

## **Pop critique, pop journalism, pop feminism**

"Pop" in feminist media

by Vina Yun

Austrian contemporary feminist print media focuses on the cultural field - popular culture in particular. Publications founded by the year 2000 show a shift to culture in their choice of titles, such as the magazines female sequences. FrauenLesbenKulturHEFTig and nylon. KunstStoff zu Feminismus und Popkultur. From the visual style to the topical content, the language used to the newly wrought subjective writing styles, "Pop" had finally arrived in feminist media.

Writing about Pop vs. Popjournalism

"Pop" is a relatively new object of study within academic scholarship and journalistic practice. It is an ambiguous term, used to describe mass culture (including genres such as popular music, media, film, fashion, lifestyle, and games); pop music (pitched at the other end of the indie/underground spectrum); and a literary and journalistic approach that embraces daily life and personal subjectivity. Whilst pop writing has existed as long as the pop music genre, there is no easy linear development of feminist pop critique in German-speaking media.

A genealogy of sorts can be found within music magazines (some now defunct) such as Sounds, Vision, Spex or Intro; these publications combined "politics, theory, fashion, film, sex, love, shortly all relevant dimensions of social and individual life" with pop.<sup>1</sup> The concept of "pop

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critique" represents a paradigm shift from pop writing: "The field of cultural realisation formed by the culture industry - whether it be music, literature, entertainment, film and so on - is a platform for the dissemination of debates, values and views."<sup>2</sup> The 1960s saw the repositioning of Pop to include an analysis of social, political and economic struggles for cultural hegemony, led by British and North American Cultural Studies.

### Pop She Writes

Pop journalism constitutes a field relatively closed to women: females are an industry minority, as demonstrated in the gender ratio within the editorial departments of German and Austrian pop magazines. The structural absence of women largely goes unnoticed by the otherwise omnipresent men; these cultural workers avoid critical questions about gender and rather wish to write about "music itself". In response, women-only editorial departments developed to provide access for females to get ahead - the rejection of male-dominated environments takes the pressure off female journalists in having to "correct" false images of their sex, and women do not (so often) have their very presence used to fulfil some quota of the "token woman".

In antagonism to these strides of women-only editorial teams, some men criticised feminist media for its perceived essentialism and dogma: "(b)ecause in nylon magazine only biological women are allowed to write about biological women."<sup>3</sup> German journalist Tine Plesch summarises the magazine debates with a hint of irony - "Women's party, women's bands, women's music - no winners, but possibly the lightly esoteric or

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essentialist smell [free] from stinky feet?" Such a tongue-in-cheek response overlooks the importance of independent feminist structures and media set-ups.<sup>4</sup>

nylon and female sequences may have been the first Austrian magazines to articulate a "feminist pop journalism" or "feminist pop critique", but these publications did not arise from nowhere. As the former co-publisher and editorial member for nylon magazine, I was personally inspired by female journalists who had come before - women published in magazines such as Spex, testcard and DE:BUG; contributors to radio shows (as Katharina Weingartner did for Musicbox/Zickzack); and who delivered critical analysis on popular cultural phenomena. The pioneering work of journalists and writers such as Clara Drechsler, Sandra and Kerstin Grether, Jutta Koether, Tine Plesch, Anette Baldauf, Katharina Weingartner, Mercedes Bunz, Annette Busch, Barbara Kirchner, Anette Weber and Anne Philippi, set the scene for pop feminist magazines to emerge. Their work, in particular, made it possible for nylon and female sequences to bring together feminism and a pop sensibility with self-confidence.

### Feminist Pop Theory & Cultural Studies

Alongside the work of theoreticians from British and North American Cultural Studies, which was slowly absorbed in German-speaking countries, postmodern approaches encouraged a "cultural hype" that institutionalised the academic study of popular culture.<sup>5</sup> In the 1980s and 90s, the Cologne pop magazine Spex became the medium for pop discourse, moving between academia and popular journalism with ease.

