

Karma Chameleon: Performative Acts, Gender Constitution, and the Second British Invasion

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The aim is to examine the performative acts and gender constitution in the context of the Second British Invasion. Despite the pervasive character of patriarchy and the prevalence of sexual difference as an operative cultural distinction, gender was not passively scripted on the bodies of many British singers. The subversive performances did not exclude suffering and marginalization but simultaneously undermined compulsory coherence.

Keywords: performative acts, gender, Judith Butler, the Second British Invasion, United Kingdom, United States, 1980s

Introduction

According to Butler (1988; 2003), gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which multiple acts proceed. Gender requires a conception of a constituted social temporality. It is instituted through a stylized repetition of acts through time, in a mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. Gender transformation can happen in the relation among such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating or its breaking or subversive repetition. Butler (2003) argued that gender should not be understood as the cultural inscription of meaning in a previously given sex. Gender designates the apparatus of production by which it is established. Furthermore, it could produce a false notion of stability, in which the heterosexual matrix would be ensured by two fixed and coherent sexes and maintained by the repetition of acts, gestures, and signs from the cultural sphere, which would reinforce the construction of male and female bodies. However, it is possible to dismantle, through subversive acts, heteronormativity, a concept that expresses the expectations, demands, and social obligations that derive from the assumption of heterosexuality as natural (Jesus, 2009; 2010; 2014; 2017).

The aim of the article is to examine the performative acts and gender constitution in context of the Second British Invasion, which was constituted by music acts from the United Kingdom that brought with them synthpop and new wave styles to the American charts and became popular in the United States during the early-to-mid 1980s mainly due to the cable music channel Music Television (MTV). Along with Butler (1988), the main argument indicates that, despite the pervasive character of patriarchy and the prevalence of sexual difference as an operative cultural distinction, gender was not passively scripted on the bodies of many British singers. Their subversive performances did not exclude suffering and marginalization but undermined compulsory coherence.

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Performative Acts and Gender Constitution

Butler (1988) argued that the body appearance in the world is not predetermined by interior essence, and its concrete expressions should be understood as specific possibilities, constrained by available historical conventions. The materiality of the body bears a dramatic meaning as a manner of doing and reproducing a historical situation. The doing of gender manifests a set of strategies which Foucault (1980) would call a stylistic of existence, one that has a history that conditions and limits possibilities. Gender is a corporeal style, an intentional and performative act with clearly punitive consequences. Those who fail to do their gender right may be punished. The collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of their own production. The mundane reproduction of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies relate to the deeply entrenched expectations of gendered existence. The sedimentation of gender norms over time has produced corporeal styles which, in a reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes in a binary relation to one another, such as a heterosexually based system of marriage which guarantees the reproduction of that kinship system and is reproduced through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with natural appearances and heterosexual dispositions (Butler, 1988).

Along with Rubin (1975) and Foucault (1980), Butler (1988; 2003) suggested that sex, gender, and heterosexuality are historical products which have become conjoined and reified as natural over time. The repetition of the performance is a reenactment and re-experiencing of socially established meanings, with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame in a culturally restricted corporeal space. However, Butler (1988) argued that performative acts may either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation and break down conventions that demarcate the imaginary from the real. They constitute a reality that may be a new modality of gender that may not be assimilated into the pre-existing categories that regulate gender reality. Androgyny, for example, can challenge the distinction between appearance and reality that structures the thinking about gender identity. However, gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control. The re-description of the politics of performative gender acts needs to expose the reifications that serve as substantial gender cores and elucidate the act and strategy of disavowal which at once constitute and conceal gender as people live it (Butler, 1988). According to Harding (1998), all gender is a form of drag, an act rather than an attribute, a doing rather than a being. In this context, Butler (1990) showed that multifaceted gender performances are subversively playing with gendered meanings and showing how they can be redefined.

The Second British Invasion, Performative Acts, and Gender Constitution

The First British Invasion was a mid-1960s cultural phenomenon. UK rock and pop music acts—such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, and the Kinks, for example—and other aspects of British culture became popular in the United States. Many of them had been influenced by earlier US rock and roll, but a subsequent handful of British performers, particularly the Rolling Stones, revived a musical genre rooted in the blues and black culture, which had been largely rejected when performed by American black artists in the 1950s. These last British musicians were considered rebellious unlike parent-friendly polished pop groups, such as the Beatles. Many artists of the First British Invasion were important to the development of counterculture,

