

**Articulations of Queering Straightness:  
An Analysis of Contemporary Norwegian Pop**



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# Articulations of Queering Straightness

An Analysis of Contemporary Norwegian Pop

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Agnete Eilertsen, November 22, 2016

## **PREFACE**

My interest in queering in mainstream Norwegian popular music started, somewhat ironically, with my enthusiasm for Norwegian underground music, and especially punk. During my teen years, when I identified as a punker, I developed a profound fascination with DIY culture and, in turn, with the connection between music and social change, and between music and living 'outside the box', or outside normative culture. In my early twenties, I also fell in love with feminist theory and soon saw the rich connections between music and feminist activism, as well as music's impact upon the redefining of gender norms. A couple of years later, while working my master's thesis, I discovered queer theory in the context of popular music's perpetual engagement with gender norms as a political statement. I realised that researching music and gender produces valuable information about the norms of gender and sexuality that are circulating in society. As music scholars have demonstrated repeatedly over the past twenty years or so, it is not only *underground* music that engages gender politics, queerness, and so on but also mainstream pop. Likewise, it is not only 'queer' artists who queer their acts but also 'straight' artists. In this way, following upon these many interventions, I conceived of a PhD project that would investigate how mainstream straight artists queered their acts, and what the implications of this might be.

This project has taken me down many different paths, in fact, and I have engaged with more approaches to queering than I would have thought possible. Early in the process, as well, I realised that I would have to be flexible in my approach to my case studies and applied different perspectives and methodological tools as the situation demanded. Thanks to this flexibility, my case studies are not directly comparable as such, though they contribute to a common cause all the same. Please note, as well, that my aim was not to determine the 'degree of queerness' of each case study but rather to explore the various ways in which queerness might arise in musical performance, and what this might mean, culturally, socially and politically. I detail my methodological and theoretical approaches in chapter 1, by way of an introduction to the mechanisms and goals of my investigation.

# CHAPTER 1: SETTING THE STAGE

## Introduction

This project begins with two main assumptions. First, popular music is rife with issues that concern gender politics. In a way, in fact, popular music *is* gender politics—an arena where artists and their fans can take on, play out and negotiate gender in much more explicit and hyperbolic ways than what is generally deemed acceptable in ‘real life’. At the same time, popular music has always policed and reinforced the dominant notions of gender and sexuality. In the last three to four decades, music scholars drawing on feminist and queer theory have explored these two faces of popular music. On the one hand, it has been shown that particularly male-dominated genres such as rock have long upheld strict gender norms, leading to the exclusion and marginalisation of women and sexual minorities.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it has been shown that the transgression of gender norms is now and always has been integral to the culture of popular music, meaning that popular music can also catalyse new understandings of gender and sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as Simon Reynolds and Joy Press observe, ‘rock [like other popular genres] offers an imaginative space in which you can reaffirm your sexual identity, or stretch and sometimes escape its limits altogether’ (Reynolds and Press, 1995:xiii). Most interesting of all, I find that certain artists seem to embody *both* of these aspects at the same time, and this phenomenon, which I will refer to as straight-queering,<sup>3</sup> is the subject of this thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bayton (1998); Cohen (1997); Frith and McRobbie, ([1978] 1990); Perry (2003); Reynolds and Press (1995); Walser (1993).

<sup>2</sup> See Brett et al. (1994); Clifford-Napoleone (2015); Fast (2012); Halberstam (2005, 2007a+b); Hawkins (2002, 2009, 2016); Jarman-Ivens (ed.) (2007); Leibetseder (2012); Solie (1993); Whiteley and Rycenga (eds.) (2006).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Straight-queer’ and ‘straight-queering’ have been defined in different ways. Stan Hawkins, for instance, says that ‘straight-queerness designates a type of behaviour that does not quite fall outside an idealised framework that is legitimised by assumptions and norms’ (Hawkins, 2009:106). Sean Griffin defined a straight-queer as ‘an individual who identifies as heterosexual, yet still considers him or herself “queer”, outside of normative heterosexuality’ (Griffin, 2009:2). For the purposes of this thesis, I will use straight-queering to label those acts through

This project was born out of the realisation that, though queer popular musicology is by now a well-established albeit relatively small branch of musicology, most of the existing studies of contemporary popular music are based on Anglo-American and Anglophone music—even those conducted by Norwegian music scholars. And, as I write this, no large musicological study on contemporary Norwegian popular music has focussed on queerness or queering (or any other form of that word), though a few have employed queer theory as part of their theoretical frameworks.<sup>4</sup> For scholars interested in the politics of straight-queering, however, mainstream Norwegian popular music represents a unique and exciting opportunity, because it is somewhat paradoxical. It is quite diverse, in that it encompasses a range of styles and genres (though rap and electronic pop are particularly big at the moment). But it is also rather homogenous, particularly in terms of ethnicity (presumably because Norway is a relatively homogenous country, at least in relation to many other European nations), and, in addition, most Norwegian artists perform quite traditional gender roles, even though Norway is often considered an open and tolerant society when it comes to gender politics. Moreover, so-called queer artists (artists who are ‘out’ as queer in any way, or who identify with queer politics) are conspicuously absent in Norwegian popular culture, at least in the mainstream. These qualities are in contrast to much other Western popular music, which offers a wide array of immensely popular artists who queer their acts—artists who have set out to challenge norms of gender and sexuality for decades as part of a tradition that continues today (David Bowie, Annie Lennox, Prince, Lady

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which pop artists actively construct themselves as heterosexual and largely conform to established gender norms in their performances—using, for example, music, lyrics, interviews and ways of stylising their bodies—while at the same time employing markers that introduce a sense of ambiguity and transgression to this gender performance. I will return to this later in the chapter.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Birgitte Sandve (2014) utilises a queer perspective on Lars Vaular as part of a larger analysis of masculinity in Norwegian hip-hop, and, though his work is not exclusively on popular music, Mats Johansson (2013) draws upon queer theory as part of an analysis of gender constructions in contemporary Norwegian folk music. Silje V. Onsrud (2013) employs queer theory as part of her analysis of gender relations in schoolchildren’s music education as well.

Gaga, Azealia Banks, Peaches, Angel Haze and Mika, to mention but a fraction of them).<sup>5</sup>

When I started this project, I could not find any artist in the Norwegian mainstream identifying as genderqueer, and only a few who expressed any affiliation with queer politics (the rap act KUUK is one of those artists, and I will return to them later in this thesis). There are surely queer people in Norway who are playing and making music, but they are mostly operating in the margins and the underground.<sup>6</sup> And there have been a few 'queer incidents' involving Norwegian popular music that sparked public discussion.<sup>7</sup> However, in the Norwegian mainstream, the music which is played frequently on the radio, wins *Urørt*<sup>8</sup> and follows us each day in our cars, our homes and our workplaces, the lack of gender and sexual diversity is conspicuous. This is unlike other Western countries but also other Nordic countries, especially Sweden, where discussions about queerness and gender politics are more prominent in the public discourse and there are quite a few artists who explicitly engage in gender politics through queering (such as Silvana Imam, the Knife, the Sounds and Andreas Lundstedt).

This does not mean that a queer aesthetics—in the forms of weirdness, flamboyance, eccentricity, 'difference' and play on Otherness—is absent in Norwegian mainstream popular music. On the contrary, it seems almost ubiquitous, and this contrast between a quite homogenous Norwegian culture in general and the ubiquitous queer play with identity in its popular music makes for fertile ground upon which to explore the politics of (straight-)queering.

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<sup>5</sup> See Hawkins (2016) for musicological analyses of many of these artists.

<sup>6</sup> For example, there are a few queer punk bands associated with the Blitz house in Oslo, a few well-known drag groups (Great Garlic Girls and Queentastic), the gay vocalist of the black metal band Gorgoroth, Kristian Eivind 'Gaahl' Espedal and electronica composer/artist/actor Nils Bech, among others.

<sup>7</sup> In 2015, for example, Touraj 'Tooji' Keshtkar came out as gay through the posting of a very controversial music video, called 'Father', which included simulated gay sex in front of an altar in a Christian church. The video caused a ruckus in the Norwegian Church and even led to the loss of his position as a TV host for a child programme on NRK. While Tooji was never very popular (he was mostly unknown until he represented Norway in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2012) and has since disappeared from the spotlight, this incident stands out to me as a markedly queer event in Norwegian popular music history.

<sup>8</sup> The talent show for 'new music' hosted by NRK, and one of the most important promotional channels for newly established Norwegian bands and artists.



In this thesis I will suggest that the particularities of gender politics in Norwegian popular music, and the absence of profiled queer artists, have much to do with the history of gender politics and gender policies writ large in Norway. Norway has a long history of so-called state feminism, with a strong focus on women's rights within the framework of the traditional family. When it comes to gay and lesbian rights, as well, the discussion has mainly centred on marriage rights, resulting in discourse that has been somewhat homonormative. This, in turn, may have suppressed alternative queer thinking about gender and sexuality in the collective imaginary, and therefore in popular culture as well. At the same time, Norwegian popular music is a transcultural space that appropriates and inherits styles and ways of performing from UK and US popular cultures, as well as those of other Nordic countries. In other words, Norway is a society that has a long tradition of 'conventional' thinking regarding gender, sexuality, love and family, but it is also a place where queer thinking and aesthetics slowly permeates the dynamic, and popular culture plays an important role in this process. How, then, should we approach queering in Norwegian popular music in this setting? Is it mere appropriation, with no 'real' impact? Or does it in fact contribute to the process of making Norwegian society more 'open' to queer thinking? With Norwegian gender politics as my backdrop, I will set out to critically consider how Norwegian mainstream, presumably 'straight' artists employ signifiers of 'weirdness', Otherness and ambiguity, and how these modes of expression might be understood from a queer perspective.

In the last decade or so, several popular music scholars have discussed queerness in 'straight' artists' musical performances.<sup>9</sup> As a starting point for my own exploration, then, I would like to unpack two themes that have continued to resurface in this research: queering as *infiltration* and queering as *appropriation*.

With the former, I refer to the way in which queerness in popular music has been interpreted by music scholars as a challenge to gender norms, using the argument that many performances invite queer interpretations and identifications despite the fact that the performer

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<sup>9</sup> See the work of Susan Fast, Stan Hawkins, Freya Jarman, Sarah Kerton, Emma Mayhew, Susan McClary, Erik Steinskog and Sheila Whiteley.

identifies and presents as heterosexual. In other words, several popular music scholars have even pointed out that queerness in popular music can be found anywhere—even in performances that on the surface seem to be heterosexual through and through (and in many ways heteronormative).<sup>10</sup> For instance, Sarah Kerton concludes her analysis of the girl group Tatu by saying that ‘they may not be gay, but they are certainly queer’ (Kerton, 2006:166), in reference to the way in which their performance style disrupts the dominant notions of gender and sexuality. Often this style derives from certain performance strategies, such as irony, parody and camp, that are designed to infuse the act with a certain ambiguity (Leibetseder, 2012). Freya Jarman makes the same point in ‘Notes on Musical Camp’ when describing camp as a strategy ‘posing as valueless, while presenting a parodic challenge to presumed norms of gender/sex relations in particular’ (Jarman-Ivens, 2009:193).

On the other hand, the appropriation of queer aesthetics can be problematic, and some scholars have argued that queer antics often (1) mask normative narratives, and (2) lessen the political potential of queer strategies.<sup>11</sup> Often, popular music performances are draped in a veil of Otherness that seems queer on the surface but has at best a questionable political impact. For example, in addressing Madonna’s appropriation of gay style, Jarman points to the popular perception of her queering as ‘little more than the inauthentic usage of a marginalized style that became almost fashionable in its otherness’ (Jarman-Ivens, 2004:69). Similarly, in his book on the British pop dandy, Stan Hawkins cautions that ‘all too often acts of entertainment parade the arbitrariness of gender and its social construction at the expense of marginalized groups’ (Hawkins, 2009:105).

This tension—between queering as a way of slowly (but surely) moving the boundaries for acceptable gender behaviour and queering as a way of desensitising the public to queer strategies (and thereby lessening their impact)—is one of the main themes of this thesis, and it is along the axis between infiltration and appropriation that I position my various cases

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<sup>10</sup> See Jarman-Ivens (2006, 2009, 2011); Oakes (2006); Rycenga (2006); Mayhew (2006); see also Sullivan (2003).

<sup>11</sup> See Devitt (2013); Hawkins (2006, 2007b); Nyong’o and Royster (2013); Schlichter (2004).

concerning the politics of Norwegian artists' straight-queering. As an extension of this theme, I am also interested in how my cases not only queer their acts but also 'straighten' them. While existing studies concerning queering and gender performativity in popular music have inspired this thesis to a considerable extent,<sup>12</sup> there is still much work to be done. For instance, I will address how discourses of 'difference' (or queerness) and normality (or straightness) are evoked and employed within the same performance, and how this plays a role in the construction of an artist's identity and persona. As this project has progressed, it has become blatantly clear that queerness and normativity, or queerness and straightness, are by no means simple or readily distinguishable categories within a given music performance. Instead, they are closely intertwined, and when artists play their music, create their persona and forge their identity in their performances, they actively draw on both queer and straight signifiers—even balancing them, I would argue—in ways that are always interesting, often quite problematic and generally closely connected to issues of identity, belonging, power, authenticity and the socio-economic context of contemporary Norway. One of the starting points of this thesis, then, is that, in Richard Dyer's words,

There is no pure expression of queeritude, uncontaminated by an equally unalloyed straightness surrounding it. [Rather, queer] works with and within the wider culture, of which [it] is an ineluctable part. (Dyer, 2002:9)

As the overreaching concern of this thesis is to consider the ways in which 'straight' artists queer their acts in performance, it latches on to the current academic discourse concerning the queering of heterosexuality.<sup>13</sup> With its basis in popular musicology and queer studies, my main objective will be to shed new light on the politics of straight-queering in popular music in general, and in contemporary Norwegian popular music in particular. I will utilise methodologies from popular musicology to make sense of the queer

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<sup>12</sup> See Auslander (1999); Bannister (2006); Fast (2012); Halberstam (2006, 2007b); Hawkins (2006, 2009, 2016); Jarman-Ivens (2006, 2009, 2011); Leibetseder (2012); Richardson and Hawkins (2007).

<sup>13</sup> See Griffin (ed.) (2009); Thomas (2009); Sedgwick (1990).

ambiguities that are often present in all kinds of popular music. Thus, I must underline the fact that this is not a 'traditional' queer study that focuses on subjects identified as queer (read LGBT) and their engagement with popular music.<sup>14</sup> Instead, I will explore how discourses of queerness (and straightness) are invoked and played out in more-or-less mainstream (often presumably 'heterosexual') popular music.

If music 'serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organization (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated' (McClary, [1991] 2002:8), then the gendered discourses that I will unpack in Norwegian popular music will also offer valuable insight into the discourses on gender and sexuality that were circulating in Norway in the years 2013–2015. My three cases will present selected issues and key concepts in depth to at once evoke and transcend that cultural timeframe.

Like many queer studies before this one, my thesis relies upon Judith Butler's theory of performativity as its theoretical baseline, and I will provide a thorough discussion of her work and how it informed my musicological inquiry later in this chapter. Because I straddle two interdisciplinary (or post-disciplinary) fields, queer studies and popular musicology, I have also been drawn to a range of scholars working in areas including feminist theory, masculinity studies, queer studies, popular musicology, philosophy and audiovisual studies, including Matthew Bannister, Susan Fast, Jack Halberstam, Stan Hawkins, Freya Jarman, Susan McClary, Richard Middleton, Alan Moore, John Richardson, Eve K. Sedgwick, Nikki Sullivan, Jodie Taylor and Sheila Whiteley.

As Noreen Giffney (2009) has pointed out, queer studies revolves around discourse analysis, which in turn demands a focus on the text (in its broadest sense). Here I will focus on audiovisual texts, with a special emphasis on music videos. As a musicologist, I will pay particular attention to how meaning arises in the 'music itself' (Scott, 2009). I am also interested in the performative strategies that drape my case studies in a veil of

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<sup>14</sup> A focus on gay/lesbian visibility was particularly prevalent in early queer studies, including those in musicology (see Brett, Wood and Thomas [1994]). In many ways, the term 'queer' has since been renegotiated, which has led to its expansion. I will return to queer as a concept later in this chapter.

‘weirdness’, ‘difference’ and Otherness and will approach them according to queer thinking and the socio-cultural context in which they play out. This resonates with Sheila Whiteley’s (2009) observation that

What is significant to an understanding of queer is the felt or perceived difference and how this relates to (musical) language (expression, emphasis and tone), what is glimpsed, what is sensed in performance. (Whiteley, 2009:208)

Within each case study, one or two music videos will make up the central subject. My readings<sup>15</sup> will engage with the ways in which meaning arises both inside and outside of the musical text and encompass studio production (instrumentation, musical style, digital processing and manipulation, specific musical gestures, and so on), the voice (that is, how it is used by the artist and staged on the recording), the performing body (how it is stylised in the video and elsewhere—press photos, for example), the lyrics and the overall aesthetic stylisation of the music video (the filming technique, the narration). I deliberately chose not to interview the artists in question, because I wanted all of my information and impressions to derive from sources otherwise readily available to the general public. This is thus not an ethnographic study, although I see the value of such an approach in another study, as a way to get a better idea of artists’ intentions and interpretations of their own queering. Here, however, I am, in short, more concerned with, in Jarman’s words, the ‘*sonic audibility* rather than [...] *discursive presence*’ (Jarman-Ivens, 2011:21, emphasis in original) of different musical elements. I did, however, seek out published interviews, newspaper articles, social media posts and other means through which the artists in question expressed themselves publicly, in order to supplement my music video analyses. I have also studied commentary fields, reviews and other places where fans and critics express their views on these artists, in order to gauge their reception, which in turn has much to do with how one might interpret a performer’s degree of queerness.

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<sup>15</sup> I use the term ‘reading’ interchangeably with the term ‘analysis’, following Hawkins in *Settling the Pop Score*, ‘to designate a move between focusing on the structures of music alone and the broader context within which the music is located’ (2002:1–2).

I take a hermeneutic audiovisual approach and apply a discursive textual analysis with an emphasis on intertextuality, in this way paying attention to how the various discourses surrounding the artists convey meaning by relating to other performances and discourses. My approach derives from a view of the audiovisual text and its different elements as ‘an affective totality whose unity is nevertheless partial and bound up in multiple complex ways with the cultural situatedness of performers and listeners’ (Richardson and Hawkins, 2007:15). I will return to my approach later in this chapter.

Unavoidably, the choices I have made along the way (and therefore my findings) are grounded in my own position as a feminist, white, native Norwegian with a musicological background. Reading queerness into a piece of music or a music video is not an exact science. It entails picking up on often quite subtle ambiguities and interpreting them from within a queer theoretical framework (which can be itself very diverse and even internally inconsistent). Moore has argued that perceived ambiguity in music can be problematic, because ‘with many songs, ambiguity is only the result of unfamiliarity with idiom, and is thus dependent on the nature of the listener’s competence’ (Moore, 2012b:197). In other words, my reading of ambiguity, strangeness and ‘weirdness’ arguably has as much to do with who I am as an analyst than with the music itself. As a native Norwegian who belongs to the same generation as all of the artists I analyse, I occupy a certain insider position in relation to this whole project. The advantage of this is that I have insight into the cultural codes that non-Norwegians might otherwise ignore or misinterpret. The disadvantage of this is that I may sometimes be too close, perhaps taking for granted or otherwise failing to explain certain aspects of a performance that a non-Norwegian might read as queer. I have done what I could to capitalise on the former and minimise the latter, but the reader will be the ultimate judge.

## **A popular musicological approach to straight-queering**

### **Conceptualising ‘queer’**

As Philip B. Harper, E. Francis White and Margaret Cerullo note, ‘the minute you say “queer” [...] you are necessarily calling into question what you mean

when you say it' (Harper et al., 1990:30). Before I turn to the details of my case-study approach, then, I will address this concept in more detail and clarify my own understanding and application of it.

Eve Sedgwick (1993) states that the word 'queer' has roots in the Indo-European 'twerkw' (across), German 'quer' (transverse), Latin 'torquere' (to twist) and English 'athwart' (across, obstruct, oppose). The 2010 *Oxford Dictionary of English* indicates that its etymological roots are unclear.<sup>16</sup> Scholars more recently have continued to explore the term's rich connotations. Queer has historically been used as a derogatory term referring to homosexuals and other 'gender deviants', and, as Jodie Taylor points out, 'in essence, queer bespeaks a displeasing oddity, perversity and twistedness' (Taylor, 2012:13). It was only at the very end of the twentieth century that queer was re-appropriated as a positive term to denote non-normative sexual practices and gender identities.

The development of queer theory is connected to several social processes of the twentieth century, including the emergence of the lesbian and gay liberation movement, second- and third-wave feminism, lesbian feminism, the AIDS crisis, the emergence of postmodernism and the popularisation of poststructuralist thought (particularly Michel Foucault's work) in the academy, all factors which spurred activists and scholars to challenge normative views on sexuality, sexual identity, sex, gender and gender presentation (Taylor, 2012). The academic theorisation of 'queer' originates in feminist and LGBT studies and was supposedly labelled as such by Theresa de Lauretis in 1990. Since then, queer theory has spread to a wide spectrum of academic disciplines while morphing into a rich, multifaceted, sometimes contradictory discourse.

