenigen, die das Nicht-Identische repräsentieren.” [...] Identitätszwang und totale Integration sind vorherrschend.” [Own translation, F.H.].

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Song Directory

- Beyoncé: "Formation" from the album *Lemonade*. Columbia Records 2016.
- Britney Spears: "Work B**ch" from the album *Britney Jean*. RCA Records 2013.
- David Guetta: "Play Hard" from the album *Nothing But the Beat*. Virgin Records 2012.
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