POWER, RESISTANCE, AND SUBVERSION
The boundaries of representing gender benders in popular visual culture

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Abstract

Both within contemporary academic and societal discourses gender benders are almost always situated at the margins. From this position they subvert and reaffirm the hegemonisation of dichotomous gender roles. In both discourses gender bending is read as set of subversive practices. Largely based on the theories of Judith Butler, some academic discourse perceives the bending of gender as an act of resistance with the aim of re-ordering and re-conceptualising gender as a fluid concept. Gender benders do the play full gender-act and create ambiguity. By using different style characteristics gender benders are described as the bodily hybridisation of masculine and feminine stereotypes. The transgression of gender boundaries has been evaluated in cultural studies academic readings as preferably resistance through pleasure and this resulted in a monolithic discourse. Meanwhile gender benders came out of the margins and are now commodified as mainstream and accepted within mainstream popular culture. Especially on the target group broadcasters MTV and TMF. Through commodification the resistance was absorbed and incorporated into consumer capitalism. In this movement the subversive potential of gender was muted. In this paper I will account for the genealogy of a muted resistance in search of some logics of incorporation. More specifically, I will use a reception study of popular culture texts (case MTV and TMF) amongst young consumers: do they read the bending of genders as resistance through pleasure?

1. Introduction

When we switch on the music channels on television, or leaf through a glossy youth magazine and even when we walk through trendy areas of western cities, we see young gender benders; performers that are playing a game by bending their gender. By doing so gender ambiguity arises: people might start asking questions about what femininity and masculine really mains. The academic discourse on gender bending is rather positive, in the sense that these performances are seen as acts of resistance against dominant or even hegemonic\(^1\) gender roles. Gender benders are read as a parody, as a questioning of masculinity and femininity. Given this ability to publicly question the dominant discourse on masculinity and femininity, some scholars argue that this resistance creates a space for cultural change with regard to the duality of gender roles. They hope to break the dichotomy of these gender roles and consequently make them more flexible and multiple. The resistance against the hegemonic gender roles by the bending of genders has become a discursive agenda in popular culture research. The central question of this article is whether young media consumers do read these gender performers as an act of resistance? And if so, whether this reading is as monolithic as academics insist?
2. Performativity: boundaries and transgression

Some academic discourses on gender bending are based on the writings of Judith Butler. Gender bending has to be situated in a framework of gender entanglement. It is described as the bodily hybridisation of masculine and feminine stereotypes, through which gender ambiguity can arise. It seems that a consensus has been reached to consider gender as a cultural and social construction. The central idea of Judith Butler on this issue is that gender is not an expression of nature but that it is performative. Gender is seen as an act, that originates both under the weight of history and under the power of the consensus. One doesn’t have gender, but one does gender. Gender is seen as a performativity act, which is repeated to affirm identity. Gender dichotomy and gender roles are societal constructions: “[...] if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief.” (Butler, 1990b: 217). So if gender is not expressive but performative, there is a space created for breaking boundaries by subversive repetition of gender (Butler, 1990a: 217-279); By doing so hegemonic reality is questioned and room for re-creatable and changeable gender positions is developed. One presumes that when the bending of genders is convincing enough, it will be imitated by the audiences and can gain a place in the consensus.

The ambiguous play of constructed self-images implies a gender shift. For gender benders, gender identity is nothing more than one image out of series of images. With this particular image they problematise masculinity and femininity. Anneke Smelik refers to David Bowie as an artist who explicitly bends his gender. By anticipating a strong visual culture he performs his self as an image. This image is so central that it actually became a style. As a result the notion of gender and gender identity as such is questioned. Although often confused with it, gender bending in popular culture is different from traditional transvestism. Transvestism is a theatrical play. The audience is well aware of the sex of the performer and he or she is seen as an actor (Smelik, 1993: 24). What’s more, it confirms the rigid polarity of the genders: “[...] transvestism display a tendency to treat femininity and masculinity as fixed categories possessing an essential reality of their own.”Woodhouse, 1989: 79). Smelik (1993: 19-49) also distinguishes between male and female gender benders, because of the different positions they have taken according to their sexes. Wishing to cross boundaries, male gender benders are travelling to examine the other. This is a journey without any obligations. Contrary to that, female gender benders want to create possibilities to break the boundaries of their position as women in society (i.e. the position of the other), intending to show the audience new representations of masculinity and femininity.

