



*Not for Distribution*

# 5

## weaPons of mass seduction

### Performing Pop Masculinity

To all intents and purposes Harry Styles, unofficial frontman of internationally renowned boy band One Direction, could easily be mistaken for a young Mick Jagger (see Figure 5.1).

The men's good looks, broad smiles, matching windswept hair styles and shared fashion sensibilities bridge a 51-year age gap. Both are singers who have enjoyed the adoration of a passionate fan following, yet in terms of the version of masculinity each represents, the two could not be more different. While Jagger is openly admired by both sexes, few men admit to being fans of Harry Styles whose following is commonly depicted as restricted to teen and pre-teen females. Unlike the older man, Styles radiates a wholesome, good humoured exuberance, appears to genuinely like female company and is never happier than when exalting the women in his life. He also differs from the Rolling Stones leader in showing a marked preference for older female partners, whereas Jagger



figure 5.1 Harry Styles.

is always seen in the company of much younger women.<sup>1</sup> Jagger's androgynous charm is tinged with danger and more than a hint of misogyny: he has a reputation for treating his partners callously, and from the outset, chauvinism, themes of mistrust permeated the Rolling Stones' songbook.<sup>2</sup> The younger singer is also androgynous but his failure to comply with core characteristics of normative masculinity underscores much of the antipathy directed towards, by critics, highlighting deeply entrenched prejudice against those who fail to comply with accepted expressions of gender. As representatives of competing constructions of manliness, the differences between the two could be seen to represent ongoing tensions as society struggles to adapt to the impact of global capitalism, and women's emancipation. Men's position is under attack from various directions to the point that many of the privileges enjoyed by previous generations are being eroded.

During the 1990s, academic enquiry in the field of gender studies threw light on the fragility of masculinity, examining it through the lens of feminist perspectives (Bordo, 1999; Faludi, 2000). Building on Eve Sedgwick's (1985) pioneering work and linking feminism to queer theory scholars—both Judith Butler (2011) and Jack Halberstam (1998) exposed the limitation of conflating masculinity with male gender, creating space for new ways of theorizing gender.<sup>3</sup> These new manifestations of gender found expression in the media-fuelled constructions of the New Man and New Lad identities surfacing in the late twentieth century. In many respects Jagger and Styles could be seen as ambassadors for these different ways of being. With his well-groomed narcissism and sensitive, agreeable demeanour, Styles is closely aligned to the feminized 'New Man' beloved by 1980s media (Mort, 1996). Jagger's foppish identity is equally tinged with feminine qualities but he could hardly be viewed as "sensitive, emotionally aware, respectful of women and egalitarian in outlook" (Gill, 2003: 37). His tempering of effete posturing with misogyny and a desire to dominate and control women connotes old-fashioned perspectives on gender relations, aligning him more closely with the sexism New Lad culture which reacted to the feminizing influences undermining men's authority (Jackson et al., 2001). In this respect he remains a beacon of hope for normative values to a generation of men "battered by feminism" (Faludi, 2000: 594). Nevertheless, in the battlefield of identity politics, some younger men are drawn more to pop masculinity's emotionally literate, female friendly image, particularly those who reject the unreconstructed sexism of ageing rock gods.

Tensions between old and newer ways of enacting gender are never far from the surface in a conflict that finds an expressive outlet in media texts and popular culture: notably in popular cinema, where we are offered a competing spectrum ranging from foppish aesthetes to hyper-masculine beefcakes. To counter feminization, action movie protagonists perform a reflexive sadomasochist version of masculinity via rugged, emotionally inarticulate performances invoking exaggerated displays of physical prowess (Jeffords, 1994). On the other hand,

romantic comedy creates a platform for masculine vulnerability, showing men as insecure, effete and self-protective (Babington and Evans, 1991). These contradictions are mirrored in the sphere of leisure, where some men have turned to feminine-coded hobbies like knitting and ballroom dancing (Merz, 2014; Hawkes, 2013) while at the same time, competitive, aggressive sports such as ‘white collar boxing’ are undergoing a renaissance (Martin, 2016).<sup>4</sup> Clearly the former activities do little to endorse dominance but aggressive sport creates the kind of environment where “individual success, male-male bonds[and] the rejection of the feminine”, can be affirmed (Kibby, 1998: 16).

Popular music performance has always provided a platform for men to experiment with identity, often by espousing dress, gestures and behaviour deemed incompatible within more conventional spheres of employment. Moreover, male artists regularly play with aspects of feminine identity, whether by wholehearted incorporation as in glam rock and new romanticism or by subtle allusion as Hebdige (1979) observed in his study of the mod subculture. There are, however, limits to men’s tolerance of ‘gender-bending’ and whereas artists like David Bowie, Prince or Jagger generally meet with the approval of male fans, the feminized image of young men in boy bands is less universally appealing.

Perhaps the rejection could be attributed to the context of the gender parody—a point elaborated by Butler who writes how:

the sight of a transvestite on stage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence ... On the street or in the bus, the act becomes dangerous, if it does, precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act.