Because of its plurality and democratic approach to theory building, Donald E. Hall (2003) suggests that queer theory would actually be more accurately described as queer *theories*, and that any claim of 'queer' as having one true interpretation would be misleading. This is, in Hall's words, because queer emphasises 'the disruptive, the fractured, the tactical and contingent' (Hall, 2003:5). Giffney (2009) also emphasises its multifaceted

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<sup>16</sup> See the 2010 edition, 'queer'. Available at [http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m\\_en\\_gb0680110?rskey=jKJLAy&result=6](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0680110?rskey=jKJLAy&result=6) [retrieved 6 November 2015].

nature and has described queer theory as ‘a diverse, often conflicting set of interdisciplinary approaches to desire, subjectivity, identity, relationality, ethics and norms’ (Giffney, 2009:2). Queer therefore can be notoriously hard to pinpoint, and as Jarman has poignantly noted,

queer, by its very definition, cannot be and does not want to be contained (and of course, to say ‘by its very definition’ is in fact oxymoronic for this same reason, since in defining it we risk undermining its mercurial nature). (Jarman-Ivens, 2011:16)

Still, while queer is inherently contentious, some interpretations are more common than others in queer scholarship, and they inform my understanding and usage of the term as well. First, there is the notion of queering as a performative act (a *doing*, not a *being*) with political implications—that is, something artists do in order to have some kind of (political or aesthetic) effect. Second, there is the notion of queer theory as a lens—a way to approach an object of study, in order to ferret out the aspects of a performance that in one way or another deviate from normative understandings of gender and sexuality. Thus, queer theory represents a tool that I as a researcher and music fan can apply in order to queer the artist in question.

Often the word ‘queer’, especially in its popular usage, is conflated with gay/lesbian/bisexual identity, or seen as a subset of this complex. While there is a historical connection there, and while queer popular musicology definitively also includes studies of individuals that identify as queer (Halberstam, 2005, 2006; Taylor, 2012), queer is more usefully framed as a means of conceptualising and deconstructing identity than as an identity label in and of itself. Among other things, the conflation of queer with specific ‘queer identities’ restricts the mobile, anti-identitarian positions that queer potentially offers. Moreover, as Nikki Sullivan notes, queer as a label of sexual identity creates a false sense of unity, as it is ‘positioning sexuality as a unified and unifying factor’ (2003:44). Therefore, as Taylor has argued, to label oneself as queer is not useful unless it is ‘in an effort to keep ourselves, our desires and our positionalities mobile’ (Taylor, 2012:14). Following this, as mentioned above, queer is often conceptualised as a *doing* rather than a *being*. Indeed, as Eve K. Sedgwick has noted, ‘queer seems to hinge much



more [than “gay” and “lesbian”] radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation’ (Sedgwick, 1993:8–9). On a similar note, Jarman has argued that

As a verb, ‘to queer’ suggests a process, and one of upsetting, making strange, unsettling, perhaps an act of trickery and deceit; and it suggests this in multiple languages through its connection with the act of questioning and of enquiry. (Jarman-Ivens, 2011: 15)

What can queer mean, then? Sedgwick has suggested that it may refer to

the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically. (Sedgwick, 1993:8)

Queerness signals transgression of boundaries and (sometimes) subversion of norms, and as I have approached the cases presented in this thesis, the feeling of dissonance, unease, ‘weirdness’ and ‘difference’ that queerness produces has guided my inquiries. As a theoretical lens and a methodological tool, queer theory arguably benefits musicological scholarship by providing a critical and flexible means of addressing the discourses that circulate in music performances. It is a way of *seeing*, *listening* and *thinking* about the music at hand. Pitting itself against heteronormativity and homonormativity alike, queer disturbs strict categorical thinking about gender and sexuality and negates a binary understanding of gender. It signals a decidedly anti-essentialist way of looking at people, gender, sexuality and identity. In the words of Moe Meyer,

[queer is] an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts. (Meyer, 1994:2)

Queer studies then become ‘something, a tool perhaps, that produces self-reflection and feelings of uncomfortability; a troublesome agent of rebellion’

(Giffney, 2009:23). One concern regarding such an open-ended and vague definition is that it renders queer essentially meaningless and at the same time, ironically, potentially all-encompassing. To avoid this pitfall, it is, as Giffney (2009:23) points out, helpful to recall Lee Edelman's view of queerness as something that 'can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one' (2004:17). In this way, queer always signal mobility and instability and is often recognised by the feeling that something is 'off'. Is there anything that can *never* be queer, then? Despite its open, slippery nature, I concur with Jarman's insistence that queer is decidedly anti-normative—'indeed, the moment it becomes normative, it stops being queer' (Jarman-Ivens, 2011:17).

### **Approaching queering in popular music**

Arguably, the propensity of popular music to be queer, or convey queerness, hinges upon its ability to air a range of different emotions and discourses, including rebellion, catharsis, desire and sexuality, on the one hand, and humour, theatricality and playfulness, on the other. For this reason, 'popular music can be seen as a catalyst for different truths, for different interpretations that have worked to free the queer imaginary' (Whiteley, 2006:xiv).

In the book *Playing It Queer*, Taylor draws several parallels between popular music and queerness, some of which I want to emphasise here (2012:45–50). First, popular music is, and always has been, associated with sexuality, as 'music allows us to explore and circulate emotions and pleasures, to immerse ourselves in the ecstatic, to let go, to speed up, to slow down, to be overcome and to climax' (Taylor, 2012:45). Second, popular music is associated with rebellion. Thus it has historically provided an accessible means of showing resistance to accepted norms and 'normal' ways of behaving. Like queer, then, popular music can also be seen as a 're-envisioning of the world that goes well beyond the norms of value and propriety, offering up an impression of "different" spaces and temporalities' (Hawkins, 2016:9). Third, popular music provides spaces for self-representation and the fashioning of identity, often in ways that are not acceptable in 'real life'. Fourth, popular music is associated with political activism and has been used actively to promote queer politics. A prime

example is the punk sub-genre queercore, but riot grrrls and other feminist cultural activists have also queered their acts by subverting the role of women and femininity in traditionally masculine genres (this will be addressed further in my chapter on KUUK). Finally, popular music favours ambiguous expressions that resist precise descriptions, by embracing theatrical and over-the-top aesthetics. It is in this sense that both popular music and queerness cross paths with expressions of weirdness and eccentricity, as well as uncanny, confusing and even scary expressions.

### **Approaching queer musicology**

One of queer theory's great contributions to musicology is arguably its mode of inquiry, which asks 'could there be more to this piece of music, or this piece of performance, than what first meets the eye (and ears)?' In other words, queer theory represents a tool that seeks to look behind and beneath the dominant or immediately available narrative. Whiteley points out,

Popular music, in particular, contains both hidden histories and iconoclastic figures that have long attracted devoted audiences who sense something quite different from what the mainstream thinks is being projected. (Whiteley, 2006:xiv)

Attempts to construct a queer musicology made a mark in the beginning of the 1990s through the publishing of the anthology *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (Brett, Wood and Thomas, 1994). This anthology was ground-breaking, as it provided the first comprehensive example of what a queer musicology might be and thus laid the foundation for much later work.<sup>17</sup> While popular musicology has been invested in debates on gender and sexuality since its inception in the mid-1990s (Scott, 2009), over a decade went by after *Queering the Pitch* before *Queering the Popular Pitch* (Whiteley and Rycenga [eds.], 2006)—the first anthology of queer popular musicology—entered the stage in 2006. The lack of a subtitle for this volume is indicative of how time has indeed increased the distance between queer theory and lesbian/gay studies, moving towards a more

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<sup>17</sup> Other early works that are worth mentioning include Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* ([1993] 2001) and Ruth A. Solie's (ed.) *Musicology and Difference* (1993).

'open' definition of queer that is less attached to specific sexual identities. One main theme of both these anthologies is the effort to unpack how queerness arises at the crossroads of music, the performing body, the audience, and the cultural and historical context in which they are situated. Queer theory has since influenced the work of many popular musicologists (as well as other music scholars),<sup>18</sup> and the earliest work has now been followed up by an array of books, articles and book chapters addressing queerness and gender performativity in popular music.<sup>19</sup>

Although analyses inspired by queer theory by now comprise an established branch within popular musicology (and popular music studies), there is no consensus as to what exactly makes music queer. Instead, a range of themes and issues has been brought to the table to decipher the queerness that can be entangled in all aspects of music performances and all kinds of music milieus.<sup>20</sup> In this thesis, one of the main strategies for identifying queerness has been to pin down the particular moments in the audiovisual text where a sense of dissonance seems to occur. In short, I understand queerness in popular music mainly in terms of 'clashing' discourses or conventions that arise at particular moments in the performance, creating a tension that exposes the dominant notions of how the relationship between them 'should' be. I side again with Jarman, who, drawing on Annamarie Jagose, has argued that queerness reveals itself in 'those gestures that *dramatize incoherencies* in an already tenuous set of links—it is that which brings the precarious nature of the relation to the foreground' (Jarman-Ivens, 2011:17, emphasis in original). When different audible and visual elements that do not seem to 'belong together' nevertheless appear together, it results in a blurring of boundaries between what is deemed intelligible and what is deemed unintelligible, while also pointing to the arbitrary way in

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<sup>18</sup> Including Susan Fast, Stan Hawkins, Freya Jarman, Susan McClary, John Richardson, Robert Walser, Elisabeth Wood and Sheila Whiteley, to mention a few.

<sup>19</sup> See Fast (2012); Halberstam (2005, 2007a, 2007b); Hawkins (2002, 2009, 2016); Jarman-Ivens (ed.) (2007); Maus and Whiteley (eds.) (forthcoming); Taylor (2012); Whiteley (2007).

<sup>20</sup> Clifford-Napoleone's (2015) work on the queerness of heavy metal, Hawkins's (2016) discussion of Kurt Cobain's play with masculinity, Jarman's (2006) theorisation of the potential queerness or instability in gangsta rap lyrics, and Devitt's (2013) documentation of bio-queen performance milieus are but a few examples.

which any discursive relationships are formed in the first place. This resonates with Butler's conceptualisation of the *queer moment*<sup>21</sup> as a moment

where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories is put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable. (Butler, 2004:216)

Identifying these moments, in my case, entails the consideration of a range of issues that have to do with gender conventions within particular genres, within the Norwegian setting and within Western popular culture—in other words, considering both the musical text and its context.

### **Establishing theories of musical text and context**

Every text and every reading has a social and therefore political dimension, which is to be found partly in the structure of the text itself and partly in the social relations of the reader and the way they are brought to bear upon the text. (Fiske, 1989:97–98)

My aim is to situate my work firmly within popular musicology, which is, in Derek Scott's words, 'distinct from "popular music studies" in that its primary concern is with criticism and analysis of the music itself, although it does not ignore social and cultural context' (Scott, 2009:2). Given this focus on the 'music itself', questions of how music signifies have been central to much popular musicological work,<sup>22</sup> and critical musicologists such as Susan McClary and Lawrence Kramer have informed my own take on this significantly. One of the central contributions of critical musicology has been a focus on music as a carrier of cultural meaning and an acknowledgment that music can influence society and the other way around, and that music cannot be regarded as having any inherent meaning but rather signifies in relation to the discourses in which it is embedded and by which it is surrounded. Kramer has pointed to the important role music has played in

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<sup>21</sup> The term 'queer moment' has been used previously by Doty (1993), Sinifeld (1994) and Burns and Veri (2013). There is also a PhD dissertation discussing this term at length by Dafydd James (2011).

<sup>22</sup> See Brackett (2000); Hawkins (2002, 2009); Moore (2001, 2012b); Walser (1993).

the formation of society, arguing that ‘music, as a cultural activity, must be acknowledged to help produce the discourses and representations of which it is also a product’ (Kramer, 1990:17). Within popular musicology, Hawkins has argued that ‘musical codes can only assume meaning through the cultural context of their location’ (Hawkins, 2002:9), while Robert Walser (1993) has emphasised the way in which music signifies in relation to its context, asserting that his interest ‘is less in explicating texts or defining the history of a style than in analysing the musical activities that produce texts and styles and make them socially significant’ (Walser, 1993:xiii). David Brackett (2000), for his part, problematizes a sharp distinction between text (music) and context, arguing that ‘[musical texts] gain their meaning by circulating with other texts from other media, which may include mass media publications, videos, film, industry publications, and “historical” documents’ (Brackett, 2000:19).

As music videos represent the centre and starting point for all of the case studies in this thesis, the following discussion focuses on strategies for audiovisual analysis.

### **Reading music videos, queerly**

Previous research into gender in music videos includes E. Ann Kaplan’s seminal *Rocking Around the Clock* (1987). Grounding her analyses in film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze, Kaplan’s work on gender representations in music videos has been ground-breaking. I will not delve further into the details of Kaplan’s work at this point, but rather cite it as a springboard to addressing two issues that are central to any discussion of the music video: first, how one might assess the relationship between music and image as a site for the production of meaning, and second, how one might conceptualise the role of the viewer.

### **Music and video: Strategies in audiovisual analysis**

Several popular-music scholars working with audiovisuality have criticised Kaplan for not acknowledging music’s important role in music video.<sup>23</sup> and it

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<sup>23</sup> See Cook (1998); Goodwin (1992); Hawkins (2002); Walser (1993).

is true that the tendency in early research on music video was to largely ignore the role of the music, which Andrew Goodwin, among others, has lamented:

In the study of music television a number of major lacunae are evident, but underlying many of them is the neglect of the music itself. This deafening silence in the corridors of the academy combines with an overestimation of the power of the visual to disfigure the study of music television. (Goodwin, 1992:2)

To counterbalance the largely visual focus of early music-video scholarship, popular musicologists have striven to bring the analysis of music into music video analysis (Hawkins, 2002; Walser, 1993; Shuker, 2001), and music scholars such as Nicholas Cook (1998) and Robert Walser (1993) have likewise asserted that the music in the music video occupies a special and central position and must be included in music video analysis (Walser even describes the music as ‘indisputably primary’ [1993:157]). Moreover, Richard Middleton ([1995] 2009) has argued that much of the music video’s textual richness with regard to identity (gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) lies in musical discourses connected to genre, styles, voices, instruments and so on.

On the other hand, as Anahid Kassabian has pointed out, music scholars have on their part been criticised for over-emphasising the role of the music:

While deeply attentive to the music, the scholarship produced within popular musicology—film scholars have said—has looked suspiciously like an analysis of a score and very little like a study of an audiovisual text. (Kassabian, 2010:44)

As part of this discussion, Walser has argued that ‘the challenge of analysing music video is that of interpreting and accounting for *both* musical and visual discourses’ (Walser, 1993:157, author’s emphasis), thus promoting a mode of inquiry that strives to see the ‘whole picture’—all of the elements in a music video, in relation to its social and cultural context.

The acknowledgment of music video as an independent and important part of popular culture has gained a firm foothold within popular music studies; Diane Railton and Paul Watson point out that ‘music videos are not

simply advertisements; they are, rather [...] both “promo and product”, and, as such, “have revised the nature of contemporary music” (Railton and Watson, 2011:2). The meanings embedded in a music video certainly are complex. As Hawkins and Richardson (2007) note, music, lyrics and images often influence one another in a way that makes the music video not merely a visualisation of a song but rather an independent work of art that often ‘takes on its own life after repeated viewings, produces different understandings, and even becomes more important than the song’ (Hawkins and Richardson, 2007:606). In other words, the images in a music video may complicate or otherwise open up for new meanings in the music (ibid.:605). Thus, while it is perhaps true in most cases that the music is made before the video,<sup>24</sup> the web of discourses surrounding the musical, visual and lyrical content of a music video encompass a range of mutual influences and relations that produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Ever-changing new technologies impacting both the production and the dissemination of music videos and must likewise be accommodated in any assessment of the ‘meaning’ of a contemporary music video. This is a central theme in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (2013), edited by John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman and Carol Vernallis. With regard to my case studies here, YouTube is especially important and Paula Hearsom and Ian Inglis’s chapter in this anthology notes that YouTube has led to a considerable democratisation of the music-video marketplace, in part thanks to the comments field that is situated beneath videos. They observe that ‘the “gatekeeping” commentary of a TV-studio-based video jockey has been replaced in YouTube by the open access equality of user-generated commentary’ (Hearsom et al., 2013:490). In the present study, it has indeed been interesting to observe how fans and listeners respond to the artist’s gender performance through the comments field, and how this gesture, in addition to those available via other social media, makes dialogues between artists and fans more readily possible, allowing artists, in

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<sup>24</sup> However, as Mathias Bonde Korsgaard (2013) shows, contemporary music video has taken many new, sometimes interactive forms that challenge even this common assumption.



turn, to negotiate their gender performances in more or less direct contact with their viewers/listeners.<sup>25</sup>

Approaches that engage analytically with intertextuality have been central to unpacking the complexity of popular music audiovisuality, and they are the most important methodological tools for me in this thesis as well. While the term 'intertextuality' can be found in the work of both Roland Barthes and Roman Jakobson, its current application is generally attributed to the work of Julia Kristeva, whose theory is based on a synthesis of Michael Bakhtin's dialogism and Sigmund Freud's notion of dreamwork (Buchanan, 2014). The term refers to the way in which cultural texts produce meaning through references or relations to other texts. In addition to explicit citation, many theories of intertextuality identify other relations as well. Framing music as intertextual is thus both a fundamental approach to its nature and a methodological tool for deconstructing the discourses at play within it.

Relatedly, it must be said that no new musical text is inherently autonomous but instead always exists in some sort of relation to other texts. As Marita Djupvik (2014a:6) has pointed out, Richardson and Hawkins (2007) shows that viewers/listeners make connections, often unconsciously, between the music video (for example) and all kinds of alternative cultural texts:

[a] pop video [...] is not only related to other pop videos of a similar genre, but to all audio-visual texts, to films, musicals, commercials, political documentaries, to academic discourses, and so on. All texts have the potential to influence each other. (Richardson and Hawkins, 2007:17)

Acknowledging this web of interrelated discourses allows the scholar to unpack the complexity of any cultural product while 'circumvent[ing] the domination of one interpretation over another, or, to put it differently, the totalisation of any specific singularity' (Hawkins, 2002:27). An intertextual

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<sup>25</sup> This is particularly evident in the case of KUUK (chapter 2) and Lars Vaular (chapter 4). In the case of KUUK, hostile comments seem to have furthered and magnified their feminist profile, while in the case of Vaular, some negative comments about his 'feminine' gender style in one video prompted him to 'explain himself' to the fans, and to actively 'straighten' his act.

perspective also allows the scholar to unpack *influences* and view musicians or songwriters as both products of discourse and acting subjects with agency, which is in accordance with Butler's notion of performativity.

If meaning results from intertextual relations, then the feeling of queerness that can arise in audiovisual music performances is presumably bound up in intertextuality as well. Moreover, intertextuality as a theoretical framework explains how one can see queerness as both a strategy (on the part of the artists) and a methodological tool (on the part of the analyst). In other words, artists may consciously draw on different discourses in order to create an aesthetic that invokes queerness. Likewise, the viewer/listener may employ an intertextual perspective to interpret the performance queerly. Theories of intertextuality also serve to negate the notion of intrinsic meaning, thus avoiding the trap of essentialism. As Richardson and Hawkins maintain, forging meaning is ultimately a matter of interpretation—of picking up on the different discourses to which the text refers, through an interrogation that can be highly individual and dependent on the interpreter's available reference points: 'The musical text is indefatigable in terms of how we read it, and only gains its meaning through an active reading' (2007:15). This resonates with Brackett's emphasis upon the centrality of listening competence, or 'the range of subject positions available to a listener dependent on that individual's history and memory' (Brackett, 2000:13). I would heartily agree that the theoretical positioning or listening perspective of the analyst is a very important subject position—one that profoundly impacts the scope and results of the analysis. Analysing a music video, then, becomes a question of not only figuring out what it means but also pinpointing those discourses and ideologies that are encouraging the interpretation in question. This axiom resonates with Moore's (2012b) view of music analysis as a tool for studying *how* music communicates meaning: 'it's not about *what* songs "actually" seem to mean, it's about *how* they mean, and the *means* by which they mean' (Moore, 2012b:1, emphasis in original).

### **'Queer watching'? Conceptualising 'the gaze'**

If queer analysis is a way of seeing and understanding, then is it productive to talk about a 'queer gaze'? Theories of the gaze are asking questions about the ways we look, and how the ways we look facilitate the (re)production of (gender) identities (Sullivan, 2003). Alongside Foucault's theory of the panopticon gaze, Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, as described in the landmark text 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' ([1975], 1989) has probably been the most influential contribution to this area. Although Mulvey confines her theorisation of the gaze to Hollywood cinema, it has made its way to other contexts as well. Employing Freudian notions of scopophilia (the pleasure of looking), ego identification and fetishism, Mulvey argues that classic Hollywood cinema is designed to satisfy male (heterosexual) unconscious desires, or the 'male gaze'. In other words, the gaze as a fetishistic form of scopophilic pleasure belongs to the man only: 'in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female' ([1975] 1989:19). Mulvey argues that this alignment has been sustained through the presentation of females on the screen as *objects to be looked at* (through shots that dwell on the female body, for example), while males on the screen are presented as *subjects to identify with* (ibid.). However, as Sullivan (2003:198) notes, the notion of a single, unified and exclusively male gaze has been criticised and in turn reworked by queer theorists. Pointing to the essentialism inherent in the notion of a fixed, gender-specific gaze, several scholars have introduced other ways of looking and identifying in a cinematic context. For example, Mary Ann Doane (1991) suggests that the way females view film must be considered more fluid and shifting than Mulvey's theory would appear to allow for. Kobena Mercer (1994) has further argued that ethnicity impacts viewing practices, while Richard Dyer (1992) and Yvonne Tasker (1993) have demonstrated that males are also objectified in film.

