

# Female Musicians' Visual Gender Staging in Music Videos

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The design analysis of the media presented in this article focuses on the representation of female musicians, looking at the ways in which they stage both themselves and their gender in music videos. According to my observation, the visual portrayal of female artists has been defined by a long history of stereotypical gender representations that have to be overcome. In the music videos published by female musicians, we can observe design strategies for self-portrayal and gender staging, as well as sources of aesthetic inspirations and trends. Different oppositional design strategies are described that either blur gender, provoke the viewer or overcome stereotypical gender representations.

#female musicians

#gender staging

#visualisation

#design

#music video

## Focus, Rationale and Approach

Based on a visual communications perspective, this article analyses strategies of 'acting out genders' applied by female artists in the production of their music videos. The design analysis in this article focuses explicitly on the representation of female musicians, looking at the ways in which they stage both themselves and their gender in music videos. According to my observations of Artwork and Music Videos of the last decades, due to a long history of stereotypical gender representation, using design to create and acquire new spaces and improved visibility is particularly relevant and challenging for a multitude of female musicians at all levels of expertise.

I will describe and analyse four key examples in which strategies of 'discerning' design is successfully used to improve the representation of female musicians by creating images of gender and self-portrayal that overcome and undermine stereotypical gender roles. This article takes a cross-genre approach to the highly differentiated popular music landscape, instead of exploring the specific signs, codes, visual idioms, and established gender representations within particular music genres, for example Hip-hop or Heavy Metal. Although the term gender features a greater diversity than just the differentiation between male and female, this binary division cannot be avoided in the following analysis:

*[...] and, these analyses always have to be read against the background of socially acquired and prescribed gender roles and identities: it is about the positioning, self-perception and self-definition of the genders in relation to socially constructed roles. (Brandes 2014, 27)*

## Developments

The popular music business was and still is predominantly dominated by men, with only 22.4 percent of performing artists being female, and the numbers are much lower among people behind the scenes like songwriters and producers.<sup>1</sup> Up to the end of the 1990s, male-dominated record companies and music labels were responsible for the distribution and marketing of female musicians and bands, which also included the way in which their image was shaped.

*Old-fashioned views held by the male decision makers in the music industry are fuelled by a desire to increase profit margins: sex sells. In an industry where are a sexualised and gendered image of a woman has deep cultural roots, this continues to have a negative effect on female musicians. (Whiteley 2013, 39)*

Through the representations on record and CD covers and in music videos, these companies also influenced the representation of gender, often catering to stereotypical concepts of masculinity and femininity. Viv Albertine, guitarist of female British Punk band 'The Slits' explains this while describing how her band was treated by the responsible persons from the record company:

*First of all, Island<sup>2</sup> assigns us an art director<sup>3</sup>. [...] He says, the cover must be flashy pink and made of plastic with cracks and zippers all over. Bullshit. I say, we want something that reflects who we are and what kind of music we're making, and this has got nothing to do with pink plastic. (Albertine 2016, 243)<sup>4</sup>*

Today, to a large extent, the music business works differently, with social media applications and related technologies playing a central role. As there are fewer and fewer large record companies

and much smaller budgets, female musicians not only have more responsibility with regard to the distribution and marketing of their music but also have more options in terms of self-determination. They have the opportunity to control distribution, marketing and self-representation via social media platforms such as Bandcamp, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, etc. These media platforms give female musicians new freedoms and opportunities in their identity presentation of themselves and their gender, but, on the other hand, these tools also pose new design challenges and need to be used responsibly as the photos and videos that have to be created for these channels to communicate the artists' identity and image. Hence, the corporate design of the artist becomes increasingly important and is attributed greater responsibility. As female artists largely use the same channels and platforms as their audience, they enter into a direct relationship that facilitates mutual inspiration. This form of participation shapes a development that has led to new styles of performance and gender representation. A good example to show this is Instagram.