The concept of hegemony is used in the tradition of cultural studies. I.e. as a consensual system of thinking about the world. Whereby ideologies are naturalized to appear as common sense by voluntary agreement. Hegemony and power is conceptualised as a matter of persuasion and consent as of force. It is never secured once and for all. As Christine Gledhill (1997: 348) says “Any dominant group has to a greater or lesser degree to acknowledge the existence of those whom it dominates by winning the consent of competing or marginalized groups in society. Unlike the fixed grip over society implied by ‘domination’, ‘hegemony’ is won in the to-and-fro of negotiation between competing social, political and ideological forces through which power is contested, shifted or reformed.” In this paradigm representation is seen as a key site because of the importance of the power of definition.

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3. Fluidity and the construction of identities

For Judith Butler (1990a; 1990b) gender is merely a play of appearance: gender is a style, a disguise. The parodic effect prevents the fact that nothing is masked or disguised, because the masquerade cannot be based on an original gender identity. Butler uses Foucault’s assumption that a masquerade is a representation of what history has shown us. It is an indication that there are no fixed identities. He argues that a masquerade is a particular and hegemonic signifying system were subjects repeat gender signs as the essence of a particular identity. Parody especially shakes the binary gender system. According to Myra Macdonald (1995: 225) masquerade:

“literally [...] means putting on a mask or a disguise, but the term has been adopted in feminist film theory to suggest that when female stars exaggerate their feminine attributes, they denaturalise femininity and invite the audience to think critically and sceptically about the assumptions we normally make about it.”

By employing a bricolage of particular poses, movements and acts an imaginary body is created or a made identity is formed. This merely bodily identity is a cluster of femininity and masculinity. But at the same time it can also be a changing drag dance, playing a double game of gender. Alternately, hyper maleness and femaleness is shown (Schwichtenberg, 1993: 129-142).

4. Materialising the body: a site of performing the self

The current interest in the body as a communicator of values and the persuasiveness of images in the popular consumer culture is situated in the profound transformation of the western industrial society. These images are a cultural effect of the increased celebration of the human body from the economic and political structures. The increase of pleasure, desire, diversity and the playfulness of values is characteristic for contemporary consumerism, often compared by the concept of hedonism. They are part of the cultural space that is formed by the process of post industrialisation. These changes in the legal and the moral apparatus of the late industrial society are associated with changes in the structure of the economy, particularly with the decline of industrial production. The increasing importance of service industries is linked to the transformation of the traditional working class and their changing lifestyle. Economic change and restructuring implies a fundamental reorganisation of labour, in the course of which working hours were reduced and wages have been increased. Consequently consumption also expanded. The working body has become a demanding body (Turner, 1996: 2-6). In this perspective there is a clear commercial and wealthy life and as an indicator for the possession of cultural capital.

The body is now seen as part of a self-project whereby individuals can express their own emotional needs. The body is now contingent and flexible: it can differ under influence of personal wishes or needs. The body seems to provide a foundation for the construction of identity (Jagger, 2000: 46). Human beings are conceptualised as embodies subjects and the material body is the site in which differences of gender are constituted. Gender benders articulate their own emotional needs to express their changeable femininity and masculinity. Within a social constructionist paradigm these bodily expressions are conceptualised as discursive articulations: the body is seen as a receptor of social meanings. Far more radical is the view of Foucault. He sees the body not only as giving meaning through discourse, but also as totally constructed by discourse. The body as a biological identity disappears and becomes a highly unstable socially constructed product (Shilling, 1999: 70-99).
The improvement of the distribution and the evolution of mass publicity create a consumer market for the personal, for the body. These changes are associated with a new type of personality, referred to as the concept of the performing self (Turner, 1996: 4-6). The body has become the "visible carrier of the self" (Featherstone, 1995). The performing self gets recognition by successful acts of the self and is visible in the form of the body. Bending genders can be situated in this specific context where the social self is expressed through the body, which is a site of consumer demands. The self is seen as a bodily imago of the consumer society and it plays a very important role in the understanding and evaluation of the self in the public sphere. Turner (1996: 6-23) argues that a bodily imago is essential for a good self-image. In contemporary modernity the self equals the present self. The body is seen as a text or as an aggregate of meaningful signs. According to Jameson (1995) and Baudrillard (1983) the image of the body is central to identity, rather than the body as such. Within the consumer culture of late modernity the self has become a reflexive project whereas the self is constructed and reconstructed through the plurality of consumer choices. The self-constituting subjects "use commodities and their open-ended meanings to continually reinvent themselves." (Jagger, 2000: 51-52). Similarly Mary Douglas (1970) sees the body as a source of metaphors for structures. For example, she interprets a disorganised body as standing for a disorganised society. But at the same time the body can also be read as an expression of power.