While not dismissing the many problematic representations of women in popular music (for instance in lyrics and in music videos), scholars have also problematized and nuanced Mulvey's account of the gaze in this area as well. Especially since the 1980s and 1990s, the objectification of men in popular culture has escalated significantly (Hawkins, 2002:17), and this is especially evident in how men are portrayed in music videos. While acknowledging Mulvey's theory as quite out-dated, especially in its framing

of the straight man as incapable of being objectified, Hawkins applauds its invitation to ‘a greater concern for the cross-cultural responses between receivers and viewers’ (Hawkins, 2002:17)—that is, Mulvey’s notion of the gaze points to how meaning is inscribed in cultural products, and this process’s dependence on the viewer’s ‘own relation to class, ethnicity, race, nationality, and gender’ (ibid.). This mode of interpretation entails, in effect, a pluralisation of the gaze.

Popular music scholars, particularly those drawing on Butler’s theories of performativity in one way or another, have employed the gaze in many different ways. In a reading of the music video for ‘Candy Shop’ by 50 Cent, for example, Djupvik (2014b) employs a gaze that seeks to see ‘behind’ this rapper’s hypermasculine display, and to suggest that certain musical and visual elements—an ‘exotic’ string and flute riff, as well as the odd absence of beautiful women in key parts of the video—in fact hint at the ‘potential fragility of [...] his masculinity, even his heterosexuality’ (Djupvik, 2014b:223). Another perspective on the gaze is provided by Sullivan (2009), who observes that how one views a music video may differ depending on to whom one thinks the video caters. In her reading of Prodigy’s music video ‘Smack My Bitch Up’, Sullivan notes that her impression of the video changed when it was revealed at the end that the main character was a woman. In her study of Led Zeppelin’s female fans, Susan Fast (2001) demonstrated a gender reversal of the objectifying gaze:

Certainly in performances of so much rock music it is the male body that is displayed—as a symbol of masculine strength and power to male *and* female spectators and as an object of erotic desire for female (and probably also male) spectators. (Fast, 2001:186, emphasis in original)

Fast emphasises that this pertains not only to ‘feminine’ or androgynous men but also to ‘those whose image is built around aspects of identity that are characteristically defined as male’ (Fast, 2001:187), and that the female gaze upon Robert Plant may take the form of both erotic objectification and musical identification. This, argues Fast, is a source of female empowerment, just as Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’ empowers men (ibid.). Sometimes performers employ performance strategies that consciously seek to evade the straight

gaze as well. Doris Leibetseder (2012) argues that the performance strategy mask/masquerade ‘deceives the gaze and diverts the attention to something else in order to distract from something that the wearer wants to hide’ (Leibetseder, 2012:82). From a queer perspective, this act often translates into a disruption of the binary gender system, and here Leibetseder points to the music video ‘Downtown’ by Peaches, in which Peaches appropriates both male and female masquerade. Leibetseder also points to the female mask that Annie Lennox wears on the iconic cover of her album *Diva*.<sup>26</sup> Importantly, then, all of these ways of engaging with popular music—artists queering their acts through masquerade or other queer strategies designed to disrupt the gaze, or fans looking and experiencing an artist queerly, or music analysts looking at and interpreting a performance in queer terms—work to avoid or deflect the (straight) gaze and thereby queer gender norms.

But what about the analyst who employs a ‘queer gaze’? Caroline Gamman and Lorraine Evans (Gamman and Evans, 1995; Evans and Gamman, 2004) argue that the ‘male gaze’ has become a cliché that leaves little room for ‘queer relations of looking, or to explain changes in some contexts where women’s experience is not completely defined by patriarchal discourse’ (1995:15). They also offer a queer critique of post-Mulveyan accounts of the gaze, arguing that while adding other subject positions (such as female, black, gay and lesbian) to gaze theory has represented an important correction, it does not address the underlying problem—at least from a queer perspective—that the ‘gay gaze’ or ‘black gaze’ is as essentialist as the ‘male gaze’. If identity is fluid and multifaceted, then the gaze is too. Can there even *be* a ‘queer gaze’, then? Gamman and Evans hesitate to make the case for such a concept, suggesting instead that viewing a text queerly entails paying attention to *all* of the possible identifications that a text might invite, instead of limiting oneself to the theoretically fixed identity of the subject looking (Evans and Gamman, 2004:217).

Applying Gamman and Evans’s perspectives to music video analysis, one might look for the (sometimes obvious) queerness embedded in it but also undertake an effort to ‘queer it’—that is, to employ a way of looking that is grounded in queer theory. They refer to this positioning as ‘spectator

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<sup>26</sup> See also Hawkins’s (2002:124–125) analysis of the same album cover.

fluidity' (ibid.:217), arguing that while 'there might be consensus on the denoted meaning, there is always ambiguity in the realm of connotation' (ibid.:218). This approach allows for the embrace of sometimes contradictory parts of the given text, because it acknowledges that neither queer nor straight/normative representations can be said to be consistently univocal. As already briefly discussed, and as Evans and Gamman point out (ibid.), this means that a text may denote queerness on the surface while at the same time embodying a heterosexist narrative beneath the surface. The opposite can also be true—sometimes a presumably heterosexual narrative may also come with a 'queer twist', recalling the different ways straight-queering has been theorised within popular music studies. While taking into consideration that some texts seem to encourage certain (queer or straight) interpretations, Evans and Gamman nevertheless appear to maintain that all texts 'can be viewed queerly' (ibid.). In turn, popular music might therefore be subjected to 'queer hearings'. While I embrace the principle that queer readings and hearings are therefore always possible, I would hasten to add that this should not entail forcing queerness upon the text but instead involve grappling with and embracing the unstable and ambiguous elements in the text and acknowledging the queerness that is always already there. Alexander Doty sums this up,

(...) queer readings aren't 'alternative' readings or 'reading too much into things' readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along. (Doty, 1993:16)

### **Notes on queerness and straightness: Issues of appropriation, subversion and transgression**

Having discussed what I mean by 'queer' and how I have implemented the appropriate tools and theories from musicology and audiovisual studies, I now want to clarify this thesis's use of the concepts often thought to be the opposite of queer: straight, heterosexual and heteronormative. In short, heteronormativity will denote the institutionalisation of heterosexuality—that is, those assumptions that sustain the normality of heterosexual

monogamy and traditional gender roles and in turn ensure that other sexual and gendered expressions are found to be abnormal (Butler refers to this as the 'heterosexual matrix', to which I will return shortly). While heterosexuality is clearly a component of the heteronorm, it is not *by definition* normative. 'Straight', on the other hand, is often conflated with heterosexual, but in the same way that queer is different from gay/lesbian, 'straight' can be distinct from heterosexual. More precisely, I wish to describe as 'straight' any performance of gender that can be placed within the frames of heteronormativity—performances that encompass not only inferences of heterosexuality but also gestures and manners that establish the artist as cisgendered<sup>27</sup> and conform to the norms of gendered behaviour. With this in mind, I will now introduce a number of issues that arise when queerness and straightness cross paths.

My cases all frame themselves as heterosexual and cisgendered through their references to heterosexual sex and heterosexual and/or monogamous relationships in their lyrics, interviews and social media platforms. In many ways, then, they are quite conformist with regard to current expectations. However, the tension between these artists' positioning as heterosexual and their often queering antics raises a host of issues regarding how normality, normativity and heterosexuality are created or evoked in performance, and how straight-queering is linked to the politics of transgression and subversion.<sup>28</sup> The questions, then, are how might representations of heterosexuality be approached from a queer perspective, and how might one interpret the queering of straight artists?

In an article on the politics of body modification, Sullivan astutely observes that when we talk about queering and transgression, we tend to indirectly, and often unconsciously, employ the dichotomy of good and bad. This is regrettable, Sullivan argues:

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<sup>27</sup> Following Schilt and Westbrook (2009), I consider cisgender to describe people 'who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity' (p. 461). Cisgender is thus the opposite of transgender and supplants the terms 'biowoman/bioman' and non-transgender.

<sup>28</sup> Note the difference between transgression and subversion: while transgression denotes crossing of boundaries in any form, subversion denotes the overthrowing of power structures. Thus, subversion is associated with social change, whereas transgression may or may not lead to lasting change.

It is not enough to unquestioningly assume that conformity is bad and transgression is good or to presume that such categories are stable, discrete, identifiable, and unambiguous. (Sullivan, 2006:561)

In other words, Sullivan warns us against an uncritical celebration of ambiguity while pointing out that labels such as 'conforming' and 'transgressive' or 'straight' and 'queer' can be contentious and sometimes even conceal complexity rather than expose it. Good and bad have long been linked to both queer and straight, depending on the time, place and social context. While queer is still widely used as a derogatory term, 'the growing authority of the critical tendencies that aim at unsettling the hegemony of heterosexuality' (Schlichter, 2004:544) has now also seen it equated with 'good', as is 'transgressive'. In any case, Sullivan reminds us that 'queering one's act' can be problematic, and that transgression is neither unambiguous nor straightforward. To address some of the issues Sullivan brings up, I will next (1) trace some of the central debates regarding how representations of heterosexuality and the straight subject may be addressed from a queer perspective, and (2) highlight the complex relationship between queer aesthetics, transgression and subversion in popular music.

Although, as already outlined, most queer theorists emphasise that queer is more about deconstructing identity than serving as an identity label in and of itself, the notion of being queer is still frequently equated, particularly in its vernacular uses, with LGBT-identified people. There are, of course, good reasons for this, as LGBT people have long been marked as deviant and unwanted, just as heterosexuality has been constructed as normal and normative. In this sense, LGBT lives have been, and still are, queer. Tamsin Spargo compares this dynamic to the relationship between women and gender studies:

just as women were the first group to explore gender difference, so lesbians, gay men and other groups whose sexualities are defined against the norm of heterosexuality have been foremost in the exploration of the politics of sexuality. (Spargo, 1999:7)



Thus the relationship between heterosexuality, 'straightness' and queer theory has been the subject of much debate. On the one hand, scholars such as Calvin Thomas (2009) have argued that queer theory *can* queer the straight subject, in the sense that it can encourage heterosexual scholars to see themselves and other people in a new, self-critical light, thereby dismantling heterosexuality's hegemony. Thomas's own employment of queer theory emphasises its potential for destabilising notions of identity: 'Queer theory ultimately asks: who the f\*\*\* knows who or what one *is* in relation to the question of whom or how or what or when or even if one f\*\*\*s?' (Thomas, 2009:23). Butler puts forward a similar view in her article 'Critically Queer' and includes 'straights for whom the term expresses an affiliation with anti-homophobic politics' (Butler, 1993b:21) within the group of people potentially encompassed by queer. David Halperin likewise agrees that queer belongs to 'anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of his or her sexual practices' (1995:62), and that queer could extend to 'some married couples without children [...], or even (who knows?), some married couples *with* children—with, perhaps, *very naughty* children' (ibid.). Butler, Halperin and Thomas, then, emphasise queer theory as a critique of normativity, stressing the difference between heterosexuality as a personal sexual preference and heteronormativity as a matrix of power within which heterosexuality is but one component. From this perspective, then, heterosexuality is not automatically excluded from queerness but rather seen as a constructed identity category that encompasses as much variation as any other. Thomas labels his affiliation with queer modes of thinking 'straight-queer' (p. 21), denoting, in the words of Sean Griffin, 'an individual who identifies as heterosexual, yet still considers him or herself "queer", outside of normative heterosexuality' (Griffin, 2009:2).

Within popular musicology, the notion that heterosexuality can be queer(ed) is reflected in research that seeks to show how apparently unmitigated heterosexual performances may also embody elements that can be interpreted queerly, often as the result of conflicting discourses in the musical text. As Emma Mayhew observes,

Although many 'queer' rock stars turn out to be conventionally heterosexual in their personal lives, a queer aesthetic or sensibility

has often been a hallmark of an artistic and transgressive identity in rock. Thus a queer/artistic nexus has existed in rock that has not necessarily been associated with the personal sexual practice of the subject, but rather has been about challenging the normal common-sense understanding of gender—aligned unproblematically with a biological and anatomically defined sex. This is done by invoking a different way of listening, a queer sensibility, which does and can exist alongside a heterosexual reading. (Mayhew, 2006:169)

Paradoxically, it is often the most exaggerated, seemingly 'straightest' expressions that are found to invite queer interpretations. Jarman's (2006) 'Queer(ing) Masculinities in Heterosexist Rap Music' is a good example—in this article Jarman argues that constructions of hypermasculinity in rap music are often problematized, albeit subtly. For example, in addressing the lyrics of Eminem's 'Remember Me?', Jarman suggests that while their semantic content can be seen as extremely heteromasculine, the way in which they are delivered problematizes this character. Jarman points out that the boastful, fast-paced delivery that often renders the semantic content incomprehensible in fact removes the rapper from the masculine domain of communicative language. This, Jarman argues,

opens up something of an irony: that in the demonstration of their linguistic skills, which purports to confer patriarchal approval upon them, and in the delivery of misogynist and/or homophobic lyrics, male (gangsta) rap artists invoke a mode of utterance that works precisely *against* the hypermasculine, male-centric world in which they profess to operate. (Jarman-Ivens, 2006:207)

Moreover, the way in which the rapper constructs himself as so profoundly 'hypermasculine' and heterosexual can even raise a suspicion that he is overcompensating, in this way making his gender performance unstable because of its sheer obviousness:

The paradox of overdetermined surface message and underlying means of representation, even (or, especially) in the face of manifest misogyny and homophobia, may well give cause to respond to rap: methinks the rapper doth protest too much. (Ibid: 211)

This, Jarman argues, invites a queer interpretation. Jason Lee Oakes (2006) also addresses how almost overly normative gender performances might be queered. He approaches this from another angle, however, by discussing how Stevie Nicks's traditionally feminine but also 'highly performative' (Oakes, 2006:43) gender style is queered when it is parodied in drag performances. Oakes notes that Nicks's queer appeal seems to reside in those qualities that might otherwise be seen as either negative (her 'witchiness') or outside of the realm of political potential (her hyperfemininity). Thus, her femininity is not only appropriated and magnified but also subverted in an apparent attempt to 'reconcile feminism and femininity' (2006:51). Oakes concludes that 'while Nicks's witchiness and hyperfemininity may confirm gender stereotypes for more conservative listeners, from another perspective Nicks serves as a model of female—and, more specifically, feminine—empowerment' (Oakes, 2006:52).

Turning to the scholars/interpreters themselves, some queer theorists have questioned the straight intellectual's ability to see beyond and deconstruct their own normative and privileged position. Suzanna Danuta Walters has argued that 'deconstruction of identity politics [...] might have some merit, but it can also, in the world of academia, as well as in other social spaces, become the vehicle of co-optation: the radical queer theorist as married heterosexual' (Walters, 1996:841). Annette Schlichter points to the somewhat vague and contradictory feel embedded in the notion of the 'queer heterosexual' or 'queer straight', which emerges 'as a somewhat elusive subject of current critical discourse' (Schlichter, 2004:544). If all sexual and gender categories are, as Foucault has proposed, social constructs born out of a scientific regime that 'questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light' (1978:45), however, then 'heterosexuality', like 'homosexuality', is a category that is up for deconstruction via queer theory. In other words, it is susceptible to critical scrutiny as any other gender constellation. Nevertheless, Sullivan points out, 'despite the considerable amount of research on "sexuality", heterosexuality remains, for the most part, relatively unquestioned' (Sullivan, 2003:119). This is why Griffin (2009) argues that while questions of how straight subjects can or should engage in queer theory (which Thomas's work has centred on) and whether

heterosexuality can be queer (in any meaning of that word) are important, it is perhaps more imperative to work out the ways in which queer theory might engage critically with heterosexuality (or other dominant ideological positions) as an institution and a social construct, in an attempt 'to unseat their power as an almost unspoken "default" core from which everything else is defined' (Griffin, 2009:4).

As outlined so far, there are some problematic aspects of theorising queerness in heterosexuality, and in one sense, as long as heterosexuality (at least in the form of long-term monogamous relationships) is privileged and normative, and queer is anything that is not normative, then heterosexuality can never be 'truly queer' (which is itself, to my ears, a rather essentialist tag). As an alternative to trying to frame heterosexuality in terms of queerness, Chris Beasley, Heather Brook, and Mary Holmes (Beasley, Holmes and Brook, 2015; Beasley, 2015), have introduced the term *heterodoxy* as a means of exploring the complexity of heterosexual relations. One of their main concerns, which they present in an article titled 'Heterodoxy: Challenging Orthodoxies about Heterosexuality' (2015), is the worsening reputation of heterosexuality (mainly as a result of the 1980s 'sex wars' and the growth of queer theory), which prompts them to challenge the 'common account of heterosexuality in critical gender/sexuality scholarship as nasty, boring and normative' (Beasley et al., 2015: 682). For Beasley and colleagues heterodoxy signals 'an extensive variety of non-normative heterosexual possibilities or innovations relevant to broader analysis of social change' (ibid.: 684), and they sketch out some of these possibilities using a model arranged around degrees of deviation from the heteronorm. Reminiscent of a dartboard, the bull's eye of their model is the 'cissexual'—those situated smack-dab in the middle of normativity. The next level, which encloses normativity, is divergence, and then comes transgression, followed by subversion. The outermost ring is dissidence, and outside of the 'dart board' altogether one finds heresy. Each level is exemplified by a practice one might find within heterosexual relations, such as non-normative gender roles within marriage (divergence), kink sexuality (transgression) and non-cohabiting (subversion).

I concur with some of their key points. Heterosexuality (or, rather, representations of heterosexuality in performance) often involves non-

normative elements, as exemplified by the cases presented in this thesis. It is also true that the heterosexual subject, like any other, demonstrates individuality and uniqueness, and that heterosexuality simply cannot be equated with a set of monolithic, static desires. However, I question their premise that, within queer theory, 'heterosexuality is usually critically conceived as homogenous and synonymous with heteronormativity' (Beasley et al., 2015: 682–83). My experience has been that queer scholarship, both within and outside of musicology, though not traditionally as involved with heterosexuality as with other, non-normative sexualities, certainly does engage with—and has the potential to engage much further with—heterosexuality as a social construct.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, I do not see a big difference between queer and heterodoxy, or why there should be a problem calling the practices they describe 'queer'. As the authors present it, heterodoxy is something other, and something less radical, than queer. I read them as hesitant to use queer for two reasons. First, queer seems too radical:

(...) we would suggest that the broader arena of non-normative is not inevitably as challenging as that to which the term 'queer' can more confidently lay claim. (Beasley et al., 2015: 684)

Second, the notion of 'queer heterosexuality' is problematic:

'Queer heterosexuality' looks suspiciously like a push for heterosexuality to 'have it all', to be both dominant and marginalised, such that heterosexuality invites itself along to the fashionably cool queer party without having had to pay the dues of marginalisation. (Ibid.)

These authors, then, present heterodoxy as a type of 'queer light'. I would argue, though, that by stating this, they do not challenge the opposition between queer and hetero—which it seems they are trying to do by pointing out that heterosexuality can be non-normative as well—but rather maintain it. While I find their account helpful for sorting out the ways in which non-normativity might be practiced within the boundaries of heterosexual relations, I do not see why the issues they outline cannot be comprehended

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<sup>29</sup> See Griffin (ed.) (2009); Jarman-Ivens (2006); Hawkins (2006, 2007); Thomas (2009); Sedgwick (1990); Sullivan (2003).

within the framework of queer theory. Some of the practices they place within the frame of heterodoxy have even been theorised by queer theorists, such as deliberate childlessness (Halperin, 1995). If queer theory is a 'deconstructing enterprise, taking apart the view of a self-defined by something at its core, be it sexual desire, race, gender, nation or class' (Gamson, 2000:348), as Joshua Gamson has argued, then the tool queer theory/theories represents certainly should be able to deal with straight representations as readily as queer. When it comes to Beasley and colleague's hesitation about 'queer heterosexuality', their discussion acquires a sense of dissonance. On the one hand, they discuss how heterosexuality cannot *be* queer, and how it is offensive towards queer people to co-opt heterosexuality into the 'queer club', and indeed these are problematic issues. On the other hand, however, they keep with 'understandings of "queer" as a verb rather than a noun' (Beasley et al., 2015:690). To me, this constitutes an important distinction that merits further nuance. In this thesis, it is my own position of looking at heterosexuality, or representations of heterosexuality, queerly that is not about naming heterosexuals as *being* queer, but rather recognising everyone's capacity to *do* queer, or engage in queering (in the sense of challenging normative notions of gender, sexuality and identity), regardless of sexual identity or preference. This position resonates with the critiques of Walters (1996) and Schlichter (2004) as well. All in all, then, I do not see any reason to abandon queer theory as a framework for understanding non-normative representations of heterosexuality. However, in order to stress that I remain critical of these representations, and to continue to acknowledge their queer *and* normative aspects, I will use the terms 'queer elements' and 'straight-queering' alongside 'queer' in my analyses.

