

"PJ Harvey and Music Video Performance"

Abigail Gardner

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"And there was trouble taking place" – this short line from a PJ Harvey song fits perfectly to the central message of Abigail Gardner's book on Harvey's music video performance. According to the author's premise, Harvey is somehow causing "trouble". Consequently, Gardner focuses on how this trouble manifests itself and how it can be theorised within the context of music videos. In doing so, she concentrates on (troublesome) topics such as desire, abortion, infanticide, murder, war or nation, which were featured in Harvey's work over the last quarter-century. Moreover, the author assumes that there is something new at play in Harvey's video performances. According to Gardner, common models of gendered identity constructions, which were hitherto used to analyse women in popular music, had trouble with this "new" and failed to capture it. Therefore, the book pursues two objectives: It aims to present a detailed critical analysis of the video work of one of Britain's premier musicians and it re-conceptualises and extends established concepts from both feminist and queer theory as well as models from film and video scholarship.

From monsters, mothers and divas to nation and Englishness

Against the above mentioned rich thematic background of the musician, Gardner focuses on ten of Harvey's music videos. With an insightful feminist reading she opens up room to consider how Harvey plays around with images of femininity, gender identity, desire and sexuality. From a gender-theoretical perspective it is utterly intriguing how the analysis presents Harvey's performances as causing trouble with visualised memories of archetypes of femininity and as forcing their reconceptions: Whether she is performing the mother, the lover, the murderess, the (male) rock star or the diva; she resists, confuses and does not fit to the expected patriarchal and (hetero) normative parameters.

However, Gardner goes beyond simply positioning Harvey as disruptive, meaning that she somehow interferes with the conventional ways of behaving as a woman. According to the author, present theoretical models – whether from gender and queer studies (Rivière, Irigaray, Butler) or models used by feminist media theorists (Burns/Lafrance, Whiteley) – fail to capture what is original about Harvey's mostly humorous, parodic and ironic performances. Gardner argues that Harvey's video performances problematise the dialectical nature of adaption versus disruption

and subversion. Thus, she comprehends disruption no longer as a rupture that operates within a model of resistance or recuperation, but as more radically deconstructionist of the very frameworks within which such dialectics take place.

At the end of her study, Gardner turns to Harvey's more recent preoccupations with questions about history, place – specifically England –, national identity and war, and the author shows how her work adds to political debates. Here too, Gardner traces how Harvey's work challenges common understandings – in this case the understanding of the past and the imagination of nation – by means of her conversations and renegotiations with national and transatlantic musical, with cultural memory and with visual and lyrical heritages.

Not only for Harvey admirers

Readers do not have to be Harvey fans in order to be attracted by the interdisciplinarily designed study, that offers an impressive insight into popular music. There may be some over-interpretation of the musician's intentions, and – from a gender theoretical point of view – there are surprising omissions when it comes to Harvey's latest video clips on England, history and war. But one of the main strengths of the book – apart from the fact that it is the first academic book to present a detailed critical analysis of Harvey's confrontational video work – is the extension of established concepts from feminist theory and models from film and video scholarship.

In sum, Gardner's study is driven by the contention that there is a value in analysing Harvey's video performances. The musician's work questioned what it means to be feminine and to desire, and it has recently turned to offering reflections on national identity. Such questions are crucially significant...and when it comes to such topics, trouble is taking place.

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Tipp

Abigail Gardner wird im Rahmen von "Tanz in Bern" an der Podiumsdiskussion vom 8. November 2017 teilnehmen (Siehe S. 15).