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This ongoing trend of fusing popular journalism with academic styles in magazines was reflected in nylon and female sequences; they were not "pop magazines" but magazines about "pop discourse". A change of writing style within these publications introduced a radical subjectivity - such as fandom and spotlighting one's own involvement in subcultural scenes - in a rejection of "objective" journalism that reports from a distance. An academic tone was still unmistakable - nylon identified one of their objectives as being to "theorize our own daily lives as women".

This was to search for "authenticity" in cultural practices, but to examine gender and race signifying systems (as achieved through codes, signs and symbols). By establishing consumerism as a serious topic of feminist analysis, magazines like nylon provoked feminist thinkers who criticised pop theory for "culturalising" social questions, and for neglecting economic relations and institutional politics. Writing in DE:BUG magazine, Mercedes Bunz charts some of the interventions of Cultural Studies theory in more economic-fixed studies:

Resisting a dominant theoretical discourse that focused left thinking on political economics since the Sixties, Cultural Studies showed that pop culture also had a history and therefore was a play of meanings that could brilliantly address the question of power. Despised by the "Frankfurt School" [a critical theory movement in Germany from the 1930s onwards which denounced the political impotence of the 'popular'], the mainstream could now be re-valued. Reception was discussed as an equally active contribution alongside production."<sup>6</sup>

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In order to establish pop critique as part of a feminist cultural critique, the nylon editorial collective referred to British Cultural Studies theorists like Angela McRobbie and Erica Carter. Carter pointed out that the definition of "culture" often excluded women: "Not 'only' is the unequal treatment of women the basic problem that should be picked up by critical pop culture, but the underlying hierarchical gender dualism"<sup>7</sup>

Male pop critics, female fans

Following these appeals, a re-evaluation of cultural practises occurred, especially those traditionally associated with women: shopping, fandom, dancing, girls' and womens' magazines, and so on. The gender hierarchy within culture was unveiled as a "male canon of knowledge"<sup>8</sup> prevents women from entering pop critique discourses - male pop critics do not see themselves as "fans" but as experts whose knowledge results from strategic collecting and "good taste". This privilege self-perpetuates itself.

"Those, who have the power over the archives, determine what is carried outside or what is to be forgotten", German pop magazine testcard stated in its "Gender" issue. Calling on the notion of discursive power described by French theorist Michel Foucault, testcard began to question, "what the particular [hegemonic] power represents, what it advises and therefore what it excludes."<sup>9</sup> As such, the challenge for a feminist pop journalism is to break into existing "archives" and to oppose the historical void of women in pop culture; a condition asserted repeatedly by mainstream media outlets that cover "special issues" of "Women in Rock" and "Women

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in Hip Hop" and confirm women's exceptional status from the status quo.

Pop feminism establishes an alternative, collective memory that knows a plurality of pop herstories. As long as it seems strange for girls to form bands, rap, DJ and so forth, encouragement and promotion is needed as a matter of course. As German pop writer Tine Plesch explains: "Passing on music as a male dominated sphere in the lexicon or in reference books, in radio playlists or the rest of the music press, carries [with it] the image that pop music is widely a male domain, despite the chart success of female artists - or that critical feminist media is not relevant." <sup>10</sup>

Regarding the sexist dichotomy of "men collecting" and "women consuming", German pop journalist Kerstin Grether tells the pop magazine goon: "Boys define themselves greatly through records, CDs and Downloads. They fetishise the fact that they even know that they bought those cultural assets; they define themselves through consumption. So, it is exactly what they criticise female fans for."<sup>11</sup> Because feminists should not just react to the oppressive system, Grether drafts the potential of feminist pop critique as an attempt "to recompose reality (...) in a new and exuberant way. If pop is what redeems the world, then pop feminism might offer possibilities to live in a more enjoyable present right now. And to develop some utopian images for it."<sup>12</sup>

### Making a career in the pop industry

Today, modern pop critique has become an integral part of bourgeois cultural journalism whilst fantasies of liberation and the transgressive power of pop seem to be

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in a crisis. The radical, and early, gesture of pop journalism has become lost - one cannot deny the complicity of pop critique with the capitalist industry any longer:

Praising the active recipient somewhat stabilizes the economic conditions instead of changing them...film, TV shows, pop music or popular culture in general are an acknowledged cultural genre. The mainstream has touched intellectual grounds; there are tons of thesis papers on Madonna. Therefore, Cultural Studies has been taunted by its reputation of giving capitalism a helping hand with its recommendation of must-buys. Today, writing about the mainstream per se is not revolutionary anymore.<sup>13</sup>

Conditions have changed in other areas, too. Whereas many used to work voluntarily under precarious conditions in order to get close to their dream job of a "pop critic", today self-exploitation has become a basic condition, with journalists working for little or no money. In the neo-liberal labour market, cultural workers and brainworkers have become "role models for a flexible, mobile pool of labour force that is humble in their claims for social and labour law provisions."<sup>14</sup> Despite precarious jobs and poor working conditions, the pop culture industry's allure is unfractured - there is still plenty of symbolic capital to gather (which might turn into actual money in the future).

The pressure to open personal cultural interests to economic exploitation increases as "pop becomes part of one's career planning... Former DIY-attitudes, traditionally based in subcultures, become more and more

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generally required soft skills."<sup>15</sup> For women in pop journalism - who are already in a more vulnerable position than men due to wage disparity, the inequity of management positions, and the employment of new jobs to the male task force - the chances of climbing up the job ladder become even more limited.

### Utopia Pop

Among pop critics over the years, a growing schmaltzy mental state diluted the impact of pop critique as political writing. "Instead of pushing the various possibilities of writing into the spotlight, an idiosyncratic writing took over, which takes the writer as serious as the artist or topic written about," Sebastian Hinz observes in goon magazine.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of drawing the curtain over pop critique, it might be worth re-articulating a feminist utopia under these very-same changed conditions. Mercedes Bunz pleads: "Utopia is still what's ahead, what's unmatched...the moment when possibilities are involved, possibilities that haven't been put into practice yet, and possibilities that turn the present upside down."<sup>17</sup>

Is it still possible to surprise and bewilder in pop today, to take up chances to destabilise prevailing conditions? The pop industry knows how to adopt such "disruptive elements" as its own very well - it even needs them to restore itself continuously.

Although nylon and female sequences no longer exist, the discursive spaces and networks which surrounded them live on - the young Austrian magazine fiber. Werkstoff zu Feminismus and Popkultur evolved out of nylon, and former editors, publishers and authors of nylon and female

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sequences have become actively involved in the recent German-speaking publication *Female Consequences. Feminism, Antiracism and Pop Music*.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, *Hot Topic. Popfeminism today is an innovative book of feminist and anti-racist perspectives on contemporary popular culture*, edited by feminist pop journalist Sonja Eismann.<sup>19</sup>

If there is no escape from "pop", then feminist utopia, which dares to explore boundary transgressions of gender, race, sexuality and class, should focus its lens once again. Even though some feminist demands have been implemented there are still many more in the waiting line. Feminist pop media like *fiber* or *Missy Magazine*, which is about to be launched this autumn, might be a space where such feminist utopian ideas can be expressed. Or, to speak with Dagmar Brunow from the Women's Music Center in Hamburg, "The objective is that feminism becomes pop again."<sup>20</sup>

This article was originally written and referenced in German. Translation by Vina Yun.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Hinz quoted in Jochen Bonz, Michael Büscher and Johannes Springer (eds), *Popjournalismus* (Mainz: Ventil Verlag, 2005), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Conne Island Editorial Staff, "How to exit from Guyville? Männer, Frauen, die Gesellschaft und was Popkultur damit zu tun hat", in CEE IEH (2003:97) [www.conne-island.de/nf/97/19.html](http://www.conne-island.de/nf/97/19.html)

<sup>3</sup> Sven Opitz, "Nylon/Bust/Bitch/Hues - Hallo in der New Girl Order", in *intro* (2000/01:80) [www.intro.de/magazin/musik/23012341](http://www.intro.de/magazin/musik/23012341)

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<sup>4</sup> Tine Plesch, "Frauen in der Popkultur", in CEE IEH (2003:101) [www.conne-island.de/nf/101/11.html](http://www.conne-island.de/nf/101/11.html).