To recap, then, I have discussed how popular music shapes and disseminates gender identity, and that music performances is not only a demonstration of normative gender but also an arena where gender is constantly (re)negotiated. Also, I have stressed that the relationship between queering and subversion is never clear-cut and therefore problematic. After all, as Mayhew has noted, rock has always based its ideals of authenticity on the principles of its artists' originality and their rebellion against societal and

moral constraints (Mayhew, 2004). Moreover, as Reynolds and Press (1995) have shown, rebellion and transgression often hide otherwise dominant narratives and enforce masculine hegemony, often at the expense of femininity and non-normative masculinities. Queerness in music is also tricky because, as Marion Leonard (2007) has pointed out, while a given gender performance might be taken as queer in one musical or social setting, it could be perfectly normative within another setting. Queer aesthetics have become a central, almost 'natural', ingredient in a wide array of pop performances, as Hawkins discovers in his various studies:

Today it is often the case that when mainstream artists appropriate gender-ambivalent coding, their degree of acceptance is predicated on them *signifying* as queer rather than *being* queer. (Hawkins, 2006:282)

Thus, for Hawkins, queering in popular music often takes the form of the appropriation of a certain aesthetic rather than the intention to queer gender norms. Hawkins's (2006, 2007b) studies of male queering in mainstream pop are useful for illustrating the issues surrounding queer appropriation in popular music. In order to problematize such appropriation in music performances, like Hawkins I also activate the concept of *disidentification*. So far, I have provided some examples that illustrate how straight-queering might act as a form of infiltration, in the sense that it can arise where one least expects it to 'make strange' even those expressions that appear thoroughly normative and stereotypical. Disidentification has been used in queer theory to refer to a way of relating to gender norms that entails simultaneously obeying them and failing to obey them. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler describes this as an 'experience of misrecognition, [an] uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong' (Butler, 1993a:219). J. E. Muñoz elaborates:

The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this

code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (Muñoz, 1999:31)

Hawkins who applies Muñoz's concept in his work has argued that one strategy of disidentification in popular music is *opacity*—the practice of disengaging, distancing oneself, infusing one's act with a sense of ambiguity, not telling the whole truth (2016:63). This prevalent strategy is used by straight artists, of course, including those in the cases presented in this thesis. The problem is that when straight artists do so, they also often hide their normativity, and hence their privileged position. Hawkins describes the queering antics of straight male pop stars as 'a type of tourism that characterizes a new generation of white male pop stars within a no-man's land' (Hawkins, 2007b:197 & 2016) and laments elsewhere how 'queerness can quickly become a strategy in pop music of postmodern intent without any form of political resistance' (Hawkins, 2006:289). If opacity, transgression and gender fluidity are part of the game for any pop star today, employing queer, ambiguous or 'metrosexual' signifiers is not a means of queering but rather a way of 'modernising patriarchy' (ibid.:210) and need not entail that these artists 'express attitudes that put them at risk as they still contribute to the dominant system by spelling out their underlying heterosexuality' (Hawkins, 2007b:207).

On a similar note, Tavia Nyong'o and Francesca Royster are concerned that the proliferation of queer aesthetics in mainstream popular music might lessen the potential of queer strategies, noting that '[q]ueer and camp aesthetics are pervasively merchandised and ubiquitous, narrowing the range of oppositional consciousness they could once occupy' (Nyong'o and Royster, 2013: 412). Queering in popular music, then, is a strategy that has been used to both challenge and—seemingly paradoxically—reinforce existing hegemonies. In this sense, queering in popular music is a practice that may or may not be subversive. Rachel Devitt expresses this poignantly:

On one hand, the history of Western popular music is in many ways a history of sexuality and rebellion, the bold-type moments of which have often involved taboo-transgressing displays of desire and a good deal of genderfucking, from Elvis the Pelvis to eyeliner-friendly emo boys. On the other hand, those queer moments in pop music also end



up recuperated into and even recuperating normative conventions that do not allow space for queer acts or queer people. Meanwhile, very few out queer artists have enjoyed widespread success in pop music even as the mainstream music industry has, at various times, attempted to cater to the powerful 'pink' dollar. (Devitt, 2013: 429–30)

Arguably, an important part of the discussion of the *effect* of queering comes down to theorising issues of intent—that is, questioning whether or not norms and structures can be subverted, changed or queered without the artist in question intending to do so, simply through the act of transgression. On this issue I am in partial agreement with Elisabeth Wilson, who has argued that transgression in itself does not denote any 'real' politics but rather a crossing of boundaries which may or may not disturb power relations, and which does not have to have any lasting effect. Wilson adds that 'we have to have an idea of how things could be different, otherwise transgression ends in mere posturing' (Wilson, 1993:116). I remain conflicted, however, because I find that the act of transgression *always* has the potential to queer gender norms, and in this way aid in lasting change and the 'forging of new realities'. Moreover, as I pointed out in my discussion of the 'queer gaze' earlier in this chapter, queering of norms is arguably also a matter of interpretation and not always about intent on the part of the artist.<sup>30</sup> I therefore maintain that interpretation often aids in making non-normative practices visible, which can be a valuable way to disturb and problematize any normalisation process.

The issues outlined so far relate on the most basic level to how one defines and utilises queer as a theoretical concept. As a conclusion of sorts, I would argue that focusing on the performativity of any gender expression, including heterosexuality, seems to be crucial to conducting an analysis that navigates these issues in a way that does not re-establish those categories and binary positions that queer potentially challenges. As I intend to establish during the course of this chapter, queer, and what one might call straight, or normative, representations are often intertwined in

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<sup>30</sup> Of course, the opposite is also true: 'Watching, hearing, and imagining a performance are based on the artist's intentions as much as our engagement as listeners' (Hawkins, 2016:17).

performance, making the expression complex and often contradictory, and making it impossible (or at least counterproductive) to label an entire performance queer, straight, transgressive or conforming. Moreover, while 'queering one's act' in performance can be a way of challenging and negotiating gender norms, it remains necessary—as my case studies seek to exemplify—to employ a critical attitude towards artists' display of Otherness.

### **Judith Butler's theory of performativity**

Butler's ([1990] 1999) theory of performativity has significantly impacted queer studies, informing much of my work in this thesis. In an effort to develop a queer theoretical concept of identity, of normativity, and of the connection between gender, sex and sexual identity, and to work out a theoretical basis for the queer potential of popular music performances, I provide a discussion of Butler's theory.

The term 'performativity' originates in the language philosophy of J. L. Austin and was originally used to denote speech acts, and particularly those utterances that do what they say, such as 'I promise' (Lloyd, 2010). Butler co-opts the term to denote a bodily enactment instead of a linguistic phenomenon (ibid.). In *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 1999), Butler's most extensive accounting of performativity, she argues that gender is not something innate that exists prior to discourse and prior to doing but rather a series of actions or significations that constitute and reconstitute the subject through its constant repetition. Butler's notion of performativity emerges within a critique of the feminist theorisation of the separation of gender and sex (Lloyd, 2010). When Simone de Beauvoir, for example, famously wrote in *The Second Sex* that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', she sought to counter biological determinism by theorising gender as a social construct (and therefore something that could be changed). Yet she nevertheless sustained the widely accepted notion that (biological) sex is an inner, unchangeable essence. While Butler applauded the notion that gender is not an essential quality, she extended it as well, by arguing that the notions of 'sex' and 'sexual identity' are also social constructs.

Notably, in her essay 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' (1988), Butler lays down the basics for her theory of performativity by defining gender as a 'series of acts which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time' (1988:523). She picks up this line of thought in *Gender Trouble*, stating, 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler, [1990] 1999:34). For Butler, identity is not something you are but something you do, and it is therefore, in a sense, an illusion. This does not mean that the performance of gender is voluntary, or that a person can change gender at will: 'Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it simply be equated with performance' (Butler, 1993a:95). Instead, performativity foregrounds the constant repetition of 'subjectivating'<sup>31</sup> norms, always executed within the matrix of power that regulates it.

While it might be fairly easy to grasp gender as a discursive construction, applying this reading to 'sex' is a bit thornier, perhaps because we see the sexed body as a physical *fact*—it is material and must therefore be objective. Certainly Butler acknowledges that the body is physical but remains concerned with the way in which the concept of 'sex', as soon as it is named and described by language, enters a discursive realm which marks and forms it: "To "concede" the undeniability of "sex" or its "materiality" is always to concede some version of "sex" and some formation of "materiality"" (Butler, 1993a:10). Hence there are numerous possible ways to view the sexed body. While a division into two sexes organised in a binary relationship is one way to conceptualise people, it is not the only way. Instead of seeing 'sex' as mere physicality, it could be seen as 'the norms that govern how the body manifests itself in the world'. How 'sex' is conceptualised in discourse thus impacts how people present themselves and exerts a normative force which operates through a process of exclusion, defining who is and who is not intelligible as human. On this basis, Butler argues that it does not make sense to see the sexed body as a static, 'natural' canvas through which a 'socially constructed' gender is mediated. The concept of sex is instead as constructed as gender is, and therefore also as

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<sup>31</sup> Butler coins this term to describe the norms that govern the making of the subject.

performative—the body has numerous possibilities that are realised according to historical conventions and societal norms. It is not merely a factic materiality that mediates gender; instead, it bears meaning, which makes it necessary to *do* the body in the same sense that one *does* gender, through repeated acts: ‘The “I” that is its body is, of necessity, a mode of embodying, and the “what” that it embodies is possibilities’ (Butler, 1988:521). Butler further argues that since sex is about norms that govern the body, then sex is nothing without gender—that is, gender subsumes sex:

If gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not accrue social meanings as additive properties, but rather is replaced by the social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption, and gender emerges, not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as the term which absorbs and displaces ‘sex’. (Butler, 1993a:5)

Butler stresses that ‘there are no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality’ (Butler, 1993c:315). The reason why it is widely perceived that sex, gender and sexuality are connected at all, Butler argues, is what she calls the ‘heterosexual matrix’—a notion inspired by Michel Foucault’s theorisation of sex in *The History of Sexuality* as constituted by a ‘diffuse regulatory economy of sexuality’ (Butler, [1990]1999:25), Monique Wittig’s notion of the ‘heterosexual contract’ and Gayle Rubin and Adrienne Rich’s notion of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Lloyd, 2010). The heterosexual matrix denotes the culturally instituted norms and practices that create an ideal relationship between sex, desire, sexual practice and gender, and that make them appear to be naturally implicated in one another. Butler argues that it is the heterosexual matrix that sustains the supposed naturalness of heterosexuality, because the norms that constitute woman/man imply a desire for the opposite sex (to be a woman you must desire men, and if you do not, you are less of a woman, and less feminine). As a result of the heterosexual matrix, some identities become intelligible (man, masculine, desires women—an identity that is viewed as coherent) while others become unintelligible (for example, intersex, masculine, desires men—an identity that is viewed as incoherent):

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire. (Butler, [1990]1999:31)

To remain an understandable and viable subject, one must cite, embody and act according to these strict norms or face sanctions, discipline, regulation or punishment (Butler, 1993a; 1993b; [1990]1999).

An important corollary of Butler's theorisation, however, is the inherent instability of *identity*. Thanks to strict gender norms, gender emerges as an assignment that is never carried out perfectly: '*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*, in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself' (Butler, 1993c:313, emphasis in original). The subject can therefore never inhabit the ideal that (s)he feels compelled to act out, and 'insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of "man" and "woman"' (Butler, 1993b:26). Gender norms are flawed, not always efficient, and therefore open to subversion by '*working the weakness in the norm*' (Butler, 1993b:26, emphasis in original) which, in this sense, causes 'gender trouble'. In the introduction chapter to *Bodies That Matter* (1993a), Butler also argues that the process of repetition is what destabilises the norms that govern our conception of identity—within each repetition, that is, resides the potential for a 'productive crisis' (Butler, 1993a:10). So even though Butler stresses that gender, sex and sexuality are limited and regulated by discourse, performativity allows for an understanding of identity as something much more fluid and changeable than previous understandings would suggest.

### **Performativity and the queer potential of (music) performances**

A music performance is in every way a performance of identity, which is amenable to Butler's notion of performativity. While performances are conscious self-representations implemented within a limited time frame and

performativity labels an often unconscious, constantly ongoing repetition of gender norms, Butler nevertheless sees the performance as a unique opportunity with regard to queering. Drag acts, for example, destabilise the heterosexual matrix, not by proliferating gender ('as if a sheer increase in numbers would do the job' [1993b:26]) but by exposing the failure of the heterosexual regime to live up to its own ideals: 'drag is not an imitation or a copy of some prior and true gender [...], drag enacts the very structure of impersonation by which *any gender* is assumed' (Butler, 1993c:312); then, later, 'drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation' (Butler, 1993c:313). Granted, Butler's example is an explicitly gendered performance, the whole point of which is to portray and perform gender queerly; one might argue that this can hardly be applied to popular music performances in general. However, if we allow that popular music performances are *always* also gender performances, in the sense that they are coded and staged according to gender norms and gender categories, Butler's belief in the queer potential of performances can be readily extended to a wide array of popular music.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as Hawkins has pointed out, 'performances are disclosed by the captivating positioning of the gendered body that transcends everyday experience' (2016:26). And, as previously discussed, if we take into account the ubiquitous phenomenon of queering in pop music, and the hyperbolic way in which gender is often presented, it becomes evident that popular music is in fact an accommodating site for queer expression.<sup>33</sup> This is perhaps particularly true of 'postmodern' pop and rock—where my cases are situated—whose notions of authenticity, as Lawrence Grossberg (1993) has suggested, are formed around play with styles and identities (more on this later in this chapter).

Butler's work has tended to focus mainly on how the performing body looks and says, therefore largely ignoring the musical ways in which gender performativity is evident in the performance of music. With reference to Butler's analysis of Aretha Franklin's 'Natural Woman', for example, Judith

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<sup>32</sup> Musicologists who take performativity into account include Susan Fast, Freya Jarman, Stan Hawkins, Judith A. Peraino, John Richardson, Jodie Taylor and Sheila Whiteley.

<sup>33</sup> See Devitt (2013); Taylor (2012).

Peraino criticises its focus on the lyrics alone and lack of consideration of ‘the register or timbre of Aretha’s voice or [...] the performance of the words or the interaction of Franklin with the female back-up vocalists. We are only meant to listen through Franklin’s voice (as if transparent)’ (Peraino, 2007:60). Peraino’s observation reminds us about all of the important information regarding gender and sexuality that can be extracted from exclusively musical aspects. Yet in terms of the analysis of musical performances, Butler’s approach has several useful implications. First, it opens up for a mode of listening that counters hegemonic readings by searching out and emphasising those elements in a musical performance that in one way or another point to the inherent instability and fragmented nature of identity—the in-between, the hard-to-classify, the non-normative. It is a mode of thinking that looks past the notion of binary gender, acknowledging that there is often more to a performance than can be explained by strict binary notions of male and female, masculine and feminine, or homosexual and heterosexual.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to remember that ‘all performances and all attempts at subversion will be ambiguous and open to multiple meanings’ (Sullivan, 2003:92), and that ‘the political and subversive potential of performance is always contextual’ (Taylor, 2012:34).

Second, an emphasis on identity as performative—as a matter of *doing*—has prompted musicologists to develop modes of analysis that pay close attention to the particular audiovisual means by which gender is done in music performances (the instruments used and/or how they are played, how the voice is produced and manipulated,<sup>35</sup> a specific sound,<sup>36</sup> the production,<sup>37</sup> or how the performing body is stylised).<sup>38</sup> This emphasis also invites a mode of analysis that focuses on how music is used as a tool by

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<sup>34</sup> This is arguably one of the main tenets of queer popular musicology, and it has been applied in a number of ways to a number of themes—see, for example, Devitt’s (2006) work on drag bio-queens, Fast’s (2012) work on Michael Jackson’s relationship to genre, Jarman’s (2011) work on the voice, Hawkins’s (2007, 2016) work on both straight-identified and queer-identified performers, and Rycenga’s (2006) queering of musical form.

<sup>35</sup> See Jarman-Ivens (2011); Steinskog (2008); Whiteley (2007).

<sup>36</sup> See Fast (2012).

<sup>37</sup> See Hawkins (2016).

<sup>38</sup> See Hawkins (2013); Leibetseder (2012).

participants in queer subcultures to both build oppositional identities and deconstruct normative ones.<sup>39</sup>

Third, Butler's thinking has implications for how the analyst views the artist's *agency*. Granted, for Butler, expressions of gender are governed by strict norms that limit the range of possibilities available for a human to act out. However, these norms are themselves somewhat unstable and also destabilised through the repetitive doing of gender. In this sense, 'the subject is not outside the language that structures it but it is not wholly determined by it either' (Djupvik, 2014b:220). What arises, then, is an understanding of agency which is somewhere 'in the middle'—partly deterministic and partly voluntaristic. This helps explain why popular music performance is often considered an 'ambiguous text [that] resists as well as conforms to normative categorization through the seamlessness of audiovisual flow' (Hawkins, 2013:481). Pop artists both *reflect* a system, a culture, and a host of different discourses and actively participate in their (re)formation and disruption. With all of this in mind, I will now turn to the question of the performer.

### **Addressing the artist: *Persona* and *personal narrative***

At the centre of the pop performance is the performer, who is always in the process of creating and performing an artist identity. To conceptualise this, I will now activate two notions of the artist: *persona* and *personal narrative*.

My understanding of the term 'persona' is primarily based on Phil Auslander's (2009) work, itself based on Simon Frith's engagement with the same term. In *Performing Rites* (1996:212), Frith proposes that any pop performance demands a *double enactment*: the pop singer enacts both an image (a star/artist personality) and a song personality (which depends on the lyrical content and 'feeling' of the song). Auslander expands on Frith's scheme and labels three levels of the artist's role: the *person* (the role the artist plays in, for example, interviews, when (s)he talks about her/his personal life), the *performance persona* (similar to the notion of the artist's

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<sup>39</sup> See Clifford-Napoleone (2015); Halberstam (2005, 2006); Schwandt (2009); Taylor (2012).



image, or the artist as a social being) and the *song character* (the role played when the artist is conveying the ‘feeling’ of a given song). While considering Auslander’s discussion of *roles*, however, I would hasten to return to Butler’s theorisation of performativity to again emphasise the *performative* aspect of all three of these levels of the persona. The artist’s person, in other words, is no less performative than the performance persona or the song character, but when we talk about the artist as a person, we risk implying a ‘real’ person behind her or him, to our detriment. Auslander also observes that viewers/listeners only have access to the person as mediated through the persona, which in practice means that the *person* is a part of the *persona*. In other words, the extent to which an artist appears to reveal things about the ‘real self’ must be seen as part of how (s)he wishes to be perceived.

Ultimately, I am less interested in exploring where the real person stops and the persona begins than pointing out that artists continuously create themselves, whether as ‘ordinary’/‘normal’ or otherwise. Thus, the concept of the *persona*, then, pertains to the performative aspects of ‘star’ or ‘artist’ identity formation at least as much as the given performance or song.

In their article titled ‘Remodeling Britney Spears: Matters of Intoxication and Mediation’, Hawkins and Richardson (2007) suggest an intertextual method for examining the role of personal narratives in artist identity-making. They point out that artists not only create personas but also personal narratives—through their songs, their self-presentation, and the discourses that surround them—which aid the construction of their evolving artist identities and link them simultaneously to the past, present and future. The term ‘personal narrative’ has been used in other contexts in musicological research to denote how pop *auteurs* tell personal stories through songs, and in early queer musicology to ground analysis in the own personal experiences of these scholars with the music (see, for example, *Queering the Pitch* (Brett, et al., (1994) 2006]). For Hawkins and Richardson, however,

(...) [p]ersonal narrative [...] is about the narrative reconstitution of the self through an open-ended process of reflection and revision. By marking certain events in personal histories as significant, while at the same time bypassing others, personal narrators create navigational beacons that enable themselves and others to make sense of the past,

while providing points of reference that will inform interpretations of future actions and events. Identity, in this sense, is negotiated by means of an ongoing dialogue between past and present selves. (Hawkins and Richardson, 2007:607)

Perhaps the key point here is that personal narratives are *performative*, as ‘they pertain not only to *what* we tell but *how* we tell and act’ (ibid.). Moreover, the performer’s personal narrative serves as a backdrop to any music performance as it disrupts its own interpretation and reception—that is, to any musical performance’s queerness. In addition, the dissemination of a personal narrative helps bridge the gap between person, persona and song character—or the personal and the professional lives—thus aiding in the construction of a coherent, even ‘authentic’ artist identity.<sup>40</sup>

### **Notes on ‘authenticity’**

Before I turn to the socio-cultural context and specific aspects of my case studies, I will address the concept of authenticity in more detail and situate it within a broader discourse on queering in popular music studies.

To start with: Auslander has argued that authenticity is performatively constituted:

Rock authenticity is performative, in Judith Butler’s sense of that term: rock musicians achieve and maintain their effect of authenticity by continuously citing in their music and performance styles the norms of authenticity for their particular rock subgenre and historical

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<sup>40</sup> This line of thought is further developed in Hawkins’s (2013) discussion of Rihanna’s music video ‘Umbrella’, in which he introduces the term *hyperembodiment*. Drawing on Steve Dixon’s theorisation of this term, Hawkins uses the concept of hyperembodiment to denote the way in which digitised bodies in music videos are edited and made beautiful according to cultural beauty standards in a way that is impossible to manage in real life. For Hawkins, hyperembodiment ‘implies an obsession with the look that is governed by the technologies of musical production as much as the decisions that go into directing the video’ (Hawkins, 2013:481). The digitally manipulated body adds a new dimension and new possibilities to the artist’s persona and personal narrative, as ‘the very sight of an artist performing affords a new rendition of the audio recording, the emphasis falling on the mannerisms of the body’ (Hawkins, 2013:467).

moment, and these norms change along with changes in the prevailing discourse of authenticity. (Auslander, 1999:72).

Conceptualising authenticity as performative entails perceiving it as not an essential part of any particular kind of music but rather as ‘a number of signs brought together to construct, represent and valorize authenticity’ (Scott, 2009:3). If authenticity is something artists do in performances, then it might be argued that it is not first and foremost the music that is authenticated but the artist her/himself. Precisely along these lines, Moore describes authenticity as something *ascribed* to artists and not *inscribed* in music: ‘rather than ask what (piece of music, or activity) is being authenticated, [...] I ask who’ (2002:210). Moore also notes that authenticity not only depends on what the artist does but also represents a ‘construction made on the act of listening’ (ibid.). The construction of authenticity thus becomes the responsibility of the listener as interpreter, as well as the performer as manipulator of the right cultural codes to encourage a certain interpretation. Authenticity is inextricably associated with notions of ‘realness’, and Moore provides an analytical model that specifies three main notions of authenticity at play in popular music, each ascribing to some version of truth-telling:

- 1) First-person authenticity, or *authenticity of expression*, indicates that the artist is (or has successfully conveyed the impression that (s)he is) telling the truth about her/his life and conveying real emotions.
- 2) Second-person authenticity, or *authenticity of experience*, indicates that the artist has successfully conveyed the impression that (s)he is representing the feelings and emotions of another person or group of people—‘that the music is “telling it like it is” for them’ (Moore, 2002:220).
- 3) Third-person authenticity, or *authenticity of execution*, refers to an artist who successfully associates her/himself with a tradition or genre, through seemingly ‘accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance’ (ibid.:218).

