

Fashioning Pop Personae

Gender, Personal Narrativity, and Converging Media in
21st Century Pop Music

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Introduction

*I'm not a woman, I'm not a man
I am something that you'll never understand*

Prince, "I would Die 4 U"

During my final year of writing this dissertation, the world of pop music lost some of its iconic artists: David Bowie, George Michael, and Prince to name a few. The deaths of these spectacular performers – who were significant contributors to the soundtrack of my youth – served to reinvigorate my appreciation for their vast and diverse musical output and their unique self-presentations. In turn, I was reminded of the degree to which present-day pop representations are anchored in the past. By raising this point I am not lamenting a perceived lack of innovation in pop music of today, like Jason Toynbee did when he argued that “an explosion of creativity in the 1960s and ’70s has been followed by stagnation to the extent that popular music of the advanced capitalist economies has today grown moribund and self-referential” (2014, 209).¹ Rather, I would call attention to the matter that self-fashioning in pop always has been characterized by reciprocal relationships between notions of identity, look, and sound that constitute unique performances which entertain, delight, and excite us by design.

Pop artists have an extraordinary ability to affect us in complex and fascinating ways. Popular music engages both our intellectual and emotional faculties, which holds true not just for fans, but also for scholars. How music signifies and what it *means* to us has been one of the key issues for musicologists (and researchers from other disciplines) with an interest in popular music over the last few decades. Underpinning my own fascination with popular music is identity politics, which is defined in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, age and so on. In particular, I am intrigued by how pop performances can call attention to the fluidity of gendered identity, which

¹ Also see Reynolds, who envisions pop coming to an end “not with a BANG but with a box set whose fourth disc you never got around to playing” (2011, ix).

was frequently made evident by the three aforementioned artists. For example, the lyrics from Prince's "I would Die 4 U" (1984) seem to playfully reference how pop artists at times are able to transgress and oppose the strictures of gender – which is bound up with how his persona² was characterized to a large degree by genderplay³ – while also raising the issue that pinpointing how this is achieved can be an arduous task. Certainly, matters of gender in pop music are intricate. And even though pop performances have the potential to subvert and transgress gender norms, it is striking how prevailing perceptions and expectations of gender persist both in popular culture and in Western culture more generally. As is made clear in this dissertation, gendered representations in pop are more often than not characterized by contesting symbols and signs, which can result in performances that elaborately redress dominant norms in the guise of opposition or innovation.

Developments in the field of gender research have happened rapidly. Stan Hawkins (2017, 1) states this in the introduction to *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*,⁴ a volume that marks the twentieth anniversary of the seminal book on popular music and gender, *Sexing the Groove* (Whiteley 1997a). Hawkins (2017, 1) also points out that while there has been a surge of interest in research on popular music and gender, there is much work to be done still. Indeed, due to the ever-changing conventions of pop music production, performance, and consumption, there is a necessity for continuously devising new theories and methods for studying gendered identity in pop music. In particular, continuous developments in technology and media practices have led to changes in modes of representation and production that warrant scholarly scrutiny, not least with regard to the increasing significance of media convergence in the staging and showcasing of pop personae.⁵

² In my usage of the term "persona" I am referring to the social role that pop artists assume, which can be described as the part of their personal selves that audiences are granted access to. This is not to be confused with how some artists perform in character, one notable example being David Bowie performing as Ziggy Stardust. The concept is revisited and discussed more thoroughly later in this introduction chapter, particularly in relation to personal narrativity (the stories that circulate around pop artists) and how specific parts of artists' identities are conveyed to audiences while others are undercommunicated.

³ "Genderplay" denotes a switching of roles and toying with gender norms in ways that are designed to entertain as well as aspire to strategies of self-fashioning (Hawkins 2009; 2016, 28). See studies by Hawkins and Niblock (2011) and Walser (1994) that place primacy on excavating the particularities of Prince's negotiation of gendered identity.

⁴ Note that article II of this dissertation appears as a chapter in the collection.

⁵ The two terms "staging" and "showcasing" surface at various points as distinct aspects of pop representation. In my usage, the former refers to how pop identities are constructed through sonic,

Relatedly, John Richardson and Claudia Gorbman observe in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* that “[a] climate of rapid and far-reaching technological and social change informs new audiovisual culture, whose implications for modern life we are only beginning to grasp” (2013, 5). It is against the backdrop of recent technological and cultural developments, then, that I frame a range of gender issues through a musicological critique that examines audiovisual aesthetics alongside personal narrativity.

The artist persona, and its promotion in pervasive and spectacular ways, assumes center stage in my investigations. A primary objective is to contribute new insights into prominent and emerging strategies of representation. With a specific focus on commercial pop, I argue that today’s pop artists work within disparate modes of expression that span intersecting spaces, and ask how we deal critically with the performative⁶ implications of their gendered representations. I thus take a particular interest in how pop personae are constituted across a variety of platforms, attempting to demonstrate how signs and symbols dispersed in different contexts are aggregated in our experiences as listeners, viewers, and audiences. As such my aim is to show that personal narrativity in pop is bound up with our experiences of sound recordings and music videos.

By advocating an approach that focuses on the omnipresence of pop personae in Western culture, the studies I have conducted contribute to the rapidly growing scholarship on commercial pop music, offering new insights into the plurality of its potential meanings and the phenomenon of converging media. How do the personae of today’s pop artists operate across the boundaries between different mediums? How are pop artists’ gendered bodies staged and eroticized through the fetishizing processes of audiovisual production? What is the importance of authenticity and artistic agency in a pop context where artists have generally been devalued as inauthentic, and how do pop artists attach themselves to sites of authenticity and

visual, and other means. The latter describes, in a general sense, how such constructions draw attention to artists’ personae, highlight particular aspects of their identities, and ultimately sell albums and concert tickets by providing entertainment value.

⁶ The issue of performativity warrants unpacking, which is undertaken in relation to matters of gender later in this introduction.

agency both on and off-stage? These are the central questions that guide my investigations in the four individual articles that comprise this dissertation.

Outline

Submitted in an article-based format, this dissertation consists of an introduction chapter and four individual articles. One of the benefits of this format is that the methodology within each article can be adapted to fit the individual object of study. Thus afforded the possibility for a broad excavation of ideas in article form, I am able to delve into a plurality of intriguing and important issues. The introduction chapter serves to contextualize, connect, and substantiate the research undertaken in the individual articles. Having already introduced the key themes for the dissertation during the opening pages, I proceed to elaborate on my theoretical and methodological foundations, outline my approach to interpretation and audiovisual analysis, and discuss personal narrativity and gender performativity in context of popular music. This culminates with an overview of the research conducted in the individual articles and a consideration of how they intersect through a discussion of my findings. I finally offer some concluding remarks and suggestions for further research.

The four individual articles that make up the main part of the dissertation cover different but related issues connected to commercial pop music and identity politics. They appear in the following order: **I** “Empowered or Objectified? Personal Narrative and Audiovisual Aesthetics in Beyoncé’s *Partition*”; **II** “Holding on for Dear Life: Gender, Celebrity Status, and Vulnerability-on-Display in Sia’s ‘Chandelier’”; **III** “Fashioning a Post Boy Band Masculinity: On the Seductive Dreamscape of Zayn’s *Pillowtalk*”; **IV** “Azealia Banks in ‘Chasing Time’: Body Politics and Queer Erotics”, co-authored with Stan Hawkins.

On the whole, the articles grapple with issues pertaining to contemporary pop representations in a variety of ways. They are independent from each other in the sense that they deal with separate artists, topics, and research questions. At the same time, the articles are united in attending to the primacy of the artist persona in a pop music context. This is manifested in how each of them addresses personal narrativity,

authenticity, and artistic agency, in turn relating these matters to sound recordings, music videos, and other aesthetic objects. Additionally, each article explores the staging of the gendered body through audiovisual production, which entails addressing the creative realization of music related technologies as part and parcel of gender performativity in pop. The individual article contributions thus relate closely to each other, and this will be further explicated towards the end of this introduction chapter.

Musicological Foundations

My investigations are executed from a musicological point of view, placing primacy on music analysis and audiovisual analysis. I develop an interpretive approach that draws on numerous fields of research related to *popular musicology*. In his introduction to *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, Derek B. Scott (2009, 1) recalls that he and Stan Hawkins knew of no previous usage of the term when they began editing the journal, *Popular Musicology*, at the University of Salford in 1994. Scott explains that their engagement with popular musicology emanated from a lack of musicological research on popular music in the early 1990s. The general scarcity of musicological studies on popular music at that point in time was contrasted by a significant amount of work in the broader field of popular music studies, dominated by scholars in the fields of sociology and cultural studies.⁷ Popular musicology distinguishes itself from popular music studies first and foremost by advocating a *musicological* approach to the critical analysis of music, while endorsing the relevance of cultural or social context. Popular musicologists frequently apply theoretical models drawn from, for example, anthropology, sociology, media studies, and gender studies to music analysis. Such diversity, Scott (2009, 2) notes, may characterize popular musicology as a post-disciplinary field in the breadth of its theoretical foundations and its objects of study.

Popular musicology, then, can be characterized by an ambition to expand on the traditional tools of music analysis in order to examine music as part of a social and cultural experience. At the time of the field's emergence, this also entailed a will to question the dichotomy between art music and popular music (*ibid.*), or more generally challenge entrenched traditions and established standards by confronting the practice of music analysis and its positivistic status (Hawkins 2012, 4-5). Similar tendencies were evident in adjacent musicological fields such as *critical musicology* (in the UK) and *new musicology* (in the US). Popular musicology, critical musicology, and new musicology would converge as fields of study, and objects of interest, theories, and methods may intersect or overlap across these fields and others.⁸

⁷ See Frith (1987, 133).

⁸ The boundaries between these fields are far from clear. Scott (2009, 2) points out that some critical musicologists have been concerned mainly with popular music, offering the example of Allan Moore.

The developments in musicology during the 1990s, that shaped critical approaches for years to come, have had a major impact on my own methodological approach,⁹ particularly with regard to addressing our understandings of the possible meanings of sound recordings and audiovisual texts. In *Critical Musicological Reflections*, Hawkins (2012, 2) recollects the significant changes in musicology during the last decades of the twentieth century, and pinpoints the social and cultural relevance of music within a media-saturated political context as central to the paradigmatic shift that took place in musicological research from the 1990s onwards. This is reflected in the critical concern that music simultaneously is influenced *by* and has influence *on* its context. McClary made this point when she suggested that music acts as “a public forum within which various models of gender organization (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated” (1991, 8). Similarly, Kramer had argued that music as a cultural activity “must be acknowledged to help produce the discourses and representations of which it is also a product” (1990, 17). Building on such an understanding of the music/culture relationship in terms of a bidirectional model, my discussions and analyses revolve around the premise that pop artists and pop music alike are experienced simultaneously as both reflective and constitutive of larger sociocultural structures.¹⁰

Examining one area of popular music that has been relatively neglected in this regard, my focus falls on contemporary solo artists operating within the domain of commercial – or mainstream – pop music.¹¹ Surprisingly, mainstream pop has

Notably, Moore edited an anthology, *Critical Essays in Popular Musicology* (2007a), having previously described “popular musicology” as an unfortunate term (Moore 2003, 2). This demonstrates the vague and often confusing divides that exist between the fields, as well as a growing acceptance of the very term ‘popular musicology’. Conversely, the term “new musicology” has all but fallen into disuse in scholarly writing (Richardson 2016, 126), and Kramer has argued that the “best name for what has been called (used to be called?) ‘the new musicology’ is the term [...] *critical musicology*” (2011, 64 – original emphasis). For these reasons, I do not distinguish between these three musicological fields from this point on.

⁹ Influential texts of this period include Abbate (1991), Brackett (1995), Kramer (1990), Middleton (2002 [1990]), McClary (1991), Moore (1993), Negus (1992; 1996), and Walser (1993).

¹⁰ For comprehensive introductions to research on the cultural and social functions of music, see Clayton et al. (2012) and Scott (2000).

¹¹ An arguable exception to this is found in article IV, which deals with Azealia Banks, whose commercial success is debatable and who is considered to be a hip hop artist and rapper as much as a pop artist. However, as will be discussed in further detail, the boundaries that govern “mainstream pop music” are blurred. This point is evident also in Banks’ own music, which exhibits an eclectic mix of

received relatively little attention from scholars up until recently.¹² I say surprisingly because, notwithstanding that mainstream pop music is often held as artistically and aesthetically inferior by some critics and audiences, the ubiquitous presence of pop artists in Western culture and their unmatched commercial reach should imply that their representations have enormous potential for impacting on our own constructions of identity. Philip Auslander (2009, 314-15) has observed that audiences do not receive performers' representations passively, but, rather, make use of the same means of expression as artists in their responses to them. Concentrating more on the music than Auslander, Hawkins (2011, xvii) describes pop as comprising a myriad of elements that can be assessed through the dichotomies they inscribe in everyday life. His suggestion is that "pop systematizes the very components of its own plurality, its significance determined by its musical as much as its social criteria" (ibid.). These assertions affirm the cultural, social, and political value of studying representational strategies in pop, and they spur investigation into how pop artists attach themselves to different facets of identity in a variety of ways. To hone in on a definition of "pop", then, I would ask: by what criteria can we recognize *mainstream pop music* as different from other forms of popular music?

Identifying Mainstream Pop

The challenges of defining pop are pointed out by Hawkins (ibid., xii). This task is complicated all the more when we consider that "developments in pop (however we choose to define it) are the precursors for the evolution of countless new styles, trends and influences we experience today" (ibid.). In order to pin down the scope of my study, I want to initially devote some attention to matters of genre, style, and the mainstream.¹³ In its most basic sense, the term "genre" refers to a "type". When it

hip hop, EDM, and pop idioms. The matter that Banks has received a lot of attention in mainstream media, which is discussed in article IV, also arguably secures her place within mainstream pop culture.

¹² As recently as 2011 Hawkins (2011, xiii) noted the scarcity of musicological studies that deal specifically with pop music. There are, of course, exceptions here, especially if one considers the broader field of popular music studies. Artists who have received much scholarly attention include Madonna (Bradby 1992; Danielsen and Maasø 2009; Hawkins 2002, 2004a, 2004b), Prince (Danielsen 1997; Hawkins and Niblock 2011; Perone 2008; Walser 1994), and more recently Lady Gaga (Click et al. 2013; Halberstam 2012; Iddon and Marshall 2014). See also Baker et.al. (2013). Scholarship on commercial pop music is on the rise, and one major aim of this dissertation is to contribute to stimulating this burgeoning field.

¹³ I acknowledge that, within musicology, genre and style are widely discussed and somewhat contentious terms. See for example Brackett (2005; 2016), Fabbri (2007 [1999]; 2012), Holt (2007), Middleton (2002 [1990]), Moore (2001b), Negus (1999), Tagg (1982), and Toynbee (2000) for various approaches. I discuss genre and style primarily in terms of their relevance to notions of identity

comes to different types of music, it is commonplace and arguably intuitive to distinguish between them primarily based on musical criteria, that is by identifying differences and similarities in stylistic traits. However, as David Brackett (2016, 3) observes: The more closely one describes a genre in terms of its stylistic components, the fewer examples actually seem to fit the description. In pop, many – if not most – artists move back and forth between different musical styles, creating fusions that make the boundaries between genres increasingly fluid.¹⁴ Contemporary pop music can be described as more amorphous than ever before. This certainly seems to be true with regard to the artists I study in this dissertation, for instance in the case of Azealia Banks (article IV) whose sound draws heavily on influences from house, hip hop, and R&B. Nonetheless, that a musical example cannot be confined to a genre does not mean that it does not participate in one. This distinction, Brackett argues, emphasizes “the temporal, experiential, functional, and fleeting quality of genres while nonetheless retaining the importance of the genre concept for communicating about texts” (ibid.). For genre distinctions do matter profoundly to most of us. Fabian Holt makes it clear that notions of genre are fundamental to our musical experiences, suggesting that “[t]here is no such thing as ‘general music’, only particular musics” (2007, 2). As he points out, our concepts of music are often deeply social:

Humans are enculturated into particular musics and ways of thinking about musical difference. For me, and probably many others, this began in childhood, when I was introduced to the musics of my family and encountered a distinction between music for children and music for adults. My immediate surroundings taught me that age and gender are determinants of musical preferences, and these are also articulated on the level of genre (ibid., 2-3).

Holt’s description of how different types of music “belong” to different people directs attention to the role of musical taste in articulating identity on a personal level and in everyday life. On a larger scale, genre categories inform the strategies of record

construction and negotiation, where style refers first and foremost to the aesthetic conventions that govern musical (and visual) expression. In this sense, while I would view artists such as Beyoncé and Zayn as operating within the mainstream pop genre, their employment of musical and visual codes draws on and blends many different, recognizable styles. Also see Moore (2012, 119-63) for a detailed survey of musical styles, where the idea of an artist’s *idiolect* assumes relevance.