In the academic discourse on gender bending, the basic assumption is that the body can be read as a communicator or an expressive text. Accordingly the performance of gender is situated in, on, around and through the body. The body is the site of the performance of femininity and masculinity. These genders are no essence of nature, but are formed by history and by the dominant consensus: “As an intentionally organised materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body is a historical situation [...]” (Butler, 1990a: 272). What is important is that one recognizes that the body is never neutral, because it is always gendered. The body is a site of the performance of gender:

“Considering that “the” body is invariably transformed into his body or her body, the body is only known through its gendered appearance. [...] My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts, which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time.” (Butler, 1990a: 274).

According to Roseann M. Mandziuk (1993: 168) the issue of public, text and context of popular culture are related to a political consciousness-raising:

“Such inquiry began with models that theorised simple linear interactions and hypodermic injections of information into otherwise passive subject. Alternatively, contemporary lines of inquiry seemingly have brought us far to out current theoretical location that is built on a multitude of “-isms” such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstructionism. These new vocabularies have opened fresh debates about cultural discourse and popular media, raising questions about a multidimensional relationship among audiences and cultural texts that is far more complex than simple linearity.”

The uni-dimensional concept of the audience(s) is replaced by a multi-dimensional subjectivity. The attribution of meanings to a representation enables an interaction between the image and the referential frame of the audiences. So not every viewer will interpret the image in the same way. Buikema et al (1995: 85-88) also suggesting that no one has the power to decide which interpretation is the right one.
5. Simulating the spectacle in popular visual culture

Referring to the aspect of simulation, the readings of Jean-François Lyotard (1984) are quite relevant. He assumes that contemporary media give the ability to the formations of new identities. Jean Baudrillard (1983) also concludes that there is a changing play of pseudo identities conceptualised in the concept of simulation. The play of intertextuality, overacting, deconstruct the codes and meanings are style characteristics of contemporary modernity. Using parody, mimesis, irony and pastiche, a space has been created were new representations can be read. Buikema et al (1995: 104-105) suggest that this does open up perspectives for new gender representations that can be employed by those (i.e. others) who could hardly or not establish their own autonomous identities. As Mandziuk (1993: 177) says:

“With the world as text and life a series of simulations, feminist theorists envision a landscape that is beyond binary categories of sex or gender, masculine or feminine. Identities are dispersed into what Susan Suleiman calls a multiplied set of narrative and interpretative possibilities, “so that what results is a dizzying accumulation.”

Academics like to see popular culture as a place where the dizzying accumulations of meaning concerning femininity and masculinity are performed. Especially the emissions of the music channels MTV and TMF² are considered a collection of borrowed and recycled images refusing to make any sense fixed of the cultural surrounding. MTV is seen as an ensemble of insignificance, an amalgam of images (Abercrombie, 1996: 16). MTV uses style, sensation, performance and spectacle rather than narration. Like John Fiske (1987: 250) suggested:

“The visual images often have no meaningful connection to the words of the lyric, but are cut to the beat of the music [...]. Style is a recycling of images that wrenches them out of the original context that enabled them to make sense and reduces them to free-floating signifiers whose only signification is that they are free, outside the control of normal sense and sense-making and thus able to enter the world of pleasure.”

In these quick changeable series of images the performer has a central place and frequently changes her- or himself. In this context MTV and other popular cultural products have an important place in the meaning of gender differences, offering meaning to fragmented identities of men and women. Using the term pop artist of both sexes, Anneke Smelik (1993: 19-20) argues that gender bending is inherent connected with pop culture. Gender bending is often considered as a style or phenomena within contemporary modernity where certainty is questioned and ambiguities and paradoxes are created. The fixed gender meanings are losing their unequivocality. All this has to be placed in the

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² MTV (Music Television) and TMF (The Music Factory) are both music channels. MTV Europe is part of MTV Network Europe and offers an additional set of 5 specific music channels. MTV Europe is part of Viacom Inc. Viacom is a global media company with strong position in broadcast and cable television. The Music Factory (TMF) is a music channel who broadcast 24 hours a day music and started in 1995 (Van Der Rijt et al., 2000: 80). In 2001 MTV Europe bought The Music Factory of the Dutch publisher Wegener. TMF is broadcasted in The Netherlands and in the Northern part of Belgium (Flanders). It is a music channel with attention for the local music culture.
particular context of the commodification of signs. Commodity-signs are playing an endless game of destabilising long-term meaning and cultural order (Featherstone, 1995: 75).