Grossberg (1993) has also identified several forms of authenticity which contribute to Moore’s overall scheme. Johan Fornäs’s explanation and

development in *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity* (1995) of Grossberg's model of authenticity is also helpful:

Grossberg identifies three forms of authenticity in rock discourses. The most common is associated with hard rock and folk rock, and builds on the romantic ideology of rock as a construction by and expression of magically dense community. In more dance-oriented and black genres authenticity is instead localized in the construction of a rhythmical sexual body. A third form appears in postmodernist self-conscious pop and avant-garde rock, which plays with styles, well understanding that they are always artificially constructed, but through this very cynical self-knowledge shows a kind of realistic honesty. (Fornäs, 1995:276)

Grossberg's third form of rock authenticity, 'authentic inauthenticity', is of particular interest here:

Authentic inauthenticity says that authenticity is itself a construction, an image, which is no better than and no worse than any other. Authenticity is, in fact, no more authentic than any other self-consciously created identity [...]. The only authenticity is to know and even admit that you are not being authentic, to fake it without faking the fact that you are faking it. (Grossberg, 1993: 206)

Authentic inauthenticity can be seen as a deconstruction of authenticity that ascribes to a postmodern take on identity as shifting and improvisational. While authentic inauthenticity denies the existence of 'authenticity' per se, it nevertheless evokes authenticity by ascribing to a notion of honesty and integrity. What is important is that inauthentic authenticity opens for a play with (gender) identity and queer expressions as part of the authentication process.<sup>41</sup> This play often manifests itself in a certain romanticised notion of 'difference', weirdness and eccentricity. Indeed, as Mayhew (2006) has argued in relation to the tropes of romantic creativity, 'The eccentricity and deviance of the artistic subject are therein credited as the ultimate markers of authentic and personal expression' (Mayhew, 2006:174). And further, this sort of play with identity manifests as a tension between notions of straight

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<sup>41</sup> Several popular music scholars have applied Grossberg's theory in their work, including Butler (2003), Hawkins (2002), Maus (2001) and Niblock & Hawkins ([2011] 2016).

and queer that ‘helps produce ideas of uniqueness and individuality’ (Mayhew, 2006:170).<sup>42</sup>

### **Theoretical and methodological considerations: Summary**

Due to the multiple meanings and notorious slipperiness of queer as a concept, the queering of popular culture is by no means univocal but instead, as Sullivan has pointed out, has ‘taken multifarious forms, has focused on different issues, and has drawn on a range of theoretical positions, often to contradictory or conflicting ends’ (Sullivan, 2003:189). This is also true of queer popular musicology. The vast range of topics is perhaps not surprising, however, given the multiple forms queer theory takes, combined with the multiple discourses that surround popular music.

In an effort to carve out my own position, I have devoted this chapter to a general popular musicological approach to queering that will be applied throughout my thesis. In sum, it is an intertextual approach to audiovisuality that focuses mainly on how artists engage performatively in the negotiation of gender norms in musical performances. I see queerness as arising when there is a perceived mismatch between expected gender behaviour and actual gender behaviour. This occurs when artists employ strategies that rebel against established norms or confuse the viewer/listener—for example, when artists employ ambiguity and opacity<sup>43</sup> as strategies of disidentification.<sup>44</sup>

I see the artist as both subject to discourse and active as an agent in the creation of her/his persona and personal narrative.<sup>45</sup> I remain acutely

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<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, this observation is corroborated by psychologists Wijnand A. P. Van Tilburg and Eric R. Igou, who found a correlation between ‘eccentricity and quality of the creative work within the stereotype of artists’ (Van Tilburg and Igou, 2014:93). Suspiciously close to what might be called queerness, their eccentricity is defined as ‘deviation from the norm, something that is not routinely expected from human behaviour’ (ibid.). Through a series of studies, they were able to show that when artists (they used examples as diverse as Van Gogh and Lady Gaga) were described as ‘eccentric’, their art was typically evaluated more positively, especially when they also *looked* eccentric.

<sup>43</sup> See Hawkins (2016).

<sup>44</sup> See Butler (1993a); Muñoz (1999).

<sup>45</sup> See Butler (1993c); Djupvik (2014b).

aware of the 'gaze', acknowledging that, as an analyst, I actively queer my cases by pointing out their various possible queer readings.<sup>46</sup> From this perspective, queerness in music performances becomes a dialectical process. It is what the artist/music/performance does but also what the interpreter finds in the material read as queerness, not (just) as ambiguity, weirdness or eccentricity. Relatedly, in an effort to mobilise my readings within a larger socio-cultural context, I attempt to accommodate the ways in which fans and viewers/listeners relate to my cases, particularly in the social media, in commentary fields, and in the music press. I also think about what these acts might mean in the specificity of the Norwegian context.

At the beginning of this chapter, I flagged up two ways in which straight-queering has been viewed in queer popular musicological research: as infiltration and as appropriation. This in turn begs the question of whether or not an artist's straight-queering actually works to queer gender norms or merely engages queer aesthetics in a way that does not have any 'real' or lasting impact. As I have argued throughout this chapter, and as previous research in this field suggest, queerness can arise anywhere—even in apparently entirely straight or heteronormative performances.<sup>47</sup> Yet we ought not to read queerness into every slightly odd performance. Moreover, when supposedly straight artists queer their act, it brings up questions of appropriation, and I have already pointed to the fallacy of assuming that transgression necessarily leads to the subversion of norms.<sup>48</sup> Because straight-queering is often part of an authentication process,<sup>49</sup> a critical view of straight-queering is productive for unpacking a range of discourses at play. Hence, instead of thinking of queer as a label to put on a performance, I seek to engage critically with heterosexuality as a social construct, which entails not only pinpointing and interpreting the moments when queerness arise but also explaining how a performance may produce a sense of straightness, as well as the tension that might arise between these two oppositions. By engaging with three quite different cases, I hope to bring more clarity to the ways in which straight-queering in music performances

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<sup>46</sup> See Gamman and Evans (1995, 2004).

<sup>47</sup> See Jarman-Ivens (2006, 2011); Hawkins (2009); Oakes (2006); Rycenga (2006); Mayhew (2006).

<sup>48</sup> See Devitt (2013); Hawkins (2006, 2007b); Nyong'o and Royster (2013).

<sup>49</sup> See Grossberg (1993); Mayhew (2006).

works in practice. However, before I turn to the case studies, I will provide some contextualisation in the form of a discussion of discourses of gender and sexuality in Norway in recent years, followed by a consideration of important socio-cultural factors that are relevant to each of my cases.

### **Defining discourses on gender and sexuality in Norway**

I made reference earlier on to the conspicuous absence of queer artists in Norway, and in this section I will look at why this is so. Norway is both geographically and symbolically (through its non-membership in the EU) located on the outskirts of Europe. A rich, industrialised country, it is also a relatively newly independent nation-state, having achieved independence from its union with Sweden in 1905 (although Norway's constitution was written in 1814). When it comes to the politics of gender relations and sexual minorities, Norway (like the other Nordic countries) has a good international reputation. For example, on the United Nations Development Programme's 2013 Gender Inequality Index, Norway is ranked ninth.<sup>50</sup> Several factors contribute to Norway's progressive reputation here. First, Norway has implemented extensive anti-discrimination legislation. The initial law against gender discrimination passed in 1978 and has since been followed up by laws that forbid discrimination on other grounds, such as disability, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation.<sup>51</sup> Second, women represent a large part of the working force, and this participation is supported by extensive parental benefits and statutory rights to childcare for pre-school children. Third, Norway's universal health care system guarantees every citizen the right to affordable health care. This extensive welfare regime makes it possible, as Jan Löfström (1998) has argued, to characterise Norway as a

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<sup>50</sup> See the UN's 2014 Human Development Report, p. 172, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr14-report-en-1.pdf> [retrieved: 29 October 2015].

<sup>51</sup> See the Norwegian Anti-Discrimination Act on the Basis of Ethnicity, available at <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2013-06-21-60?q=diskrimineringsloven>; the Anti-Discrimination Act Concerning Sexual Orientation, Gender Expression and Gender Identity, available at <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2013-06-21-58?q=diskrimineringsloven>; and the Gender Equality Act, available at <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2013-06-21-59?q=likestillingsloven> [retrieved: 28.10.2015].

woman-friendly state, 'thus challenging the Patemanian view of the state as inherently male and inescapably oppressive of women' (Löfström, 1998:5). This form of institutionalised equality politics (which is found in the other Nordic countries as well) is often referred to as 'state feminism', and Löfström suggests that the relative equality between men and women in the Nordic countries could be partly due to the fact that these countries became industrialised much later than some of the other countries in Europe, such as England: 'one can argue that the social role of men and women has been conceived somewhat differently in a preindustrial rural context than in an industrial urban middle-class context' (Löfström, 1998:3), and, consequently, 'the conceptual polarization of genders was not as all-encompassing' (ibid.).

When it comes to sexual minorities, Norway and the other Nordic countries have a somewhat similar reputation 'as a vanguard in lesbian and gay civil rights' (Löfström, 1998:8). Supporting this is the fact that Norway was relatively early to implement partnership rights for gay and lesbian couples (in 1993). In addition, the state had already taken measures to prevent discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in 1981 (ibid.).<sup>52</sup>

Despite these seemingly utopian conditions, feminist and queer scholars have frequently problematized the image of Norway as an egalitarian society. For instance, Åse Røthing and Helena B. Svendsen (2010) have pointed out that heteronormative values dominate discourses on gender and sexuality, demonstrating that while 'homotolerance' is presented as a central Norwegian value in state run schools, the prospect of not being heterosexual is a daunting one for many young people, and bullying on the basis of sexual identity is prevalent (both in schools and on social media).<sup>53</sup> Røthing and Svendsen connect this to the problematic associations of the word 'tolerance':

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<sup>52</sup> See the Anti-Discrimination Act Concerning Sexual Orientation, Gender Expression and Gender Identity.

<sup>53</sup> A survey conducted by Skeiv Ungdom [Queer youth] of their own members showed that four out of ten had experienced bullying on the basis of sexual and gender identity. This prompted Sarah Dilkestad (head of Oslo Skeiv Ungdom) and Eirik Rise (former head of Skeiv Ungdom) to argue that schools do not focus adequately on norm critique or understand non-normative sexualities and gender expressions in young children (Dilkestad and Rise, 2016).



teaching for ‘tolerance’ toward homosexuals in Norwegian schools serves both to assert the fundamental *difference* between homosexuality and heterosexuality and to underline the privileged position of heterosexuality in society. (Røthing and Svendsen, 2010:149, emphasis in original)

Moreover, gay and lesbian politics in Norway have been centred on the rights to marry, to adopt children and to make use of sperm donors or surrogates—that is, on non-heterosexuals’ right to fit into traditional understandings of life and family. The fact that a universal marriage law was not implemented until 2009 underlines how difficult and time consuming this process has been. In addition, the emphasis on gay and lesbian identity politics may have hampered queer understandings of identity, gender roles and family. Røthing and Svendsen (2010) critique the educational system, where debates on homosexuality have been dominated by the notion of heterosexuality as the norm. Norman Anderssen and Tone Hellesund (2009), who have analysed the discourse around same-sex adoption, are in agreement with Røthing and Svendsen:

Parallel to a continuous liberalization of sexualities in Norway we seem to witness a consensus on heteronormativity in Norway on both sides of the debate as the basic axiom in public discussions on homosexuality and adoption. (Anderssen and Hellesund, 2009:102)

Furthermore, they suggest that state feminism, with its focus on equality and difference between men and women within the frame of the nuclear family, may well have played a role in sustaining the dominance of a dichotomous understanding of gender (ibid.:115).

Arguably, the relatively extensive legal rights of gay and lesbian couples, as well as the extensive focus on traditional family values within the gay and lesbian rights movement, have contributed to a blossoming of homonormativity, with little room left over for alternative thinking about gender and sexuality. In an article in the Nordic queer journal *Trikster*, Agnes Bolsø makes the observation that ‘each and every established voice in gay politics on a national level rejects queer theory wholesale’ (Bolsø, 2008:1). In critiquing several gay and lesbian activists—particularly those affiliated with the National Organization for Gay and Lesbian Liberation (LLH)—Bolsø

suggests that the ‘gay establishment’ on the political left ‘sees its privilege undermined or threatened by the possible implementation of some of the basic ideas of queer theory’ (Bolsø, 2008:1). This perspective is reinforced by the fact that family constellations, other than gay and lesbian monogamous couples, have been absent in public discussions of non-heterosexual relations and gender constitutions. At the time of this writing (spring 2016), however, LLH had changed their name to FRI (*foreningen for kjønns- og seksualitetsmangfold*, or, in English, the Union of Sex and Gender Diversity), arguably signalling a more inclusive take on gender politics. Moreover, on 6 June 2016, the Norwegian Parliament passed a law granting every person the right to decide his or her own legal gender.<sup>54</sup> This means that transgender people no longer have to undergo sterilisation in order to change the gender attributed to them in public registers, which has been celebrated as a huge leap forward in terms of transgender people’s inclusion in society. The fact that a female-to-male transgender will now be able to give birth and still be legally male will presumably be hard for many people to grasp, and time will tell whether the result will be backlash or progress. And as the discourse in Norwegian society slowly shifts from an almost exclusive focus on gay/lesbian issues to include issues concerning transgenderism and transsexuality, it will also be interesting to see how this affects Norwegian popular music and popular culture in the years to come.

Despite the legitimate concerns of queer scholars and activists, however, liberal values such as equality and tolerance are still widely held to be central to Norwegian identity, to the advantage, arguably, of both women and sexual minorities. The relationship between men and women, Löfström observes, appears to be ‘conspicuously equal’ (1998:3), at least when compared to many other Western countries, and the situation for sexual minorities is also fairly good—the environment is generally relatively safe, and civil rights are protected. Moreover, Löfström links the Nordic countries’ feminist politics and gay rights as well:

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<sup>54</sup> See the Law on Changing Legal Gender (*Lov om endring av juridisk kjønn*), available at <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2016-06-17-46>.

It is interesting that precisely the societies where women and men are perhaps most equal in the West are also the societies where gay and lesbian formal legal rights are most advanced. (Löfström, 1998:5)

Discussions concerning gender and sexuality, of course, are in no way exhausted and keep surfacing in the public debate. For example, while female participation in the workforce is at an all-time high, it is highly gender segregated, both horizontally and vertically. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the 'Norwegian Paradox' (Solbrække, 2009:179), has aggravated debates across a large spectrum of gender-political concerns. Particularly relevant in the present context is the ongoing debate surrounding Norway's highly male-dominated popular music industry, which surfaces in newspapers and blogs almost annually in connection with the release of the summer festival programmes (themselves often criticised for containing predominantly male headliners). When it comes to scholarly work, Astrid Kvalbein and Anne Lorentzen made headlines in 2008 with the anthology they edited titled *Musikk og kjønn—i utakt?*<sup>55</sup> which problematized a wide array of issues concerning gendered relations in the Norwegian music field, including in education, in the recording studio, in orchestras and in journalistic discourse.<sup>56</sup> In 2012, in turn, Lorentzen's report titled 'Kjønn(s)balansen i norsk populærmusikk'<sup>57</sup> made headlines by showing, among other things, that female artists are economic losers in relation to their male colleagues. In 2009, several actors in the field (festivals, conservatories, non-profit organisations, workers' unions, artists' associations, etc.) joined forces to create the initiative 'Balansekunst'<sup>58</sup> to work out innovative ways of improving the gender balance in this area. One concrete example of progress is the non-profit organisation AKKS, which coordinates band camps for girls in order to recruit more women into popular music in the next generation. Likewise, the music festival Feminalen in Trondheim is a specific response to the lack of visibility of female artists. Featuring exclusively female artists as well as debates and exhibitions, the goal of the festival is to 'make room for the very competent female musicians

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<sup>55</sup> In English: *Music and Gender – out of step?*

<sup>56</sup> See also Lorentzen & Stavrum (2007)

<sup>57</sup> In English: 'The Gender (Im)balance in Norwegian popular music'

<sup>58</sup> In English: 'Balancing Act'

out there'.<sup>59</sup> For the group KUUK, this critical discourse supplied a crucial backdrop for their formation. They played at Feminalen in 2014, where they were also featured in a photo exhibition, and have since made their mark as a band that is engaged in gender politics.

Despite a widespread focus on gender equality (or perhaps precisely because of it), Norway comes across as both heteronormative and homonormative. Only a few attempts have been to challenge the established categories of man/woman and homo/hetero, although the recent moves in politics concerning transgenderism might indicate that some queer ideas are starting to gain a foothold. As already mentioned, there has traditionally been little room for consideration of alternative ways of thinking about life, love, family and sexuality. If popular culture reflects society, and the other way around, then this goes some way towards explaining the lack of queer artists in Norway as well.

### **Introducing and contextualising the cases**

As I have outlined so far, the main part of this thesis consists of three case studies involving three artists within different genres, each of which brings up different themes connected to straight-queering. Norwegian popular music is packed with straight artists that may be said to queer in some way or another, so my selection process, while difficult, privileged certain key features. First, these artists all queer in diverse and intriguing ways. Second, they frame themselves as straight, producing a certain tension in relation to their queering antics. Third, they are all highly regarded and therefore attach themselves to notions of authenticity. Fourth, they are all relatively mainstream (Lars Vaular more so than KUUK or Kaja Gunnufsen) and have played on mainstream radio and at festivals, meaning that they have all been quite visible and audible in the Norwegian popular music discourse over the past few years (2013–2016). Fifth, they are all Norwegian and sing/rap in Norwegian, which ties them more intimately to a specifically Norwegian context. Finally, and most importantly, their performance strategies never

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<sup>59</sup> See Feminalen's home page (original: 'gi spillerom til noen av de dyktige kvinnelige artistene dom finnes'; my translation). Available at <http://www.feminalen.no/about/#bio> [retrieved: 23 February 2016].

seem to generate indifferent or neutral responses from fans and the music press. Instead, their reception is most often characterised by either fascinated approval or confusion—even dismay—and alongside their popularity they have all been deemed weird, eccentric or ‘different’. Moreover, this perceived weirdness or difference can be linked directly to how they perform gender and sexuality in their music.

## **KUUK**

Consisting principally of rappers Mira Berggrav Refsum and Ragna Solbergnes,<sup>60</sup> KUUK played its first concert at a club in Oslo called Revolver as part of Klubbøya in the summer of 2013. Since then, the pair has been very active and has built up a fairly large fan base through touring and playing festivals. They have released a couple of music videos and a handful of singles but have yet to release a full album, though they are now a voice to be reckoned with in the Norwegian hip-hop and alternative scene. ‘KUUK’, while not meaningful in Norwegian in its written form, is a (pseudo-)homophone of ‘kuk’, the Norwegian equivalent of ‘cock’. In this way signalling vulgarity as well as masculine aggression, this name is backed up by their music and somewhat ‘outrageous’ performance style. The two are politically vocal, both on and off stage, especially in relation to the discourse around women in the music industry and the polarisation of feminist and anti-feminist voices in Norwegian society writ large.

Arguably, one of the defining characteristics of KUUK is their feminist politics, though they hesitate to label themselves a feminist band.<sup>61</sup> While, as mentioned, feminism in Norway is institutionalised to a large degree and left-wing politics has enjoyed strong support, there remains a considerable tension between feminist and anti-feminist, left-wing and right-wing, in public discourse. In addition, an increasing rate of Islamic immigration has upped the anti-Islamic rhetoric in some milieus, and the ‘threat from Islam’ is

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<sup>60</sup> KUUK also has a band join them for their live shows, currently consisting of Ole Øvstedal on bass, Andreas Lanesjord as the producer and DJ, and Sahrish Abbas, who is credited on their Facebook page with ‘laser percussion’.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, the interview available at <http://www.vl.no/kultur/alle-som-ikke-er-idioter-er-feminister-1.376266> [retrieved: 27 May 2016].

often seen as connected to modern feminism (Holst, 2012). The most violent manifestation of right-wing extremism was represented by the attacks on 22 July 2011 during which terrorist Anders Behring Breivik killed seventy-seven people. In the aftermath of the worst terrorist attacks in Norwegian history, some scholars have claimed that Breivik's views are not all that uncommon in the mainstream. In the anthology *Motgift*, Sigve Indregard, Ingrid Wergeland and Bendik Wold find that 'Breivik's "manifesto" coincides on several accounts with claims that ten years ago were reserved for the extreme right, but that are now more or less mainstream in Norwegian public discourse'<sup>62</sup> (Indregard et al., 2012:15). In the same anthology, Cathrine Holst (2012) hastens to add that this does not imply that 'moderates are really just extremes in disguise'<sup>63</sup> (Holst, 2012:207) but instead that the debate between feminism and anti-feminism in contemporary Norwegian society is extremely polarised. Since *Motgift* was published in 2012, not much has changed; as the immigrant crisis in Europe continues, the polarisation between the extreme right and left has only seemed to increase all over Europe. As Tore Bjørgo, director of the Centre for Research on Extremism (C-REX), said in an interview posted on the University of Oslo's website uio.no,

right-wing extremism has been smouldering below the surface since the Second World War. It was ignited by the influx of refugees in the 1980s and 1990s, and now the same thing is happening again. (Garbo, 2016)

With anti-feminism on the increase, there has been a corresponding increase in interest in the Norwegian public debate about feminism, within popular culture in particular (in American popular music, as well, feminism has become a rallying point for superstars like Beyoncé and Taylor Swift). As a result, new feminist initiatives have surfaced, and in 2014 forskning.no<sup>64</sup> was able to report that 'feminism has become trendy' (Jakobsen, 2014). One

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<sup>62</sup> Original: 'På flere punkter sammenfaller Breiviks "manifest" med påstander som for ti år siden var forbeholdt ytterste høyre fløy, men som nå er mer eller mindre "gjengs tale" i norsk offentlighet' [my translation].