¹⁴ A similar point has been made by Walser (1993, 27), particularly with regard to how the fluidity of genre boundaries in popular music relates to the ceaseless creation of new fusions and extensions of existing genres.

companies, the creative practices of artists, as well as the experiences and perceptions of audiences. These processes are examined by Keith Negus (1999, 28-29) in his theorization of “genre cultures”. He draws on a theoretical framework found in Steve Neale’s (1980) use of genre as a sociological concept and Simon Frith’s (1996) writing on genre rules, to gain an understanding of genres as systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that circulate between subject, text, and industry. According to Negus, genre cultures arise “from the complex intersection and interplay between commercial organizational structures and promotional labels; the activities of fans, listeners and audiences; networks of musicians; and historical legacies that come to us within broader social formations” (1999, 29). The core issue is that genres are not static groupings of musical traits, but rather loose associations between texts whose criteria of similarity vary according to a range of factors (Brackett 2016, 3-4). Put differently, genres operate as social categories that permeate our encounters with music. For Brackett (*ibid.*, 5-6), the focus falls on exploring how particular genres emerge to become accepted across a range of discourses and institutions, for which he advocates a genealogical approach.

The fact that genres are rooted in history has been explored by Franco Fabbri, who raised the obvious, but largely unaddressed, point that “for each genre that comes to our mind there must have been a time when it didn’t yet exist” (2012, 180). To Fabbri, this means that any deliberate account of genre should take into consideration genre formation and diachronic processes. Concurring with Fabbri on this point, I would argue that pop expressions of today can be traced most clearly back to the advent of MTV and the pop icons of the 1980s and 1990s. This idea resonates in the work of Hawkins (2002, 2), who draws on Frith (1988) to claim that pop emerged as a term of praise for the first time in the 1980s after evolving out of the fragmentation of rock in the late 1970s. Certainly, the influence of the MTV pop icons of the 1980s and 1990s is discernible in many of today’s pop artists, especially with regard to music video as a prevalent mode of pop expression. That the music video is now one of the primary aesthetic objects in pop, is exemplified by their popularity. Videos that attain mainstream success on YouTube frequently amass views in the hundreds of millions,

and sometimes cross over into billions.¹⁵ Accordingly, I devote much attention to the music video as one of my main objects of study. In particular, my investigation of music video in today's pop context involves exploring how the medium intersects with other aspects of pop culture and various modes of expression.

Even though the sound recording has long been considered the primary product of pop, it has always been but one of the outlets through which pop artists reach out to their audiences. This is made evident by Sheila Whiteley in the opening pages of the aforementioned *Sexing the Groove*, when she argues that “[t]o theorise the significance of popular music [...] it is necessary to identify the interrelationships between musical sounds, lyrical texts and visual narratives (either in the form of live performance or music video) and how they produce and foreground different sensibilities” (1997b, xiv). Whiteley's argument that music is experienced differently in relation to differing formats remains valid: meaning is located at variable points. The same can be said about how we experience pop artists and their meticulously crafted personae in different media, if we even want to separate this from our experiences of the music, of which I'm not certain. This perspective opens up for contemplating the social and cultural implications of pop representations by reminding us that music genre conventions transgress the audible and manifest themselves also in conventions that relate to identities, social structures, and cultural norms. This view is supported by Brackett, who notes that “while musical traits may alert us to general tendencies that differentiate artists and recordings at a given moment, without other types of information about producers, consumers, critical discourse, and the music industry [...] these traits will not suffice” (2016, 4). Sharing this position, I would argue that mainstream pop is defined through modes of production and consumption, aesthetic profusion, and target audience as much as through demarcations in musical style.¹⁶

¹⁵ As of September 12, 2016, YouTube's own statistics show Psy's *Gangnam Style* (2012) as the most viewed music video of all time, with a view count in excess of 2,6 billion.

¹⁶ This is not to say that it would be impossible to identify musical idioms belonging to a mainstream pop style, but rather that so doing would provide little insight into the significance of pop in a sociocultural context, without also considering other factors. See, for example, Auslander, who observes regarding glam rock that the genre “was defined primarily not by a sound but by the appearances adopted by performers, by the poses they struck rather than the music they played” (2006b, 71). See also Shuker (2008, 7) and Hawkins (2002, 2-3).

For the purpose of this dissertation, then, my interest is primarily in pop music that is specifically geared towards commercial success and marketed towards the general public through diverse channels. As a musicologist, I take heed of Hawkins' warning that "the task of interpreting pop is an interdisciplinary task that deals with the relationship between music and social mediation" (2002, 3). That pop artists are marketed across formats is arguably becoming an increasingly pressing matter for inspection: pop artists today partake in a music industry that is undergoing major changes and challenges to adapt to new media¹⁷ models of pop culture consumption. Portable and handheld technologies make sound recordings, music videos, and other pop content instantly accessible to a still growing number of people. Considering that the digitization of pop music has transformed the recorded music commodity, leaving the system of accumulation that developed around its prior forms to appear fatally destabilized (see Stahl and Meier 2012, 442), we can assert that these changes are reflected not only in new forms of distribution and marketing, but subsequently also in the representational strategies that pop artists employ to promote their distinctive brands.¹⁸ Pop's alignment to celebrity culture, which is emphasized by Holt (2007, 17),¹⁹ is also of relevance here, and will be addressed at a later point. In dealing with matters of representation and identity in relation to the diverse modes of address that characterize pop music, my primary concern is to devise a method for assessing how pop, in its many guises, signifies via interrelationships between numerous texts and discourses.

An Intertextual Model for Interpretation

In striving towards a holistic approach to interpretation as the basis for my model of analysis, I employ an intertextual method. My concern is with sonic texts (tracks,

¹⁷ New media is generally defined as digital, networkable, and interactive content available through the Internet (websites, video games, social media etc.), and the term refers to the possible access to content anytime and anywhere.

¹⁸ See Carah (2010) and Meier (2013).

¹⁹ Holt (2007, 17) argues that a characteristic feature of mainstream pop is its heavy focus on mass media texts and the individual celebrity. This certainly holds true for pop music – and it is one of the aspects that I pay particular attention to in this dissertation. Nevertheless I find it problematic to separate pop music from other genres based on this observation. Consider the primacy commonly placed on celebrity status and wealth among rap artists, or the case that mass media channels such as radio or television are equally important as channels of promotion and distribution for rock or country artists as they are for pop artists. I find Holt's observations about the prominence of the individual celebrity in pop as an organizing feature of the genre helpful, however, to the extent that they draw attention to the significance of nonmusical factors in distinguishing between genres.

sound recordings), visual texts (photographs, album artwork, written interviews and media articles, online commentary), audiovisual texts (music videos, documentary video material, recorded live performances, video interviews). Firstly, this approach accommodates the vastness of the material that is made available to me – and audiences – when encountering pop artists over a variety of different platforms. Also, an intertextual method is necessary to deal successfully with theories and perspectives found in various fields of research. I turn to a threefold model of analysis that seeks to demonstrate how the areas of personal narrative, audiovisual aesthetics, and identity politics set each other in motion (see figure 1.1).

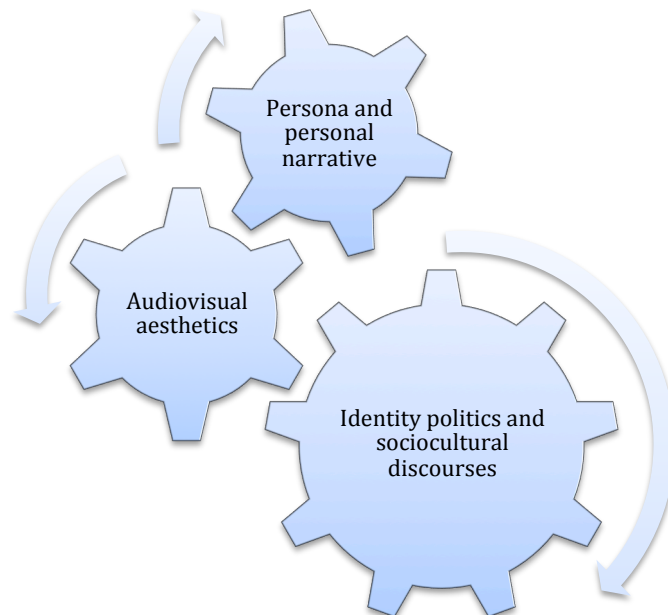


Figure 1.1: Model of analysis

Intertextuality as a concept was coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s, and has since become a rather contested term that is employed in many differing ways.²⁰ In attempting to incorporate it within my own studies, I adhere to Richardson and Hawkins’ theory that intertextuality is “the state by which it becomes possible for a text to become a text through a network of relations that define it as a text. Moreover, it serves as a methodological tool for identifying the strategies of encoding and

²⁰ For a detailed discussion on intertextuality in musicology, which traces the term from Julia Kristeva’s philosophical project, and its relation to Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism, to diverse approaches in various academic fields, see Richardson (2007, 402-405). Also see Middleton (2000a), as well as Lacasse’s (2000b) study into intertextuality and hypertextuality, which builds on literary critic Gérard Genette’s work to propose a typology of recorded music.

decoding a text” (2007, 17). Their definition of intertextuality highlights the significance of relationships between signs, which is a salient point in relation to my particular interest in situating an examination of the role of converging media in pop within a musicological critique.

To regard musicology as an intertextual field, as Scott (2003, 4) suggests, entails investigating a broad range of discourses to explain music, its contexts, and the way it functions within them. I want to emphasize that pop texts²¹ are influenced not only by other pop texts, but also by any other text or discourse that the reader brings into her/his interpretation. This has been argued previously, for instance by Brackett:

While musical texts may retain a ‘relative autonomy’ – music is a medium with specific properties, practices, limitations, and possibilities – they gain their meaning by circulating with other texts from other media which may include mass media publications, videos, film, industry publications and ‘historical’ documents (1995, 18).

Hence, any text forms part of larger structures and discourses. As such, the act of interpretation involves addressing both direct strategic references and examples of stylistic imitation in order to connect a text to cultural and historical contexts (see Burns et al. 2015, 6). During this process, I am also concerned with extramusical and paramusical material,²² which is implicit in my decision to examine the artist persona and its mobilization over a variety of formats and platforms. My choice of methodology, then, allows for critical reflection on the diverse and multifaceted discourses in relation to which representations in pop signify. Furthermore, it accommodates the view that meaning is not inherent in any specific text, and emphasizes that meaning should be understood as excavated through the act of interpretation. Certainly, pop texts operate symbolically, and their potential meanings are found most readily in the readings of audiences, fans, and scholars. This argument has its foundation in Roland Barthes (1977a), who declared the death of the author by opposing the idea that any text has an intrinsic, fixed meaning. By denying the author,

²¹ In theorizing the ‘pop text’, which entails scrutinizing the total constituents of pop music experience, I align myself to Hawkins’ (2001; 2002, 3–8; 23–25) application, definition, and theorization of textual analysis. As he maintains, intrinsic to the ‘pop text’ are sound recordings, live performances, public appearances, and music videos.

²² See Tagg (2012, 229) on this distinction. See also Burns et al. (2015) and Lacasse (2000b) for their approaches to metatextuality (interviews, reviews, commentary) and paratextuality (artwork, title, complementary artefacts).

in the sense that he disputes the idea that the “true” meaning of a text lies in the author’s intention, Barthes (ibid., 148) makes the text open to a plurality of meanings when he argues that the multiplicity of the text is united in the reader. This rings as true for pop texts as the literary texts that Barthes was referring to.

Listeners exercise a great deal of flexibility in uncovering the potential meanings of a song or track,²³ which is a point that is raised by Moore (2012, 6). He has argued elsewhere that songs *afford* certain meanings, which entails that it is only possible for an analyst to determine a range of plausible responses to a text (2001a, 6-7).²⁴ While I am sympathetic to Moore’s view on this topic, my approach to studying popular music diverges from his when it comes to the importance of addressing matters of sociocultural significance, identity, and gendered meanings in popular music. Moore (2001a, 6-7; 2012, 5-7) seems to find it necessary to downplay these aspects of the music experience in order to focus on the importance of sounds, which in turn keeps him occupied principally, if not exclusively, with sound recordings. As I have already stated, I hold the sound recording as just one of several commodity objects in popular music, and would argue that our present-day encounters with pop music equally encompass music videos and other mediums through which artists operate, with primacy ultimately being granted the artist persona. Therefore I endeavor to address musical and visual codes in ways that elucidate the connections between pop aesthetics, artist personae, identity politics, and sociocultural contexts. Thus, employing an intertextual approach, to explore how the various dimensions of pop expression intersect, is central to my musicological critique.

Within the confines of each article I adapt a unique approach to deal specifically with the particular issues at hand, while always utilizing my general model of analysis as a starting point for undertaking critical interpretation. My interpretations are guided by hermeneutic principles, and are informed primarily by a range of musicological

²³ Like Moore (2012, 15), I distinguish between *songs* and *tracks*. For example, “Hallelujah” is a song written by Leonard Cohen, while his recording of that song, which appears on *Various Positions* (1984), is a track. Cohen’s version appearing on *Live in Dublin* (2014) and Jeff Buckley’s version on *Grace* (1994) are completely different tracks with changes made to instrumentation, melody, production and so on, while the song remains the same.

²⁴ A similar argument was presented previously by Middleton (2002 [1990], 172-74) in his discussion on codes and competences. For writings on the related idea of ecological perception, see Clarke (2005) and Moore (2012, 243-58).

approaches in this respect. Kramer (2011, 2) refers to the application of hermeneutics as *open interpretation*, which he describes as aiming not to reproduce its premises but to produce something from them: depending on prior knowledge, but expecting that knowledge to be transformed in being used. This view reflects how a hermeneutic approach can highlight the importance of social and cultural contexts in uncovering the possible meanings of a text, and also draws into question the knowledge or competences of the interpreting subject. I want to emphasize that processes of listening, viewing, and interpreting are necessarily undertaken from a subjective standpoint. As noted by Richardson, critical writing in the hermeneutic sense requires “the ability to write from experience, apply knowledge of cultural codes to primary research materials, and to extrapolate from theory when undertaking interpretations” (2012, 11). In other words, it calls for the scholar to interrogate and reflect on taken-for-granted assumptions, including her/his own. In this sense, it is my own perceptions and assessments that define the findings I come up with. Here, matters such as genre competence,²⁵ my age, gender, ethnicity, and the generally Western – specifically Norwegian – environmental and cultural context I am part of, come into play.

The approach to analysis I employ in each article can be characterized as *close reading*. The term “close reading” is another that is somewhat disputed. Not dissimilar to intertextuality, the concept has been subjected to disparate and diffuse applications to the point where its very mention sometimes arouses suspicion (Richardson 2016, 111). One might take note of Moore’s (2007b, xix) problematization of the prefix “close”, when he argues that the myopia risked by close reading can be avoided by also attending to the wider field. Hawkins had suggested earlier that the idea of reading a musical text should “designate a move between focusing on the structures of music alone and the broader context within which the music is located” (2002, 2). Indeed, extensive contextual consideration is central to most critical, interpretive approaches grounded in musicology, and the act of reading is often undertaken implicitly rather than explicitly.²⁶ On this topic,

²⁵ See Moore (2001a, 26; 2012, 166) on listener competences.

²⁶ This is an assertion that is grounded in Richardson’s (2016, 116) recent essay on the close reading of music, where his list of scholars who operate in the vein of close reading include many that have influenced my own approach: Burns and LaFrance (2002), Hawkins (2001 – I would place most of his

Richardson proposes that “the aim of such interdisciplinary inquiry will generally be to elucidate the aesthetic experiences and attendant cultural meanings of the objects, events, or performances that are its principal focus” (2016, 112). Readings thus attend to the meanings that result from our encounters with objects, events, or performances in cultural settings (ibid., 114), which entails a large degree of personal investment on the part of the reader.

A reader-centered (as opposed to author-centered) approach is demonstrated well by Burns and Lafrance (2002),²⁷ who address the tenuous nature of textual meaning by merging critical cultural study with music analysis and audiovisual analysis. By acknowledging the non-fixity of meanings, Burns (2002, 32-35) inhabits a poststructuralist orientation, which is something that also underpins my own analyses,²⁸ and emphasizes the importance of integrating *music analysis* into the study of popular music. I would note that my own analyses of sound recordings rarely rely on technical jargon or traditional notation. This choice aligns me to Walser’s (2003, 22) position, namely that descriptive language may well be the most appropriate for communicating our understandings of a piece of music. In this sense, the articulation of critical thought through prose is one of my most important analytical tools as I aim to invite a broad readership through my writing.

To sum up so far, I strive towards a critical approach that draws on intertextual and interdisciplinary studies grounded in musicology. I keep in mind Philip Tagg’s pertinent warning that “a rejection of hermeneutics will result in sterile formalism while its unbridled application can degenerate into unscientific guesswork” (1982, 77). Tagg’s argument is that hermeneutics should be applied in combination with other musicological sub-disciplines, and he points to the sociology and semiology of music as the most fruitful entry points into the study of popular music (ibid.). In recent decades a number of studies have heeded Tagg’s warning, and gone even

work in this category), Jarman-Ivens (2011), Krims (2000), Moore (2012), Scott (2003), Vernallis (2004).