*(Butler, 1988: 363)*

As we are unlikely to encounter men like Bowie employing florid gender parody outside the theatre or concert hall, their actions ultimately pose less of a threat to normative identity than those of the subtly modified image of male pop singers. Furthermore such artists use parody to challenge orthodoxies, imbuing the performance with iconoclastic stature whereas mainstream pop masculinity has more in common with the pastiche abhorred by Frederic Jameson in his study of the undesirable characteristics of postmodernism (Jameson, 1991: 18).

### **Philogynous masculinity**

By avoiding representational extremities and occupying a marginal queer space, pop masculinity’s gender neutrality allows performers to occupy a position both within and beyond the patriarchal sphere. Thus, despite superficial visual similarities, Jagger’s “effete dandyism” and his attempts to take up the privileges of femininity connote the “cruel machismo” of patriarchy (Reynolds and Press,

1996: 14) whereas Styles' more benign gender neutrality represents a symbolic nod in the direction of egalitarianism. Here the men's images represent opposite extremities of a "fundamental conflict in the male psyche – between the desire to break the umbilical cord and a desire to return to the womb, between matricide and incest" identified by Simon Reynolds and Joy Press (1996: 385). It is suggested that this ambivalence towards women is manifested in either "love and aggression ... in misogyny and philogyny" (Smith and Ferstman, 1996: 197). The conflict finds expression in the visual apparatus, performance styles, music and song lyrics of rock and pop with pop rejecting the overtly misogynistic strategies employed by rock and metal musicians to reproduce "the hegemonic strategies of control and repression" via fantasies of dominance" (Walser, 2015: 117–20). Instead male pop singers manifest a heightened and potentially pathological love of women defined by the Greek philosopher Cicero, as philogyny.<sup>5</sup> If misogynistic popular music texts symbolically denigrate women, pop's protestations of love and longing reinstate their primacy by cementing a desire to be at one with things feminine.

In a tragic example of philogyny, driven by desire for his mother, Oedipus the mythical king of Thebes kills his own father, ultimately courting disaster in Sophocles' Athenian tragedy *Oedipus Rex*: having committed patricide and incest, he resorts to gouging out his eyes (Vellacott, 1971). Extreme cultural resistance to expressions of Oedipal desire is reflected not only in a universal prohibition of incestuous dyads, but also in the ridicule directed at adult men who are too close to their mothers. During the early twentieth century Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory drew heavily on the Oedipal myth, notably in his studies of the subconscious where he explored how dreams resolve internal conflicts. Within *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) for example, Freud claimed that children experience homo- and heterosexual urges directed initially at parents as the earliest love object. Eventually, however, a boy begins to desire only his mother, recognizing that father stands between him and the object of his affection, thereby presenting an apparently irreconcilable conflict (Nevid, 2011: 388).

The resultant struggle leads to anger, fear, and problems identifying with adult male figures because in order to accomplish union with his mother a boy fantasizes subconsciously about killing his father. In healthy males desire for mother is displaced onto other women but if left unresolved, Freud proposed the Oedipal complex would result in serious psychosomatic disturbance (Phelan, 2005: 90–9). Pop singers in boy bands appear to resolve the Oedipal dilemma by abandoning the corporeality of some competing genres. Whereas rock stars are presented as preoccupied with sexual satisfaction and gaining power through physical, sexual domination, pop's male sexuality "is transformed into a spiritual yearning carrying only hints of sexual interaction" (Frith and McRobbie, 1990: 375). By idealizing and worshipping women from afar, always from a vantage point of pubescent boyhood, the dilemma of

forbidden desire is partially resolved. Staying trapped in a perpetual state of conflicted youth, adoring women and desiring their love from a distance, the demands of adult masculinity to fulfil sexual desire can be avoided.

Investing in romance, the pre-sexual precursor to physical intimacy, allows pop's singers to fantasize about the delights of lovemaking without ever consummating the prohibited dyad. Hence while heavy metal secures protection from the feared other through the practice of 'exscription' of the feminine sphere (Walser, 2015: 115), pop masculinity's longing for attachment find expression via textual and performance codes classified as feminine (MacDonald, 2013; Moos, 2013; Wald, 2002; Jamieson, 2007).<sup>6</sup> By drawing upon cultural texts and practices normally rejected by patriarchy, philogyny offers a refreshing contrast to the chauvinism commonly witnessed in popular music culture. According to Christian Groes-Green this is accomplished by employing female-friendly strategies including:

male narratives and gender configurations, as elusive or limited as they may be, which divert from predominantly misogynous masculinities and which delineate forms of manhood that favor female subjects' rights to agency, security, respect and well-being in gender equitable ways.

*(Groes-Green, 2012 293)*

One powerful means of demonstrating respect for women is by venerating mothers – a tremendous outpouring of admiration regularly manifested within fan magazines, websites and interviews, where the young men are never happier than when speaking in quasi-Oedipal terms about their mums. In a *Take That* pop annual, the boys are invited to give a description of their mother: an opportunity used to speak in the most loving terms, drawing forth responses such as: “She’s the best, she’s absolutely beautiful looking. She’s kind, caring – very kind, very caring and she’d always put us before herself”, “She’s very caring and loving” and “She’s very sensitive ... she’s so lovely” (Kadis, 1994: 22). A recent newspaper article revealed the extent of Harry Styles’ attachment to his mother by informing readers: “He’s a mummy’s boy ... Sometimes, he phones up to five times a day. When there’s a time difference, he tends to text saying, ‘I love you, Mum,’ or ‘I miss you’” (Percival, 2012). Images portraying Styles show him fondly embracing his mother, who to all intents and purposes looks like she might even be his girlfriend.