<sup>63</sup> Original: 'Det er [...] ikke slik at de moderate "egentlig" er ekstreme' [my translation].

<sup>64</sup> Norwegian online newspaper devoted to Norwegian and international research.

manifestation of this 'trend' is the all-female Facebook discussion group titled Den Selskabelige Diskusjonsforening, which is dedicated to topics concerning women, women's rights and feminism and boasts over four thousand members, many of whom are important cultural personalities. Also as of this writing, feminism is once again part of the everyday media discourse, as the widely popular NRK youth drama series SKAM, about the lives of five teenage girls in Oslo, has in a sense made feminism 'cool again', igniting important discussions about rape in youth culture in mainstream as well as social media.

KUUK engages in the polarised discourse between feminism and right-wing anti-feminism through both theatrical gender rebellion and written political utterances, contrasting a warmly supportive tone towards other bands, female artists and fans with confrontational newspaper columns, an in-your-face, aggressive performance style and expressly queer-supportive politics. Two of the key concepts for this case study will be *transgression* and *abjection*. As I will argue, the way in which the pair employs horror aesthetics, notions of abject femininity and sadomasochism, and notions of authenticity from both hip-hop and punk makes for a profound queering of 'proper', heteronormative femininity. I will also show that the pair's whiteness and privilege may also raise questions about their ability to actually subvert heteronormativity.

### **Kaja Gunnufsen**

When I started research on Kaja Gunnufsen in the spring of 2014, she had just released her debut album, *Faen Kaja*. After leaving the spotlight for a year due to the birth of her son, she started playing shows again in 2016, indicating on her Facebook page that she would release a new album sometime in 2016 as well. In spite of her relatively short music career, the buzz about Gunnufsen even preceded the release of her debut album. It started with a nomination as 'Ukas Urørt'<sup>65</sup> in January 2013, followed by the

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<sup>65</sup> Urørt, meaning 'untouched', is a radio program as well as a website. Up-and-coming and unsigned bands upload their music to the website, and every week music is selected to be played on the radio program, which airs nationwide. Every

listing of her single 'Desp' at the radio station P3<sup>66</sup> in the spring of 2013 and appearances at a couple of Norway's largest music festivals the following summer. In 2015, she was nominated for a Spellemann award (the Norwegian Grammys) in the category 'Newcomer of the Year', and while she did not win, she was clearly a force to be reckoned with in Norwegian alternative pop.

The key to my reading of Gunnufsen is *normality*, or, more specifically, the way in which she employs signifiers of both normality and queerness through her play with 'weirdness' and irony. Artists like Gunnufsen can slip under the radar of the queer gaze, simply because of their apparent normativity, but a closer look uncovers several layers of queer discourse. Kaja Gunnufsen and KUUK are opposites in many ways. While KUUK chooses an aggressive and confrontational style, Gunnufsen, as a singer-songwriter, is known for her laid back, down-to-earth demeanour. With Neil Young as its inspiration, her musical style is known as 'simple': 'Listening to him I discovered how simple one can make one's songs, and how much effect they can have. It is allowed, it is okay, to make simple music'.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, her lyrics can be melancholy when describing lost love or a sense of not 'getting it right' in life, evoking, in turn, the atmosphere of the so-called Nordic noir TV series. Gunnufsen can also come across as quite eccentric, however, and her lyrics and public appearances sometimes reveal an artist who utilises humour and wit as central qualities of her communication.

In an article titled 'The Zeitgeist as Battleground'<sup>68</sup> (2014), *Dagbladet* culture editor Geir Ramnefjell characterised Gunnufsen as *normcore*. Since it first appeared in 2013, normcore has been conceptualised in different ways. Some see it as a fashion trend 'for people who know they are one in 7 billion', including washed-out 'mom jeans', old t-shirts and baseball caps inspired by the 1990s; others see it as a broader mode of social protest against the

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week an 'Ukas Urørt' - 'Untouched of the Week' - is named, and Kaja Gunnufsen has been one of these.

<sup>66</sup> P3 is a radio station that is part of the Norwegian national broadcasting company NRK. It targets youth and young adults and hosts the radio program 'Urørt'.

<sup>67</sup> Original: 'Med han så oppdaga eg kor enkle sangar ein kan laga, og kor mykje effect det kan vera i dei. Det var lov, og greit, å lage enkel musikk' [my translation]. Interview available at <http://p3.no/musikk/10-kjappe-kaja-gnufsen/> [retrieved: 24 February 2016].

<sup>68</sup> Original: 'Tidsånden som kampsone'.



individuality-driven hipster culture. According to the trend agencies K-Hole and Box 1824, who have been credited for coining the term in their manifesto-style 'Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom' (2013), normcore is an attitude for people who realise that maintaining an image of uniqueness is futile in today's world.

It used to be possible to be special—to sustain unique differences through time, relative to a certain sense of audience. As long as you were different from the people around you, you were safe. But the Internet and globalization fucked this up for everyone. In the same way that a video goes viral, so does potentially anything. (K-HOLE & BOX1824, 2013:4)

These agencies lament the feeling of isolation that follows the pursuit of being unique and promote an attitude that privileges for sameness and community: 'normcore moves away from a coolness that relies on difference to a post-authenticity coolness that opts in to sameness' (K-HOLE & BOX1824, 2013). This resonates with the recent trend in the Norwegian blogosphere in which people, particularly parents (of both sexes), pay tribute to the imperfect life and the flawed body.<sup>69</sup>

As 'Youth Mode' suggests, then, normcore is more of a theory or approach than a fashion style. In a way it is also a counter-reaction to the proliferation of a queer aesthetics in popular culture—that is, the constant pressure to transgress. Normcore says that the only way to distinguish oneself from a transgressive crowd is to be absolutely and utterly 'normal'. In this sense, then, normcore represents a means of queering the display of queerness in popular culture. Thus, normcore can in a certain sense be seen as an oppositional discourse, and through her quirky display of ordinariness, Gunnufsen does indeed fit this description. However, Gunnufsen's act does also resonate with a far more normative discourse, namely the Law of Jante. This is, as I will explain in more detail in chapter 3, a social discourse and mechanism for control prevalent in the Scandinavian countries that polices and opposes any attempts of framing oneself as extraordinary or in any way better than anybody else. With these two discourses as a backdrop, I will

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<sup>69</sup> See, for example, <http://www.antisupermamma.no/>, <http://casakaos.blogg.no/>, or <http://pappaentiltre.blogg.no/>.

explore this apparent contradiction in Gunnufsen's act. I will argue that while Gunnufsen conforms in many respects to the normative (hetero)femininity associated with a post-feministic point of view, there are complications—the way she combines her almost childish mannerisms with quite explicit lyrics, for example, and the way she introduces a postmodern, slightly ironic attitude to her otherwise quite earnest lyrics and performance style. Finishing the chapter with a reading of the music video 'Faen ta', I will argue that Kaja Gunnufsen actually—in spite of, and in addition to her straightness—brings to the table a certain quality that challenges heteronormativity.

### **Lars Vaular**

Lars Vaular is a white Norwegian rapper from Åsane, a suburban area outside the city of Bergen. Vaular has been a recording artist since 2003 – mainly as part of the duo Tier'n & Lars – but released his first solo album only in 2007. Since then he has released five studio albums and four EPs (the most recent in 2015), as well as numerous singles. Vaular has been a central figure in the Bergen hip-hop scene for over a decade but enjoyed his commercial breakthrough with his second album, *D' e glede*, in 2009. In recent years he has met with considerable mainstream success, winning a couple of Spellemann awards, including 'Lyricist of the Year' in 2011, and earned almost unanimously great reviews for his music and especially his extraordinary language skills. On Facebook, Vaular describes his music as 'post hip-hop', and his YouTube channel states that he 'makes music inspired by hip-hop, rap and pop'.

With this particular case study, of course, I enter the domain of masculinity studies, an area that has seen increased attention from music scholars in recent years,<sup>70</sup> though not from a queer perspective as such (Berggren, 2012). As the notion of the 'new male' has made its way into public consciousness in the Western world, Norway has also seen changes in its ideals of masculinity. Despite its investment in gender equality, modern

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<sup>70</sup> See Bannister (2006); Biddle and Jarman-Ivens (2007); Djupvik (2014b); Halberstam (1998); Hawkins (2006, 2007, 2009); Jarman-Ivens (2006, 2007); Oakes (2009); Whiteley (2007).

Norway is also a country with fairly traditional domestic gender roles. For example, females in heterosexual relationships typically manage most of the housework, though this gender gap is shrinking.<sup>71</sup> When it comes to fatherhood, on the other hand, Åse Røthing and Helene Aarseth (2009) state:

Several studies from the 1990s onward suggest that we are entering a new phase, where the relationship to their children will be a central part of young fathers' lives. (2009:173)<sup>72</sup>

Interestingly, Lars Vaular emphasises his fatherhood in his most recent releases, and while Norway has never developed the 'macho' masculine ideal one finds in some countries, the new, 'softer' masculinities represented in popular culture by figures like Vaular have prompted some public debate. In his doctoral thesis on modern Norwegian masculinities, Fredrik Langeland (2014) describes how 'metrosexual' masculinities have also led to the increasing visibility of what he calls 'retrosexualities'—styles of masculinity that invest in traditional, nostalgic notions of 'real men', as exemplified by popular Norwegian phenomena such as the TV show *Manshow* and men's magazines such as *Mann* and *FHM*. Langeland argues that retrosexuality sees metrosexuality as an indication of masculinity in crisis.

[Retrosexuality] is thus a representation of 'man' that does not only articulate a form of insecurity, but also triggers a potential anxiety for the destruction of masculinity. (Langeland, 2014:124)

Langeland's description of metrosexuality and retrosexuality resonates in my argument that Vaular's display of modern, 'new male'-inspired masculinities conflicts with or undermines the (hetero)masculine ideals, grounded in homosociality, that are found in the rap milieu in Norway. Vaular encountered retrosexual anxiety upon releasing his much-debated music video 'Det ordnar seg for pappa', in which he fairly explicitly queers his act, and I will read the video according to the notion of *homosociality*. In

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<sup>71</sup> See <https://www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/artikler-og-publikasjoner/ikke-lenger-nedgang-i-husarbeidet> [retrieved: 25 February 2016].

<sup>72</sup> Original: 'Flere studier fra 90-tallet og fremover tyder på at vi er på vei inn i en ny fase, der relasjonen til barn blir en sentral del av unge fedres livssammenheng' (my translation).

particular, I will unpack how Vaular creates his artistic persona through the dissemination of both queer and straight signifiers within the homosocial milieu of the Norwegian and Bergensian hip-hop scene, but also in the context of the new, 'softer' forms of masculinity in Norwegian society. I will argue that Vaular is consciously employing strategies for queering Norwegian hip-hop under cover of pushing genre boundaries, 'challenging people's insecurities', and displaying his own, quirky fashion style. However, I will also argue that one cannot take Vaular's display of queerness at face value. On the contrary, while I see his queering as challenging norms of masculinity to some extent, I also find that it comes across more as politically correct genderplay<sup>73</sup> than as a subversion of existing structures.

This chapter has concerned how queerness can be conceptualised and how it arises in music performances, which prepares the ground for my 'critically queer' reading of the case studies at hand. Some important points I have made so far, is that although queerness can take many shapes and forms, it is always performative. Further, it is a matter of interpretation, of how one *sees* and *listens* to the performance at hand. And finally, queerness, as well as straightness, always arises in close relation to its context. Moreover, as both straight and queer aesthetics mix and create a straight-queer sensibility, it brings up a host of questions related to gender and identity politics, and the politics of creating an artist persona. Taken together, all the three cases I have introduced demonstrate this in different ways. In the following chapters, I will dive deeper into each case, hopefully shedding more light on the politics of straight-queering in contemporary Norwegian popular music.

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<sup>73</sup> As with Hawkins, I employ the term *genderplay* 'to denote the switching of roles and toying with norms that are intentionally designed to entertain' (Hawkins, 2016:28).

## **CHAPTER 2: 'EVERYONE WHO IS NOT AN IDIOT IS A FEMINIST': FEMINISM, TRANSGRESSION AND QUEERNESS IN KUUK**

### **Introduction**

During this chapter I set out to explore rap group KUUK. As outlined in my initial introduction of the duo, their performance style is quite transgressive. However, how is transgression linked to queerness? And do KUUK's gender performance and affiliation to feminism make their act subversive in any way? How are signifiers of queerness and straightness visible and audible in their act? These are questions I will explore in this chapter. This chapter can be roughly divided into three main themes: First, I discuss KUUK's relation to the rap tradition. Second, I address their relation to the punk tradition. And third, I discuss KUUK's employment of horror aesthetics, including sadomasochism and play on abjection, and how this influences their act in terms of gender and sexuality.

As I described in the introduction, KUUK played their first concert at a club in Oslo called Revolver as part of Klubbøya in the summer of 2013.<sup>74</sup> KUUK's story, however, starts a couple of weeks prior to their debut concert. At the Hove festival in 2013, Mira Refsum, who was working as a volunteer at the festival, ran into the world-renowned hip-hop guru 2Chainz and his crew. The encounter resulted in Refsum freestyle-rapping for them in front of a video camera while they exclaimed, 'this girl is happening!' and 'we're gonna make you big!' (Refsum and Solbergnes, 2013). As it turned out, the video clip later appeared in the video '24 Hours to Live',<sup>75</sup> which was released shortly after she met them as part of a YouTube miniseries on 2Chainz's life and career. And that is when it all started.

This slow-paced, ambient and introspective video starts with 2Chainz's thoughts on his rise to fame and response to the question 'What if

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<sup>74</sup> Chapter title quotation is from the headline of this interview: <http://www.vl.no/kultur/alle-som-ikke-er-idioter-er-feminister-1.376266> [retrieved 20 June 2016].

<sup>75</sup> Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBytBscW\\_Zc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBytBscW_Zc) [retrieved 2 June 2015].

you had only 24 hours to live?’ Refsum appears quite abruptly toward the end of the video, saying, ‘I love you, 2Chainz, so much. You started my rap career’ and then starts freestyling in Norwegian. She finishes her performance with this: ‘That was a Norwegian rap for you, 2Chainz. About being a whore’. Refsum had founded KUUK a couple of months prior to this and noted in an interview (Refsum and Solbergnes, 2013) that the story of this appearance spread like wildfire and she realized she wanted to make the most out of the situation. She gathered some friends and made a music video that was posted on YouTube shortly thereafter as a continuation of the freestyle session from ‘24 Hours to Live’. The song, called ‘HOR’, caused quite a stir but is no longer publicly available on YouTube (KUUK’s second music video is also called ‘Hor’, but it is not the same one). The original featured Refsum and a group of her girlfriends outdoors in a plastic tub, and she is wearing the star-spangled bathing suit that would later become her signature stage outfit with KUUK. The video, which appeared intended to be silly (at the end, she exclaims, ‘I’m the white girl who destroys the seriousness’), sparked a great deal of adverse reaction from YouTube viewers in the comments section, both concerning the physical appearance of Refsum and her friends and her lameness as a rapper. This whole incident ignited a spark in Refsum, who then wrote ‘the longest Facebook status update in her entire life’ (ibid.), which was published as a chronicle in *Dagbladet* the next day (Refsum, 2013). In it, she questions the notion of Norway as an egalitarian society:

I get mad because I am a woman. And because as a woman I am always judged based on how I look. Because I and other women cannot express ourselves without getting feedback on how we look. (Refsum, 2013)<sup>76</sup>

She also mentions her newly established band KUUK, ‘the only female hip-hop band in Norway, and the only Norwegian female dirty band [*griseband*]’. She also states that while many see feminism as outdated or even unnecessary, she continues to call herself a feminist.

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<sup>76</sup> Original: ‘Jeg blir sint fordi jeg er kvinne. Og fordi jeg som kvinne alltid vil bli vurdert ut ifra utseendet. Fordi jeg og andre kvinner ikke kan eksponere oss selv uten å få tilbakemeldinger på hvordan vi ser ut’ [my translation].

Intentional or otherwise, this eventful start clearly contributed to establishing KUUK as a feminist activist band,<sup>77</sup> and Refsum's *Dagbladet* statement was only the beginning of the band's general outspokenness in the media concerning issues of gender, equality and sexuality (Refsum is currently a regular blogger for *Dagbladet* as well).<sup>78</sup> Importantly, as I have seen for myself at their concerts, KUUK obviously struck a chord, both in the young, mostly white women who presumably identify with their feminism but also in young, mostly white men. KUUK also represents one of the few bands and artists in Norway that explicitly expresses a queer-friendly politics and has been outspoken about the right for people to be whoever or whatever they want to be.<sup>79</sup> In one recent interview, KUUK (Mira Refsum and Ragna Solbergnes) express concern over the strong presence of heteronormativity in Norwegian society:

It felt like it wasn't allowed—to be different. Everything seems to be about what kind of job you have, whether or not you are married and how many kids you have. If you don't have this wish for a traditional family life and career, people think you are weird. In this song ['Hor'] we rap that as long as you don't hurt anybody, you can do whatever you want and be at peace with yourself.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> KUUK problematizes this categorisation. In a recent TedX Talk, they noted that, as a female musician, 'you have to get used to endlessly being remarked on your sex, being compared to other female artists, and to always be discussed as either a feminist phenomenon or a feminist problem' (ca 0.30). They then add that they have 'never written one single song about feminism or politics. All our songs are about having fun, partying, and having sex' (1.10)). YouTube video available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiaSNYF6GWs> [retrieved 13 June 16].

<sup>78</sup> See the entry where Mira calls for better sex education in schools, <http://m.db.no/2015/03/27/kultur/meninger/bloggen/seksualitet/seksualundervisning/38435859/> [retrieved 6 June 2015], or this one, where KUUK joins a debate that was raging in spring 2015 over sexist lyrics in 'russ' songs (songs aimed at and made for senior high school graduates): <http://www.dagbladet.no/2015/05/08/kultur/meninger/bloggen/russ/musikk/39082091/> [retrieved 6 June 2015]. Refsum was also featured in the satirical TV show *Trygdekontoret* (NRK), where she debated porn: [http://www.nrk.no/presse/programtaler/trygdekontoret-1\\_8\\_-1.12192833](http://www.nrk.no/presse/programtaler/trygdekontoret-1_8_-1.12192833).

<sup>79</sup> They also played at the Oslo Pride festival in 2015: <http://www.mynewsdesk.com/no/oslopride/pressreleases/her-er-pride-park-programmet-1152176>.

<sup>80</sup> Original: 'Det følte som om det ikke var lov å være annerledes. Alt handlet om hvilken jobb man har, om man er gift og hvor mange barn man har. Hvis du ikke har disse ønskene om familieliv og en tradisjonell karriere, blir du sett rart på. I sangen

As much as they explicitly support queer politics, however, their act is grounded in a certain type of straightness—for one thing, KUUK references (a lot of) heterosexual sex in their very explicit lyrics. Moreover, their act seems to cater predominantly to a social and cultural elite comprised of mostly white and highly educated individuals. While the act can be seen as transgressive, it may or may not be queer, and I have chosen to engage with KUUK's performance strategies in light of both feminist and queer theory and politics. The following discussion of the band's name will introduce the members as well as the arguments presented in this chapter.

## **'KUUK'**

While a discussion of psychoanalytical theories of the phallus falls beyond the scope of this thesis, any all-female, feminist band that calls itself the equivalent of 'cock' needs a bit of related discussion. Questioned about their choice of name, KUUK said they picked it because they could not find any positive words for vagina and were therefore forced to settle for the word for the male genitalia (in Norwegian), but with an extra 'u' and the addition of all capital letters.<sup>81</sup> Like the band in performance, the name is confrontational, vulgar and also a bit silly. While it evokes notions of masculine power, it also – as I will return to shortly – blurs or queers the line between male and female. It can also be considered a form of protest, and perhaps even a way of queering femininity. Last, but not least, it embodies a humorous twist that borders on the absurd or even bizarre.

KUUK's complex deployment of a range of somewhat paradoxical gender signifiers is a central theme throughout this chapter, and the name itself will lead the way. In a comprehensive account of queer strategies in popular music, Leibetseder (2012) demonstrates how the dildo, when used as a prop on stage by female performers, is a tool for 'gender blending', or

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rapper vi om at så lenge man ikke sårer noen, kan man gjøre det man vil og ha det godt med seg selv' [my translation]. See <http://www.vl.no/kultur/alle-som-ikke-er-idioter-er-feminister-1.376266> [retrieved 25 May 2016].