²⁷ See, for example, Lafrance (2002, 20-26), who traces their opposition to author-oriented hermeneutics back to Barthes and Foucault.

²⁸ My own poststructuralist positioning is implied by my insistence on the multiplicity of potential meaning to any text, and can be summed up with Middleton’s argument that “[t]he musical worlds that we inhabit, then, are not clear sets, filled with autonomous entities which are foreign to each other and connected only via neutral ‘links’; rather, they are half-way worlds, without clear boundaries, filled with transient knots of variable meaning, practice, and status” (2000b, 10).

further than he might have had in mind in combining theories and methods from fields such as sociology, gender studies, queer studies, or ethnic and racial studies, within a musicological approach. A critical approach to interpretation offers great mobility across disciplinary fields in order to complement my intertextual methodology. My primary influences in this regard are Brackett (1995), Burns and Lafrance (2002), Danielsen (2006), Hawkins (2002; 2009; 2016), Jarman-Ivens (2011), McClary (1991), Middleton (2002 [1990]; 2006), Moore (2001a; 2012), Richardson (2012), and Walser (1993; 2003). Drawing in particular on the work of some of these scholars, one key aspect of my approach lies in addressing musical codes.

Linking Musical Codes to Identity Politics and Notions of Authenticity

To call to attention the musicological dimensions of this dissertation, I want to highlight the integration of music analysis into a broader interpretive approach as one of the most fruitful ways for a musicologist to uncover aspects of identity and meaning that have largely been bypassed by scholars from other fields. Brackett and Hawkins have been particularly influential in the development of my own approach to music analysis, especially with regard to how music signifies through *musical codes*.²⁹ Building on semiological principles, Brackett proposes:

The notion of the ‘musical code’ offers a way of theorizing the connections between musical sound and such ‘extra-musical’ factors as media image, biographical details, mood, and historical and social associations; it can explicate the connection between a particular piece and the general *langue* from which it derives, and permit us to speculate about the connection between the musical sounds we hear and the ‘human universe’ implied by the lyrics” (1995, 9 – original emphasis).

One of my main analytical concerns relates to how pop aesthetics are experienced as meaningful, which, as Hawkins (2002, 10) has argued, entails taking into account both technical and stylistic coding. There is always a sense of ambiguity in a text, and in some respects this relates to how interpretations oscillate between levels of

²⁹ Note that Brackett, Hawkins, and others were part of the next generation who extended the work of scholars in pursuit of meaning in popular music, such as Tagg (1982) and Middleton (2002 [1990]).

denotation and connotation (ibid.).³⁰ Hawkins (ibid., 9) argues that musical codes only assume meaning through the cultural, social, and political contexts through which they are articulated. By advocating an approach that is concerned with how musical codes attach *arbitrarily* to the discourses that construct them, he emphasizes that connections between pop performances and sociocultural contexts are made continuously by audiences and fans, who experience and respond to these connections in quite extraordinary and diverse ways (ibid.). Matters of identity are a prime concern in understanding these processes.

I consider identity as something that can be constructed, negotiated, and contested in countless ways. It is something we explore and negotiate rather than something we discover within, and music assists in this process by constructing “our sense of identity through the experiences it offers of the body, time, and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (Frith 1996, 275). A similar point is raised by Negus, who suggests that “[a] sense of identity is *created* out of and across the processes whereby people are connected together through and with music” (1996, 133 – added emphasis). In particular, my interest in pop performances stems partly from their ability to challenge any notion of fixity when it comes to matters of identity: the majority of pop artists continuously demonstrate that their representations – and ours – can be varied, modified, and reinvented.

Implied by my understanding of identity politics,³¹ is a sensitivity to the myriad of ways in which pop music informs discourses, practices, and experiences surrounding gender, sexuality, class, and so on. In explicating the link between pop music and identity through analysis, I side with Hawkins in highlighting two critical points: “first, identities are performatively constituted by the artist’s expression, and second, there are important links between music reception and identity” (2002, 12). Artist subjectivities are carved out aesthetically in relation to ideas of genre and style, which

³⁰ See also Brackett (1995, 9-11) and Middleton (2002 [1990], 220).

³¹ See Biddle (2012) for a thorough discussion on conceptualizations of identity and identity politics, as well as their relation to music. When choosing to address the more general “identity politics” over “gender politics”, even though gendered identities take precedence in my articles, this is to acknowledge the interdependence between different “categories” of identity such as gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

in turn relate to how audiences respond to musical codes in socially and culturally significant ways. The frequent practice of fans and listeners distinguishing between “their” music and “our” music – or them and us more generally – indicates that identity can be defined through conceptions of difference as much as sameness. This is a Derridean viewpoint, argued by Hawkins (ibid., 13) when he detects that identity is ascertained by differentiation. While recognizing that the insistence on structures of sameness within groups is central to identity politics, Hawkins (ibid.) draws attention to the work of Lacan, Lévinas, and Hegel on same/other relationships to emphasize that any given group always identifies itself as different from other groups. The same/other dichotomy is relevant also to the categorization of different types of music, where conventionalized binaries such as *popular/classical* or *rock/pop* assume particular significance: Central to popular music are the lineages of styles and genres that carry assumptions and expectations. In other words, with these distinctions come sets of characteristics and prejudices that are commonly conflated with particular genres and, by extension, also individual artists. Commercial pop artists, for example, have commonly been considered less skilled, less autonomous, and ultimately less *authentic* than their counterparts in other genres.

Already well researched within the broader field of popular music studies,³² authenticity might be deemed relevant to any iteration of popular music performance. While some scholars have consigned the concept to “the intellectual dustheap” (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, 30), there is arguably much to be gained by interrogating how different *notions* of authenticity are mobilized by performers and fans alike. Well worth stressing is the idea that authenticity is not merely inscribed in a performance. Rather, it is found within an assembly of codes and signs that are given value culturally within the conventions of time, place, and the listening or spectating subject’s personal references. Pinpointing the ramifications of such a definition, Moore notes that “[s]iting authenticity within the ascription carries the corollary that every music, and every example, can conceivably be found authentic by a particular group of perceivers” (2002, 220). We might consider, then, that some notion of authenticity – something that resonates as “true” or “honest” within the framework of

³² See Coulter (2017), Dibben (2009), Frith (1996), Grossberg (1992), Hawkins (2002), Middleton (2002 [1990]; 2006), Moore (2002; 2012), Taylor (1997), Toynbee (2000), Walser (1993), and Weisethaunet and Lindberg (2010).

the listener's values and expectations – is vital to the processes of making sense of and deriving pleasure from any genre of music. Indeed, as Scott writes:

Many people feel a need to *believe* in some kind of music-making [...] and authentic music may be defined as the music that has the effect of making you believe in its truthfulness. If we believe in no music at all, then we can only feel fooled or dissatisfied by the emotions it arouses, for the self has been invested in a bewitching configuration of sound in which any apparent honesty of emotion is, at bottom, nothing more than a technique [...] (2009, 4 – original emphasis).

Following Scott, I would add that audiences to a large extent “believe in” or want to believe in their favorite artists, and that this extends across genres and styles. This is not to say that audiences are oblivious to the process. On the contrary, as Frith points out, the “up-front star system means that pop fans are well aware of the ways in which pop performers are inventions” (1996, 185). I would contend that audiences can be completely aware of the arbitrariness of authentic expression and experience, and still feel rewarded for letting themselves “believe” in particular artists or music. At the same time, generalizations and stereotypes of what is perceived as authentic in contexts of composing, producing, and performing music hold tremendous influence on the organization of both the production and reception of popular music. I deal with this topic extensively in article III, in relation to how Zayn fashions his post boy band persona partly by distancing himself from common perceptions of boy bands. In the case of boy bands, their close association with the inauthentic in a derogatory sense has much to do with the processes through which they are formed: The matter that members are often selected through auditions or talent competitions posits boy bands as not “real” but “manufactured” bands.

Notably, Whiteley (2003, 166) has suggested that the manufactured no longer attracts derisory comments within the pop arena. She elaborates by drawing attention to how the success of manufactured artists confirms that “the boy next door” really can become the next big thing, an idea that in turn, she argues, can be held by consumers to validate the possibility of her/himself being “discovered” (ibid.). Further, Whiteley points to an indication that the general public “no longer mind that they are being manipulated” (ibid., 168). While I can go along some way with these generalizations,

to the extent that they could hold true for particular fans or listeners (setting aside the obvious pitfalls of assuming that it is actually possible to distinguish between manufactured and real artists), I part ways with Whiteley by insisting that values and ideologies associated with artistic autonomy and creative integrity continue to prevail as the ideal also *within* mainstream popular music. Whiteley makes a value judgement when she offers George Harrison as an example of someone with real talent (*ibid.*), and thus does not acknowledge sufficiently that the credibility of an artist's persona is important to fans of any genre, something that is also tied up with the expectations that are placed on pop artists to fulfil the demands of masculine and feminine identities in accordance with ideas of genre and style. This is most evident in how pop artists construct their personae in alignment with commonly held understandings of authenticity and artistic agency (see articles I, II, and III), and in audience and media responses where the devaluation of commercial pop music as inauthentic is often undertaken in gendered terms (see article III).

With these discussions in mind, I return to one of my central aims, namely to contribute with new insights into how pop identities are expressed in performance, with a particular focus on audiovisual aesthetics: how is the uniqueness of the artist's persona articulated through sounds and images? I take as a starting point that, more often than not, contemporary pop performances are meticulously staged and aestheticized through digital technologies, which raises interesting questions with regard to representational strategies and the manipulating processes of audiovisual production. This seems particularly pertinent when it comes to pop videos, where rapidly evolving norms of production and manipulation mirror the simultaneous changes in social and cultural circumstances.

Music Video and Audiovisual Analysis

Throughout this dissertation I place particular emphasis on music video and audiovisual analysis. As Hawkins and Richardson (2007, 605) insist, there have been surprisingly few musicological studies into music video, and this assertion still holds true a decade later.³³ Music videos have moved beyond their function as mere

³³ This is a growing area of research within the broader field of popular music studies. Significant contributions during the last decade include Beebe and Middleton (2007), Gardner (2015), Railton and Watson (2011), Vernallis (2013a), as well as a number of journal articles and book chapters, including

marketing tools, and, for many of us, they are the “most frequent way into music now” (Gardner 2015, 7). Music videos are now arguably the most prominent aesthetic objects through which contemporary mainstream pop artists project their identities. In devising my model of audiovisual analysis, I draw on the work of several scholars who have dealt with music video and audiovisual representation.

One of the first major works on music video, E. Ann Kaplan’s (1987) groundbreaking study *Rocking Around the Clock*, laid the foundation for subsequent studies and received some criticism.³⁴ One of her critics, Andrew Goodwin, contested her view of music videos as intrinsically postmodern, also criticizing her for neglecting the issue of music and sound, and set out to establish a “musicology of the image” (1992, 49-71). By suggesting a variety of ways in which we can mount a musicological analysis of visual imagery, he engaged more closely with the reciprocal relation between sound and vision than previous scholars.³⁵ A similar attention to the bidirectional relationship between sound and images can be found in Michel Chion’s (1994 [1990], xxvi) work on film music and film sound,³⁶ which conceptualizes the idea of the *audiovisual contract* – that one perception influences the other and transforms it. His work in this regard can be viewed as one of the most influential contributions to audiovisual research, not least by offering a means to challenge a predominant focus on visual imagery in the study of audiovisual texts. A key aspect of the audiovisual contract can be found in the idea of added value, what Chion describes as

the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression ‘naturally’ comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself (ibid., 5).

Burns and Lafrance (2017), Burns and Watson (2010), Hawkins (2013), and Hearsurn and Inglis (2013). See also Arnold et al. (2017).

³⁴ See Cook (1998), Goodwin (1992), Hawkins (2002), and Walser (1993).

³⁵ Of particular note, Goodwin (1992, 50) has contended that visuals are a key element in the production of musical meaning even before the intervention of video imagery (referring to the circulation of visual representations of pop in the media, live performances, or advertisements), arguing that the concept of synaesthesia is of key importance for understanding music television. Notably, he does not engage in detailed close readings to the extent of those offered by later scholars. However, Goodwin’s work opened up for new analytical methods in audiovisuality.

³⁶ Note that Chion’s work (1994 [1990]) predates that of Goodwin, though there is no reference to the former in Goodwin’s *Dancing in the Distraction Factory* (1992). On this same topic, see also *Unheard Melodies* by Claudia Gorbman (1989) and Cook’s (1998) *Analyzing Musical Multimedia*.

Commonly, visual events in music videos are synchronized with sounds that reinforce and heighten their impact (emotional or otherwise) on the viewer, or even alter our impressions of them. Relatedly, Richardson and Gorbman suggest that “[i]mages encourage us to ascribe meaning to musical discourse, but the process is always open ended” (2013, 22). Crucial points for investigation thus pertain to how particular points of synchronization (or desynchronization) of sound and image guide our attention, and through which means this is achieved. Hawkins and Richardson’s (2007) reading of Britney Spears’ “Toxic” (2003) brings up similar issues with a musicological perspective. Influenced by Chion, Hawkins and Richardson offer an intertextual approach to audiovisual analysis that does not elevate any single element (images, music, sound, lyrics) in the process of making sense of music videos:

By advocating a systematic approach to understanding the construction of the relationship between the visual strata of a video and the music, our purpose is to deal with how pictures open up new meanings for songs. Theoretically speaking, this position is grounded in an insistence on the reciprocal nature of the audiovisual contract [...] Siding with film theorist Michel Chion, our consideration of the role of music is directed to the transference of one set of references onto the other, and how this constitutes the primary function of the visual text (ibid., 605-606).

In accordance with Hawkins and Richardson, I have decided to pay attention to how musical events correlate with visual edits, camera movements, and other video production techniques, in an attempt to uncover how audiovisual aesthetics can achieve a particular impact on account of the ways in which the coding of music and visuals interact with one another. Here, elements such as lyrics, sounds, images, and editing should be addressed in relation to each other. Granted that audiovisual texts signify primarily by virtue of mutually dependent relationships between sounds and images, these interrelationships are strictly managed by video directors and producers. Also influenced by Chion,³⁷ Carol Vernallis (2004; 2013a) enters from the field of communication studies to take up this issue by placing particular emphasis on narrativity and editing techniques.³⁸ In *Experiencing Music Video*, she presents methods and theories that are useful for determining the potential effects of editing

³⁷ See Vernallis (2004, xiv; 177-180)

³⁸ Her more recent work also brings up issues of YouTube aesthetics and how new technologies and changing platforms have shaped music videos of today (2013a; 2013b), offering insightful perspectives on the increasing complexity of the current audiovisual landscape.

and production techniques on viewers, suggesting that music video editing can extend the iconography of the pop star by highlighting particular elements of a sound recording (rhythm, timbre) or phrases in the lyrics (2004, 27). Vernallis (ibid., 28) emphasizes not only the heterogeneity of shots in music video, but also the materiality of the edit itself. Her studies reveal that it is the edits which enable relations between sounds and images, and thus facilitate potential meanings in numerous ways.

The aforementioned studies give me a platform for addressing pop videos of today in all their complexity. Such inquiry entails a consideration of how this mode of expression functions within the rich tapestry of pop culture. My articles engage in a variety of audiovisual material, mainly music video, live performances, filmed interviews, and video documentary material. I thus take heed of Richardson and Gorbman's (2013, 20) suggestion that there is something to be gained from striving for a general view of the audiovisual. My focus falls on how audiovisual aesthetics are constituted and operate, in an attempt to further our understanding of modes of representation and identity politics in pop. Richardson and Gorbman argue that a study of aesthetics "indicates that experiences of the audiovisual *matter* – in a certain sense they are primary – but also they are rooted in the material and cultural contingencies of their making and by their uses in the 'real world'" (ibid., 32 – original emphasis). Surely, aesthetics are tangled up with how technological developments are leading to changes that expand the standard for, e.g., the album format.³⁹ Relatedly, pop artists and their collaborators are talking about their own musical practices in ways that evoke notions of artistic endeavor as linked to creativity, while simultaneously confronting some of our common conceptions and assumptions about how sound recordings and music videos come into being.

Most studies into music video take the song/video relationship for granted: the view that sound recordings are primary, already recorded before the video is conceived, is pervasive (Goodwin 1992; Railton and Watson 2011, 2; Richardson 2007, 417;

³⁹ Selected examples of this trend include Björk's *Biophilia* (2011) which is largely considered the first app-album (featuring accompanying essays to each song written by musicologist Nicola Dibben) and *Vulnicura* (2015) which is being developed for a virtual reality version, Frank Ocean's back to back release of video project *Endless* (2016) and second studio album *Blonde* (2016), and Kanye West's *Life of Pablo* (2016) which was updated several times after its release with new tracks, additional lyrics, and altered mixes to become what West himself described on his Twitter account in March, 2016 as "a living breathing changing creative expression".