It is hard to imagine members of the rock community exalting their mothers in such a manner: indeed, rock discourse invokes dismissive terms like ‘old lady’, ‘chick’ and ‘groupie’ as a way of diminishing the important role female partners and lovers play in men’s lives.<sup>7</sup> Open exhibitions of heterosexual excess are similarly avoided in favour of a pure and chaste image of boyish innocence. Even if the chastity is a fiction, by remaining archetypal ‘mother’s boys’ the artists are safely rendered “non-phallic”, a sexually inoperative state ensuring they

are neither a threat to women or male peers (Jagodzinski, 2005: 152). These performances of filial fondness and sexual restraint contradict the societal demand that men deny reliance on women, distinguishing pop's masculinity from gender identities forged around maligning, mistrusting or maintaining distance from the opposite sex.<sup>8</sup>

### **incorporating the feminine**

The philogynous inclinations of pop masculinity also find expression via dress, voice and embodied gestures where feminine signifiers are appropriated and embraced as a form of gender homage. Although other male artists commandeer elements of feminine identity, pop's flirtation serves a very different purpose than it does in, for example, heavy metal or glam rock where exaggerated parody veers more towards the kind of gender disorder enacted in the medieval practice of 'misrule'. In these ceremonies transvestism was carried out mainly by men disguised as grotesque females in the belief that a man could achieve sexual strength by temporarily impersonating a woman.

Through grotesque submission, he would learn dominance; through misrule, he might learn rule; through a brief ironic concession to 'petticoat government', he would learn not androgynous wholeness but male mastery.

*(Gilbert, 1980: 397).*

Rather than resorting to drag to ameliorate fear of the other, the boys play down hyperbolic camp parody due to its preference for "images of female excess which are blatantly misogynistic" (Robertson, 1996: 5). They prefer instead to pay a more cautious and restrained tribute.<sup>9</sup> Instead of emphasizing difference, the boys magnify similarities between the sexes: gently modifying masculine features and wearing unisex clothing. By exhibiting unmanly qualities such as "self-pity, vulnerability and need" (Frith and McRobbie, 1990: 375) they ensure the gender inversion lacks hostility.

A particularly effective means of articulating messages in the "expressive equipment" employed to create a façade, Alison Lurie (1981) identifies clothing as one of the most potent modes of communication. In popular music culture, dress code is used to anchor an artist's image within a genre's sartorial conventions, thereby demonstrating allegiance to any incumbent ideology. Hence male rock stars gravitate towards individualistic, casual clothing made from strong, rugged materials like denims or leather to support the notion that they are manly. The rejection of a potentially threatening adult male identity has the effect of rendering pop masculinity safe as can be seen in images depicting artists in boy bands as playful and unthreatening - not unlike the young women Goffman (1979) described in his famous study of advertising imagery which showed women as passive and subordinate to males.



The passivity of these poses contravene traditions dictating that men manifest an element of toughness or dominance because in its hegemonic guise masculinity represents

a set of values, established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organize society in gender unequal ways. It combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy.

*(Jewkes et al., 2015: 40).*

It is not unusual to see artists in boy bands making use of props such as puppies and toys to imply that they will do no harm. Expressing playfulness and the vulnerability of childhood challenges the assumption that men must be: “unemotional (except for rage and anger) [or] present themselves as invulnerable, autonomous, independent, strong, rational, logical, dispassionate, knowledgeable, always right, and in command of every situation, especially those involving women” (Johnson, 2005: 14). The rejection of these qualities creates an overall impression which adapts pop masculinity to comply with an environment where men's privileges are under threat and overt attempts to dominate others are less desirable.

### **deploying erotic capital**

The boys also employ their youthful good looks to promote the positive qualities of pop masculinity. Throughout history women have used beauty as a source of ammunition in an overall arsenal of feminine wiles to capture men of all ages, and scholarly studies suggest that social value is accrued incrementally as a direct result of sexual attractiveness (Green, 2018b; Hakim, 2010). The term ‘erotic capital’ is evoked to describe, “the quality and quantity of attributes that an individual possesses which elicit an erotic response in another”—an area that cultural theorists have tended to ignore in their omission of the importance of beauty in all areas of social life (Green, 2008a). Moreover, Hakim contends, erotic capital's significance is magnified within sexualized, individualized modern societies, where both men and women are under intense pressure to look good. Nevertheless, she goes on “women have a longer tradition of developing and exploiting it, and studies regularly find women to have greater erotic appeal than men” (Hakim, 2010: 499).

The mobilization of good looks gives young men a trump card in a hegemonic pecking order where they take full advantage of the seductive quality of aesthetically pleasing features. Whereas older men can flaunt maturity or wealth in the erotic economy, today's young men are exploiting youthful good looks to gain an advantage over ageing competitors. In the case of women,

a combination of beauty, charm and emotional intelligence was viewed as a compensation for a lack of physical strength or wealth and Hakim suggests that since men are supposedly motivated by sexual desire, it is women who have capitalized most on trading erotic currency. However, now that they have more personal and sexual freedom, they too are equally susceptible to the ego enhancement conferred by the attentions of a good-looking, younger male partner. Thus, regardless of whether they are socially or economically inferior, a young man's good looks and healthy physique are highly valued, not just by teenage girls, but by older women too.