6. Strategies of subversion: ways of transgressing the gender boundaries

To confuse gender representation in popular culture, performers are using different style characteristics. One of the major elements in this entanglement is the concept of simulation (cfr. supra). Simulation starts with the violation of all references with the aim of creating new cultural signs. A frequently example is Madonna:

“Thus, from her disengendering polysexual display in ‘justify’ to her drag dance in ‘Express Yourself’ to her representation as space-age dominatrix in the Blond Ambition tour, Madonna will continue to stimulate and deconstruct the “truth” of sex and gender. Though strategies of simulation, she transforms the “truth” of gender into drag, a dialectical fragmentation between two terms, and then fissures this destabilised sex identity further by means of splitting and displacement to advance a prodigious sexual plurality. In more general terms, her disingenuous figuration says much about the political promise of postmodern strategies.” (Schwichtenberg, 1993: 141).

All stable and fixed references are lost. Especially feminist theorists applauded the collapsing of the bipolarity of the gender roles. By using mass media and their constructed images the entanglement is in progress. Gender play is the mix and match of styles that flirt with the signifiers of sexual difference, cut loose from their moorings. Such inconstancy underscores the fragility of gender itself as pure construct. Thus gender play takes shape in a postmodern pastiche of multiple styles: masculinity and femininity fractured and refractured in erotic tension. Another common way to play with gender is cross-dressing. Clothes are seen as a symbolic system. They are playing an important role in the production of the self. Marjorie Garber (1993: 151) argues that cross-dressing is a criticism on the binary gender system. She gives the following definition of cross-dressing:

“Cross-dressing is about gender confusion. Cross-dressing is about the phallus as constitutively veiled. Cross-dressing is about the power of women. Cross-dressing is about the emergence of gay identity. Cross-dressing is about the anxiety of economic or cultural dislocation, the anticipation or recognition of “otherness” as loss. All true, all partial truth, all powerful metaphors. But the compelling force of transvestism in literature and culture comes not, or not only, from these effects, but also from its instatement’s of metaphors itself, not as that for which a literal meaning must be found, but precisely as that without which there would be no such thing as meaning in the first place.” (Garber, 1993: 390).

Although some theorists, like Woodhouse (1989) distinguish gender bending from transvestism, the drag is conceptualised as a theoretical and deconstructive social practice that analyses the structures from within. Through the discourse of clothes the drag puts questions in the naturalness of gender roles. Marjorie Garber (1993: 159) also marked crossover style as different from cross-dressing. Crossover is a form of cross-dressing, but is more accepted in society than cross-dressing. It’s often about women wearing pants and men using make-up. Garber defines crossover as a self-conscious parody outside of the underground drag clubs, out on the street. Even here the borderline is shifting towards a more flexible masculinity and femininity.
7. The discursive formations on gender bending

A. Breaking the discursive gender boundaries: academics looking at the margins

So far we have seen that in academic discourse gender bending is considered an act of playing with gender roles, of breaking through the gender boundaries and questioning hegemonic gender discourse. A few scholars have pointed out that especially transvestism reproduces the fixed masculinity and femininity. A paradigm shift has taken place. Bending gender is a subversive practice stemming from the avant-garde entering popular culture. Gender benders raise questions about the dominant gender discourse and blur the boundaries of gender. Using Judith Butler, gender bending is seen as an act of resistance. Applauding the resistance of the gender benders, it seems that academics have forgotten the different meanings and polysemic readings of text. These fragmented and contradictory readings seem to disappear by the desire to break gender boundaries. Gender benders are seen as agents of resistance who are engaged in empowered discursive practices. The power referred to here is that which breaks the hegemonic discourse on masculinity and femininity. At least that is what these scholars hope for. The desired result is an effect of empowering the others.

Mostly drawn on the theories of active audiences the concept of resistance was incorporated in the discursive agenda of scholars on gender bending in popular visual culture (Fiske, 1987; Morley, 1980; Schwichtenberg, 1992). Audiences are considered having semiotic power, i.e. the power of the plurality of meanings of a text. Paradoxically these scholars are using the paradigm of the active readings of media texts but the polysemic signifying practices are not taken into account.