Schwartz 2007, 62; Vernallis 2004, x, 55-56). It is becoming clear, however, that this is not always the case. Beyoncé's creative director, Todd Tourso, explains that Beyoncé would actually rewrite or alter some of the music – change lines or add new parts to a song – so as to go with the video (Dobbins 2013). By describing Beyoncé as “watching rough cuts for the videos in the studio and tweaking the music to fit the visual” (ibid.), Tourso accounts for a process that opens up for considering how the images and narrative of the video might come before, and bear influence on, musical material. Chirag Patel, of Norwegian rap duo Karpe Diem, describes a similar process by stating in a recent interview that they “were thinking of the music video when we wrote the lyrics, and thought about the concert part when we made the videos” (Holen 2016).⁴⁰ Such statements attest both to the shifts in music video practices⁴¹ and to these artists' desire to attach themselves to an ideology that dismantles certain creative boundaries and traditions. In this sense, attributes of creativity and innovation relate to notions of authenticity that cover up their commercial motives, which raises a range of issues with regard to the implementation of technologies and the diverse promotion of the artist persona.

To sum up before dwelling further on these issues, I aim to situate a flexible model of audiovisual analysis within my broader interpretative approach, where all sorts of discourses and texts are examined alongside audiovisual ones. This is crucial with regard to the investigation of contemporary pop artists, whose personae are disseminated via transmedia strategies in ways that confront some of our comfortable distinctions between different platforms and formats. One of the challenges of addressing audiovisual aesthetics in relation to matters of identity is, as I have already suggested, to figure out the role of technological manipulation (mixing, editing, effects) in eliciting particular moods and staging the gendered body, which is an issue to which I will soon return. The central point is that a pop star's image and her/his music cannot be separated, since audiences infer as to who pop artists “really are” both from their off stage personae and from how they come across in performance (in concert, sound recordings, and videos). This comes to the forefront as the focus is

⁴⁰ My translation from Norwegian: “vi tenkte på musikkvideoen da vi skrev tekstene, og tenkte på konsertbiten da vi lagde videoene” (Holen 2016). See also Birgitte Sandve's (2014) Ph.D. dissertation that conceptualizes “staging the real” in Norwegian hip hop, and deals with Karpe Diem as one of the main case studies.

⁴¹ Such shifts have been detailed previously by Korsgård (2013), who argued that the music video format has opened up to a range of transformations.

directed towards the artist persona and personal narrativity, which leads me to discuss the role of proliferating and converging media in pop.

Forging the Self: Persona, Personal Narrativity, and Converging Media

Persona is one of many terms in music that is subject to different uses and understandings, both in everyday contexts and among scholars (Auslander 2006a, 2009; Burns 2010; Cone 1982 [1974]; Dibben 2009; Frith 1996; Hawkins 2016; Moore 2012). Etymologically, the word is derived from the Latin word referring to a theatrical mask, which describes well how the persona in pop showcases the artist in sophisticated ways. Entering from the field of performance studies, and drawing on Frith's (1996, 186-87) model for understanding the different aspects of the pop voice, Auslander (2009, 305) distinguishes between the real person (the performer as human being), the performance persona (the performer as social being), and the song character (the role that performers play in accordance with the lyrics of a particular song).⁴² The artist's persona should be considered the primary point of identification between pop artists and their audiences (ibid., 306). Following Auslander, I view the persona as pertaining to how pop artists present themselves holistically through a variety of means including interviews, documentary material, social media, sound recordings, music videos, live performances, and album artwork. In this sense, my definition of the persona is interchangeable with what is generally referred to as an artist's "image"⁴³: the values, actions, and traits with which an artist is commonly associated. It follows that the persona is always open to contestation and change, but still retains a great deal of continuity over time, or in different places and situations.

By addressing pop personae as holistic representations that are constituted by symbolic fragments scattered across multiple media, I oppose Moore's (2012, 91; 181) view that the persona is manifested primarily in the recorded voice in its relation to, for example, lyrics and melody. Moore (ibid., 181) discusses the persona in terms of the role artists assume when singing, and upholds that this role is shaped first and foremost by markers in music and sound. Certainly, the artist persona (and its articulation of gender, class, etc.) is conveyed and negotiated through the recorded

⁴² Auslander's (2009, 309-313) theorization of the persona as social front – how artists are experienced in relation to their appearance and mannerisms – builds largely on Goffman's (1959) well-known ideas about self-presentation, which have also influenced my own work.

⁴³ See Dyer (2004, 2-16) on the "star image".

voice in relation to genre and style.⁴⁴ But what of the ways in which artists articulate their subjectivities in other situations? To describe an artist's identity outside of the sound recording Moore conflates Auslander's "real person" and "performance persona" into what he calls "performer", explaining that he is "less interested in musicians than I am in music" (ibid., 180). A problem concerning this conflation is that it bypasses the friction (or discrepancy) between the artist as a "real person" and her/his personal narrative, which is attended to by Auslander:

[T]he real person is the dimension of performance to which the audience has the least access, since the audience generally infers what performers are like as real people from their performance personae and the characters they portray. Public appearances off-stage do not give reliable access to the performer as a real person, since it is quite likely that interviews and even casual public appearances are manifestations of the performer's persona (2009, 306).

A central issue here is that personae are closely linked to social, cultural, and historical discourses, in the sense that they are constructed to both reflect and respond to, for example, genre conventions and sociocultural norms (ibid., 306-307). The symbols that serve to attach artists to sites of gender, sexuality, ethnicity etc. are (more or less) strategically deployed – both musically and otherwise – in order to grab the attention and win the affection of particular audiences. In this regard, as I demonstrate in my articles, the artist persona operates through a multitude of different and intersecting channels, only one of which is music.

I would contend, then, that an understanding of the artist persona that privileges the musical text circumvents the significance of nonmusical aspects in influencing audiences' expectations to, and perceptions of, the artist. Here, I follow Auslander (2006a, 101) by insisting on a broad conception of performance, emphasizing that identities are constantly performed and that there is always a distinction to be made between the persona (the public person) and the real person.⁴⁵ I am thus less

⁴⁴ That the recorded voice of any singer in popular music is mediated, is an issue that Moore (2012, 187-207) deals with through his comprehensive conceptualization of the personae environment. His work on these issues has been of influence to my own approach for addressing the recorded voice and production aesthetics.

⁴⁵ This position is influenced also by the work of Godlovitch (1998), Goffman (1959), and Graver (1997). See in addition Rojek's (2001) ideas about the split between "the veridical self" and the self we show others.

interested in the different characters that artists assume – such as David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust, to use one of Moore’s examples – or the song characters they portray in accordance with the lyrics of a particular song, than I am in the persona as related to (but not identical to) the conception of an artist’s private self. Here Moore and I diverge, in that he would view Ziggy Stardust as Bowie’s persona (2012, 181), whereas I see Stardust as a character: When Bowie was in character as Ziggy Stardust, he was nonetheless recognized as Bowie; but, I would argue, the Bowie that the public had access to, was still his persona (the public artist) and not his private self (however tempting it would be to believe so). In one sense, the main significance of Bowie’s performance as Ziggy Stardust lies in how it influenced audiences’ perceptions of him: The elaborate nature of Bowie’s costumes, character stories, and stage shows were largely received as indicative of his creativity and capacity for innovation, which ensured the authenticity of his persona in relation to the demands placed on musicians to exhibit “talent” and “originality”. On another level, the costumes, mannerisms, and narratives that Bowie made use of in character as Ziggy Stardust, gave him the opportunity to theatricalize his gendered identity and sexuality in ways that also raised questions about, and spurred interest in, his personal life. Moore recognizes that “the relationship between *persona* and *performer* matters for the listener” (2012, 260 – original emphasis), and notes, in relation to “The Jean Genie” (1973), that “Bowie’s wilfully obscure sexuality added to his notoriety” (ibid., 146), yet shows little interest in accounting for how this notoriety might have influenced audiences’ readings of Bowie’s performances and recordings. I argue that a broader definition of *personae* facilitates inquiry into the many connections between extramusical and musical material, and allows one to consider how the artist’s articulation of (gendered, ethnic, sexual) identity in different contexts bears influence on listeners and viewers’ interpretations of sound recordings, videos, and performances.

Representation in pop is as much about constructing and maintaining a compelling persona over time as it is about seducing audiences in the moment of listening, which suggests that any context in which we encounter pop artists can be of equal importance to how we form an impression of them. Relatedly, Frith concedes that pop artists are always recognized as “themselves” despite assuming many different characters, but he too maintains the primacy of the voice:

[A] pop star is like a film star, taking on many parts but retaining an essential “personality” that is common to all of them and is the basis for their popular appeal. For the pop star the “real me” is a promise that lies in the way we hear the voice, just as for a film star the “real” person is to be found in the secret of their look (1996, 199).

Even though my articles go far in exploring the performative potential of the voice, and I fully acknowledge the significance of the voice as a recognizable trait of an artist’s persona, I would argue that pop artists are even more similar to film actors than Frith acknowledges here. Audiences’ interest in the artist persona is not confined to their encounters with sound recordings, but extends itself into every domain in which pop artists have a strong presence. This point is emphasized when considering the primacy of the celebrity in Western culture (Cashmore 2006; Holmes and Redmond 2006; Marshall 1997; Marshall and Redmond 2016), which is manifested, for example, in the sheer number of fans who take an interest in pop artists’ social media accounts: According to *Forbes*, Zayn’s social media following is estimated to be in the region of 50 million (Buli 2016), while Beyoncé’s audience on Instagram alone surpasses 90 million.⁴⁶ A holistic view of the persona thus provides the means with which to examine the representational strategies in pop that extend across the boundaries of different media, and prompts a discussion of discourses on celebrity in relation to the phenomenon of media convergence.

Celebrity Culture and Converging Media

The intersection between pop and celebrity culture is a multifaceted topic, not to mention that discourses on the celebrity are more generally fraught with contention and contradictions. This becomes evident in articles I and II, where matters of gender and agency are considered in light of the tension between positive and negative views associated with celebrities and their status.⁴⁷ This dialectical tension is called attention to by P. David Marshall and Sean Redmond who emphasize the endurance of celebrity as a cultural phenomenon:

⁴⁶ Instagram’s official number as of December 22, 2016, is 90,3 million.

⁴⁷ Celebrity discourses are highly gendered, and often it is the female celebrity who is most thoroughly scrutinized. See Milly Williamson (2010) for a brief but considered discussion of gender and agency in relation to celebrity, and also Fairclough (2012) on female celebrities, ageing, and hyperscrutiny.

Online culture in all its many mobile and social media structures continues to use celebrity as the “click-bait” to draw attention and guide the searching user through all manner of content and stories. At the same time, all this activity, all these vignettes on stars and the notorious have generally been seen by cultural critics and audiences alike as the ephemera of culture and history, the flotsam and jetsam of contemporary culture [...] And yet, for a very long time, a culture of celebrity has proclaimed its significance and – though the personalities change – it endures as a remarkable social, cultural, economic and, perhaps surprisingly, political phenomenon (2016, 2).

Indeed, interest in both the private and public lives of celebrities have been afforded a central place within an online-driven Western cultural discourse. This is evident in how “celebrities operate as a transcendence of categorization in their obvious display of their uniqueness, their singularity and their public visibility and thereby serve as the locus of debate about all forms of cultural codes, etiquette and discussion of what is ‘normal’ and acceptable” (ibid.). In many ways, pop personae have become a measure for how audiences might enact their own subjectivities, as currents in pop culture spill over into other aspects of society. Accordingly, pop artists (along with other celebrities) are simultaneously revered and scrutinized. This also raises issues of the exploitation and commodification of the self, as audiences are always hungry for more information about the private lives of stars. Because, as Ellis Cashmore has argued, “[t]he whole point about celebrities is that there can never be too much information” (2006, 43). Most of the “information” we attain about pop stars is gleaned from their representations in various media, which would make it wise to question how these representations come into being.

In the case of pop artists, the sheer omnipresence of their personae – and also the elaborate means whereby these personae are fashioned and disseminated – can make it feel as if we know them intimately (Dibben 2009, 317). This blurring of the lines between public and private is arguably one of the more compelling aspects of pop culture. The issue is addressed by Kristin J. Lieb in her study of female popular music stars as brands:

As celebrities blur the line between the personal and the professional for attention, audiences themselves are blurring the lines between their personal and public selves via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. [...] As such boundaries collapse,

and we can no longer distinguish a private person from her public representation of herself, we feel like we know her – especially if she is on Twitter, just like us. But what we really know is her constructed advertised brand. In the case of a celebrity, this brand is the end product of myriad professional authors [...] (2013, 31).

In the context of pop music, Lieb’s observation that celebrity brands are the end product of a myriad of professional authors tailoring the brand towards its intended audience relates to how sound engineers, songwriters, producers, and video directors play major roles in shaping a sound recording or music video.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, as Will Straw (1999, 200) has observed, audiences generally evaluate music recordings, videos, or concerts as the output of a single individual or integrated group. Straw explains:

The unique character of music evaluation in this respect stems from the willingness with which we grant this primacy to performers (few would do the same for film or theater). The precise input of composers, producers, engineers, and back-up musicians is, most of the time, unclear to us (ibid.).

Granted that pop performers are afforded the primacy that Straw describes, I would argue that this is because their personae are a quite persuasive means of laying claim to artistic agency and authenticity. Certainly, the artist’s musical aestheticization and navigation of style are key elements in maintaining a convincing persona. Simultaneously, the musical experience arguably becomes increasingly meaningful when audiences, as Lieb and Dibben both observed, feel that they *know* the artist in question, her/his values, and her/his emotions. Arguably, then, the persona – as I have defined it here – can be compelling to the extent that it conceals the division between an artist’s public representation and her/his private self,⁴⁹ which is discussed in particular in articles I, II, and III. In turn, the pressure on artists to construct and promote compelling personae, which is often manifested in a pronounced social

⁴⁸ Importantly, these processes are also gendered. See, for example, Hawkins (2013) and Warwick (2004).

⁴⁹ This is, of course, a multifaceted issue. In Dibben’s (2009, 328-330) investigation into expressions of emotional authenticity in popular music, she refers to the example of Amy Winehouse in order to discuss how the performance of the “private” for public consumption can become exploitative. Relatedly, Rojek notes that, for celebrities, the borders between the public and the private self can easily become confused (2001, 11). Also see Ålvik (2014), who examines how Norwegian artist Marit Larsen promotes the idea of her “just being herself” partly by claiming that “she has no image”.

media presence,⁵⁰ is intensified by audiences' increasing mobility and unprecedented access to pop related materials.

Present-day modes of pop music consumption are defined to a large extent by recent technological developments, in the sense that familiar media, such as sound recordings and music videos, are now experienced primarily in an online context which is vastly different from that of only two decades previous. In his work on media convergence, Henry Jenkins (2006, 2) highlights both the flow of media content across platforms and the migratory behavior of audiences as central elements of current culture. Emphasizing that convergence should not be viewed simply as a technological process, Jenkins calls to attention the participatory aspects of contemporary modes of consumption. He argues that “convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (ibid., 3). This is a pertinent point also with regard to reception in pop.

As the representational strategies that promote the artist persona across multiple platforms become increasingly pervasive and sophisticated, audiences become accustomed to seeking out additional information through different media to enrich their musical experiences. In turn, audiences' increasing flexibility in acquiring music related material, and their interest in the personal lives of stars, are capitalized on by pop artists whose personal narratives are ubiquitously disseminated: social media, (online) magazine articles and interviews, and YouTube and Vimeo channels are increasingly important platforms through which pop artists disperse various clues and hints as to “who they are” to garner attention for themselves and their music. The key issue here is that pop texts are experienced within the framework of discourses and narratives surrounding the artist. A particularly intriguing point of entry for addressing this issue resides in how the personal narratives of pop artists can impinge on our readings of sound recordings and videos.

Navigational Beacons: On the Influence of Personal Narratives

I take a particular interest in how the personal narratives of pop artists – the stories

⁵⁰ See for example discussions on Banks in article IV.

that are told about them – influence and guide our readings and experiences of pop texts, be it in sound recordings, music videos, or live performances. Integral to my model of analysis is a conceptualization of personal narrative that relates to how negotiations between the past and the present impact on constructions of identity. In this regard, my starting point is based on the assertion made by Hawkins and Richardson:

By marking certain events in personal histories as significant, while at the same time bypassing others, personal narrators create navigational beacons that enable themselves and others to make sense of the past, while providing points of reference that will inform interpretations of future actions and events (2007, 607).

Personal narrativity relates not only to how artists present themselves, but also to the discourses that surround them in magazine articles, newspapers, TV programs, fan commentary, and so on. From this perspective, personal narratives are constitutive of pop personae, in the sense that they guide our attentions and influence our perceptions of an artist, and they permeate the multi-platform managing of identity and (auto)biography, thus functioning as the backdrop for any pop performance. In the sense that personal narratives unfold piece by piece across multiple channels, they can be viewed as transmedia stories.⁵¹ For Jenkins, a transmedia story

unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comic; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. [...] Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole (ibid., 98).