Instagram often features photos and videos that the respective female artist has taken, and distributes herself with her smartphone. With this form of communication, she creates an intimate relationship with the viewer and establishes a connection between public and private spaces. On Instagram, she can do this using photos and videos that show her in her own action spaces and activities, and she can also upload images that communicate critical messages on issues she considers relevant.

Mykki Blanco,<sup>5</sup> an artist interacting with 73,000 (cited date January 2019) followers, does this very skilfully: she/he juxtaposes the expected images of her/himself as a 'man' or a 'woman' with photos or videos featuring critical and provocative content like a photo of a 'Fuck Trump

Tattoo', for example. She/he thus successfully communicates her/his political and socio-critical thoughts and her/his understanding of gender to her followers and, in the best case, raises their awareness of these issues. With this method, she/he is able to fight against discrimination, to advocate freedom of choice in gender identity and to spread the demand for equality, using only the power of images.

The functions of music videos described by Diederich Diederichsen in his book *Über Pop-Musik* can thus also, and not least, be transferred to the contents of Instagram.

*The latency of pop music's connection between sounds and visual ideas had become an object that could be formed and studied, an object whose structures also manifested other fundamental elements not included in the music itself: dance moves, dress codes, cultural solidarity, political position, brands and products etc. (Diederichsen 2014, 148)*

For female artists, the following five design-relevant factors have changed: more images have to be produced for more channels. Alongside established representation forms like cover artwork, music video, stage performance, photos for band information and PR, websites, posters, etc., social media provide additional options: complementary sales platforms such as the iTunes Store or apps must also be serviced. Therefore, a distinct and consistent design concept is becoming increasingly important. Second, however, the budgets for these concepts have become smaller (except for the Big Players like Ariana Grande) or there is no budget at all (for all upcoming artists). Third, there are more technologies for creating design-relevant content and they are more easily accessible. For example, photo and video cameras that are able to generate semi-professional to professional-standard products have become cheaper.

A good smartphone can produce images of adequate quality. Additionally, publishing via the Internet has become easier through technical improvements. Image editing, for example, is today already included in most publishing software.<sup>6</sup> Fourth, software for editing videos and pictures is easily accessible and its application is explained in various online tutorials. Therefore, everybody can use the software, at least in theory. Finally, the participation enabled by social media facilitates more direct contact with the audience. This has a reciprocal effect: on the one hand, the (female) artists can decide for themselves the degree of intimacy they want to share with their followers. They can choose how much to reveal about their private lives and can control the experience. On the other hand, through feedback and posts from their fans, artists not only get a feel for approval and criticism but also learn about the issues in their fans' lives, about their looks and styles. Artists can use this kind of feedback to refine the topics they are addressing in their work and to develop their visual forms of representation and their gender constructions. Through user-generated content, there is an even wider dissemination.

### **New Possibilities through Design**

Due to the above-explained changes, female artists now have more tools and options to play with traditional representations of femininity. In the following, these tools will be analysed in relation to the question of gender construction through design. In this analysis, the music video plays an important role because it also reveals the wealth of possibilities that the medium holds for female artists' alternative gender constructions: in videos, female artists can not only stage and represent themselves but also their action spaces and actions.

Ideally, design can change visual hierarchies and stereotypical gender roles. There are different alternative design strategies that either blur gender, provoke the viewer, appropriate masculinity or overcome stereotypical gender representations. The strategy of "self-sexualisation" (Reitsamer 2015, 96), in which the artist chooses to sexualise herself and thus transforms herself from a sex object defined by the male gaze to a knowing and powerfully acting sex subject, will here only be treated in the context of provocation. The images generated through narcissistic self-objectification and the presentation of a perfectly sculpted female body by artists like Rihanna, Azealia Banks and Nicki Minaj,<sup>7</sup> are not considered here because, in terms of design, they do not seem to offer an alternative to the sexualised representation of 'women as objects'. Although, in these cases, the body is stylised as a central resource for female identity construction and thus holds a power potential necessary for an opposing attitude (cf. Gill 2016, 545), this form of power is questionable.