As a concept power/resistance has entered the field of the social science. Resistance is seen as a twin sister of power mostly drawn on the work of Foucault. As with power the discursive positioning of resistance has grown. The two fields are linked together. As Mark Torpe (1999: 112) mentioned: “This had had the effect of making resistance ubiquitous in a similar way to power and, at its most extreme, this culminates in the possibility of and communicative activity being rendered open to representation as resistance.”. Linking power and resistance has resulted in an academic believe in the power of marginality. These margins are deconstructed and represented as resistance and radical social change. A dangerously uncritical construction of the margins appears on scene as sites of resistance. David Harvey (1996: 100) describes this construction as a romantic turn. The neo-romanticism as Hartley points out, presents marginality as a subversive field with the powerfulness of force. The force is considered as a power of resisting and contesting the contemporary social order. Power, resistance and marginalisation are blurred concepts. Considered as floating signifiers these concepts allow the academics to formulate their desire for social change. As Thorpe (1999: 127) suggests: “The ‘margins’ and ‘resistance’, as revolutionary sites, are ‘good to think’ when one can think them from distance.”

On another level gender benders are attributed the power of being flexible. Flexibility is a concept frequently found in a capitalist neo liberal discourse, but is now transferred to the sphere of gender performances. The consumeristic connotation is not at all far away. The euphoria of the gender bending is dangerously entering the discourse of consumerism. Like the grasping of anarchistic street protest as a marketing tool gender bending is incorporated in the market sphere of popular culture. Gender identities are becoming goods to consume.
B. Articulating gender bending: resistance and/or incorporations

The resistance of gender benders is seen to be related to the concept of bricolage. It describes “the re-ordering and re-contextualization of objects to communicate fresh meanings” (Clarke, 1976: 177). Objects, which already carried symbolic meanings, are re-signified in a new context. Gender bending re-orders the gender acts and re-conceptualise gender as a fluid concept. Stuart Hall (1996: 287) defines resistance as a changing metaphor for cultural change, allowing us to think about cultural transformations. Resistance is conjunctural and relational. It is not universal, but should to be seen in a particular context and in a particular social relation. So the resistance of gender benders has to be situated in a specific social context. Resistance can be read in the performance of gender bending, but not all the time and not always as monolithic. This reading depends on the context of the reader(s).

Another assumption we have to abandon is that resistance has to be seen as opposite of dominance. According to Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998: 3-39) resistance can be fragmented. Using the concept of Incorporation Resistance Paradigm (IRP) they assume that audience research can be problematic: “as whether audience members are incorporated into the dominant ideology by their participation in media activity or whether, to the contrary, they are resistant to that incorporation.” (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998: 15). The duality of dominance or resistance is maintained by academics. As Bourdieu (1984) has described it, resistance can be seen as a normative distinction of values of the classifier. The academic distinction of resistance and dominance creates two poles of a dichotomy. One the one hand we find the pole of the preferred reading of hegemonic discourse and on the other hand the pole of polysemy and resistance is constructed (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998: 15-28). Neglecting that a preferred reading can be contradictory and that resistance is polysemical and fragmented.

Resistance is performed in the mainstream popular culture. Gender benders articulate a resistance against the dominant gender discourse. This resistance is now re-formulated and can be perceived of as depending and co-operative with regard to the market (Gelder et al.1996: 145-148). It is a part of the hegemonic sphere and can change over time to power dominance. It seems that two discourses are active at the same time. There is a potential resistance against a hegemonic gender discourse, but at the same time this resistance is incorporated by a hegemonic consumer culture.

8. Readings on gender benders in popular visual culture

How do youngsters read representations of gender bending? To confront the theories elaborated in this article, I will now look at the reception of gender bending by young media consumers. Emphasizing on the discourse of popular culture we focussed on youngsters for the reception study. Youngsters are not only seen by the broadcasters of music channels as the major target groups, the academic discourse on popular culture is also mostly articulated around young media consumers. Using the method of focus group interviews, I want to explore the process of reading and signifying practices of media discourses. Each focus group interview started with a screening of a collage of

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3 Focus group interviews are a useful method for comprehending the consensus on a topic and for perception analysis (Morgan, 1998). A second supporting element of this kind of interviews is the possibility offered to the participants to express themselves rather freely (Lindlof, 1995). Following a pilot interview 7 focus groups were recruited from 3 different schools. 54 youngsters, of whom 31 females and 23 males between the ages of 14 to 18, took part in the focus group sessions. Each group was homogenous according to age and education level. Each interview was conducted as a flexible,
images of gender benders. The respondents saw parts of video clips of Queen, Marilyn Manson, Madonna, Garbage and Texas. After seeing a collage of images of gender benders in popular culture, a focus group interview on the following topics took place: (1) masculinity and femininity; (2) gender bending, travesty and multiple gender identities; (3) practices of gender bending; (4) statement, play and empowerment. Following transcription, each interview was thematically coded based on grounded theory. In the analysis we combined a descriptive and analytic characterisation of the interviews. In this article I discuss a linked series of themes with focus on the readings of youngster of gender bending in contemporary visual popular culture.