A parallel can be drawn to how pop artists promote their subjectivities in multiple media channels. Pictures and statements on social media platforms, interviews in magazines and on TV, documentary and behind-the-scenes footage, sound recordings, music videos and short films⁵² can all be a point of entry into experiencing the pop

⁵¹ On the topic of transmediality, see also Dena (2009) and Eder (2015).

⁵² One particularly interesting development in recent pop expressions is the emerging prevalence of short films. Usually more substantial in length than the traditional music video – and to a lesser extent bound to the format of recorded song – such films routinely tie together multiple tracks, spoken word

persona. The instantaneous access to pop content afforded by portable and handheld devices defines the new convergence culture, where fans are conditioned to actively seek out new information and products (ibid., 133). Audiences are continuously encouraged to consult various channels to secure additional details about their favorite songs and artists: the inspiration for particular songs are revealed in documentaries or interviews, the visuals of a music video can offer a clue to the potential meaning of lyrics, and pop stars' social media accounts offer previews of new tracks and videos, and not least an opportunity to glimpse into their "private lives". When it comes to matters of artist biography, I am less interested in determining fact from fiction than in elucidating how biographical details are integrated within and presented as part of an artist's persona. By discussing aspects of Paul Ricoeur's work, Negus shows that the distinction between fictional and factual is often inconsequential when it comes to how narrativity structures our experiences:

Identities and experiences are comprehended as we narrate events and interactions that will always incorporate the views and behaviour of others. [...] Ricoeur stressed the "complementarity between fictional and empirical narratives . . . our fundamental historicity is *brought to language* by the convergence of the different modes of narrative discourse" (1983, 4). Our grasp of the temporal world is acquired as much through the 'fictional' as it is through the 'factual' (2017, 152 – Ricoeur's original emphasis).

Regardless of the truthfulness or accuracy of the narratives or stories circulating about an artist, they can influence our perceptions, expectations, and opinions. Ultimately, this is about how we read pop texts. My argument is that musical codes signify in conjunction with a range of nonmusical aspects, not least those promoted by personal narratives. I want to emphasize that what we know about pop artists (or learn about them) through reading interviews, studying photographs, reading articles about them, listening to sound recordings, or watching videos, will always inform our future readings of other songs or videos. Burns argues:

In most cases of popular music listening, the listener is familiar with the singer, that is, familiar with the popular persona of that recording artist and possibly with the artist's political and social views. The listener or fan might have formed an impression of the

sequences, and elaborate narratives. Prominent examples of the phenomenon include Beyoncé's *Yours and Mine* (2014) and *Lemonade* (2016), Alicia Keys' *Let Me In* (2016) and *The Gospel* (2016), Lana Del Rey's *Tropico* (2013), and Vince Staples' *Prima Donna* (2016).

artist's values from the artist's recordings and videos, as well as from media coverage (2010, 156-157).

Burns observes that the amount of information we are fed about pop artists can make it “difficult to separate the artist from the musical product, and it is all too easy to interpret the music as a realistic reflection of the artist's worldview” (ibid., 157). Clues as to “who an artist really is” are dispensed in accordance with a variety of conventions – such as those grounded in style and locality – as the norms of representation vary greatly across different genres, times, and places. As is evidenced in, for example, articles II and III, pop artists frequently narrate their past experiences in ways that shed light on their purported ambitions for the future. A key aim of my investigations into this topic is to uncover how the navigational beacons found in personal narratives might work as cues to guide our interpretations of songs and videos. This is as much about what is concealed as it is about what is shown. What I bring to the surface is that, by revealing particular details about themselves while concealing others, pop artists promote their subjectivities in intensified ways.

Most notably, my inquiries into contemporary modes of representation in pop make it clear that pop artists infiltrate our daily, personal lives, and encourage us (to varying degrees) to partake in theirs. My reasons for delving into these issues relate to the matter that “the personal is political”, as Whiteley (2000, 44-50) reminds us. Within this statement resides a feminist critique that calls attention to the social and cultural circumstances that influence our understandings of our selves and others. My primary concern is to illuminate how musical codes and audiovisual aesthetics can gain their effects in relation to a range of extramusical factors pertaining to the artist's persona and her/his personal narrative, which calls into attention matters of signification, reception, and identity politics. At the heart of all of my investigations, lies the question of gendered identity.

Negotiating Gender in Pop

Interrogating the discourses related to the negotiation and navigation of gendered identity in pop is a central aim of this dissertation, which is also manifested in each of the articles. Reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of an approach grounded in popular musicology, and also highlighting the complexities of situating gendered identity within a musicological critique, part of my methodology involves applying helpful theories from outside of research on popular music. My interest in the intersections between pop music and gender politics prompts me to pay particular attention to scholarly fields such as sociology, gender studies, and cultural studies. I am thus aligned with a long list of prominent musicologists whose work places primacy on linking popular music to gender. In particular, what I would describe as my post-McClaryian feminist position owes a lot to critical musicological studies on gender in the 1990s and the 2000s.

By bringing cultural criticism to the field of musicology, McClary's *Feminine Endings* (1991) helped set in motion developments that led to a radical broadening of the topics of study within musicological approaches.⁵³ Raising questions of gender and sexuality in relation to a diverse repertoire of music, *Feminine Endings* is a seminal text among many noteworthy studies that deal critically with aspects of gendered identity in a music context (see Abbate 1993; Burns and LaFrance 2002; Fast 2001; Hawkins 2002, 2009, 2016; Jarman-Ivens 2007, 2011; Koestenbaum 2001 [1993]; McClary 2000; Scott 2003; Solie 1993; Walser 1993, 1994; Warwick 2007; Whiteley 1997a, 2000, 2003; Whiteley and Rycenga 2006). Building on the work of these scholars, my studies of gendered representation and identity politics in pop are guided by an understanding of gendered identity, sexuality, and ethnicity as negotiable and flexible constructs, all of which should also be considered mutually dependent, intersecting categories (see Collins 2004, 2009 [1990]; hooks 1999 [1982], 2004; McCall 2005; Nagel 2003). One imminent question that needs to be addressed before delving further into matters of methodology is: how do gender politics in pop emerge as part of a broader popular cultural discourse?

⁵³ See *Musicological Identities* (Baur et al. 2008) for a collection of essays honoring McClary by taking up issues such as gender, sexuality, and temporality.

The Year of Pop Feminism?

In order to provide an overview of the cultural and political landscape within which contemporary pop representations are situated, I will now briefly discuss how in recent times gender politics has gained prominence in Western culture in significant ways, as gender inequity and feminist issues are increasingly embraced as topics of interest in the mainstream media.⁵⁴ Though a renewed, or in some ways even new,⁵⁵ mainstream interest in feminism is the result of many intricate processes, I identify two major factors that have contributed to broadening and diversifying discussions on gender equality and female empowerment over the last years. Firstly, mainstream media has fueled an interest for “pop feminism” in a now mainly online media context (Alter 2014; Marcotte 2014; Solnit 2014; Vincent 2014). Secondly, big names in popular culture – not least in pop music – have made increasingly overt gestures and efforts to define feminist ideas as constitutive of their public identities.

Notably, *Merriam-Webster* lists “feminism” as the fifth most popular word of 2014, based on an analysis of the top lookups in their online dictionary, with a spike in popularity identified after *TIME* claimed that 2014 was the “year of pop feminism” (Alter 2014).⁵⁶ A number of magazines, newspapers, and online sites ran with this idea, several of which cite Beyoncé’s performance at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards as a crucial moment.⁵⁷ Some went as far as describing this particular performance as one of the most powerful pop cultural messages of recent time (Traister 2014). In late August 2014, Beyoncé took the stage at the 31st annual MTV Video Music Awards. Just over halfway through the performance of an eighteen-

⁵⁴ To avoid confusion, I find it helpful to distinguish between *mainstream* and *mass* media, where the latter is not identified by its point of view or the size of its audience, but rather from the fact that its product is made available to a plurality of recipients (see Thompson 1995, 26).

⁵⁵ In observing that 2014 was the year when feminism for the first time became “cool”, Alice Vincent of *The Telegraph* implies a binary distinction between feminism as an intellectual discourse and the ways in which issues of gender equality have been perceived or engaged in mainstream culture. Certainly, feminism has commonly operated as an oppositional force to mainstream thought and cultural norms. See de Beauvoir (1997 [1949]), Friedan (2010 [1963]), and Millett (2000 [1969]) for feminist texts that – while having been proven very influential – were massively criticized upon their release.

⁵⁶ See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/2014-word-of-the-year/feminism> (accessed February 18, 2017).

⁵⁷ *Time Magazine* suggests that you could say “that feminism is to 2014 pop stars what sex was to 1964 rockers, it’s nothing new, but it’s suddenly become electrifying” (Alter 2014). *NPR* argues that “the chart-ruling women of 2014 are creating a common language from insights feminists have been sharing for decades” (Powers 2014). *The Telegraph* observes that “[t]hroughout 2014 the glass ceiling was rattled as cultural figures stood up and declared themselves feminists” (Vincent 2014). All three identify Beyoncé, with particular reference to her 2014 VMA performance, as one of the driving forces behind feminism’s rising popularity in mainstream culture.

minute medley, the lights were dimmed and the music was replaced by an excerpt of Nigerian writer and feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TEDx Talk “We Should All Be Feminists”.⁵⁸ The words of Adichie’s speech were displayed in large letters that flickered across the huge back-screen. As the display presented the word *FEMINIST* in capital letters, Beyoncé positioned herself center stage (see figure 1.2), thus, one might argue, taking a stand both literally and figuratively.



Figure 1.2: Screenshot of Beyoncé’s 2014 VMA performance

Beyoncé’s performance gained massive attention in mainstream media across the globe, and helped re-ignite the conversation about what feminism means or should mean. Several pop artists, along with other celebrities, have taken a similar stance and spoken publicly in favor of feminist values.⁵⁹ For example, actress Emma Watson – at the time a United Nations Women’s goodwill ambassador⁶⁰ – delivered a speech about gender issues at the United Nations New York headquarters in September, 2014 to launch the HeForShe campaign for gender equality. In an interview with *BBC*

⁵⁸ The same sample is used in Beyoncé’s “Flawless” (2013), which also appeared in the medley. For a video of Adichie’s talk, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc (accessed September 15, 2016).

⁵⁹ The proclaimed support for feminist causes by pop artists raises the issue of whether or not political endorsements by celebrities may translate into actual changes in public opinion. For an ethnographic study that tackles this question, see Jackson and Darrow (2005).

⁶⁰ The UN has a long standing tradition of enlisting volunteer services and support from well known musicians, authors, actors, and athletes to draw attention to key issues and UN activities. The list of people who have lent their names to promote UN’s causes includes Nelson Mandela, David Beckham, Angelina Jolie, Harry Belafonte, Celine Dion, and Dionne Warwick.

Radio in November, 2013, Miley Cyrus said that she felt like “one of the biggest feminists in the world because I tell women not to be scared of anything” (Sieczkowski 2013). Similarly, Taylor Swift told *The Guardian* that she – after previously having been reluctant to describe herself as a feminist – realized that she had been taking a feminist stance all along without actually saying so (Hoby 2014). The outspoken support of feminism by pop artists, in its many forms, raises the point that popular culture can act as a powerful means of raising consciousness about political issues (see Hague et al. 2008; Jackson and Darrow 2005; Street 1986, 2012; Street et al. 2008; Wicke 1992). At the same time, pop artists who engage in political debate can be met with suspicion and allegations of “jumping on the bandwagon” for their own commercial and personal gain.

Political messages in pop culture are commonly coopted, marketed, or watered down by the music industry, major corporations, or mainstream media (Shuker 2008, 242). The recent mainstream interest in feminism has led to corporations and brands adapting their marketing strategies to reach the diverse range of consumers who are becoming increasingly aware of gender issues. Global brands such as Pantene and Dove have coopted feminist ideas and released advertisements or promotional material that employ polished iterations of feminism to promote the respective brands.⁶¹ While some consumers will react positively to these marketing strategies, the polished and watered down versions of feminism as presented by big business might also raise suspicion or distaste. Celebrities who speak out for feminism and female empowerment are similarly met with diverse responses, ranging from all out praise, via questioning of their sincerity and motives, to harsh criticism or even harassment.⁶² In particular, there seems to be a tension that arises between pop artists’ feminist positioning and their self-aestheticization or self-sexualization in music video and live performance, which is something to which I devote much attention in article I by mapping Beyoncé’s self-presentation as feminist against the audiovisual aesthetics of one of her music videos. More broadly, all of my investigations of the audiovisual

⁶¹ See Dove’s 2013 “Real Beauty” campaign and Pantene’s 2014 “Not Sorry” ad.

⁶² Watson has stated that she received threats within twelve hours of making her speech at the UN headquarters (Kenyon 2015). An example of criticism against pop artists’ feminist messages is writer and critic Gaylene Gould’s essay in *The Guardian*, where she focuses on Beyoncé and Cyrus, among others, to ask if “this watered-down feminism [might] serve the very system that feminists should be fighting to dismantle” (Gould 2013). See Brady (2016) for a study that deals with celebrity feminism in relation to Miley Cyrus, her feud with Sinead O’Connor, and the performance of sexuality.

aestheticization of pop personae probe into how pop artists negotiate their gendered identities *performatively*.

On the Performative Dimensions of Pop Expression

For almost three decades now, the theories of gender performativity that were first presented by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1999 [1990]) have been hugely influential across many scholarly fields.⁶³ My own approach to performativity is grounded in a Butlerian understanding of gender as constructed within a binary framework, where the acts and gestures that constitute gendered identities are performative “in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler 1999 [1990], 185 – original emphasis).⁶⁴

Performativity can thus be described as pertaining to the processes through which identities are constructed by behaviors and actions. This warrants a critique against the distinction between sex and gender, in the sense that gender is viewed as the discursive and cultural means by which sex is established as natural and prediscursive (ibid., 9-10). I take such an understanding of gender performativity as my inroad for deliberating on the pluralistic utilization of signs and symbols found in pop.

The influence of Butler’s work on performativity has entered the study of popular music, where a handful of scholars have interrogated the performative nature of discourse in order to show how gender performances in popular music can transgress, queer, or subvert normative gender roles (see Burns and LaFrance 2002; Hawkins 2002, 2009, 2016; Jarman-Ivens 2011; Leibetseder 2012; Walser 1994; Whiteley and Rycenga 2006). Certainly, the disruptive potential of pop identities suggests the relevance of perspectives found in queer theoretical approaches to gender (Ahmed 2006; Ferguson 2004; Halberstam 1998, 2005, 2012; Muñoz 1999, 2009; Wilchins 2004). A thorough theorization of queerness falls outside the scope of this

⁶³ See also Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* (2011 [1993]).

⁶⁴ While my investigations into gendered representations in pop are guided by a Butlerian understanding of performativity, I am well aware of various criticisms towards Butler’s theories (Bordo 1995; Fraser 1995; Namaste 2009). However, the enduring significance of Butler’s theories within the critical study of gendered identities can hardly be denied, not least as a foundation for influential studies into music and gender (Burns and LaFrance 2002; Fast 2001; Hawkins 2002, 2009, 2016; Jarman-Ivens 2011; Walser 1994; Whiteley 2003).

dissertation, one exception being article IV.⁶⁵ Even so, I suggest that some of the most interesting (in my opinion) new insights brought forth by recent gender research concern issues of queerness and transgender (see, for example, de Villiers 2012 and Salamon 2010). Such issues are also receiving increasing coverage in the mainstream media. For example, Bruce Springsteen caused headlines in the international press by cancelling a show in North Carolina in April 2016, in protest against a recent state law restricting lavatory use by transgender individuals.⁶⁶ This incident highlights how gender issues permeate popular music in numerous ways, and spurs explication of how pop artists articulate particular values and convey their own gendered identities both off and on stage.

A central premise when it comes to gender in pop is that there is a performative dimension to any given musical expression (Hawkins 2002, 14), and the idea that pop artists reflect on their own communicative facility in relation to genre and style is the basis for my discussions throughout. Hawkins (ibid., 18) adapts Butler's work to a critical musicological model, arguing for gender identification as a fluid entity and suggesting that the conception of identity as a free-floating construct of performance is one of the most compelling ideas to emerge from queer theory. Furthermore, he notes that the "representations commonly found in pop videos are about blurred and destabilized subject positions" (ibid.). This is a point of view that I also subscribe to, and all of my analyses place primacy on examining how pop performances often blend *contesting* markers of identity, which is something to which I will return when discussing my findings.