Like men before them, financially independent older women seek handsome younger partners to bolster their status: hence the emergence of the 'cougar', a term describing mature, female sexual predators who prey on young men (Gibson, 2002; Montemurro and Siefken, 2014). A study of the phenomenon points out how histories of love, sex and marriage formerly played down women's sexuality on the grounds that couple formation was viewed to be an economic transaction (Lawton et al., 2010). It was generally assumed men would take the lead in pursuing female partners but nowadays some women have sufficient financial power and social stature to ensnare younger men, as the high-profile cougars Madonna, Jordan and Cheryl Cole have demonstrated recently.<sup>10</sup> A wealthy woman can afford to disregard her potential partner's income, choosing instead to be guided by feelings of sexual attraction and a desire to exhibit social power.<sup>11</sup>

Without wishing to endorse the view that male pop singers are less talented than their rock, metal or counterparts, it could be argued that if such a deficit existed, attractive features and a fit body might well compensate. As Hakim points out, like an economic endowment, erotic capital is "an especially important asset for people with few intellectual abilities and qualifications" (Hakim 2010). Young male pop singers are unlikely to have gained advanced educational qualifications and, certainly in the UK, the artists usually have relatively humble origins.<sup>12</sup> In this context, handsome features may be viewed as an alternative form of currency allowing the boys to gain entry into an employment sector where wealth increasingly determines success (Maconie, 2015).

### **communicating the codes of romance**

In addition to good looks, pop's men rely heavily on romance as a prop in the performative toolbox even though it is acknowledged that for many of us, love is a major source of personal misery, unfulfilled hopes and disappointment (Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky, 2008: 3). This suggests the romantic emphasis is at odds with the wider corpus of popular music, where allusions to the word love have diminished significantly since the 2000s (Smiler et al., 2017: 1083–105). Nevertheless, the theme forms an essential aspect of the expressive equipment, cementing the boys' position as harbingers of romance. More particularly, slow,

sentimental ballads – defined by Dave Laing (1969: 51) as “the mainstay of popular song” – allow them to dwell intensely on the subject.<sup>13</sup>

Mainstream pop does not have a monopoly on the subject of love because it is a universal topic within the meta genre of popular music. Even in the testosterone-fuelled sphere of heavy metal, artists will occasionally employ some, “suitably sappy songs with which to celebrate true (lustless) love” (Frith and McRobbie, 1990: 382).<sup>14</sup> What is distinctive about pop masculinity, is its rejection of purely sexual expressions of Eros or anything incompatible with the ideology of romance, hence politically sensitive or existential themes are avoided. Rather than eulogizing the virtues of world peace, demanding an end to war or insisting on instant sexual gratification, they woo the audience with earnest protestations of undying love. In this respect boy bands encroach upon the subject matter of female artists who sing more about love than they do about sex (Dukes et al., 2003).

Romantic narratives communicated via the “preparatory literature” of girls’ magazines, used to be viewed as the sole preserve of young women, propelling them towards limited socially proscribed roles (Willinsky and Hunniford, 1993). Entering territory traditionally designated as feminine and harking back to the tradition of romantic love makes sense at a social juncture when traditional masculinity is under attack. Boy bands fly in the face of evidence that at least half the marriages taking place in the UK will end in divorce,<sup>15</sup> but at least pop masculinity highlights how ithyphallic, macho posturing is losing currency in today’s social climate. Women are showing they can survive economically and socially without a husband and that they, more than men, are nowadays likely to initiate divorce proceedings (Brinig and Allen, 2000). Taking the changing gender dynamics into account, emotionally literate masculinity resonates better with a generation of women conditioned to “expect more from men, and not make excuses for those who don’t call, are married, cheat, treat them poorly, or refuse to commit” (Lukas, 2006: 15). Now they are making such significant social and economic gains, and are no longer as reliant on the universal solution of romance, it could be argued that baton should be passed to young men. By placing faith in romantic love, youths show that they too are vulnerable and lack the power and agency traditionally assigned to men. In paying attention to their appearance they adopt the previously feminine-coded strategy of trading good looks and a pleasant demeanour in exchange for the love and protection of a partner. Perhaps this is why the repertoire almost entirely avoids the corporeality witnessed in R&B and classic rock in favour of hand-holding or chaste kissing.