A. Tracing the boundaries of femininity and masculinity

How do the participants define masculinity and femininity? When the respondents talked about others they often used stereotypes. This was in contrast with the way they see themselves. I could conclude

semi-structured discussion based on open-ended questions. Each focus group interview had a common schedule and a topic list was used in all groups. The focus group interviews took place in secondary schools in the classrooms during the study hours. The group interviews lasted one hour or more and were conducted by the author and students of the seminar on multiple gender identities at the Dept. of Communication Studies (Ghent University) during January 2002. This seminar was tutored by the author. The interviews were audio-taped and fully transcribed.

Table 1: Age of the respondents

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<thead>
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<th>Age</th>
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<tr>
<td>14-15</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>15-16</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>17-18</td>
<td>10</td>
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Table 2: Total respondents and gender per focus group interview

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<tr>
<th>Focus group A</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>female</th>
<th>male</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus group B</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus group C</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus group D</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus group E</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus group F</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group G</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
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| Total        | 54     | 31     | 23   |

Each focus group interview started with a screening of a collage of images of gender benders. These images were selected from a textual analysis (combination of content analysis and film analysis) of 24 hours of video clips on MTV and TMF (total 48 hours). 619 video clips were analysed of which 20 videos were coded as images of gender bending. 5 video clips were ad random chosen of this sample of 20 clips (i.e. Queen, Marilyn Manson, Madonna, Garbage and Texas). In this context it is important to mention that the participants often refer to one of the artists who performed in the video's which were screened before the focus group interviews started.
that the youngsters of these group interviews still uses traditional and very polarised categories of femininity and masculinity. In the interviews femininity is often defined as “emotional, not short-tempered and not too aggressive.” (XA3-M), and “sensible” (XC4-M). Masculinity is then defined as the opposite: “masculinity is the opposite.”(XA3-M). All participants concluded that nature is the basis for masculinity and femininity and culture has an effect on nature. They don’t agree on the notion that gender is a construction. Still there is a place for gender benders, but gender is defined as an essence of nature, not as an element of culture: Culture gives people the opportunity to create a little space where they can move themselves to one of the two poles of gender, whereby the participants still assume that nature and culture are very dichotomies.

Although the respondents say that emancipation has changed the traditional gender roles they often use polarised stereotypes to describe femininity and masculinity. When doing so they often use the biological gender to make a distinction between masculinity and femininity. When they talk about femininity and masculinity they often refer to female and male categories using biological differences. Femininity and female are articulated together, like male and masculinity.

B. Beyond the dichotomy: bending the genders

Most participants defined gender bending as a play with masculinity and femininity, mostly expressed in the vestimentary elements. The concept of gender bending was not well known by the interviewee’s. So it is important to notice and take into account the performativity of the focus group interview and the use of language, which was produced enduring the interviews.

Although they described gender bending as a playful act they still use the categories male and female to make a description of the bending of genders. As a participant says: “You can’t really make sure what it is [...] one time it is a male, an other time it is a female [...] but actually not really a male or female.” (XF4-V). Some participants describe gender benders as a third sex or androgyny: “Gender bending is a mixture. Like the image of Marilyn Manson, you don’t know what it is. He plays masculinity or femininity. But he doesn’t play a full masculinity or femininity. He just plays with both.” (XC2-M).

The distinction between a male gender bender and female gender bender is often made. Many participants define a male gender bender as someone without a gender. Words as “male-female”, “sexless” or “mixture” are often articulated in connection with male gender benders. On the contrary female gender benders are described as masculine women. They are defined and described as ‘macho-women’ and sturdy. But most respondents see female gender bending clearly as play with femininity and masculinity. The boundaries of "femaleness" are crossed by masculine "behaviour": “They (the female gender benders) still have feminine manners, but they are sturdy. They become a little masculine.” (XG3-V). The participants of the focus groups define female gender benders as ‘bending’ of the feminine gender identity and not as the bending of the female sex.