<sup>81</sup> See <http://www.vl.no/kultur/alle-som-ikke-er-idioter-er-feminister-1.376266> [retrieved 25 May 2016].



the appropriation of a gender signifier in a way that disturbs the strict dichotomy between male and female. Drawing upon the examples of the alternative pop artist Peaches and the queer punk band Tribe 8, Leibetseder argues that appropriating this phallic symbol causes a 'breakdown of the sex/gender system. [It] confirms the difference without essentialising gender' (Leibetseder, 2012:176). The name KUUK works in a similar way, I would argue. Because it sounds like the name of the male genitalia, many would promptly assume that it referred to an all-male band. Like the dildo in a female performer's hands, then, the name 'KUUK' for a female duo activates a strategy to expose unconscious assumptions about gender. The use of this name can also be framed in terms of drag—that is, as a costume, a dress-up gesture or a mask that brings with it certain expectations intended to be dashed the moment one actually listens to the music. 'KUUK' also disrupts the dichotomies that govern our understanding of male and female—a prevalent stereotype in Western culture associates masculinity with the mind and femininity with the body, and this coarse nod toward the physicality of the male sex organ yanks masculinity out of the cerebral/'male' realm.

'KUUK' is but one part of Mira B. Refsum and Ragna Solbergnes's appropriation of and play with hypermasculine imagery in their performances—as we will see, they also evoke masculinity through tough, even violent imagery and the heavy beats of gangsta rap. Yet none of this is part of a strategy of creating distance from or otherwise negating their female-ness. Quite the contrary, KUUK's lyrics and bodies in performance actually emphasise their female-ness, entirely in line with their feminist politics. Thus their performance is somewhat paradoxical, or at least multifaceted, in terms of gender, and perhaps it has to be, given that KUUK operates in a genre otherwise woefully lacking in female artists. From a queer musicological perspective, as well, their uniqueness in rap/punk calls attention to the ways in which gender expressions are negotiated in accordance with genre conventions, in turn underlining the malleability of (gendered) identity. In their study of gender styles in rock'n'roll, Reynolds and Press (1995) outline several ways in which females have approached rock and faced the dilemma of wanting to fit in while at the same time claim a space of their own. They note that many female musicians have decided to

be 'one of the boys' by crossing gender boundaries either because they do not feel that they fit into traditional notions of femininity, or because they feel that being female and feminine is antithetical to being a rock'n'roll rebel. This brand of 'female machisma', as Reynolds and Press label it, allows musicians such as Patti Smith and Chrissie Hynde to 'define themselves against the "limitations" of femininity' (Reynolds and Press, 1995:236).

Other broadly rock-oriented female artists and musicians have sought ways in which to utilise female-ness and femininity to create an aesthetic of sexual and gender rebellion that does not require position oneself as entirely stereotypically masculine. In this regard, KUUK deploys the name itself to signal their comfort with vulgarity and the transgression of gender norms and to align themselves with female artists who have utilised their bodies in performance in a way that negates notions of normative femininity (but not femaleness) while at the same time negotiating gender norms, such as Courtney Love, who, in Reynolds and Press's words, 'wields the abject interior of the female body as a kind of weapon' (Reynolds and Press, 1995:345). KUUK's female-ness is not hidden away, then, but instead used as a way to challenge gender norms within the hip-hop milieu and society in general.

KUUK's approach draws heavily on DIY (do it yourself) and evokes some riot grrrl bands as well, thus aligning them with feminist punk as well as rap. Both genres favour controversial names, though, interestingly, early feminist or all-girl punk rock and riot grrrl bands chose controversial or graphic names associated with femininity and the female body, presumably to confront the stigma often associated with that body (think of the Slits, Hole, and, more recently, Pussy Riot, among others). I have been able to find very few punk band names that refer to the male body, and those that turned up are most often all-male bands harnessing male (hetero)sexual aggression, such as the Norwegian band Brutal Kuk. Far more common, however, are band names evoking heteromasculine or hypermasculine imagery without reference to the male body itself (references to war or violence, for example). Bands associated with punk that have chosen names that evoke *embodied* masculinity have often been out lesbian or queer bands (such as the Butchies or MEN). In this company, in fact, the name KUUK does read as slightly queer.

Moreover, KUUK's use of humour and playfulness is a central part of their act. While the riot grrrl bands (in particular Bikini Kill) often sang about issues such as sexual abuse and violence against women, KUUK's content universe does not recall the riot grrrl tradition in this respect. Their serious political discourse is reserved for other arenas, such as newspaper articles, whereas their song lyrics are so explicit, they become simply silly (the chorus of the track I will analyse later in this chapter, 'HTG', goes, 'I am not the kind of girl that flirts, I only squirt, I only squirt').<sup>82</sup> And again, the name 'KUUK' indicates an interest in discomfiting their audience and cultivating a tongue-in-cheek attitude about their own performance. The fact is that KUUK is a difficult word to say in a casual if serious way for many people, but anyone who wants to talk about KUUK—whether fans, 'serious' music journalists or academics—has to say it. I can only imagine the pleasure this duo takes in having brought about this state of affairs.

## Reception

With such a high degree of shock value, one might expect that 'serious' cultural institutions and the mainstream music media would have dismissed KUUK and their performances, as has happened to many female musicians with aggressive, in-your-face performance styles before them. In fact, the opposite has happened, particularly in the more progressive or liberal outposts in the cultural field. Already in the fall of 2014, KUUK was featured in a photo exhibition at Rockheim (the national museum of popular music). With her tour photos of KUUK, photographer Maria Gossé sought to draw attention to the fact that even in Norway ('one of the best countries in the world when it comes to gender equality'), women are underrepresented in every part of the music industry.<sup>83</sup> In conjunction with the music industry festival by:Larm in March 2015, KUUK was nominated for 'role model of the year', and while they did not win, the nomination announced the industry's respect for the band. Meanwhile, KUUK was enjoying ecstatic reviews in the

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<sup>82</sup> Original: 'Ekke sånn jente som flørter, jeg bare squirter, jeg bare squirter' [my translation].

<sup>83</sup> Info on the exhibition at <http://www.rockheim.no/utstillinger/galleriet/vi-driver-hor/> [retrieved 1 June 2015].

music press. As journalist Daniel Hagen wrote in a review titled 'Norge trenger KUUK' [Norway needs KUUK], which sounds like you would expect it to,

KUUK is not a breath of fresh air in Norwegian hip-hop, they are a kick in the nuts and a punch in the face. They are essential, and all we have been waiting for, ever since Grandma started to listen to Lars Vaular and Karpe Diem.<sup>84</sup> (Hagen, 2015)

Not everyone has been equally impressed, however, and while KUUK is applauded by many feminists and has clearly struck a chord with their growing fan base and with many music critics, their performances are sometimes met with dismay. Some critics question KUUK's shock tactics, (partial) nudity and 'dirty' lyrics and wonder whether the band has any real political impact, aside from poking at people's sense of decency. After all, it is not news that women's bodies and nudity sell, and that explicit lyrics and provocation in rap music attract lots of attention. This review of their concert at by:Larm in Oslo 2015 is typical of the opposition:

KUUK is a reference and 'provocation' band. Periods, squirting, Olav Thon, injection and erection, whoring, farting—you name it—KUUK probably has the most disgusting word you know in one of their lyrics. Is this all you have to offer? [...] Granted we do not need all these taboos, but do us women need to go down the road of non-provocative provocation to get the point across? Hopefully we will not see this kind of thing in the March 8th parade; we can do better than this.<sup>85</sup>

Besides questioning KUUK's authenticity and originality by calling them a 'reference band', this critic lumps KUUK's tactics under the rubric of 'provocation for provocation's sake' and sees the band as mindlessly breaking taboos with no real political impact. In fact, the chaotic music video 'HTG', to which I will return later, proves these points to some extent—the visual narrative and the lyrics have little to do with one another thematically,

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<sup>84</sup> Original: 'KUUK er ikke et friskt pust i norsk hip-hop, de er et ballespark og et slag i trynet. De er helt nødvendige, og akkurat det vi har ventet på siden bestemor begynte å like Lars Vaular og Karpe Diem' [my translation].

<sup>85</sup> See <http://blogg.deichman.no/musikk/2015/03/06/bylarm-2015-hor-de-driver-hor/> [last retrieved 14 November 2016].

and even the relationship between the characters in the video makes little sense. It would indeed be tempting to read 'HTG' as simply a bizarre collection of unrelated and quite 'dirty' utterances circling around the themes of sex, partying and violence. Nor are KUUK's larger designs particularly apparent. While KUUK is paving the way for women in Norwegian rap, they also exploit their own social privilege, flaunting custom and standards of decency without repercussion. Such alternative interpretations have accompanied my study of KUUK, and, if nothing else, they make clear the band's transgressive nature, which is enough to engage it from a queer perspective, as I will endeavour to explain.

### **Conceptualising transgression**

Transgression has historically assumed a central place in both queer and feminist politics and activism, definitely occupying a place in KUUK's act. Etymologically, it can be defined as the act of 'crossing over, passing over or beyond' (Cossman, 2008). Also, it denotes violation—of a law, a command, or a principle (ibid.). As Keith Kahn-Harris puts it, transgression 'implies a sense of testing and crossing boundaries and limits' (2006:29).

Several theorists and philosophers have addressed the nature of transgression. Georges Bataille asserts that transgression requires the existence of taboo in order to be meaningful, and that it engages with two taboos in particular: mortality and eroticism (Bataille, 1985, 1993; Hegarty, 2000:109). Kahn-Harris notes that, for Bataille, 'transgression involves the embrace of carnality, allowing humans to "lose themselves" in the "totality"—the infinity of death' (Kahn-Harris, 2006:29). Foucault, who expands upon Bataille, among others, writes in 'A Preface to Transgression' (1977) that in a world where the idea and authority of God have lost traction, notions of transgression and taboo have supplanted notions of sacred and profane. He also emphasises the important relationship between transgression and 'the limit' (which is reminiscent of Bataille's taboo):

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its

entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. (Foucault, 1977:34)

Transgression, however, is always uncertain and unstable, and Foucault maintains that even as it implies crossing limits, it also sets up new ones, only to cross them in turn. He also argues that, as a consequence of 'God being dead', sexuality is now the sole source of taboos in modern society: 'Perhaps we could say that [sexuality] has become the only division possible in a world now emptied of objects, beings and spaces to desecrate' (ibid.:30).

In his studies of extreme metal, Kahn-Harris points to humanity's desire to 'transgress boundaries as well as protect them' (2006:29). This fills us with a certain ambivalence that is readily apparent in our relationship to the 'abject' (ibid.)—that which repulses, disgusts and repels us, or, in Kristeva's words, 'the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva, 1982:4). At the same time, the abject has a mysterious appeal that attracts and fascinates, and that is often exploited in art, and especially popular culture, including KUUK's performances.

Within feminism and queer theory, the practice of transgression often attaches itself to a certain kind of utopianism to which Lucy Sargisson (2002) assigns three characteristics. First, 'it is internally subversive, which is to say that it challenges from within the aims and assumptions of the ground whence it comes' (Sargisson, 2002:2). Second, 'it is flexible and resistant to permanence and order and even while it constructs an account (of, e.g., "politics") it accepts its own imminent dissolution' (ibid.). Third, 'it is intentionally and deliberately utopian' (ibid.). In queer theory, the idea of transgression stirs a utopian hope regarding the subversion of norms and new realities. For Butler gender performativity brings with it the possibility of subverting gender norms, which allows for those norms to change over time and provide a more liveable reality to social outcasts and gender 'deviants'. Another central utopian queer theorist is José Esteban Muñoz. In *Cruising Utopia* he argues that queer theorists, writers and activists might employ a queer utopian hermeneutics that considers how queer relations are manifested in the present, which is also a part of a longing for and looking beyond that present. For Muñoz, queerness is a 'structuring and

educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present' (Muñoz, 2009:1).

KUUK's transgressive act relies on vulgarity and plays with signifiers of abjection, while their political activity outside of music (the newspaper articles, blogs and TV appearances) situates their performance within a utopian frame of feminist protest and politics. So what are they protesting against? I read several issues in contemporary Norwegian (and Western) societies that inform and propel their performances, including the strict and narrow norms for females in public, both in general and in the music business in particular; the media's constant idolising of flawless female bodies; and the invisibility of 'real' female bodily functions and sexualities in the public discourse. In addition, as I argued in my introduction to KUUK in chapter 1, the band's act can be related to an increasing polarisation between feminist and anti-feminist voices in Norwegian society. In this way, KUUK crosses paths with both previous and contemporary feminist cultural movements and groups such as the riot grrrls and Pussy Riot. The duo is also grounded in contemporary popular culture and resonates with the over-the-top, outrageous, gender-bending, even monstrous aesthetics that Halberstam (2012) has labelled *gaga feminism* (though this aesthetics is not particularly relevant to the artist Lady Gaga as such). According to Halberstam, gaga feminism is a form of contemporary feminism that plays out particularly in popular culture and 'brings together meditations on fame and visibility with a lashing critique of the fixity of roles for males and females' (Halberstam, 2012:5). Importantly, it also foregrounds the ways in which shock value and play with clichés can be political—designed to throw one off balance and invoke a range of feelings, often either very negative or ecstatically positive. In Halberstam's words, '[It] is a feminism that has no truck with shame or embarrassment, it is for the freaks and geeks, the losers and failures, the kids who were left out at school, the adults that still don't fit in. [...] Gaga feminism is impolite, abrupt, abrasive, and bold' (ibid.:29). KUUK's feminism pushes the boundaries of what it means to be a Norwegian rapper, and of acceptable feminine display in general, but it does so within the frames of heterosexuality and the political correctness of Norwegian state feminism, and this is the core of their straight-queer sensibility. While KUUK's act might be readily applauded as utopian and revolutionary, acts of straight-

queering always raise questions of appropriation as well, and in KUUK's case, as I will argue, their privilege informs, disrupts and even undermines their queerness. On this point, I recall Hawkins's insightful note of caution: 'transgressive representations cannot just be taken at face value as they are often rooted in heteronormative norms that are linked to dominant inscriptions of conformity' (Hawkins, 2007b:200).

### **Gender in Norwegian hip-hop**

In order to understand KUUK as a rap act, one needs to first understand them in relation to the gender issues that characterise the Norwegian hip-hop scene. While females are still largely underrepresented (though never absent) in US rap, more and more internationally renowned female rappers have made it to the mainstream in recent years, including Nikki Minaj, Azealia Banks, Iggy Azalea and Angel Haze. Although hip-hop is one of the dominant genres in Norwegian popular music, there are however very few female rappers, and those that exist are not particularly well known. This differs from the US and even from the other Nordic countries (in Sweden, for example, there are several female rappers who are counted among the best in the country, including Linda Pira, Silvana Imam, and Cleo). In a sense, Norway's situation defies former rapper (now radio host) Christine Dancke's prediction of a 'girl invasion' in her 2003 single 'Jenteinvasjon'. Interestingly, female rappers seeking visibility in the mainstream seem to have better luck moving over to pop or r'n'b, as did Stella Mwangi and Samsaya, for example. Yet perhaps this trend has started to shift with the arrival of a new generation of female rappers that includes Mamacita, Izabell (winner of P3's girl rapper competition in 2014 and dubbed the new Norwegian 'rap princess' by TV2 in 2015)<sup>86</sup> and, of course, KUUK.

As is widely known, parts of the hip-hop tradition, and particularly American gangsta rap, have a history of being both masculinist and male-dominated, traits that often manifest themselves in objectifying, homophobic and sexist lyrics, and in music videos portraying highly stylised versions of heteromascularity and heterofemininity. This has sparked a considerable

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<sup>86</sup> See <http://www.tv2.no/a/6855202> [retrieved 3 June 2015].



backlash against this genre, particularly among conservative, often white voices in the US. However, pointing to the inherent racism informing much of the conservative critique of rap, Tricia Rose (2008) argues that rap lyrics do not appear in a vacuum but instead reflect (and magnify) the discourses of gender and sexuality that are already prevalent: 'Hip hop does not break from the fundamental logic of mainstream masculinity so much as convey it with excess, bravado, and extra insult' (Rose, 2008:130).

In her doctoral study on masculinities in Norwegian rap, Birgitte Sandve (2014) demonstrates that while Norwegian rappers have musical roots in American hip-hop culture, they have also adapted rap to the Norwegian context in order to create believable personae and claim authenticity, 'staging *their* sense of "realness"' (Sandve, 2014:201, emphasis in original). Yet vestiges remain in, for example, lyrics that belittle women through slurs such as *kjerring* and *tøs*, which can be translated to *bitch* and *slut*. The visual presence of women in music videos, when they are there at all, also reflects the limitations of US rap culture—they are girlfriends, groupies, 'eye candy' or background dancers.<sup>87</sup> Sandve observes that this contributes to the widespread cultural conflation of maleness and rap:

The consequences of under-representation of female rappers in Norwegian rap is that the repeated display of male performers works to reaffirm notions of rap as univocal with maleness *and* thereby determine the masculinist direction of the genre. (Sandve, 2014:201)

There have been public exchanges regarding the representation of women in Norwegian hip-hop in which experienced male rappers have expressed profound reservations. For example, in a 2004 article titled 'F.E.M.I.N.I.S.T', Don Martin, a rapper in the leftist rap group Gatas Parlament, lamented the real possibility of Norwegian hip-hop turning into a 'reactionary and unintelligent boys' club that sits in its bedroom masturbating to the rap version of *Vi Menn*'<sup>88</sup> (Don Martin, 2004). Other voices have dismissed the feminist critique of Norwegian hip-hop, however, and insisted that there is a

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<sup>87</sup> See Madcon's 'Liar' or Karpe Diem's 'Vestkantsvartinga'. One notable exception to this particular trend is Lars Vaular, whose videos occasionally feature 'regular' women or girls in leading roles—see, for example, 'Nonsens', 'Fett' or 'En eneste'.

<sup>88</sup> A Norwegian men's magazine that is comparable to *Playboy*.

certain way to portray women in the genre, and feminists simply do not get the joke (Brunstad et al., 2010:229). Vågard Unstad, a rapper in the hip-hop collective A-laget, articulates yet another position in this discussion when he defends A-laget against accusations of promoting sexism in their lyrics: 'A-Laget does not speak about women like American rappers who speak about women as accessories. We are closer to the American r'n'b artist who speaks openly about sex. [...] There were a few misunderstandings in the beginning, but we are better at communicating now. [...] It would be a far stretch to find any misogyny in our lyrics now'.<sup>89</sup> While Unstad's assurances can definitely be problematized, as we will see in chapter 4 in the context of my case study of Lars Vaular, it remains important that he feels compelled to offer them. Blatantly misogynistic and sexist content is in general not 'fashionable' in Norwegian rap, and artists accused of misogyny tend to want to deny it, even when it is true. As Endre Brunstad and colleagues point out in their discussion of ethnicity and linguistic practice in Norwegian hip-hop, 'the stylized sexism found in African American gangsta rap was, at least in its pure form, not credible in a society such as Norway, in which equality between women and men is highly valued' (Brunstad et al., 2010:229). Still, while there seems to be a certain awareness of gender issues within this hip-hop scene, there must remain mechanisms that exclude women from it, simply because there are so few female rappers there. Likewise, if Norwegian hip-hop is influenced by its society's belief in gender equality, still it clings to rather strict norms regarding the femininity and masculinity it promotes.

Thus, while most female rappers either abandoned the scene or sat on the sidelines, KUUK dived headfirst into this most notoriously masculinist and male-dominated realm of Norwegian popular music, and in many ways they 'made it' as well, despite their perpetual underdog status. In this way, KUUK is challenging to the point of changing structures in the Norwegian hip-hop scene, as much as the Norwegian music industry.

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<sup>89</sup> See <http://www.nattogdag.no/2012/04/smil-og-gift-moter-vagard-unstad-fra-a-laget/> [retrieved 13 July 2016].

## Approaching rap with a punk attitude

*'We want to keep punk alive'. Hip-hop heads with punk in their soul.*<sup>90</sup>

Various music journalists have noted the elements of performance art that are embedded in KUUK's performances, whether music videos or live shows. This has prompted comparisons to groups such as Die Antwoord (South Africa) and Death Grips (US), both of which are known for their shock value and experimental, punk-like approaches to the genre conventions of rap. The quotation above was part of an interview KUUK did in 2013 and explicitly orients KUUK regarding its genres of choice. While hip-hop has long provided a space for protest and empowerment, it is not enough for a band with feminist and otherwise outsider pretensions, even in Norway, as we have seen. Though (black) hip-hop feminism has indeed informed KUUK's approach to hip-hop, punk is what propelled them to legitimacy in the larger hip-hop scene, even if they remain outsiders in relation to many other rappers. In fact, established male rapper Onk1P allegedly posted a tweet shortly after Mira Refsum's 2Chainz stunt video in which he criticized KUUK's rapping skills. In an interview Mira responded:

Fuck Onk1P. He has been doing hip-hop for ten years, at least [...]. We have been doing this for one-and-a-half months, haven't released a single song, just a stupid, funny in-your-face stunt video. And then he manages to utter the 'you were much prettier on Facebook' bullshit, and then tweet about how bad *we* are. (Refsum and Solbergnes, 2013)

While Onk1P sees KUUK as approaching hip-hop in a way that violates certain markers of its authenticity, KUUK draws on punk to power through such objections, and furthermore to join in a popular revival of certain feminist music-making practices. While KUUK has not to my knowledge explicitly expressed allegiance with any particular feminist music praxis, I see much resonance with the riot grrrl movement.