Notwithstanding pop performances' potential to transgress and subvert norms, my interest in the performative dimensions of pop expression is prompted in large part by the persistency of normative perceptions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity through the repetition of social acts and gestures. Performativity, in this sense, can be pinned down as the reiterative practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names (Butler 2011[1993], xii). I grapple with this issue in relation to the openendedness of

⁶⁵ Issues of queerness are also discussed in article III, particularly in relation to Zayn's cyborgian voice and banal use of rock aesthetics.

⁶⁶ See Springsteen's official statement concerning this incident on his website: <http://bruce.springsteen.net/news/2016/a-statement-from-bruce-springsteen-on-north-carolina> (accessed September 16, 2016).

signification in pop in article III, where I find that while Zayn’s fashioning of a post boy band masculinity on the one hand calls to attention the precarious nature of maleness in pop by exposing the elaborate means by which pop artists promote themselves as desirable to a plurality of audiences, his masculinity still maintains its exalted status by operating alongside the female subject in ways that secure its dominance. A similar observation is made by Sam de Boise in his study of the purported “crisis of masculinity”⁶⁷ in emo rock, where he argues that representations of masculinity in emo represent rearticulated “continuities rather than challenges to traditional forms of gendered practice” (2014, 238-39). The point I am making is that even pop representations which have the potential to subvert, queer, or trouble norms in one sense, may conform to normative conventions in another.⁶⁸ On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that even gendered representations that may seem stable or natural, are open to queer readings (Djupvik 2014; Fanshel 2013; Hawkins 2016; Jarman-Ivens 2006). This calls to attention the agency of the reader (listener/viewer) in determining the significance of a given representation.

Considering the performative power of acting out gender, one can assert that pop artists and their music signify gendered identity in ways that can be simultaneously submissive and subversive. This highlights how pop representations are always balancing between accommodating and challenging norms, which is, perhaps, most evident in our varied responses to them. Related to this latter point, McClary observes that grasping present-day musical culture in all its complexity entails “being prepared to recognize the structures of feeling underlying many different repertoires, as well as their processes of dynamic change and their strategic fusions” (2000, 168).

Identifying cross-cultural fusions as a central part of today’s music scene, and also pointing out the relevance of global responses to American popular music in this regard, McClary (ibid.) argues that these phenomena should be addressed in any survey of Western music of today. In responding to McClary’s call to pay attention to the ferment located in the boundaries and fusions of unpredictable sorts, Hawkins insists:

⁶⁷ See Williams (2007).

⁶⁸ Of relevance here are the politics of homonormativity, which “sustain the ‘straightening up’ of queer points of expression” (Hawkins 2016, 13). See Duggan (2003) and Robinson (2012).

[B]ecause the relationships between pop musicians and the technologies that construct them are continuously under development, critical readings of these mobile relationships in themselves are vital to pop analysis. In addition, we can assume that the impact of media and music technology has vastly contributed to the breakdown of divisions between art forms, artists and audiences. And this has significantly led to the celebration of fluid imagery and polyvalent identities in pop (2002, 18).

Hawkins critiques the ever-changing relationships between technology and pop artists and how they contribute to the primacy of polyvalent identities in pop. In turn, this raises issues pertaining to how processes of editing and manipulation simultaneously allow for ample plurality and strict control.⁶⁹ All this relates to how the body in pop performance is articulated and aestheticized through (digital) technologies: corporeal aestheticization is central to titillating the viewer by speaking to her/his desires (Hawkins 2013, 467).⁷⁰ Though it might now have become superfluous to note that sexual imagery is becoming increasingly visible in Western culture (Attwood 2009; Gibson 2004; McNair 2002, 2013; Paasonen et al. 2007), this observation does provide a backdrop for probing at the representational strategies of pop artists that play on notions of desire, objectification, and individual agency. As Hawkins argues, “pop artists often render the mundane as spectacular, exaggerating conventions and norms that take gender objectification to its extreme” (2016, 94). It is worth emphasizing that music and sound – along with visual imagery – play a major role in constituting the sexualized aesthetics that pop artists employ, as digital technology’s increasingly important role in the production, distribution, and reception of pop music contributes to opening up new representational opportunities. Attending to this issue, a key aspect of my investigations into the performative dimensions of pop expression pertains to how gender is negotiated through processes of production.⁷¹ This sets the stage for an inspection of audiovisual aesthetics in relation to the technologies of pop texts, which contribute to staging the gendered body.

⁶⁹ Systematically, Hawkins’ work on polyvalency has developed into a critique on technology and queerness, which is discernible in his later studies. See *Queerness in Pop* (2016).

⁷⁰ For a collection of essays that deal with matters of desire, pleasure, and danger in relation to ideas of the body, see Aaron (1999).

⁷¹ For some insightful studies that deal explicitly with the recording and production of popular music, see Bennett (2016), Millner (2009), Théberge (1997), Warner (2009), Wicke (2009) and Zak (2001). I note that none of these studies deal with gender issues in any detail.

Staging the Body: Technologies and (Hyper)Embodiment

As is pointed out by Paul D. Greene in his introduction to *Wired for Sound*, the use of various technologies in musical practices is “rarely neutral or transparent in the experience of musicians and listeners. Instead, technology’s presence bears important meanings, and often leads to significant transformations in musical and aesthetic ideals” (2005, 9). He continues to discuss how technologies are invested with both anxieties and desires in relation to the politically and culturally charged nature of music: the technological processes involved in making sound recordings may for some listeners raise anxieties of engineering fakery, while others may conflate the same processes with ideas of modernity in terms of its positive associations with innovation and the cutting edge (*ibid.*, 10-11). The technologies of pop texts – as implicit or rudimentary as they may be⁷² – invariably raise concerns over the origin of sounds and matters of mediation, which are closely linked to how pop personae are disciplined through audiovisual means in performance. Hawkins addresses this topic from a musicological perspective:

[I]deals are articulated in ways that are only made possible due to the creative implementation of technologies in the pop recording. Reliant on microphones, production effects, and a range of other technological procedures, pop artists shape their personae in ways that make them instantly recognizable. Therefore, the act of staging performances is integral to understanding the idiosyncrasies of human agency (2016, 218).

To identify and examine the strategies that showcase the artist persona is thus of paramount importance when excavating identity politics within a pop music context. This goes hand in hand with problematizing how seductive pop representations are constituted by gendered and sexualized stylizations of the body through signifiers in music, sound, and visuals. Pop production is the mainline for articulating traits of gender and sexuality in sound recordings and videos (*ibid.*), as the digitized body is placed under strict control by processes of editing and manipulation.

In all four articles of this dissertation, I interrogate the processes involved in the audiovisual staging of the gendered body. The underlying premise is that pop stylization is facilitated by technological manipulation in the form of elaborate

⁷² See Frith (1996, 226) and Théberge (1999, 210).

processes of audiovisual production, whereby the aestheticization of the performer is strictly controlled. Staging the body concerns, in this sense, how notions of corporeality and embodiment are disseminated through sound recordings and pop videos, which more often than not is achieved through fragmented images, musicalized sound, and editing techniques. By considering how particular articulations of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class and so on are conveyed through pop texts, I aim to excavate the practices of audiovisual production that impact on how we experience an artist as embodied – or hyperembodied – through performance. These processes are often entwined with representations of the erotic, given that pop music sells largely by tapping into our pleasures and desires.

Somewhat elusively, the erotic permeates both musical and nonmusical aspects of pop.⁷³ This is grounded in matters of style, convention, time, and place. In one of the most thorough explorations into the topic, Scott argues for addressing sexuality and erotics in music in relation to disjunctions and historical contingencies, rather than in terms of development and evolution:

There is certainly no progress to be discovered in the way eroticism has been depicted in music: representations of eroticism in contemporary music are not more real now than they were in the seventeenth century. The fact that the latter can seem cool or alien to us today points to the way sexuality has been constructed in relation to particular stylistic codes in particular historical contexts and is therefore cultural rather than natural (2003, 17).

Musical idioms *represent* eroticism in different ways, which according to Scott (*ibid.*, 19) works on three levels: that of the composer (who may or may not have encoded eroticism), the performer (who may decode the eroticism in the composition, may add eroticism, or not convey eroticism at all), and the listener (whose interpretation can respond to the intentions of the previous two, or disregard them entirely). The central point here is that representations of sexuality are constructed within particular styles, and that musical (and also visual) styles are signifying practices (*ibid.*, 18). I would point out that style – perhaps most evidently in popular music – also works on the

⁷³ As is pointed out by film theorist Richard Dyer (1992, 152), all popular music can be regarded as erotic. My studies deal with the related topics of erotics and sexuality both in relation to their musical articulation and extramusical elements, such as the imagery of pop videos, photographs, and personal narratives.

level of production. In pop recordings, the technologically produced body of the performer brings forth a range of issues pertaining to gendered identity, which surfaces in each of my articles. As I demonstrate, for example in articles I and III, a particularly salient point for investigation in this regard is the erotic potential activated by production aesthetics, which also relates to the performative power of the voice.⁷⁴

Frith (1996, 193-196) has considered the phenomena of desire, erotics, and gender in his discourse on the voice, and points out how vocal performances in popular music often are seductive. The experience of being seduced by a voice is, of course, highly subjective. We experience voices – and the emotions they arouse in us – according to our own sexual pleasures and preferences (ibid., 195). Because we learn to always hear voices in relation to conventions pertaining to the male and female – or rather the masculine and feminine – there is a certain excitement that follows when a voice behaves unexpectedly, breaks convention, or defies classification. On this point, Hawkins (2016, 14) argues that eroticized performances in pop frequently oppose norms in ways that can connote queerness.⁷⁵ He further insists that the erotic relation between singer and listener is defined in part by the recording and production processes, thus making erotics in pop contingent on the manipulative potential of sound technologies (ibid., 170). In my analyses, this point is expanded to demonstrate how audiovisual aesthetics are defined by the technological processes that manipulate both the sounds and images of pop videos.

On account of the technological and creative developments that occurred in the late twentieth century, Sean Cubitt argues, pop videos offer “the possibility for a profound remaking of the ways we represent sex, eroticism, gender, sexuality. But there is also the strong likelihood that these techniques will be recruited for a remaking of the old ways” (1997, 295). He adds that “[o]ne should never underestimate the power of dominant culture to remould almost any technical novelty – the technological or stylistic – to its own ends. Nor is any technology free of its own contradictions” (ibid., 305). This latter point refers to a struggle over the means of representation, which is

⁷⁴ See Hawkins (2013) and Jarman-Ivens (2011).

⁷⁵ Hawkins (2016, 41; 97) associates notions of queerness and utopia with *jouissance*. See also Middleton (2006, 103-104), who builds on a Lacanian understanding of *jouissance* to theorize issues of vocality, pleasure, and subversion.

particularly apparent with regard to the intersections between technology, gender, race, and desire. The issue is brought to the fore in Robin James' (2008) investigation into the "robo-diva" figure, as it appears in live performances and music videos from Beyoncé and Rihanna, which reveals striking connections between the racialized good girl/bad girl dichotomy and the dialectics of fear/pleasure in relation to technology. James argues that an account of gender in relation to technology should also recognize the fundamental intersection with race, in the sense that "technology and female sexuality, when in white bodies (individual and social), ensure the progress and development of civilization; technology and female sexuality, when in black bodies (individual and social), corrupt civilization" (ibid., 413). That such tension is not purely negative, but rather intrinsic to the pleasures associated with pop's pluralistic use of signs, is conceded in articles III and IV where the blurred borders between the queer and the normative are devoted much attention. Of prime importance here, which is not sufficiently dealt with by James, are matters of musical aestheticization and vocal manipulation.

To shift the focus onto the sound recording, then, my analyses grapple with the stylistic coding of the voice as it pertains to matters of identity and desirability. Aspects of vocal manipulation through sound production are explored by Serge Lacasse (2000a; 2010) through his theorization of *vocal staging*. In his semiotic study of the voice, Lacasse defines vocal staging as referring to any deliberate practice which aims "to enhance a vocal sound, alter its timbre, or present it in a given spatial and/or temporal configuration with the help of any mechanical or electrical process, presumably in order to produce some effect on potential or actual listeners" (2000a, 4). This definition of vocal staging explicitly excludes physical vocal techniques such as speaking in a high tone (ibid.). It is not without its set of problems when separating the way a singer manipulates her/his voice, to achieve a certain effect, from the processes of manipulation that take place on the already recorded voice.⁷⁶ My concern is more with the vocal staging of the *gendered* voice, and the idea that pop performances – be they sound recordings, live performances, or music videos – depend equally on physical, mechanical, and digital manipulation in aestheticizing

⁷⁶ Lacasse's later work does take some interest in what I, drawing on Jarman-Ivens (2011), would refer to as the internal technologies of the voice, by studying paralinguistic: tone of voice, tempo of speech, sighing and so on (2010, 226-227). He then refers to the external technological impact on the recorded voice through the concept of phonographic staging (ibid., 227).

and disseminating (gendered) identity through the voice. In my opinion it is problematic, then, that Lacasse skims over gender issues, with little concern for how gendered identity is conveyed and constructed through the recorded voice. After all, as Hawkins has argued, the voice gains its expressive quality through gender, corporeality, and desire:

[V]ocalization is a prime mediator of identity construction, connoting subjectivity through regularized forms that become the trademark of the artist. Within all forms of vocal practice, a personalized style is constructed in direct response to generic identification, and in this way singing is consigned to a musical coding that is almost instantly identifiable [...] The mediatory power of the voice and its idealized position in popular styles has everything to do with production and technological processing, which not only reinforces but also transforms vocal features. The recording is a reconstruction of subjectivity (2009, 142).

In this sense, the connotative power of the voice results from its production in relation to its stylistic staging. With regard to how the voice is treated in the production and mixing processes, my discussions of vocal manipulation address instances of perceptible and imperceptible manipulation equally. Evaluations of recorded voices also need to take into account how certain vocal expressions and production aesthetics become naturalized, which is not to say that they are less meticulously manipulated than those vocal sounds that reveal themselves as such (see Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen 2016, 8). But how vocality is staged in pop, warrants serious consideration of the performative potential of the gendered voice through an examination of the vocal strategies employed by a singer alongside the manipulative aspects of sound production.

Delving into this matter, my approach is indebted to the work of Freya Jarman-Ivens (2011, 21-22), who, in *Queer Voices*, draws a distinction between external (recording and production processes, effects, mixing) and internal technologies (suggesting that there is a biotechnological process central to the physical production of the voice). Jarman-Ivens (ibid., 20) demonstrates the voice's role in how pop artists negotiate articulations of gender through musical performance, by entering through Butler's discussion on corporeal theatrics (gesture, move, gait) to argue that the voice could fall into that category of gender presentation. Observing that the voice is complicit in

the theatrics of gender, Jarman-Ivens argues that “a voice that does not comply with the visible signs of gender is as disruptive to the performance of gender as any other, silent sign could be” (ibid.). Her argument for the performativity of the voice also sheds light on the point that vocality in pop can be used to *disrupt* gender norms.⁷⁷ However, pop voices are often staged in ways that perpetuate normative gender perceptions and stereotypes rather than oppose them, something which surfaces in article I in relation to the fetishization of Beyoncé’s voice.

When looking into how artist representations are constructed and mediated through the technologies of audiovisual production, I take a particular interest in issues of sonic manipulation and fetishization. I seek to situate a theorization of how music production contributes to the eroticization of sound, within a broader investigation concerning hyperembodiment and notions of gender, agency, and pop aesthetics (see, in particular, articles I and IV). Studies into the technologies of pop texts too rarely deal with matters of gender in any detail.⁷⁸ Grappling with this issue, I draw on Hawkins’ (2013, 466) theorization of hyperembodiment in relation to Rihanna’s *Umbrella* (2007) music video,⁷⁹ where he attempts to situate the gendered body as audiovisually constructed, and observes that, in pop videos, a repertoire of norms disciplines the body through stark imagery and processed sound. By arguing that hyperembodied display “implies an obsession with the look that is governed by the technologies of musical production as much as the decisions that go into directing the video” (ibid., 481), Hawkins indicates the role of music and sound in constituting hyperembodied display. His point also highlights the pertinence of being vigilant with regard to the multiple events and agents involved in the processes through which pop artists become aestheticized in sound recordings and videos.

I address these issues by carefully contemplating how audiovisual aesthetics signify in conjunction with personal narrativity (see articles I and III), as well as inquiring into how eroticized agency is carved out aesthetically in relation to genre and style (see particularly article IV). As Hawkins and I seek to demonstrate in article IV,

⁷⁷ The idea of queer voices is also pursued by Halberstam (2007), who connects two examples of queer vocalization and musical genders as forming part of a subjugated history.

⁷⁸ Obvious exceptions would include Bradby (1993), James (2008), Jarman-Ivens (2011) and Warwick (2004). Also see Born and Devine (2015).