Most youngsters also differentiated between gender bending and travesty. Gender bending is seen as weird, provocative and a way of shocking people. Like one participant who said that: “Travesty is more, [...] very stereotyped, where you use more very stereotyped feminine characteristic features and the other way around, meanwhile gender bending is actually constantly changing. A whole pool of masculine and feminine elements. It is not clear at all whether it is a male or a female. They really play with it.” (MF1-V). Travesty is again defined by the focus on the vestimentary
elements, more particular the extreme play act with the vestimentary codes. The words ‘disguise’ or ‘dress up parties’ are frequently used. Travesty is seen, as a performance with is not mutual. The artist gives a performance but afterwards he or she returns to his or her own gender identity. Irony or parody are elements often articulated with travesty: “A male who tries to imitate a female. That funny because that doesn’t work at all. Like Freddy Mercury, with his moustache and his hairy legs. That is just funny.” (XB6-M).

C. Towards praxis

The respondents very often answer questions on the practices of gender bending of performers in the contemporary visual popular culture by focussing on the play with feminine and masculine features. The play with traditional gender roles is also often explained throughout the behaviour or manners which are part of the gender bending practices. Like the statements on Madonna: “In one video clip she wears earrings, or not? That’s feminine, no? But when she drives the car and the revolver. That’s exactly masculine. [...] She behaves sturdy, but you can see that she’s a female, but her behaviour is masculine.” (XF4-V). Sturdy behaviour is seen as typical masculine, but it makes a woman not less feminine. Also men who do feminine tasks are not described as feminine. They are described as something between masculine and feminine. Appearance is the measure to make gender categorisations.

D. Power and empowerment: questioning the hegemonic discourse on gender

This theme concerns the readings of the participants on the encoding of the gender benders. Most participants interpret gender bending as a play, but they also read it as a form of resistance against the hegemonic discourse on gender, allowing them to obtain power. Many youngsters referring to equal opportunities between females and males. As one participant said: “People may not make any difference, it is ok to dress up like a male or female.” (XD1-V). Or as someone else said: “There is not really a difference between men and women.” (XB3-M). Although most participants articulated the differences between the sexes, they also point on the equality and the fact that gender benders make this statement: “I think that they (referring to gender benders) want to say that there is not only a difference between men and women, but also that there is equality.” (XG6-V). When the participant discussed the theme of a statement they often linked it to the possibility of empowerment and agency: “You don’t have to restrain, you have to be who you are, as if you feel like destroying, destroy it. If you feel like perform as a woman, just do it.” (XB3-M). The breaking of boundaries was also mentioned a few times in this context. The bending of gender of Madonna has something to do with: “Point out that there are role patrons in our society, and that they have to be broken.” (XA3-M) or as someone else pointed out that gender bending is about: “making the difference between men and women vague.”(XB3-M). Gender bending is seen to increase empowerment. Especially female gender benders empower themselves. They connect power to flexibility. Flexibility is seen as a positive strategy to use power. Female gender benders use their flexibility to empower themselves. The distinction between female and male gender benders is explicitly made and female genders benders are articulated as new representations of femininity in contemporary modernity. As in the work of Anneke Smelik, (1993: 19-49) female gender benders are seen as performers who want to create possibilities to break the boundaries of their position as women in society. For women gender bending is seen as something necessary to go beyond an object of desire. The flexibility is seen as an element of empowerment.
But some participants doubted the resistance and the assumption that gender benders are making a statement about femininity or masculinity. Gender benders are just using their bodily appearance. Articulating the performance to acting or shocking. Referring to Marilyn Manson one respondent said that: “I think that he wants to attract attention, he wants to shock, so that people buy his records.” (XD7-V). One participant also mentioned the commodification of gender bending and has doubts concerning the fascination of people for gender benders. He asked a question on the consumeristic creation of this fascination. Female gender benders are far more making a statement about equal opportunities and empowerment than male gender benders according to the youngsters. Referring to Madonna and Garbage one respondent mentioned that: “They are playing a role, but somewhat deeper [...] Marilyn Manson that a fabric of merchandising. The only thing he has to do is listing to his manager how he has to dress himself to shock the audience.” (XA3-M).