Raising the stature of chastity in this way, the boys demonstrate that they are more in tune with a major cultural shift because: “As the symbolic value of romantic love in Western Societies has gained ever-greater currency during the twentieth century, so celibacy itself has become romanticized” (Sobo and Bell, 2001: 16). Indeed, a contemporary study (Twenge et al., 2015: 2273–85) reveals that despite greater sexual freedom, availability of online porn and new dating

apps, young millennials are less likely to have had sex than previous generations and more are keen to embrace sexual abstinence as a lifestyle choice. After decades of hypersexualized rhetoric, the promotion of sexual restraint represents a refreshing departure from unrelenting pressure to engage in physical intimacy whatever the emotional cost. In this social context, the elevation of romance might be viewed as liberating to both sexes, but particularly so for young girls who are coerced by the media into unwanted sexual intimacy (Gurney-Read, 2015).<sup>16</sup>

### **the ideology of romance**

Placed under deeper scrutiny, the ideology of romantic love promotes a set of unrealistic standards centred around love's profundity, the loved one's uniqueness and the purity of this particular version of love. All of these qualities are exemplified in the song 'As Long as You Love Me' (1997), where the Backstreet Boys proclaim they are prepared to risk all in exchange for love on entering a relationship with a relative stranger: "Don't care what is written in your history as long as you're here with me. I don't care who you are, where you're from, what you did, as long as you love me." In 'I Promise You' (2000), \*NSYNC also pledge eternal love and steadfast support for a loved one during times of trouble in the lines: "I've loved you forever in lifetimes before. And I promise you never will you hurt anymore. I give you my word – I give you my heart."

Pop masculinity's romantic love also involves a great deal of suffering and levels of masochism rarely tolerated willingly within masculine culture. For Boyz II Men, the pursuit of love takes on an increasingly masochistic turn in the heart-wrenching ballad 'End of the Road' (1993), where a narrator describes how dejected he feels on finding a girlfriend has cheated with another. Even so, the infidelity fails to extinguish his deep love and instead of blaming her or threatening to end the relationship, he continues to offer loving support:

Girl, I'm here for you all those times at night  
When you just hurt me and just ran out with that other fella  
Baby I knew about it, I just didn't care  
You just don't understand how much I love. Do you? I'm here for you

Themes of loving reassurance are offered to a shy girl in One Direction's 'What Makes You Beautiful' (2011), where the boys endorse her beauty to help the girl gain confidence: "If only you saw what I can see. You'll understand why I want you so desperately. Right now I'm looking at you and I can't believe you don't know, Oh oh, you don't know you're beautiful". In another example, 'Save You Tonight' (2011) a girl is advised that even though her heart is about to be broken by another man, rather than blaming her for making a poor choice, the boys offer chivalrous support: "I wanna save you. Wanna save your heart tonight. He'll only break you. Leave you torn apart, oh. I can't be no superman. But for you I'll be super human."

Similar themes of chivalry, masochistic suffering and renunciation of the male ego pervade many songs and is easy to dismiss the contents as little more than muzac. However it could be argued that pop's reconstitution of masculine identity uses dignified suffering and the co-option of aspects of femininity to reinstate men's hegemonic position under a new guise. As Connell (1995: 76) reminds us, when under threat, hegemonic masculinity will do whatever is necessary to remain at the apex of power. Yet it is also possible to see the promotion of newfound sensitivity as a strategic form of adaptation. Mary Brinton (2009) suggests that changes in the job market have created a lost generation of men, whose lack of access to secure employment has led to the latest 'crisis' of masculinity in the west (Clare, 2010; Hearn, 1999; McDowell, 2000). A high number of young men are resorting to suicide to deal with their unhappiness and feelings of uselessness.<sup>17</sup> The depth of their difficulties is illustrated by the launch of a Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) designed to support men experiencing depression, challenging cultural pressure preventing them from expressing fear and vulnerability.<sup>18</sup>

### **embodying Pop masculinity**

Dance aids the overall performance by providing a visually compelling exhibition, designed to influence the audience's interpretation of the songs. The male body's capacity to articulate masculine identity was examined in studies of classic heavy metal where a muscular physique, emblematic of physical labouring, was found to signify strength and power to a generation of men who conflated "achievement in the world of paid work with proving their manhood" (Willis, 1999).<sup>19</sup> The Rambo-esque proportions of 1980s metal artists attempted to raise masculine capital through evidence of muscularity but in the twenty-first century, posing as a redundant labourer lacks cultural purchase. The pop body's promotion of a lean and undeveloped ectomorph physique, less equipped for the rigours of manual labour, is more suited to the demands of a post-1980s workforce. The gender wage gap has narrowed to the point "today's young women are the first in modern history to start their work lives at near parity with men" (Pew Research Center, 2013: 2). There is also a growing mismatch between the technical and practical skills traditionally offered by men and those now required. Moreover, the "available employment and labor options tend increasingly to characterize activities associated, rightly or wrongly, with women" – changing patterns of employment have led to "an increasing proportion of women occupying the jobs" (Standing, 1999: 583).

Structural changes within the job market make the workplace more competitive than ever leading to greater disparity between top and bottom earners. In a neoliberal working environment, characterized by zero-hour contracts, where opportunities for promotion are few and far between, emotional labour outweighs physical strength (Felstead et al., 2007). Here the ectomorphic body

and emotional intelligence are better aligned to “labor that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response” (Hardt and Negri, 2005: 108) than in the past.<sup>20</sup>

Increasingly since the 1980s, media imagery has portrayed the male body as a source of visual pleasure for the mainstream audience (Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 1999). As a result, fit, sculpted torsos are being used to sell everything from cars to clothing (Pope et. al., 2001), yet for men who lack these qualities, the inability to achieve a similar degree of bodily perfection is becoming a source of considerable unhappiness.