⁷⁹ Also see Dixon (2004), whose work informs Hawkins’ theorization of audiovisual embodiment.

unravelling the intricacies of gender performativity is a task that is particularly pertinent to the elaborate processes of production in pop videos, where gendered expression is the result of planning and manipulation that brings into the light all kinds of gendered and racialized discourses pertaining to the body in performance. Explicating hyperembodied display and its relation to “an obsession with the look” thus opens up an understanding of the technological fetishization of the body as part of showcasing the pop star, which more often than not is attempted through hyperbolic reiterations of conventionalized or naturalized ideals of gender. As a musicologist one of my primary tasks is to cast a critical light on the diverse configurations of symbols and signs that afford particular readings, which, as I attempt to demonstrate, is tantamount to exposing the performative implications of staging the gendered body audiovisually.

Presenting the Articles

Article I: Empowered or Objectified? Personal Narrative and Audiovisual Aesthetics in Beyoncé's *Partition*

Abstract

This article examines the feminist argument that Beyoncé presents through her personal narrative in relation to the audiovisual aesthetics of the music video Partition (2013), which arguably objectifies the female in accordance with normalized perceptions of gender and sexuality. The video is characterized by striptease aesthetics and hyperembodied display, firmly grounded within the tradition of contemporary pop videos that stylize the body both visually and sonically through gloss and excess. Situated within the field of popular musicology, I approach my study through a model of audiovisual analysis. With a primary focus on the strategies of production that fetishize the body through manipulation, I provide a close reading of this video by elucidating gender politics within a mainstream pop context. I conclude that the performative power of Beyoncé's erotic display is contingent upon both the dissemination of her persona in terms of agency and the fetishizing aspects of audiovisual production.

Inspired by the release of Beyoncé's eponymous visual album, this article sets out to direct critical attention toward a perceived friction between her self-presentation as a feminist and her employment of audiovisual aesthetics which arguably objectify the female pop artist. I examine how Beyoncé's persona is characterized by a synchronization of her private and public lives, leading to a commodification of her private self which is exemplified by how specific elements of her biography find their way into song lyrics, music videos, and behind-the-scenes documentary footage. An example of the latter, *Self-Titled* (2013), presents a narrative that promotes Beyoncé's auteur-like role in the processes of writing, recording, and producing her album, thus attributing her with a great deal of artistic agency. Turning my attention toward the *Partition* video, I take a particular interest in how the female body is fetishized audiovisually through markers in sound and images, and I show how Beyoncé's personal narrative presents this bodily display as an act of empowerment related to

her foregrounded agency.

After article I was published, Beyoncé released her sixth studio album, *Lemonade* (2016), to universal critical acclaim. The album was spearheaded by the hit single “Formation” (2016), the music video to which was praised as reclaiming “black America’s narrative from the margins” (McFadden 2016). As with the *BEYONCÉ* album, “Formation” and its video were released without prior promotion, with the video gaining over seven million views on YouTube within 24 hours. In an interview with *Elle* in early April, 2016, Beyoncé reaffirmed her view of herself as a feminist (Gottesman 2016). At the same time, she nuanced her definition of the term by stating that her belief in equal rights made her a *humanist* as much as it made her a feminist (ibid.). In mid-April, 2016, a 60-minute film titled *Lemonade* aired on HBO to foreshadow the release of the album one week later, thus extending Beyoncé’s emphasis on audiovisual material as an integral part of her albums.

Scholarship on Beyoncé is on the rise, to which this article has also contributed. *Popular Music and Society* has scheduled a forthcoming special issue that focuses on various aspects of her music and cultural impact. Recently published studies on Beyoncé include Burns and Lafrance (2017), Chatman (2015), Smith (2017), and Trier-Bieniek (2016).

Article I was published online in *Popular Music and Society* in November, 2015.

Article II: Holding on for Dear Life: Gender, Celebrity Status, and Vulnerability-on-Display in Sia's 'Chandelier'

Abstract

After almost two decades as a solo artist, Sia Furler achieved mainstream success with her sixth studio album, 1000 Forms of Fear (2014). The release of the album coincided with a distinct change in Sia's self-presentation, as she revealed an ambition to stay anonymous and opted to conceal her face in all public settings. This article investigates how Sia's reluctance towards fame ties in with a personal narrative that highlights notions of vulnerability. By inquiring into her vulnerability-on-display I tackle matters of gender and celebrity in pop culture. Examining the hit single 'Chandelier' (2014) in its several iterations, I analyse the sound recording and music video alongside a selected live performance. The focus falls on how identity is articulated through visual and musical codes. As I demonstrate, Sia's vulnerability-on-display is activated most strongly when audiovisual aesthetics are mapped onto a personal narrative that strikes up a balance between vulnerability and agency.

Sia's *Chandelier* is one of the most memorable pop videos of recent years, largely due to the combination between the song's soaring hook and the dance-acrobatics of then eleven-year-old Maddie Ziegler. Ziegler functioned as a visual "stand-in" for Sia in the video by appearing with painted on tattoos (that were similar to the singer's) and wearing the recognizable platinum blonde wig that Sia had employed to conceal her face. Ironically, I argue, the signature wig that served to hide Sia's face became an identifying feature that set her apart from her contemporaries and, arguably, helped secure her success. Entering through Richardson's (2012) discussion on authorship in relation to the anonymous performers Gorillaz, I suggest that even though Sia's anonymity to a certain extent shields her from fame, it simultaneously registers as in coherence with narratives that emphasize her artistic autonomy and agency. Another topic of interest in this article is how the lyrics of "Chandelier", revolving around a party girl on the brink of self-destruction, calls attention to Sia's vulnerability by resonating with her personal narrative, which highlights substance abuse, mental problems, and personal loss. The tension between agency and vulnerability becomes a

focal point of my discussions of both Sia's persona and the audiovisual aesthetics of *Chandelier*.

Since the article was completed, Sia has released her seventh studio album, *This is Acting* (2016). She continues to conceal her face behind her signature bob wig, though it was re-designed for the new album. The wig that features on the cover for *This is Acting*, is two-colored – split down the middle – platinum blonde and black. Sia's recent music videos have continued to feature "stand-ins" in the singer's place. The video for "Alive" (2016) features Japanese actress and martial arts practitioner Tao Tsuchiya, while the videos for "Cheap Thrills" (2016) and "The Greatest" (2016) again feature Ziegler in the lead role. Both Tsuchiya and Ziegler are wearing variations on the signature wig in the videos, thus symbolically representing the singer. Sia has also continued working as a songwriter, and is accredited as a co-writer on songs released in 2016 by artists including Christina Aguilera, Kygo, and Rihanna.

Article II was published in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*, edited by Stan Hawkins, in March, 2017.

Article III: Fashioning a Post Boy Band Masculinity: On the Seductive Dreamscape of Zayn's *Pillowtalk*

Abstract

Zayn Malik's debut solo album, Mind Of Mine (2016), topped numerous charts worldwide, and made him the only British male solo artist to have debuted at the top of the prestigious Billboard 200 album chart with a first album, thus extending the astounding commercial success he had previously achieved with boy band One Direction. This article examines the considerable changes to image and style that accompanied Zayn's transition to a solo career, and argues that a primary motivation for his reconfiguration as an artist lies in opposing the common stereotypes and prejudices associated with the boy band format. My methodological approach is grounded in critical musicology and involves investigating issues of personal narrative, sonic production, and audiovisual aesthetics. By analyzing the music video Pillowtalk (2016), I demonstrate how provocative lyrical themes, shock effects, and surreal aesthetics showcase Zayn's masculinity as dangerous and seductive. Even though Zayn's fashioning of masculinity calls attention to how gendered identities are constructed and performed in pop, I conclude that his representation in Pillowtalk conforms to heteronormative gender dynamics as much as it challenges them.

The dramatic changes in Zayn's image and musical style that accompanied his transition into a solo career, prompts me to conceptualize post boy band masculinity as a means for critically examining how an ambition to oppose common prejudices and perceptions of boy bands might have guided his construction of a solo persona. In the article, I demonstrate how Zayn draws up a distinction between his past and present selves, and in turn opposes stigmas of inauthenticity by making visible his participation in particular forms of valued musical labour. Zayn undertakes this endeavor in tandem with dismantling his previous "innocent masculinity" through various means, rather favoring a more dangerous and virile articulation of masculinity. My analysis of the *Pillowtalk* video raises issues relating to the male pop body, the cyborgian voice, and how Zayn's employment of rock aesthetics might ultimately come across as a failed attempt at rock grounded authenticity. In addition, the song's explicit lyrics and the video's abundance of female nudity incite an

examination of gender dynamics. Most strikingly, I find that even though Zayn's post boy band masculinity draws attention to the precarious nature of gendered identities in pop, it maintains its lofty status by operating alongside the female subject in ways that secure its primacy.

After the article was completed, another member of One Direction, Niall Horan, released his debut solo single, "This Town" (2016). His self-presentation and musical style can be described as more or less consistent with his time in One Direction. Thus, Horan's transition into a solo career is achieved through quite a different strategy than that of Zayn, which would have been an interesting point for discussion in the article. In a sense, I would not consider Horan's solo image as falling under the umbrella of "post boy band masculinity", but would, perhaps, rather understand his gendered representation in terms of an extended boy band masculinity. My impression is that his solo career is on a parallel trajectory in relation to One Direction, as opposed to swerving off into new territory.

Zayn collaborated with Taylor Swift on the track "I Don't Wanna Live Forever" (2016), which was released in December, 2016, to promote the upcoming 2017 film *Fifty Shades Darker*. Zayn's falsetto claims attention at several points throughout the track, which is produced in an electro R&B style that is similar to his general musical style on *Mind of Mine*.

Article III was published online in *Popular Music and Society* in November, 2016.

Article IV: Azealia Banks in ‘Chasing Time’: Body Politics and Queer Erotics

Abstract

During the 2010s a new generation of queer hip hop artists has emerged, providing an opportunity to engage with a set of politics that are defined by art, fashion, lyrics, and music. A leading proponent of this movement is Azealia Banks, the controversial rapper, artist and actress from New York. This study involves a critical investigation of the track and video, ‘Chasing Time’ (2014), offering up various perspectives that probe at agency as part of a musicological study. Employing audiovisual analysis, we examine the relationship between gendered subjectivity and modalities of queerness as a means for demonstrating how aesthetics are staged and aligned to advanced techniques of production. In particular, we critique the phenomenon of eroticised agency, which is central to an understanding of the body politics of performativity. Accordingly, this opens a space for addressing issues of black female subjectivity in a genre that is traditionally male-dominated.

Azealia Banks burst onto the international music scene with her debut single “212” (2011) at the young age of twenty, and was predicted by many to become one of pop’s new stars. In subsequent years, however, Banks received more attention for her unruly behavior than for her music. With her debut album *Broke With Expensive Taste* (2014), Banks released an eclectic collection of tracks that includes the single “Chasing Time”. The research for this article was conducted with my supervisor, Stan Hawkins. We analyze the sound recording and video of “Chasing Time” as part of a musicological study that probes at the link between audiovisual production and gendered identity. Much attention is devoted to Banks’ sonic stylization through vocality and production aesthetics, which arguably forms part of a general strategy of subversion that pushes and pulls at the boundaries of a male-dominated hip hop genre. By examining how particular expressions of gender and blackness are disseminated through a strategy of overkill, we uncover the queer potential of Banks’ representation. Building on new theories of hyperembodiment (Hawkins 2013), we discover that Banks’ self-fashioning challenges the performative aspects at the core of male-dominated hip hop. This is achieved partly by means of the audiovisual aesthetics that define the performance through a high degree of artifice, and function

as a rejection of the constraints that prevent us from changing and seeing life in new ways.

Listed alphabetically, Hansen and Hawkins are equal authors of article IV. The article is submitted to *Popular Music*.

Research Summary and Discussion

In order to make clear how the individual articles intersect, I identify two primary research areas in relation to my findings: *personal narrativity and agency* and *gender and audiovisual production*. Each article deals with a range of individually articulated, case-specific questions pertaining to these two research areas, defined within the scope of each article. The articles are devised to inquire into diverse issues of gender, personal narrativity, and audiovisuality in pop, together offering a comprehensive exploration of these topics. Emanating from my critical musicological anchoring, an overarching objective is to further an understanding of how contemporary pop representations operate and signify. The remaining part of this introduction chapter contemplates how this is achieved in unique ways in the individual articles, as well as more generally in this dissertation as a whole.

Personal Narrativity and Agency: Entwining the Public and the Private

Each of my articles demonstrate how the primacy of the artist persona in pop music is secured on account of navigational beacons dispersed across multiple platforms, adding up to compelling images of “who an artist is”. Pop artists frequently present such convincing personal narratives that the lines between the private and the public are blurred, and notions of the pop star as “private self” spill into performance settings (Auslander 2009; Burns 2010, 156-57; Dibben 2009; Hawkins 2007, 198). This topic is discussed in article II, where I grapple with the entwinement of Sia’s personal narrative, her desire to remain anonymous, and “Chandelier”. I come to the conclusion that the way in which selected details of Sia’s biography are presented in interviews, and also implied and aestheticized in performance, plays a major role in how she straddles the line between vulnerability and agency. A similar example of how notions of the private filter into performance is discussed in article I, where I address how, in a behind-the-scenes documentary, Beyoncé invokes a sentiment of artistic agency and creative vision when she describes the inspiration for *Partition* as emanating from her personal relationship with her husband. This narrative, I argue, could provide a backdrop for experiencing the video, guiding the interpretation of the viewer. Strategies of tying together conceptions of artistic agency, authenticity, and the private self can, in some instances, function as a way of infusing sound recordings, music videos, and live performances with a form of authenticity. In his contribution to the anthology, *Oh Boy!* (Jarman-Ivens 2007), Hawkins raises this

matter in an analysis of Justin Timberlake's construction of masculinity:

Any guarantee of his own sense of authenticity is located in the way he bridges an obviously artificial display (in the form of music video) into a personal space that validates an authentic self. By this I mean that outside the display of performance, there are qualities that endorse other values that the star embodies, which are narrated by interviews, gossip columns, articles, and so on (2007, 198).

The bridging between artificial display and the personal space, which Hawkins describes, is facilitated in no small part by strategically deployed and highly mediated fragments of the pop artist's (ostensibly) private self. Relatedly, as I have previously pointed out, audiences often exhibit great interest in the private lives of stars (Cashmore 2006, 43; Dibben 2009, 331; Dyer 2004, 2; Meyers 2009; Vermorel 2014, 93). This is a particularly pertinent point in relation to how the celebrity aspect of pop culture implies a study of the private, but in a distinctly public way (Cinque 2016, 441). Audiences' own fandoms are simultaneously becoming more public through their participation in social media. In an attempt to unpack the unprecedented public visibility of our contemporary moment, Marshall addresses the privileged status of the public self in Western culture, where our self-identities are "externally structured by the values of attraction, attention and recognition that have been promulgated through the media of fame, visibility and reputation" (2016, 514). My articles demonstrate how pop identities are constituted audiovisually in spectacular, diverse, and strictly controlled ways. This assumes significance when we consider, like Marshall suggests, that as the gap between the public world and our own internal worlds narrows, "[c]elebrity becomes more than just a show and provider of points of identification; celebrity provides the guide for the contemporary condition of exposure of the self" (ibid.). In other words, meticulously constructed images become the new norm, as pop audiences take cues for the articulation of identity not only from performances, but equally from how their idols appear off-stage.

I address the fashioning of pop personae in numerous ways by inspecting the diverse but intertwined modes of expression that pop artists operate within. In this regard, my critical musicological approach facilitates excursions into numerous scholarly realms, aiding me in the attempt to demonstrate how signs and symbols dispersed in multiple

settings are aggregated in our experiences as listeners, viewers, and audiences. In article IV, Hawkins and I discuss how Banks carves out her defiant persona as much through iconoclastic behavior on social media as through her performances. In our reading, the challenge that Banks posits against predominant representations of women in hip hop spans many dimensions, and it is best addressed as amalgamated from her personal statements, visual expression, and intricate sonic stylization. Another pertinent example of how different facets of pop expression converge can be found in article II, where I examine how Sia's personal narrative might serve to authenticate her music and audiovisual expression (and vice versa). In the case of "Chandelier", I argue, the lyrics that describe a party girl on the brink of self-destruction resonate with accounts of Sia's personal problems and substance abuse, which in turn might be taken as a backdrop for the video, where vulnerability is invoked both sonically and visually. Similar issues are brought to the fore in article III, where I focus on how Zayn attempts to distance himself from his boy band past through posts on social media, sexualized visual display, statements in interviews, and considerable changes in musical style.

In article III, I posit that a primary motivation for Zayn undergoing considerable changes in his image, after he left One Direction, is located in a desire to oppose prevailing prejudices of innocence and inauthenticity associated with the boy band format. The commercial pop genre in general, and the boy band format in particular, has long been stigmatized in terms of authenticity. These prejudices operate quite distinctly on the level of gender. Perceptions of inauthenticity, femininity (or deficient masculinity), and the commercial tend to be conflated in discourses surrounding popular music (Coates 1997; Coulter 2017; Mayhew 1999; Meier 2008; Wald 2002; Warwick 2004, 2007). Through my investigations, I try to pin down how gendered notions of authenticity and agency play a prevalent role within the pop domain, which often involves romantic ideas of authorship.