*Girls and women are equipped with the power to act (agency) so that they can construct themselves as the kind of subject that comes close to heterosexual male fantasies found in pornography. (Gill 2016, 545)*

Without additional explanation, the viewer cannot identify this as a strategy as such. The 'self-sexualisation' staged in this form of design is only resolved through additional information provided by the respective artists in their lyrics and interviews, as well as in tweets and posts in their social media channels. If these explanations are missing, it will be difficult for viewers to tell by the video's design alone whether or not what they see is a self-determined representation. I will therefore omit this form of female self-representation in my analysis.

Based on different definitions developed for music videos and described by, for example, Klaus Neumann-Braun and Lothar Mikos (Neumann-Braun and Mikos 2006, 95ff.), I have identified and expanded four different strategies: blurring / concealing / disguising; provocation; appropriating masculinity; and staging femininity as a principle.

### **Strategy 1: Blurring / Concealing / Disguising**

A good example for the blurring strategy is the British artist Planningtonrock. Born in 1973 in the English town of Bolton, he/she officially changed his/her first name from Janine to, in gender terms, ambiguous Jam. In his/her work, which in addition to music also includes performance art and multimedia installations, he/she tackles the question of defining gender and the inherent limitations. In order to blur the sexual characteristics of his/her body, he/she uses Autotune<sup>8</sup> on the acoustic level and, in his/her design and performances, often works with the interaction of light and disguise. Additionally, he/she also uses image editing and video software to change the outlines and blur the representation of his/her body through de-constructing photos and moving images. Planningtonrock calls this “playing around with gender” (Walter 2015, 19). In his article *Die Diktatur der Normalos* (The Dictatorship of the Normals) Klaus Walter quotes the artist thus: “I want to push the boundaries in which we live, the way in which we are defined” (Walter 2015, 20). How this is implemented at the design level can be seen in the artwork, including videos, cover design, live performance, and stage costumes, designed by Planningtonrock him/herself. In order to identify the visual components I will, by way of example, describe the video for the song *The Breaks*, produced by the artist.

The video consists of two alternating scenes: first, we see the artist Jam singing, and then we see Jam with his/her arm around a girl, about 9 years old, who looks exactly like Jam. The video is set in wasteland that could be an abandoned military compound. The images are coloured in monochrome blue, and in black and white, and are reminiscent of those produced by a mobile phone camera and, at times, due to the blue tinge and the grain, of VHS-recorded material.

The video’s most distinct attributes are the protagonist’s highly alienated look and the way he/she moves. The face is manipulated with various exaggerations of the nose and forehead, giving it a masculine look. Due to this masking, the facial expressions are constrained and are no longer clearly visible. The artist’s build is strongly altered by shoulder pads, making him/her look broad and tall, which, together with the long hair and a rather female-looking mouth generates confusion. The movements are sometimes captured in slow motion, indicating poses that could be interpreted as dance moves, but remain vague.

On the pictorial level, the veiling is additionally reinforced by using various filters and by superimposing different sequences, which blurs the images even more. The use of a gauze-like transparent fabric and, sometimes, of fog adds to the impression of obscurity and ambiguity.

British artist Elizabeth Bernholz, also known as Gazelle Twin, employs a similar concept. She uses simple means to transform her body, thus portraying it in a less clear manner. In the artwork that she designed for her album *unflesh*, her face is covered with an opaque stocking mask and the female form disappears under a large hoodie. Under the hood she wears a wig of long brown hair. In photos, videos and illustrations, only her mouth is visible, distorted into an angry and snarling grimace. The aggressive poses and

behaviour are rather male-connoted, while the prominently displayed long hair is suggestive of a female, resulting in a permanent feeling of bewilderment. Through this approach, the artist is not only unidentifiable, but also exudes an air of menace as the viewer is made to feel uncertain about the nature of the hooded figure. We never know who hides behind this disguise, an impression intensified by the artist, for example, in her video for the song *Exorcise*, in which also several identical 'creatures' appear.