<sup>5</sup> Vanessa Redak, "Der 'Hype des Kulturellen'", in nylon. KunstStoff zu feminismus und popkultur (2000:1), 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> Mercedes Bunz, "Diskurse, die uns begleitet haben. Popdiskurs, Theorie und die Mutation dieses Werkzeugkastens", in DE:BUG - Magazin für elektronische Lebensaspekte (2006: 100), 74.

<sup>7</sup> Conne Island Editorial Staff, "How to exit from Guyville? Männer, Frauen, die Gesellschaft und was Popkultur damit zu tun hat", in CEE IEH (2003:97) [www.conne-island.de/nf/97/19.html](http://www.conne-island.de/nf/97/19.html)

<sup>8</sup> Tine Plesch, "Musikjournalismus: Rock She Writes. Wie können Journalistinnen zu einer Selbstverständlichkeit von Musikerinnen in den Medien beitragen? ", Lecture at the conference Musikerinnen und Öffentlichkeit (1999) [www.distler-tontechnik.de/tine-plesch/vortrag.html](http://www.distler-tontechnik.de/tine-plesch/vortrag.html)

<sup>9</sup> Martin Büsser, Tine Plesch, and Johannes Ullmaier, "Le Douzième Sexe. Geschlechterverhältnisse und Gender-Debatte im Pop", in testcard, Editorial focus "Gender - Geschlechterverhältnisse im Pop", (2000:8), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Tine Plesch, "Frauen in der Popkultur", in CEE IEH (2003:101) [www.conne-island.de/nf/101/11.html](http://www.conne-island.de/nf/101/11.html).

<sup>11</sup> Zuzanna Jakubowski, "Bloß nicht Plattenhören wie Briefmarkensammeln. Interview mit Kerstin Grether", in goon - Magazin für Gegenwartskultur (2007:22) <http://goon-magazine.de/index.php/2007/06/10/interview-mit-kerstin-grether>

<sup>12</sup> Zuzanna Jakubowski, "Bloß nicht Plattenhören wie Briefmarkensammeln. Interview mit Kerstin Grether", in goon - Magazin für Gegenwartskultur (2007:22) <http://goon-magazine.de/index.php/2007/06/10/interview-mit-kerstin-grether>

<sup>13</sup> Mercedes Bunz, "Diskurse, die uns begleitet haben. Popdiskurs, Theorie und die Mutation dieses Werkzeugkastens", in DE:BUG - Magazin für elektronische Lebensaspekte (2006: 100), 74.

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Ellmeier, "'Ein Gespenst geht um'. Prekarisierung am Beispiel des kulturellen Arbeitsmarktes", in Sylvia Köchl, Radostina Patulova, and Vina Yun, fields of TRANSFER - MigrantInnen in der Kulturarbeit, (Vienna: IG Kultur Österreich, 2007), 44.

<sup>15</sup> Jochen Bonz, Michael Büscher and Johannes Springer (eds), Popjournalismus (Mainz: Ventil Verlag, 2005), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Sebastian Hinz, "... jetzt, jetzt, jetzt, ad infinitum", in goon - Magazin für Gegenwartskultur (2006:17), 48.

<sup>17</sup> Annika Schmidt and Sebastian Hinz, "Was machen wir hier eigentlich. Gespräch mit Mercedes Bunz über

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Popjournalismus, Blogs und Utopien“, in goon - Magazin für Gegenwartskultur(2007:21)

<http://goon-magazine.de/index.php/2007/03/19/popjournalismus-2/#nav>

<sup>18</sup> Rosa Reitsamer and Rupert Weinzierl(eds), Female Consequences. Feminismus, Antirassismus, Popmusik (Vienna: 2006)

<sup>19</sup> Sonja Eismann(ed.), Hot Topic. Popfeminismus heute (Mainz: Ventil Verlag, 2007)

<sup>20</sup> Dagmar Brunow quoted in Martin Büsser, Tine Plesch, and Johannes Ullmaier, “Le Douzième Sexe.

Geschlechterverhältnisse und Gender-Debatte im Pop“, in testcard, Editorial focus “Gender - Geschlechterverhältnisse im Pop“, (2000:8),26.