What makes musical experiences meaningful to many listeners is exactly how they connect with attributions of agency, which relates to how perceptions of authorship "matter to most of us to the extent that we build up images of the various creative agents involved in expressive pursuits in our heads that inform experiences in varying degrees" (Richardson 2016, 124). Attributes of agency, authenticity, and authorship

are, in this sense, afforded by audiences rather than inscribed in texts or performances (Middleton 2002 [1990], 139; 2006, 203-12; Moore 2002; 2012, 259-71; Richardson, 2016, 124; Straw 1999). How notions of authenticity, authorship, and artistic agency intersect is a central theme in all of the articles, and I identify and discuss numerous ways in which pop artists attempt to attach themselves to sites of authenticity and artistic agency. I find that the commercial/creative dialectic – which in prevailing discourses corresponds to relationships such as authentic/inauthentic, art/entertainment, and rock/pop – is generally persistent.⁸⁰ Though ideals, expectations, and perceptions will differ with particular artists and audiences – down to the level of each individual in the extreme – conceptions of “real” and “fake” seem central to processes of pop representation and reception alike. The elaborate narratives that pop artists present across a variety of platforms thus gain significance in several ways.

In article I, I argue that the glimpses we get of Beyoncé’s private self are carefully managed in a way that attributes her with kinds of agency and authenticity, which ultimately afford her a privileged position: the ability to circumvent moral disapproval with regard to her sexualized imagery. With regard to *Partition*, I argue that Beyoncé’s privileged position relies on her personal narrative to frame the performance within notions of artistic vision. Similar issues are raised in article II, where I find that Sia’s desire to remain anonymous serves to attribute her with a type of sub-cultural agency that relates to her forfeiting fame,⁸¹ an attribution which is reinforced by descriptions of her (by Sia herself and others) as a skilled songwriter. Ideas of artistic autonomy and skill, I argue, balance out the vulnerability-on-display that takes precedence in Sia’s personal narrative and “Chandelier”, and in turn aids her in circumventing the scorn usually reserved for female pop celebrities who are seen as self-destructive (see Williamson 2010). I tackle a related topic in article III, where I point out that Zayn’s self-presentation on social media platforms and in interviews played an equal part to changes in his musical style and visual imagery in distancing him from his boy band past.

⁸⁰ See Scott (2008, 3-6) on how this polarization emerged as part of a popular music revolution in the 19th century.

⁸¹ Also see Richardson (2012, 211).

Taken as a whole, all four articles advocate the idea that meaning in pop occurs at the intersections where different dimensions of pop expression meet, and that the personal narratives of pop artists impact on our experiences of sound recordings and music videos, and vice versa. Particularly, the intricacies of pop personae and personal narrativity become evident when statements made in interviews, sentiments from documentary material, or biographical details are mapped against sound recordings or music videos. Scrutinizing the construction of pop artists' personae across platforms thus opens up for new considerations of the processes of representation, reception, and identification in the context of pop music. For the purpose of this dissertation, I address these issues as they intertwine with matters of gender politics, to which I now turn my attention.

Gender and Audiovisual Production: Erotics and Vocality

My analysis of Beyoncé's *Partition* in article I was undertaken largely in response to mainstream media coverage of what is commonly termed "pop feminism", which I discussed previously. I am quick to point out that even though feminist voices in pop have largely been embraced in the mainstream, Beyoncé being a prominent example, the representational strategies of pop artists that connect sexualized display to empowerment, are fraught with contention. Angela McRobbie describes a recent social and cultural landscape marked by an anti-feminist sentiment:

Elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice', these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism (2009, 1).

Pre-dating the so called "year of pop feminism" by five years, McRobbie's description pinpoints one of the main tendencies of the commodification of feminist ideas that would flourish in pop half a decade later, where a particular emphasis on individual rights and freedom of expression takes prevalence. This converges on a concern raised in my inquiry into Beyoncé's articulation of feminist ideas in article I. I take an interest in how her feminist positioning relates to the eroticized audiovisual

display of *Partition*, where a series of skin-revealing outfits and careful editing draws attention to the body on display. I address the video in relation to Ruth Barcan's views on how female celebrity nudity has put a glamorized spin on the revelation of women's nakedness for commercial reasons: "[w]hat was once imagined as the exploitation of women can now be repackaged as a victory for feminism" (2004, 242). She goes on to suggest that the stylized imagery of celebrities provide ordinary people with a set of body ideals against which we inevitably measure ourselves (ibid., 249). The images that Barcan discusses are arguably rife in pop, as seen also in *Partition*, where the supposed connection between sexualized imagery and empowerment is central. The link is reinforced further when Beyoncé explains in the behind-the-scenes documentary *Self-Titled* that the visuals of *Partition* were motivated by a will to communicate the empowering aspects of bodily display to her female audience. Interestingly, this shows that the personal narratives by which pop artists lay claim to authenticity and artistic agency can act to smooth over the commercial or exploitative aspects of sexualized display in pop. Such display takes many forms, and the borders between submitting to and subverting norms are rarely clear. In article IV, for example, Hawkins and I find that Banks confronts the gaze of the viewer through a strategy of self-objectification and transgression. Her excessive and eroticized performance in "Chasing Time" is the result of mischievous employment of audiovisual technologies that produces a camp⁸² aestheticization of hyperfemininity, which, ultimately, rattles the conventions of the female body in hip hop. Central to her performance, we argue, are the technologically manipulated mannerisms that spell out the erotics of queer desire.

A recurring topic in this dissertation is that gendered representations in pop are elaborately staged through processes of audiovisual production, and my investigations are all concerned with how the creative implementation of various technologies is integral to matters of desirability and gender performativity in pop. As Hawkins argues, "[p]op is about erotics and is technologically produced, depicting the social and cultural trends of gender on display and 'in play'" (2016, 12). My articles are united in building on existing studies that explicate the link between music, the

⁸² Even though camp aesthetics have received little attention in this dissertation, campness certainly plays a central part in pop, not least in relation to strategies of genderplay. Various studies that address notions of camp in the context of music include Dickinson (2001), Hawkins (2004a; 2016), Jarman-Ivens (2009), and Robertson (1996).

implementation of audio(visual) technologies, and gender performativity – in particular Hawkins (2013; 2016) and Jarman-Ivens (2011) – in order to illuminate issues and uncover details that are not reached by non-musicological investigations into the sexualization of Western culture (Attwood 2009; Gibson 2004; McNair 2002, 2013; Paasonen et al. 2007). Indeed, while the most obvious aspect of staging the body in pop relates to how the visual imagery of music videos results from careful editing, camera work, lighting, and post-production airbrushing, it must be emphasized that these images gain their effects through their interaction with music (see Burns and Lafrance 2017; Hawkins 2013, 2016; Vernallis 2004, 2013a). The issues surfacing here are explored in diverse ways in each of the articles.

For instance, I discover in article I that the equalization and compression added to Beyoncé's voice calls attention to vocal sounds and noises, such as sighs and moans. These vocal sounds are strategically placed in relation to the lyrics, as exemplified when Beyoncé's moan replaces the last word of the line "oh, he's so horny, yeah he wants to fu...", thus providing a sonic parallel to the visual signification of her hyperembodiment and hypersexualization. I argue that the coding of Beyoncé's voice in this instance evokes the sonic aesthetics of mainstream pornography, in the sense that conventionalized vocal gestures of expressed female pleasure resonate in Beyoncé's vocal performance in "Partition". A similar point is taken up in article II in my discussion of sonic feminization as pertaining to Sia's voice, where I note that it is staged in a way that could signify eroticization, though a full investigation of this point falls outside of the scope of that particular article. This sort of vocal treatment is prevalent in pop, which I similarly point out in articles III and IV when discussing how the internal technologies of the voice (the processes that happen in the body as made audible by intakes of breath or the smacking of lips) are frequently revealed and even foregrounded by compression or the voice's particular placement in the mix. While the effect might often be a byproduct of conventionalized mixing and production practices, it may nonetheless elicit specific connotations, particularly in light of discourses of the voice that see it as representative of the body and identity of the singer (see Barthes 1977b; Frith 1996; Jarman-Ivens 2011; Koestenbaum 2001 [1993]).

In music video, musicalized sounds contribute to the eroticization of pop

representations through their interrelationship with visual imagery and video editing techniques (Burns and Lafrance 2017; Cubitt 1997; Hawkins 2013, 2016; Vernallis 2004, 2013a; Whiteley 1997c). This concerns how visual depictions of bodily gestures, or visual framing of body parts and features, can incite processes of eroticization through their dialogic relationship with music and sound. For example, during the bridge section of *Partition* the focus is directed toward the curves and movements of Beyoncé's body in response to the music: she arches her back accompanied by a gliding bass note, and thrusts her chest out in sync with the snare drum. I discuss something similar in article III, in relation to scenes depicting two nude female boxers, where I argue that the synchronization of music and images is key to tantalizing the viewer: changes in the sonic texture anticipate the movements of the boxers, heighten the allure of the images, and emphasize the impact of a punch that is delivered at the moment the bass drum thumps. Such sync points are central to the eroticization of pop performance, which works both in specific split-second moments as described above, as well as in a more general "mood-setting" capacity. The latter is exemplified in article IV, where Hawkins and I argue that sonic and visual excesses are integral to Banks' eroticized display. In "Chasing Time", attention-grabbing, sci-fi inspired imagery work in conjunction with sonic events, such as ever-changing sonic textures, stylistic eclecticism, and an elaborate use of effects, to entertain and rebel.

I want to emphasize that the technologically facilitated audiovisual staging of the gendered body in pop is not inextricably bound to strategies of hyperbolic sexualization or eroticization. One topic of interest that spans all four articles is the augmented vocal realities that pop recordings promote, where the voice is always the result of elaborate processes of (re)production, whether the effects of technological manipulation are obvious or imperceivable.⁸³ It is of interest that external technologies are as crucial for the staging of Sia's "natural" sounding voice in the verses of "Chandelier" as for the staging of Zayn's more obviously manipulated voice in "Pillowtalk". The latter conjures up feelings of intimacy and distance simultaneously, which is achieved through a vocal treatment that foregrounds subtle details in Zayn's voice and body – the smacking of lips or an intake of breath – while

⁸³ See Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen on transparency and opacity in relation to technological mediation in music (2016).

at the same time conceding the external technological intervention on the voice by introducing echo and reverb effects that belie any idea of a “natural” voice. The audibly magnified function of Zayn’s voice thus calls attention to the very construction of his post boy band masculinity.

Certainly, masculinities in popular music are constructed through aesthetic means (Fast 2001; Hawkins 2007, 2009, 2016; Jarman-Ivens 2006, 2007; Walser 1993, 1994). This is highlighted by the surreal audiovisual dreamscape of the *Pillowtalk* video, within which the overstated sonic production is mirrored by visual effects and digitized bodies that draw attention to the artifice of pop performance.

Simultaneously, however, the video’s amalgamation of surrealism, female nudity, and shock effects is part and parcel of showcasing the powerful, dangerous, and intriguing aspects of Zayn’s post boy band masculinity, and ultimately facilitates its dominant positioning in relation to the female subject. This is one of many examples that show how pop performances usually blend contesting signs and symbols in ways that leave their signification open for interpretation and contestation, and similar potential for the interpretation of contradictory meanings are uncovered in the other articles. Such ambiguity, perhaps particularly with regard to the performative intricacies of gender and sexuality, is ultimately one of the most compelling aspects of pop performance. Part of this ambiguity stems from the tension that arises when different aspects of an artist’s representation are mapped onto another, leading to captivating configurations that keep us coming back for more.

Concluding Remarks and Suggestions for Future Research

Pop artists address their audiences in astoundingly varied and complex ways; this is something I have grappled with throughout this dissertation. Undertaking my studies in a holistic manner has entailed paying close attention to the personal narratives of pop artists. I have mapped these narratives against sound recordings and music videos, in order to demonstrate how pop performances are entwined with the ways in which the artist's subjectivity is conveyed through, for example, interviews, artwork, and social media. By employing this approach, I have endeavored to pin down how the personae and personal narratives of pop artists bear influence on our experiences of pop texts. I have thus sought new insights into an issue that has rarely been investigated in detail from a musicological point of view.

Throughout, I have placed primacy on examining audiovisual aesthetics. The challenges that recent developments in this area bring about for scholars, are called to attention by Richardson and Gorbman when they assert that “the warp-accelerating technological developments in the digital era and profusion of audiovisual forms and genres that has come with it challenge our ability to keep pace with meaning in our time” (2013, 32). It follows that our ways of thinking about and researching pop music in its many guises, must be continuously re-evaluated and adapted, which is something to which this dissertation has attempted to contribute. In particular, I have proposed – given how signification in pop occurs in the encounters between different texts, discourses, and subjects – that the audiovisual aestheticization of pop artists needs to be examined in relation to the phenomenon of media convergence.

Given that the “signifying practices that emerge from popular culture highlight the material conditions and possibilities of performativity in sublime ways” (Hawkins 2016, 219), musicological inquiries into the diverse strategies of representation in pop should take great care in situating the analysis of sound recordings and music videos in relation to the social and cultural structures that impact on our own lived experiences, as well as our understandings of ourselves and others. Here gender remains a primary concern. Accordingly, I have addressed the gendered body in pop performance as an aestheticized audiovisual entity. Delving into this matter, my hermeneutic approach has drawn upon a wide range of theories and methods from various disciplines in carving out my musicological critique. Through my approach I

have been able to illuminate the intricacies entailed in negotiating identity in pop by introducing dialogue between different perspectives. This has enabled me to tackle elaborate and far-reaching sociocultural issues, even though the case studies in each individual article are quite specific. However, as has been argued by Jarman-Ivens (2011, 163), it is in the specific that we can see the general. I would add that this is a particularly salient point in relation to the ever-shifting currents and constant innovations in pop, which are made evident in the unique pop expressions displayed by, among others, the artists I have been concerned with in my articles.

My studies have unavoidably prioritized some topics at the expense of others, which relates to the nature of an interpretive approach. In Susanna Välimäki's words, "the problem of meaning and signification is that of subject and subjectivity, and vice versa" (2005, 7). This point places emphasis on the fact that we as researchers always make choices with regard to our case studies, methods, and theories at our own discretion. Each of the articles thus presents a snapshot – *my snapshot*, in the sense that my interpretations are guided by my own subject positioning – of how contemporary pop artists mobilize themselves as intertextual objects. Each in their own way, the articles provide answers to the research questions that I posed at the beginning of this introduction chapter, hence resulting in a comprehensive exploration of how gendered identities in pop are carved out through personal narrativity and audiovisual display.

I note that there are certain topics related to those discussed in this dissertation that warrant further research. In particular, I would emphasize that emerging strategies of representation in pop require constant scholarly scrutiny. This I find particularly pertinent with regard to how new audiovisual practices intersect with personal narrativity. For example, the increasing prevalence of music short films as a mode of expression requires investigation with regard to conceptions of artistic endeavor and identity politics alike; the way some of these films draw together several sound recordings, elaborate narratives, and striking visuals, offers artists ample room to showcase their subjectivities. Relatedly, and in spite of some insightful studies on the topic (Hawkins 2013, 2016; Jarman-Ivens 2011), technology's role in the staging of gendered identities in pop requires additional critical attention. Even though I have addressed the topic here, I would call for other studies to further excavate the details

and intricacies of studio processes while also pursuing inroads into issues of gender performativity in pop.

Additionally, considering the amount of interest in and research on boy bands (Jamieson 2007; Moos 2013; Wald 2002; Whiteley 2003), my conceptualization of post boy band masculinity warrants further inspection of the representational strategies of artists who abandon group formats in favor of a solo career. Building on the discussions in article III, related avenues for research could involve a stronger emphasis on matters of ethnicity – perhaps particularly related to the “subsuming whiteness” of the boy band format – and the ironic distance and self-deprecation seen in recent boy band expressions. Further comparisons between the representational strategies of boy band members breaking out of the format, other artists leaving groups for solo careers, and young solo artists transitioning into adulthood would also be of great interest.

All in all, this dissertation has addressed the diverse modes of representation in pop as much as the particularities that characterize the individual artists I have studied. As I pointed out in the opening pages, pop representations depend on reciprocal relationships between notions of identity, look, and sound to entertain and excite us. I have emphasized throughout that pop artists negotiate their subjectivities and showcase their personae through musical and visual codes in ways that activate vast networks of connections and meanings, often in contradictory, unpredictable, and open-ended ways. Indeed, as Hawkins argues, “[b]ecause music furnishes us with a mix of ideals that often break down and contest reactionary social norms, it incites the senses in all of us quite differently” (2017, 3). This is one of the aspects of pop music that has interested me the most during the period of writing this dissertation, and that interest is also reflected in my own explorations. Therefore, I have placed primacy on highlighting the multiplicity of potential meanings in pop, in the end inviting the reader to reflect on her/his participation in activating them.

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