Images of contoured, sculpted torsos, over-whitened teeth and fake tans are unreal and bring with them anxieties. Younger men feel they cannot live up to them and some older men feel this degree of self-absorption is weirdly emasculating.

*(Moore, 2014)*

According to one source, “the percentage of US men who express dissatisfaction with their bodies rose from 15% in 1972 to 43% in 1996” (Garner, 1997: 30–44). Pornography used to be a male preserve, so the appearance of magazines filled with images of fit and toned male bodies is disconcerting to say the least. More so when the images are presented as a rich source of visual enjoyment for women and gay men.

Ectomorphic, toned bodies and artificially enhanced features are central to pop’s masculine aesthetic perhaps because there is less capacity to emphasize virtuoso musicianship. By identifying with the powerful presence and virtuoso skills of male rock protagonists, men may achieve a sense of omnipotence but eroticized dance and the pitiful sight of men yearning, fails to defend masculine authority (McDonald, 2013). Such melodramatic suffering is deemed unmanly because in melodrama, masochistic identification is typically experienced from a female point of view (Kuhn, 2007). Wald (2002) points out how, “male teenybopper performers display a feminized masculinity that constructs male fan desire as homoerotic”, further problematizing the dance spectacle by aligning straight men with gay male spectators. For straight men, the prospect of being looked at by same-sex peers creates insecurity, not unlike that experienced by homosexual men within gay culture where,

the physical body is held in such high esteem and given such power, body fascism then not only deems those who don’t or can’t conform to be sexually less desirable, but in the extreme – sometimes dubbed “look-sism” – also deems an individual completely worthless as a person, based solely on his exterior.

*(Signorile, 1997: 28)*

Like the gay men who ask: “Why is it that every time I see a beautiful man I feel self-loathing instead of pleasure?” (Wood, 2004: 44), the all-male visual spectacle prompts a degree of self-conscious reflection which is avoided when the gaze is directed at women.

As it is designated a feminine activity, unless men exhibit an acceptably masculine performance, the all-male dance spectacle creates certain challenges in that custom dictates individuality and self-direction if men perform with their fellows. During the 1970s the punk dance style of pogoing, was acceptably manly due to its active and aggressive character. Although men often danced in same sex groups, each man could be seen to act in a self-directed manner. Similarly, in the mod subculture men would dance alongside one another but with the aim of showing off personal proficiency or knowledge of the latest steps in a competitive way. Men were attracted to the Backstreet Boys and East 17 in the 1990s due to the fact that both groups accessed masculine cultural capital by integrating individualized and dynamic street dance moves into group performance.

### **technological ineptitude and Vocal transvestism**

If subtle transvestism does little to secure gravitas or symbolic power, a dearth of technological aptitude fails to align pop singers with ‘real men’ who are distinguished by their ability to manipulate technology (Cockburn, 1985). In Marian Leonard’s words, there is a “culturally understood ‘fit’ between masculinity and the ‘mastery’ of ‘complex’ technologies” (Leonard, 2017: 1). Rock’s protagonists demonstrate competence by controlling a complex array of equipment – from amplifiers and synthesizers, to wah-wah pedals and theremins. By contrast singing love songs sweetly in harmony does little to affirm masculinity, especially when relying heavily on the ambiguous capacity of the tenor range to communicate gender identity. In this regard choral singing is especially problematic – as it neither constructs nor defends hegemonic masculinity, consigning the practice to the margins of respectable manly behaviour (Adler, 2001).<sup>21</sup> Presumably for these reasons rock, rap and metal vocalists reject the ‘choral approach’ in favour of harsh and abrasive speech or screaming, shouting and rasping vocal styles (Walser, 2015; Shepherd, 2003).

The signification of manliness is amplified by use of a lower register, more suggestive of an adult, male presence. We can see that during the 1950s when gender roles were more strictly delineated, the rich baritone voices of solo artists such as Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash commonly graced the radio. Likewise, within early vocal harmony groups, bass singers produced deep harmonies and the Cadillacs, the Flamingos and Marcells even featured a bass lead singer.<sup>22</sup> There are a few exceptions of course, but since the 1960s, the popularity of masculine sounding baritone and bass voices has diminished to

the point that tenors now dominate in pop (Shepherd and Horn, 2012: 189).<sup>23</sup> Contemporary vocal groups usually intersperse tenor with outbursts of falsetto – an even higher register that, like high-pitched voices of boys between the ages of eight and 14, is interchangeable with the female voice, therefore connoting an absence of manly virility. In doing so they further cement their abjection. A contributor to a rock forum writes: “When I was younger I liked boy bands. But then ... I realized they all sound like girls when they sing” (Crunchyroll, 2005). Such comments illustrate that the tenacity of the cultural embargo on vocal cross-dressing is undeniable.