In the concept of gender disguise I also include approaches in which female artists use only graphics or illustrations in their artwork that make them unidentifiable as a person and do not allow clear gender attribution.

## Strategy 2: Provocation

The artist Merril Nisker, also known as, Peaches is a good example for explaining the strategy of provocation. For many years, she has been developing a space for "alternative sexual identities" (Reitsamer 2015, 96), using queer artistic practices and representations to challenge the "binary logic of gender differentiation" (Reitsamer 2015, 96) and staging herself as a knowing and empowered sex subject. The music video that she produced herself for her song *Rub*<sup>9</sup> offers many examples to illustrate the visual idiom, costumes and artefacts characteristic of Peaches. In its graphic directness, the content references the blurring boundaries between the pornographic and the mainstream as they are visualised today, and illustrates the "Porn Chic" described, for example, by Rosalind Gill (Gill 2007, 546). In parts, the performance and visuals are drastic, highlighting a fundamental problem of provocation: in a world where images and visuals are constantly becoming more radical, provocation is having a hard time to be perceived as what it is. Peaches' strategy is an

important contribution to highlight alternatives to established representations of female artists because she does not limit gender and sexuality to binary sexes and to heterosexuality and she visualises this in her performances, costumes, images, and videos in partly drastic ways. How exactly she does this, will be described, using some example scenes to explain her principle.

A pink cloud of dust settles in the desert, revealing a view of Peaches sleeping. Apparently, Peaches has been abducted by a woman in a short pink tulle dress licking at a vagina-shaped lolly and by a woman in worker's clothes who takes Peaches to a different location in a minivan. They drive into a large garage in which there are many, mostly corpulent and almost naked, women who are in stark contradiction to the beauty ideal promoted by the media because they boast a lot of pubic hair. The women are sweating and rubbing various fluids onto their own bodies and on those of the other women.

For a part of the musical performance, the scene changes to the desert. The band members are naked women who also have distinct pubic hair and a male (initially) singer who proceeds to undress during his performance. He turns from a man into a woman with glued-on breasts, until revealing real breasts underneath the fake ones. The scene changes again; it is night and we see a sex ritual where Peaches is being sacrificed. The bare-breasted "high priestess" is rolling around in the sand in front of Peaches before revealing a penis, forcefully swinging it in front of Peaches' face. The artist responds to this performance with a hearty laugh. At the end of the ceremony, we see the naked Peaches disappear together with her female abductor, now also naked. Before they walk away, they urinate, standing, in the sand.

With this video, Peaches visualises what Rosa Reitsamer refers to as "sex politics" (Reitsamer

2015, 96). According to Reitsamer, Peaches challenges the binary logic of gender differentiation because she does not reduce gender and sexuality to binary sexes and heterosexuality (Reitsamer 2015, 96). On the contrary, with her pictures, the artist opens our view to the diversities the concept of gender can offer, by representing both lesbian women and transgender.

The representation of the people in the video can be interpreted as a clear criticism of the predominant imagery of perfectly formed and objectified bodies promoted by the media. In her video, Peaches juxtaposes the stereotypical lesbian in the form of the tomboy abductor and of the pink doll-woman (with the vagina lolly) – the epitome of the omnipresent infantile Lolita – with the hairy women in the garage, some of them rather obese, who do not conform to any traditional stereotype. Through the different body shapes and the visible pubic hair, the objectified and sexualised femininity that we know from magazines and advertising, for example, is opposed by using coarse and ‘un-beautified’ representations, an impression that is additionally reinforced by showing the two women urinating in the sand. Simultaneously, with the shot of urinating in public, the artist appropriates a very male-connoted space and literally ‘marks’ her territory. The singer of the band shown in the video impressively visualises a variable, and hence fluid, idea of gender by transforming from a man to a ‘fake’ woman, to a ‘real’ woman. With this form of staging, the dominant heterosexual and binary visual idiom is expanded while simultaneously visualising a distinct criticism of the male gaze. Additionally, the artist uses her drastic images to provoke, and thus to question, the power regime of a normative societal order based on binary sexes.