the internationalization of the production of rock and roll and the establishment of the British popular music industry as a viable center of musical creativity, in which rock groups, based around guitars and drums, frequently produced their own material as singers and songwriters. However, American bands regained prominence in the late 1960s in response to the Vietnam War and the civil unrest. However, the 1970s British progressive rock acts were popular in the US, as the American working class liked its virtuosity (Macan, 1997; Perone, 2004; 2008).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, UK music was influenced by the after-effects of the punk/new wave revolution. British music videos, fundamental elements of UK TV programs, had evolved into short movies, while US pop and rock music was undergoing a creative slump due to audience fragmentation and the anti-disco backlash. Music videos were not common in America, and those that existed were usually footages from concert performances. When MTV started up in 1981, the channel had little choice but to play videos from British acts. The Human League's "Don't You Want Me" got considerable boost from MTV airplay in 1982 and has been described as the beginning of the Second British Invasion. The term "new music" was used to describe mostly British androgynous and technologically oriented artists, such as Culture Club and The Eurythmics. George Michael's band Wham! released the U.S. chart topper "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go", and Michael's "Careless Whisper" also scaled the Hot 100. At the Second Invasion's height, UK acts became number 1 hits, from Simple Minds' "Don't You (Forget About Me)" to Dire Straits' "Money for Nothing". During the Second British Invasion, the popularity of established British acts, such as Queen, David Bowie, Phil Collins, Rod Stewart, Elton John, and the Rolling Stones increased not only in the US (Bennett, 1993; Reynolds, 2005), but all over the world, even where the perspectives of economic development and the defense of human rights did not change the rigid social codes by which gender conventions were policed and maintained (Jesus, 2011; 2012; 2013).

The British artists and their music videos on MTV—which had the visual perspective that could not be apprehended over the radio—seemed to bring color and energy back to America's pop music, although many journalists were hostile to the Second British Invasion because of the supposed predominance of image over music. However, as Butler (1988) argued, the repetition of acts, gestures, and signs could challenge the distinction between appearance and reality that structures the thinking about gender identity. The performative acts of many artists of the Second British Invasion contested conventions that demarcated the imaginary from the real. Male and female aspects were no longer fixed but fractured into a kaleidoscope of images (Aufderheide, 1986).

For example, the success of A Flock of Seagulls' "I Ran (So Far Away)", fronted by a singer-synth player with unusual haircut and clothes, brought exotic looks and sounds to the American music, where the commercial burnout of corporate rock in the late 1970s opened the door for new music from the UK. While artists in America seemed simply to want to make money, UK artists clearly wanted to communicate something else, such as the blurring of strict gender boundaries. The fashion and music scenes in which these artists emerged cannot be separated from the milieux of experimentation and innovation (Hackett, 2015). Culture Club's Boy George and The Eurythmics' Annie Lennox displayed male and female sexual aspects in their songs, looks, videos, and live performances and questioned a social policy of gender regulation and control, which established how a man and a woman should dress and behave (Izod, 1995).

The new Romanticism in the 1980s was also predicated on a nostalgia for a time long gone, for poets, such as Byron and Shelley whose aesthetic preference for lace and velvet was mimicked by British bands, such as

Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet and taken to pastiche proportions by George. Conventions of masculinity and femininity were challenged with men wearing make-up, sequins, feather boas, and platform shoes, while female singers adopted male attire in the form of suits, shirts, and ties. The Second British Invasion created a space for artists who dared to be different in terms of dress, music, and sexuality. For many of them and their fans, the subversive performances did not exclude suffering and marginalization, but simultaneously undermined compulsory coherence and served as an escape from the pressure to conform in everyday life, largely because of prejudice or misconceptions. In repeated acts, these artists could flout gender conventions, play with the rules, and escape normal gender constrictions through acts of transformation of body and mind (Goulding, Saren, Maclaran, & Follett, 2004). In the case of male artists, the new images of the masculine allowed them to challenge gender norms and brought a pastiche of movement, contradictions, and irony. Duran Duran and other British bands re-signified masculinity and constructed alternative images of maleness away from the confines of heteronormative norms. The youth culture of the time provided the necessary relief from the confining realities of masculinity in the mainstream cultural production of the early 1980 (Peters, 2016).

Conclusion

During the late 1980s, glam metal and dance music replaced the Second British Invasion acts atop the US charts. Artists, such as Madonna, Prince, and Michael Jackson started to make more complex combinations of images and sounds and brought more global and explicit challenges to gender conventions than the British acts. In 1986, singers and bands associated with the Second British Invasion continued to have chart success, but American artists, such as Bon Jovi topped the Billboard 200 and displaced British artists atop the Hot 100. In the mid-1990s, the Spice Girls brought a new British Invasion, and some British acts, such as Oasis, Blur, Take That, and The Verve had success in the United States, albeit less than their 1980s predecessors. More recently, British artists, such as Adele, Sam Smith, Ed Sheeran, and Dua Lipa have been successful in the US and won many awards.

The analysis of the performative acts and gender constitution in the context of the Second British Invasion shows the importance of considering the various points of view regarding gender that have been criticized but offer alternative descriptions and prescriptions. According to Butler (1988), sexual difference should not become a reification which unwittingly preserves a binary restriction on gender identity and an implicitly heterosexual framework for the description of gender, gender identity, and sexuality. As Goulding et al. (2004) argued, transgressing against boundaries is to call into question their inviolability and the social codes of sex and gender by which such boundaries are policed and maintained.

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