Boys are often reluctant to sing high notes when they approach their teen years and when rock singers employ the use of falsetto, it is tempered by alternative means of affirming adult masculinity (Ashley, 2006: 199).<sup>24</sup> However playing a guitar assists in shoring up masculine identity because “the electric guitar ... ensures the integrity of the performing male body ... as a phallus clearly disassociated from the penis, it produces the appearance of male potency” (Waksman, 2001: 247). Without the presence of instrumental hardware, singers in boy bands are effectively naked, making them vulnerable to the feminizing gaze, via a signifying chain of “voice-body-sex-woman-display” (Middleton, 2006: 94). If no compensatory strategies are invoked, male pop singers run the risk of appearing sexually inoperative.<sup>25</sup>

Pressure to connote manly behaviour by means of the phallus has allowed it to become the body’s primary signifier of “aggressive, violent, penetrating, goal directed” masculinity (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, 1994: 239). However as “passive, receptive, enclosing” vehicles, a testicular version of masculinity permits incorporation of hitherto hidden femininity within the male psyche. Characterized by “patience, stability and endurance”, the testicular mode is experienced when men are “nurturing, incubating, containing and protecting” (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, 1994: 250). In many respects pop masculinity embraces and expresses such traits, expressing them in songs through themes showing patience, the desire to nurture a loved one or determination to rekindle lost love.

For instance, the protagonist in Take That’s ‘Pray’ (1993) begs forgiveness for failing to show sufficient love to a partner, illustrating the depth of his despair by revealing how he resorts to nightly prayer in desperation and regret at the loss of a valued relationship. “All I do each night is pray. Hoping that I’ll be a part of you again someday.” A similar theme of enduring love and a desire to care and protect is expressed in the Menudo song ‘Because of Love’ (1984) where after reflecting on love’s existential significance, the narrator extols his capacity to extend the emotion in times of need: “If you ever feel afraid let love chase your fears away ... When the load’s too hard to bear you’ll always find someone who cares. Don’t cry cos love will be there.” The classic Boyz II Men ballad ‘I Will Get There’ (1998) provides further evidence of the nurturing protective mode of masculinity. Expressing loss and intense emotional pain,



the song proclaims faith in love's capacity to enable the suffering to carry on: a theme echoed in the chorus: "I will get there, I will get there. I will get there, I will get there somehow ... Nothing's stoppin' me now. I will get through the night and make it through to the other side." We are left in no doubt of the narrator's sincerity or his determination to be reunited with his lost love.

### challenging the conventions of the gaze

Although the politics of looking are conditioned by the cinematic apparatus, there are parallels in the gaze of the music audience in that "whenever men perform they are, to some extent, objectified and feminized because they are put in the position of being looked at, rather than being in the dominant position of looking" (Sweeney, 1994: 51). Among the poses adopted by boy bands in promotional imagery many resemble those identified by Erving Goffman (1979) who noted that the submissive portrayal of women in advertisements mirrored their social subjugation. The acquiescence of pop masculinity challenges the demand that men dominate others – whether by means of physical strength, or acting aggressively during interpersonal conflict (Norman, 2017: 968). Dominance is typically portrayed by standing upright because "holding the body erect and the head high is stereotypically a mark of unashamedness, superiority, and disdain" (Goffman, 1979: 40). Exaggerated dominant postures are employed in heavy metal where we are accustomed to seeing "swaggering males, leaping and strutting about the stage [and] punctuating their performance with phallic thrusts of guitars and microphone stands" (Walser, 2015: 109).

Whatever style of performance men adopt, they invite the gaze of the male audience, thereby creating something of a dilemma because, according to Mary Ann Doane (2003) a man's desire for a woman normally underpins the performance situation. The point is elaborated by Laura Mulvey:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact.

*(Mulvey 2009: 11)*

Walter Benjamin's contention that, "Looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze" (2011: 184) sums up the dilemma. Unlike in cinema, the performer's gaze in music videos is typically directed directly towards viewers, acknowledging their presence and, in doing so, forcing them to respond in some way. This establishes a relationship between artist and spectator that can be especially uncomfortable

for men who are conditioned not to look at their peers for erotic pleasure, a point explained by Moos who suggests that:

The homoerotic implications or subtexts inherent to the performance of boy band masculinity – or in short: their “homo potential” – can function as a danger or threat towards hegemonic, heterosexual, or heteronormative masculinities ... as well as the fear of one’s own potentially homosexual desires, which frequently create a strong demand to distance oneself from boy band culture.

*(Moos, 2013)*

These issues arise within pop videos, compelling performers to navigate the conventions of the gaze. Moos (2013) shows how in ‘Quit Playing Games (With My Heart)’ (1999) gender-neutral, blond singer Nick Carter plays with his hair, rocking to and fro, lightly touching his cheeks, while the other boys reveal glistening and toned bodies as they cavort together in the rain. By referencing Madonna’s ‘voguing’ dance moves, he simultaneously connotes a style of dancing popular with the contemporary gay community, thereby distancing himself from straight males for whom the performance is problematic.

A similar dilemma surfaces in examples such as Take That’s queer performance in the video accompanying ‘Pray’, where Paul McDonald notes the way close-ups of sculpted and shirtless bodies emphasize the band members’ youthful good looks, providing a visual spectacle ostensibly designed to appeal to gay males and female spectators (McDonald, 2013). Similar homoerotic readings are invited in ‘These Days’ (2014), which shows the boys sharing a bed wearing only underwear, exposing bare legs and offering up their bodies to an eroticized gaze. The fact they are portrayed being preened in a beauty salon, enjoying spray tans and hair styling, further underscores their preparation for and intention to be looked at.