### Strategy 3: Appropriating Masculinity

In her book *Female Masculinity* (Halberstam 1998), author Judith (later: Jack) Halberstam describes

masculinity with regard to the relationship between the male body and power and dominance, and at how masculinity is also performed by female bodies. She considers performances “that show a male habitus inscribed into female bodies” (Gerhards 2015, 162). Another potential example is the appropriation of rather male-connoted action spaces and behaviour as implemented, for example, by the band SXTN. In the music video for their single, the young German female rappers celebrate a night together with their “*Fotzen im Club*” (“c\*nts at the club”).

First, there is a boozy ‘warm-up’ in a flat, before the rappers and their girlfriends take to the streets. Large bottles of alcohol are being consumed, joints are being smoked, and a baguette is prominently displayed as a ‘penis substitute’. The spaces the women occupy include the streets, an underground station, an underground train, a supermarket, the pavement, public toilets, and a club. Here, the term occupy has to be taken quite literally: they use the handles in the train for acrobatics and dance through the compartment, they harass other (male) passengers, they sit in shopping trolleys or in lockers and they stand, sit or lie on pavements, waste bins and power supply boxes in the urban space. In one scene, we see one of the protagonists losing a tooth when opening a beer bottle and laughing about it. The young women even video themselves, from a bird’s eye view, while urinating in a public toilet. All this happens using distinctly casual, space-consuming body language.

The pictures are reminiscent of a home video: the camera is close to the young women, in the centre of the action, the images seem to be created spontaneously and recorded with a smartphone, which has an (intentional) negative effect on focus and contrast. The cuts are fast, matching the song’s electronic dance beats. Image quality and camera perspective are similar to those in current YouTube videos. With the images produced in the

video and in associated social media channels, the artists visualise a break with traditional female roles (Neumann-Braun and Mikos 2006), creating a new action space for themselves. On the one hand, this includes the way in which they move and behave in the space (brawling, drinking, vomiting, urinating, bleeding, etc.) and, on the other hand, it includes the space itself because 'the street', with associated topics like territorial thinking and aggression, is seen as a male-connoted environment.

#### **Strategy 4: Staging Femininity as a Principle**

Norwegian singer Jenny Hval provides a successful example of the strategy of clearly staging oneself as feminine while simultaneously overcoming stereotypical gender representations. In her photos and videos, she is always clearly recognisable as a woman, but she avoids the poses, movements, and behaviour, that we know from conventional visualisations of female roles. The protagonists in her videos are almost exclusively women, while men, if there are any at all, are only marginal figures. Her music video for *Female Vampire* is a good example, illustrating her design concept.

Initially, the singer is standing at the roadside of an urban environment, lifting her black cape like a bat raising its wings. We then see her approaching on a bicycle, cape billowing, and leaning against an illuminated billboard like an insect attracted by light. Then we see six women from behind as they are walking through an underpass and onto an escalator. They are not talking to each other and seem to be walking purposefully and focused on their destination. The scene is reminiscent of film sequences in which street gangs are gathering. The images are coarse and slightly out of focus. They flicker similar to an old movie. The women are wearing trousers and