9. Conclusion

In this article I start with a analysis of some academic discourses on gender bending. Based on the theories of Judith Butler some academic discourses on the entanglement of genders, point out that gender is a social construction. Against the hegemonic discourse on gender, Butler (1990b) argues that gender is a discursive performativity and finds no essence in nature. People perform masculinity and femininity according to the dominant gender discourse. By using different style characteristics gender benders can be described as the bodily hybridisation of masculine and feminine stereotypes. The ambiguous play of constructed self-images implies a shift of the gender. For gender benders, gender identity is nothing more than one image out of series of images. Within this particular image they problematise masculinity and femininity. These phenomena are considered as a style within contemporary modernity where paradoxes are created. Although often confused with it, gender bending in popular culture is different from traditional transvestism.

Some scholars (Smelik, 1993) argue that gender bending is inherently connected with pop culture. By anticipating on a strong visual culture gender benders perform themselves as an image. In this pop culture an amalgam of images are represented and commodity-signs play an endless game of simulations. In this context the body - the performing self - is very important: not only is it a reflection of the fragmented self, it is also a text, which produces a discourse on gender. The body seems to provide a foundation for the construction of identity. Gender benders articulate their own emotional needs to express their changeable femininity and masculinity. Within a social constructionist paradigm these bodily expressions are discursive articulations. Fixed gender meanings are losing their unequivocality and all this is placed in the particular context of the commodification of signs. Referring to Jean-François Lyotard (1984) and Jean Baudrillard (1983) popular culture, especially the broadcast of music video’s, give the ability to new changeable gender identities conceptualised in the concept of simulation. Some academics like to seen popular culture as a site where the dizzying accumulations of meaning concerning femininity and masculinity are performed. By using mass media and their constructed images the gender entanglement is in progress. Gender play is the mix and match of styles that flirt with the signifiers of gender difference, cut loose from their moorings. Such inconstancy underscores the fragility of gender itself as pure construct.

Some academic discourses read gender bending as a series of subversive practices, breaking through the hegemonic discourse of the dichotomous genders. Bending gender is seen as an act of resistance with the aim of re-ordering and re-conceptualising gender, showing it to be a fluid concept. As with power the discursive positioning of resistance has gain its place in the field of the social science. Power and resistance are linked together implicating in an academic believe in the force of
marginality. Described as a romantic turn, these margins are deconstructed and represented as resistance and radical social change. Marginality is presented as a subversive field where people can resist and contest the contemporary social order. Power, resistance and marginality are blurred concepts and considered as floating signifiers, which allow scholars to formulate their desire for social change. Resisting the gender boundaries seems to be read as the only possible meaning. Mostly drawn on the theories of active audiences the concept of resistance was incorporated in the discursive agenda of scholars on gender bending in popular visual culture. Audiences are considered having semiotic power. Paradoxically these scholars are using the paradigm of the active readings of media texts but the polysemic signifying practices are not taken into account. A rather monolithic discourse came into being. The resistance of gender bending seems to be performed in the mainstream popular culture. This resistance is now re-formulated and can be perceived of as depending and co-operative with regard to the market. It is part of the hegemonic sphere and can change over time to power dominance. It seems that two discourses are active at the same time. There is a potential resistance against the hegemonic gender discourse, but at the same time this resistance is incorporated by hegemonic consumer culture. By using focus group interviews I problematised the concept of the readings of gender bending as articulations of resistance. Analysing the interviews I can assume that the focus groups participants did not read gender bending in the same way as the monolithic academic discourse on this subject. Their readings were more fragmented and some times even contradictory. Although some of them saw gender benders as articulations of resistance, but they still read them as discursive hegemonic constructions of femininity and masculinity. When the respondents talked about others they often used stereotypes: traditional and very polarised categories of femininity and masculinity. The distinction between male gender bending and a female gender bending is often made. Many participants define a male gender bender as someone without a gender. In the contrary female gender benders are described as playing with femininity and masculinity. Especially female gender benders are read as resistance with the aim of empowerment. Many youngsters referring to equal opportunities when they talked about the possible strategy of empowerment through the gender play of gender bending. Besides the possibility of empowerment, agency was a concept used when the participants referred to female gender benders. Some respondents doubted the resistance and the assumption that gender benders are making statements about the hegemonic gender discourse. They read the bending of genders as a form of commodification within the contemporary consumer culture. Participants will still read resistance through performances, but here it is fragmented and the unequivocallity is lost. Sure there is a potential resistance against a hegemonic gender discourse, but at the same time this resistance is incorporated by a hegemonic consumer culture.
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