Male beautification has reached baroque proportions in some quarters of the boy band community – notably in K-Pop where it is exemplified via flawless skin, artificially coloured hair and kohl-lined eyes. Men are under pressure to maintain a pleasing appearance, leading to increased demand for grooming products and men’s cosmetic surgery, a market that expanded by an average of 5 per cent over each of the past ten years (Miskavets, 2013). As a result, increasing numbers of straight millennials are prepared to subject themselves to an element of self-improvement even though being preened evokes an erotic subtext.

## notes

- 1 Styles has a penchant for older women and has dated a string of 30-somethings including Lucy Horobin, Caroline Flack and Kimberly Stewart. He also enjoys a close relationship with his mother and happily accompanies her to public places. Whereas

- Mick Jagger, at the age of 74, dated 23-year-old Noor Alfallah, who is younger than five of his children.
- 2 The songs 'Under My Thumb', 'Stupid Girl', 'This Could be the Last Time', 'Some Girls' and 'Gunface' are among others which illustrate this tendency.
  - 3 More recently Carrie Paechter (2006) critiques Halberstam for reifying masculinity without first explaining precisely what it is.
  - 4 The practice of knitting is endorsed by celebrities such as Nicholas Hoult and Ryan Gosling. In 2013 the Oxford Street branch of John Lewis responded to increased interest by offering knitting classes for men only. According to Dance UK (2017), 76 per cent of men believe dancing is a good way to keep fit and 10 per cent have taken classes.
  - 5 A term drawing on the Greek for philo, meaning loving and gyne, referring to females.
  - 6 It is acknowledged that heavy metal artists may use appropriation of the feminine within their performance but to a different end (Walser, 2015: 361).
  - 7 As recently as 2015 Keith Richards referred to his wife of 34 years as "the old lady" (Chilton, 2015).
  - 8 Walser (2015: 108–36) provides a detailed discussion of these strategies in the chapter 'Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender', in *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*.
  - 9 Notably in the indie scene where male artists are more comfortable embracing signifiers of femininity.
  - 10 From 2016 to 2018, Cole was in a relationship with an erstwhile member of the boy band One Direction who is ten years her junior. In 2017 Madonna was reportedly dating a man 27 years younger than herself.
  - 11 Providing evidence in support of the trend, Valerie Gibson's (2002) book *Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men* offers advice and practical tactics for the senior seductress.
  - 12 John Lennon's background was relatively middle-class but the rest of the Beatles were from humbler families. In one of the classic boy bands of the 1990s, the members of East 17 were all drawn from working-class backgrounds. Tony Mortimer of East 17's mother was a cleaner and Brian Harvey was a plumber.
  - 13 Dukes et al. (2003) found a decline in references to romantic love versus more overtly sexual themes in popular song since the 1960s.
  - 14 See research on song themes by Christenson et al. (1998), who looked at Top 40 songs between 1980 and 1990 and Edwards (1994), whose research focused on Top 20 chart music in the period 1980–89. Their combined findings established the presence of references to love in at least two-thirds of the songs sampled in their respective projects. The persistence of the love themes in contemporary popular music is noted by Madanikia and Bartholomew (2014) whose findings echo the earlier studies.
  - 15 Office for National Statistics, Divorces in England and Wales 2012, February 2014.
  - 16 A report found that four in ten teenage schoolgirls felt pressured into having sex or engaging in other forms of sexual activity and many claimed to have been physically or emotionally abused or raped by boyfriends (Gurney-Read, 2015).
  - 17 Suicide is now one of the biggest cause of death in men under the age of 50, a statistic some observers attribute to a combination of unemployment, low pay and limited opportunities.
  - 18 In 2016 the organization received over 60,000 calls for help, preventing around 400 suicides (Gunning, 2017).
  - 19 Deena Weinstein notes how "Muscle building is a hobby of many metal fans [whose] concentration on their arms creates the look of the idealized blue collar worker" (Weinstein, 2000: 130).

- 20 According to OECD data, since 1971, both the UK and Australia saw their share of manufacturing drop by two-thirds. In Germany since the 1980s, manufacturing's contribution to gross domestic product fell from 30 per cent to 22 per cent. Even South Korea saw a fall in jobs in the manufacturing sector (Rabie, 2018).
- 21 No doubt this helps to explain why men are so reluctant to take part in choral singing (Hall, 2005; Adler, 2003). All studies to date, show that in community choirs, female singers significantly outnumber men (Bell, 2004: 39). According to Julia Koza, their reluctance reflects a longstanding shift in the perception of singing as a predominantly masculine pursuit, to a feminine one (Koza, 1993: 212).
- 22 As did Motown group the Temptations.
- 23 Some exceptions to the rule include pop singing baritones Scott Walker, Neil Diamond, David Bowie, George Ezra, Rag 'n' Bone Man and soul singers Barry White and Isaac Hayes, whose vocal ranges span even lower registers.
- 24 There is a body of literature supporting the view of singing as a feminized cultural form unsuitable for boys (Mancuso, 1983; Ross, 1995; Demorest, 2000).
- 25 In Mick Jagger's case, his alleged misogyny may be seen as a compensatory strategy.

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