sneakers, making themselves unidentifiable with large scarves or shawls wrapped around their heads. The song starts at the moment when the women reach their destination, a dimly lit and seedy building. It is very dark, and there is only a gloomy red light. Jenny Hval and her companions seem to commence what they came to this place for: the camera pans to show the faces of the young women, who are acting in an illuminated space within the dim setting, their faces and hands now clearly visible. A second video layer is superimposed on the camera pan across the women's faces, showing their hands smearing a jelly-like substance on each other's faces, then carefully placing their faces cheek to cheek. They do this very slowly, carefully and respectfully. The substance on their faces causes the women to stick to each other. The ritual seems to be a kind of unification in which the women turn to each other. What is happening is, quite literally, a joining together and thus a female-connoted action: the forming of alliances. The images move slowly and we can see that the substance on the women's skin has dried and is coming off. The women carefully take the film off each other's faces, 'shedding their skin', and then jump into the air to the same rhythm. They have obviously been invigorated through this nightly unification with other women: a visual translation of empowerment. All this is staged carefully, avoiding any form of objectified, sexualised femininity. Instead, a male-dominated power regime is challenged by a threatening (female) night-time sororization.

#### **Outlook**

The above-described analyses show how female musicians can use design and newly gained possibilities to undermine traditional gender representations and hierarchies, thus creating new concepts of artwork and music videos beyond the described stereotypes. In the present situation, these solutions are rather an exception



to the rule. Further research is needed to identify the reasons for this and we have to accelerate the dissemination of positive examples, giving them increased visibility. If it is possible to gradually break down the boundaries of visually reinforced hierarchies, it may also be possible to shift the hierarchies in the music business, which is still dominated by men, and, simultaneously, to create representations of self(-awareness) and gender beyond the hetero-normative binary logic of gender differentiation.

*Everything pop music has openly represented so far is male hetero-sexuality. This can be changed. One can mark it as one principle among others and one can, indeed, leave it behind.* (Diederichsen 2014, 169)

## Notes

1. Study led by Dr. Stacy L. Smith (analysed Billboard Charts from 2012 to 2017) found out that only 22.4 percent of performing artists were women. <http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/inclusion-in-the-recording-studio.pdf>
2. Island is a record label.
3. The art director was unable to push through with his idea and was later replaced with Neville Brody.
4. Viv Albertine was a guitarist of The Slits, a pioneering female British Punk band.
5. The record company describes her/him as a “non-binary gender-queer post-homo-hop musical artist”
6. Through automatic image editing and filters, there is, however, an increasing danger of aesthetics becoming more universal because these tools warp reality and establish and spread stereotypes.
7. In 1992, Sir Mix-a-Lot loved ‘Big Butts’; today, artists like Nicki Minaj love their own butt, putting it and their nipples (Azelia Banks) at the centre of their visual appearance to great effect in the media.
8. Autotune is software for manipulating pitch.
9. The video is x-rated on all popular video platforms.









**Figure 1–2 (pages 41):** The Breaks by Planningtorock.

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWO9LweKzV8> screenshot. Accessed November 30, 2019.

**Figure 3–4 (pages 42):** Exorcise by Gazelle Twin.

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opfewQ2eab8> screenshot. Accessed November 30, 2019.

**Figure 5–6 (pages 43):** Rub by Peaches.

Source: <https://vimeo.com/147527929> screenshot. Accessed November 30, 2019.



**Figure 7–8 (left and right):** Fotzen im Club by SXTN.  
Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NH9HRlyos80>  
screenshot. Accessed November 30, 2019.

**Figure 9–10 (page 46):** Female Vampire by Jenny Hval.  
Screenshots: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVaWc00aZ30](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVaWc00aZ30).  
Accessed November 30, 2019.

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## Bio

**Tanja Godlewsky** is a lecturer at the Institute of Popular Music at the Folkwang University of the Arts (Essen) and founding member of iGDN (international Gender Design Network) in Germany. Taking on board an interdisciplinary approach to design, she has consistently pursued a multifaceted design career. She supports companies and agencies in the development of holistic design concepts. Since 2006, she has also been a teacher and visiting professor at universities, teaching on subjects related to design concepts, identity, and gender design. In addition to gender issues in design, her research and work also focuses on the interfaces of design and music, and on developments in the field of corporate identity of musicians. Tanja also gives talks and presentations and moderates events on various subjects related to design and pop culture.