Riot grrrl appeared in the US in the early 1990s with bands such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile and Huggy Bear. Based in the primarily white and male-dominated punk/hardcore scenes of Olympia and Washington, D.C, the

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<sup>90</sup> 'Vi vil holde punken i live. Hiphop-hoder med punk i sjela'. Subhead in an interview of KUUK in *furoreiharare.no* (Refsum & Solbergnes, 2013).

riot grrrls sought to claim space as musicians. In addition, they articulated feminism's so-called third-wave politics, as Mary C. Kearney observed at the time:

Often highly critical that 'second wave' feminism operated like a fundamentalist religion with prescriptions on how to dress, behave and think, young feminists such as riot grrrls are infusing feminist politics with forms of confrontational cultural activism which rely less on exposing gender differences than on deconstructing them. (Kearney, 1997:224)

KUUK also seems to instigate a discourse that seeks to re-negotiate feminism, womanhood and musicianship in the context of contemporary pop culture. Other parallels abound. First, the riot grrrl approach to punk anticipates KUUK's approach to hip-hop, and to music making as a whole, as a means of rebelling against notions of womanhood and femininity, both inside the genre and in society. Second, the riot grrrls and KUUK are both active in public feminist discourse. Third, KUUK's reclaiming of slurs such as 'bitch' and 'whore' was also a central practice of the riot grrrl bands. Fourth, KUUK recalls the riot grrrls in their supportive tone towards their fans and other bands.

Central to the punk tradition is the DIY (do-it-yourself) aesthetic. For riot grrrls, DIY had a feminist edge, as it provided the space to develop their skills in public. It has done so for KUUK as well. In her history of the riot grrrl movement, Sara Marcus quotes from an interview with Allison Wolfe of Bratmobile that highlights the connection between feminism and the DIY approach:

I'm not trying to play bad music, but who's saying it's bad? [...] I think it's really good for bands to go out there when they're not ready. [...] because then, as you do get a grasp on your instruments, people see you in a continuum, as opposed to just you jumped out of nowhere, which is what I always thought: The boy comes out of the womb with a screaming Led Zeppelin guitar, and I feel like I'll never know how to do that. (Marcus, 2010:82)

Like Bratmobile, KUUK entered the mainstream before they were 'ready', allowing their fans unguarded access to their continually expanding

repertoire and evolving performance strategies. KUUK started out with a very short set indeed and remains known for their quick concerts. In 2015, two years into their career, I watched a performance of their entire body of work that was thirty minutes long.

Of course, the DIY aesthetic also makes KUUK vulnerable to the charge of being ‘bad rappers’ (recall OnkLP), and this has feminist connotations as well. By presenting material in public ‘too soon’ through performances with bad flow and bad rhyming, KUUK could be accused of perpetuating the stereotype notion that women do not master language as well as men do, or, more specifically, that they have a smaller vocabulary and favour less rational and more emotional phrasings.<sup>91</sup> Relatedly, I have spoken to several people who say that they left a KUUK show because they could not stand their bad rapping skills. While I suspect that KUUK’s shock tactics and confrontational style might also have something to do with this reaction, so-called ‘poor musicianship’ is an important part of the discourse surrounding KUUK.

On the other hand, a DIY approach to music making and KUUK’s resultant outsider status regarding rap certainly serves to *authenticate* them as musicians. A central part of rap authenticity involves the idea of ‘realness’, but for KUUK this particular ideal is a hard to claim. Rose (2008) observes that initially for black American rappers, ‘realness’ generally referred to ‘talking openly about undesirable or hard-to-hear truths about black street life’ (Rose, 2008: 134). For Norwegian rappers, the idea is more connected to credibility—being believable and telling the truth about one’s life ‘as it is’.<sup>92</sup> KUUK cannot assert ‘realness’ in the wake of their obviously and intentionally outrageous performances. Their act is exactly that—an act, and one that is stylised, exaggerated and fragmented. Notions of authenticity associated with punk are a more promising fit. In his analysis of punk subcultures, Ryan Moore (2004) argues that punk is a twofold response to the ‘condition of postmodernity’. It promotes a ‘culture of deconstruction’, which ‘has allowed some punk performers to enact dramatic refusals and parodies of power, periodically capturing the media spotlight and inspiring

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<sup>91</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of this issue, see Mary Ritchie Key’s *Male/Female Language: With a Comprehensive Bibliography* (1975).

<sup>92</sup> See Danielsen (2008), Sandve (2014).

further acts of defiance among the young and disaffected' (Moore, 2004:308). And it promotes the 'culture of authenticity', which emphasises alternative media and communities, as well as political critique and action (ibid.). Both of these aspects inform KUUK's act as well, and, importantly, the duo's relation to the existing, mostly male hip-hop scene, which is both an opposition and an infiltration (of 'do it yourself', 'do what you can' or maybe 'just do it') that might prove to be the inspiration that is needed to bring more female rappers along with them.

### **'HTG': Approaching hip-hop 'gangsta style'**

Beyond their take on punk authenticity and their dedication to rap as a vehicle of expression, KUUK's aesthetics and performance strategies draw on two further sources: certain stock types of hip-hop, and an indulgence in the tropes of horror, including transgressive SM imagery and play with abjection. We can see all of this in the music video 'HTG',<sup>93</sup> which will serve as the main focal point for the rest of this chapter. 'HTG' (short for 'hard to get') was released in March 2014 and is KUUK's first official music video following the first infamous 'Hor' video. Directed by Thomas Stenerud of BRUSJAN FILM, 'HTG' (see fig. 2.1 for a visual representation) features KUUK members Mira Refsum and Ragna Solbergnes as the leads, as well as three key male characters – Supergimp, Kattebikkja, and an unnamed character which I will name Guy with Weasel (because he is pictured stroking a stuffed weasel in one of the scenes) – which factor most into the horror aspects of the video.

KUUK appropriate certain stock types from the 'mack rap' and 'reality rap' subgenres, as described by Adam Krims (2000), including the male 'pimp' and 'badman', the 'gangsta' (to a certain degree) and the female 'sista with attitude'. Alongside these various poses, the duo also raids the canon for references and even quotations. At 3:02 in 'HTG', for example, the duo

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<sup>93</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0SDCQPa80Y&spfreload=10> [retrieved 22 August 2016].

suddenly shifts to English and starts repeating, 'Money, dick, weed, that's all these bitches need'. This seems to invoke both Lil Wayne's 'Pussy, Money, Weed' and New York Rapper A\$AP Rocky's 'PMW (Pussy, Money, Weed)', the latter of which has a line in it that anticipates KUUK's almost exactly: 'Money, pussy, weed—(shit) that's all a nigga need'.<sup>94</sup> This reference is the sole example in 'HTG' of 'reality rap', which in Krims's words encompasses 'any rap that undertakes the project of realism' (Krims, 2000:70), and if its realism does not extend to the two white Norwegian women who comprise KUUK, it nevertheless aligns them with US gangsta rap and demonstrates, in turn, a 'requisite relation and proximity to an original source of rap' (Armstrong, 2004:336). It also presents, in no uncertain terms, the mack, gangsta or badman.

According to Eithne Quinn (2005), the origins of these sometimes interchangeable labels are slightly different. Mack is synonymous with 'pimp', and within US hip-hop, the mack gained prominence thanks to his 'way with words'. As Quinn explains, 'the "mack" came to mean the persuader, the trickster, the rapper. This semantic drift strikes at the center of the equivalencies between rap artist and pimp (or "player")' (Quinn, 2005:132). The badman has roots in black American folklore and has been realised in the blues men, the Black Panthers and the epic figures of Stagolee and Dolomite in Southern 'toast' poems and 'blacksploitation' films, respectively (ibid.:111). Quinn contrasts the badman with the mack as follows: 'The *badman* in gangsta rap is characterized by stylishly violent, emotionally inarticulate, politically insurgent, and socially alienated personas. [...] By contrast, gangsta's *pimp/trickster* serves to represent the more socially mobile and verbally dexterous hustler' (ibid.:109, author's emphasis). They nevertheless coexist and often complement one another: 'The motif of the nonverbal badman was always interrupted by the publicity image of the rapper and by the highly verbal act of rapping itself. Gangsta rappers, then, projected "ghetto specific masculinity" through diverse and complex combinations of physical and verbal potency' (Quinn, 2005:131).

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<sup>94</sup> Though A\$AP Rocky has attempted to distance himself from the gangsta label, he draws heavily upon the tradition in his music and visual aesthetics, and I will consider him gangsta for the duration of this discussion.

Such rap stock types aid in the construction of KUUK's feminist politics because they are active manipulators of their own destinies, despite structural discrimination and other hardships. In 'HTG', then, Mira Refsum and Ragna Solbergnes radiate female empowerment through body language and lyrics as they drive the narrative (about an upcoming 'bitch fight') forward. Refsum is the trainer and Solbergnes is the fighter, and the video culminates in an orgy of violence. KUUK wins, successfully beating down all the other women (and one of the men as well) while managing to present all of them in a positive and capable light. There is no eye candy here, and it is the men who are on the sidelines as aesthetic 'fillers' and facilitators for the main characters. (See, for example, when Guy with Weasel opens the fight by entering the ring in his underwear, holding up a sign that says 'round 1' [0:45] and when the two naked men in the shower show their backsides to the camera as Mira raps in the foreground, facing the camera [1:32]) (see figs. 2.2 and 2.3).



Figure 2.2





Figure 2.3

The active, authoritative stance also shines through the lyrics, such as Solbergnes's first verse (translated from the Norwegian): 'If you're going out to hunt, you need to build yourself up. Put on your panties, we're gonna juice, and we'll never get enough'.<sup>95</sup> Flanked by Refsum and three other women, Solbergnes fills a double role as a gangsta rapper, accentuated by the posse standing around her and her fur coat, and as a fighter or wrestler about to enter the ring. The music enters an 'attack mode' with the abrupt arrival of the crash cymbal, industrial, techno-inspired bass and fuzz guitar. 'Don't try to play HTG [hard to get], when you know you want to join in'<sup>96</sup> signals the chorus while sounding both welcoming and somehow threatening, recalling those men who do not take no for an answer in sexual situations. The chorus lyrics—'I'm not the kind of girl who flirts, I only squirt'—are accompanied by a heavy, accented beat that is synchronised to Solbergnes's punches and kicks. All in all, KUUK clearly co-opts both mack and badman in the name of feminist trendsetting, particularly regarding a marked sense of agency which contrasts profoundly with the way in which females are often represented in rap, even in Norway.

Somewhat subtly, the mack and badman figures also queer KUUK's gender expression. In my discussion of the band's name, I noted that KUUK's

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<sup>95</sup> Original: 'Hvis du skal ut å jakte må du bygge deg opp. Dra opp trusa, vi skal juice og vi får ikkje nok' [my translation].

<sup>96</sup> My translation. Original: "Ikke prøv å lek HTG, når du vet du vil være med"

gender style is not female machisma according to the formula of Reynolds and Press (1995), because this style often entails an active rejection of femininity. The KUUK duo does not reject their female-ness or their femininity but rather infuses the act with a twist of masculinity through the boastful toughness of these gangsta rap stock types. In *Female Masculinity* Halberstam (1998) demonstrates that masculinity is not an inherent property of the male sex but rather a set of properties traditionally assigned to men. He also argues that female masculinity is far more than an appropriation of maleness, and that it 'affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity' (Halberstam, 1998:1). This argument recalls Butler's theorisation of drag (which I discussed in chapter 1) as revelatory of the constructedness of gender because it 'enacts the very structure of impersonation by which *any gender* is assumed' (Butler, 1993c:312). Halberstam similarly observes, 'masculinity [...] becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white middle-class body' (Halberstam, 1998:2). When females perform masculinity, then, they help to denaturalise it by making it visible and revealing it to be just as constructed as femininity is often perceived to be. In a sense, then, if queering is about revealing the discursively constructed relationship between sex, gender and sexuality (Butler, 1993b), then KUUK's play on mack masculinity and gangsta rap is a form of queering, because it reveals the theatrical, constructed properties of the masculinity on display in rap.

Imani Perry argues that one function of the gangsta, pimp, drug dealer, and outlaw figures portrayed in mack and gangsta rap is to provide a site for black people to oppose the racism present in the dominant white culture: 'The glamour of the high-rolling drug dealer is exploited for the sake of a counter-hegemonic space, an alternative power in the face of white supremacy and the panoptic surveillance of black bodies in ghettos' (Perry, 2004:104). Despite the misogyny informing these figures, the gangsta and badman have also become sources of empowerment for black *female* rappers. In an article on female stock types and feminism in rap, Cheryl Keyes identifies the female MC figure that parallels the male badman. The 'Sista with attitude' 'comprises female MCs who value attitude as a means of empowerment and present themselves accordingly' (Keyes, 2000:262). KUUK have been 'bad girls' from the start and readily align with the Sista

with attitude stock type as they attempt to renegotiate norms of femininity by playing upon the exaggerated, almost parodic hypermasculinity<sup>97</sup> that is often found in gangsta rap. Among other things, this figure reclaims the word 'bitch', brags freely about her partying and sexual conquests (seducing, repressing and emasculating men) and disses her competitors, whether male or female (ibid.).

Just as when straight artists employ queer signifiers, it raises a host of questions about appropriation and privilege when white people participate in a predominantly black cultural practice. While the gangsta and Sista with attitude figures represent a means for black rappers to oppose white dominance, they resonate much differently with, for example, the white Norwegian rappers in KUUK. Deborah Russell noted in *Billboard* already in 1991 that white rappers have traditionally faced a 'credibility issue', as rap has always been tied to the specificities of black (and particularly black male) lives. Citing Bill Adler, Island Records VP of media relations, Russell writes, 'It's [...] a matter of black innovation, white imitation' (Russell, 1991). Since Vanilla Ice's infamous fall from grace, however, white rappers have come to be more accepted nowadays (think of Eminem, for example), and as a result new notions of authenticity have come into play (Armstrong, 2004; Hess, 2006). Since the 1980s, hip-hop's 'realness' has been rooted in blackness and being marginalised and/or raised in the ghetto (Rose, 1994:31), but white, middle-class participation shifted that notion, leading Mickey Hess to observe that 'being true to yourself and your lived experiences can eclipse notions of hip-hop as explicitly black-owned' (Hess, 2006:373). Bakari Kitwana has even gone so far as to argue that, within the hip-hop community, 'skill takes precedence over skin color' (Kitwana, 2005:160).

Nevertheless, as Todd Fraley discovers, rap represents an alternative reality of sorts—one where white people are the Other and need to 'prove their worth' as participants (Fraley, 2009:40). A further complication is that black rap authenticity hinges upon an image of black Otherness and

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<sup>97</sup> This is a mode of masculinity that according to Mosher and Sirkin is characterised by "(a) calloused sex attitudes towards women (b) a conception of violence as manly, and (c) a view of danger as exciting" (Mosher and Sirkin, 1984:151)

marginalisation, as mentioned above (Danielsen, 2008). There is thus an opportunity, in a sense, for white rappers who can claim their own Otherness to likewise claim authenticity in the rap scene. Of course, many object to this reverse 'victimisation through racial categorisation' (Armstrong, 2004:342) by white people within black music cultures. To these objectors, white Otherness is a devious strategy, because, as Marcia A. Dawkins observes, '[white] skin signifies [...] access to opportunity, audience, and strong market value' (Dawkins, 2010: 477). That is to say, whiteness generally retains its general cultural privilege even in the rap industry.

This tension between issues of race, ethnicity and gender surfaces in KUUK's act as well. While the members of KUUK are women (and therefore in the minority both in the Norwegian music business and in the rap scene), they are also white and not subjected to the same hardships and stereotypes (hypersexual, immoral, and so on) as black women in the US. Rather, their participating in an overwhelmingly black genre arguably heightens a privileged position. Moreover, a somewhat problematic connection between queerness and whiteness is foregrounded by KUUK's act. Although KUUK can be read as challenging or even queering gender structures both in the Norwegian music business and in society at large by simply making their voices heard there, they are also white, middle-class, well-educated, articulate, able-bodied, good-looking women who are able to do pretty much whatever they please from the outset. By no means does this invalidate KUUK's renegotiations of gender norms in the rap scene, but it complicates things, because whiteness signals privilege, which, in turn, signals normativity. In effect, their status as white females and inexperienced rappers, paints a picture of KUUK as rule-breakers and underdogs – as queer subjects, in that particular context – but one thing that may go unnoticed by both them and their fans is that they also capitalise on the aspects of their personae that signal dominant identity. This is supported by the fact that their reception has been largely positive, indicating that they are not actually seen as a real danger to the status quo, or, as Jarman puts it, 'the minute it becomes normative, it stops being queer' (2011:17). Similarly, Hawkins (2016) problematises queerness and whiteness in relation to Lady Gaga, noting:

(...)‘Gaga’s strategies of gender play capitalize on the dominant structures of ethnicity, heterosexuality, and Catholicism’ and concluding, ‘accepting that Lady Gaga’s pop acts privilege her own ethnicity, the ebb and flow of her queer characterizations can be incendiary’ (Hawkins, 2016:22).

Along much the same lines as Hawkins, I find that the viability of KUUK’s queerness hinges on whether it is the case that anything that is ‘politically correct’ (or largely condoned by a cultural elite) can be queered. Because KUUK appeals mainly to other white, middle-class, well-educated people, they play on Otherness while never actually being Others themselves. Paradoxically, their act almost sustains the status quo by demonstrating that in this day and age, in Norway, white women can employ transgressive sexual aesthetics without any social repercussions aside from, perhaps, a couple of bad reviews. That said, their performances do tackle some highly relevant issues, such as anti-feminism in Norway and misogyny in the music business, meaning that they do participate in a process of ‘upsetting, making strange, unsettling’ (Jarman-Ivens, 2011: 15). What we have, then, is a wobbly balancing act between an aesthetic of transgression, in the name of openly feminist and queer politics, and the exploitation of white and straight privilege toward that end.

So far I have concentrated on KUUK’s musical influences, and on the ways in which elements from both punk and rap have informed their transgressive, taboo-busting performance style. In addition, I have argued that while rap and punk provide a framework for their feminist politics, the subversive elements of their act are less clear cut. For the remainder of this chapter, I will concentrate on two aspects of ‘HTG’ that introduce a much more obviously queer sensibility to femininity in particular: sadomasochism and the aesthetics of horror.

### **Sadomasochism and transgression in "HTG"**

The term ‘sadomasochism’ ‘has been used to cover a range of practices, some of which are not explicitly sexual’ (Sullivan, 2003:152), including ‘spanking, biting, bruising, slapping, burning, cutting, fantasies, various forms of restraint or bondage, domination and submission, discipline, the use of sex

toys, and so on' (ibid.:152–153). Since the 1990s there has been a proliferation of BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Sadism and Masochism) imagery in popular culture, prompting Margot Weiss to state that 'representations of BDSM are everywhere' (Weiss, 2006:111). And representations of BDSM, or more precisely sadomasochism (SM),<sup>98</sup> are certainly plentiful in 'HTG' as well. First, there is the relationship between Supergimp and Kattebikkja (as mentioned previously, they are two of the male characters in the video) (see fig. 2.4), which depicts and/or parodies a same-sex SM relationship that is replete with black clothing reminiscent of latex or leather pants, a mask, a collar and rope. Second, it appears clear that the relationship between KUUK and Supergimp is a dominant/submissive (dom/sub)<sup>99</sup> dynamic as well. Because 'gimp' usually labels the submissive partner in the sadomasochistic relationship, it is odd that Supergimp is the 'dom' and Kattebikkja is the 'sub'. Yet it makes sense if we allow that the members of KUUK are the 'real' 'doms' in the video's narrative. Third, there is the relationship between KUUK and the 'you' addressed in the lyrics, a potential and presumably male lover (the lyrics are full of references to heterosexual intercourse) from whom KUUK demands a variety of sexual favours and acts.

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<sup>98</sup> The terms BDSM, SM, S/M, S'n'M and S&M are often used interchangeably. I will use SM for the sake of simplicity, and because it is most commonly used among participants in SM milieus, as opposed to, for example, S&M, which is mostly used by 'nonpractitioners' and the mainstream media (Weiss, 2006).

<sup>99</sup> The terms 'sub' (submissive) and 'dom' (dominant) are often preferred to masochist and sadist and label the roles they are assigned to play.



Figure 2.4

Is SM a queer or (hetero)normative practice, and – dependent on the answer to this question – can KUUK's employment of SM aesthetics be seen as part of their queer and feminist politics? Both Krafft-Ebing and Freud once defined sadism and masochism as sexual perversions and 'aberrations' (Sullivan, 2003: 151). Some modern theorists have also been critical of these alignments—feminist scholars, for example, have read SM as a heteronormative practice that replicates patriarchal values and relations (ibid.:160). Sheila Jeffreys goes as far as pointing out the similarities between some SM practices and real torture methods, calling SM both fascist and racist and arguing that 'any glorifying of oppression can only strengthen the values which maintain all forms of oppression' (Jeffreys, 1993:184). SM-friendly scholars and SM practitioners have sought to nuance this view, maintaining that the relationship between 'dom' and 'sub' cannot be captured by the dichotomies that are often used to characterise heteropatriarchal and abusive relations, such as powerful/powerless, active/passive or subject/object. This is because the sub often has a lot of influence over the situation, and, moreover, the roles are often reversible

(Antoniou, 1995; Rubin, 2011; Sullivan, 2003). Therefore, even a heterosexual SM-relation where the male is 'dom' and the female 'sub' can be interpreted as queer because it disrupts the stereotype of the female as passive, asexual or frigid and unsettles the otherwise (apparently) normative relation with a sense of the taboo. From this perspective—and especially given the theatricality that characterises much SM play—SM often becomes more of a parody of patriarchal values than a replication of them.

SM falls into the category of 'non-normative sexualities', which queer scholars have shown interest in. But is it queer as such? To the extent that SM practices subvert traditional family values, encourage nihilistic and self-indulgent forms of pleasure and engage taboos, they can be read as queer. But as Sullivan (2003) points out, it is by no means clear whether SM, with its reliance on dichotomous power relations, is actually subversive. Does it instead want to 'simply play around with or reverse normative hierarchies and thus perpetuate conservative, dichotomous, and potentially destructive modes of being' (Sullivan, 2003:161)? And given the proliferation of SM aesthetics in popular culture, Weiss concludes that 'SM has come to mean something more mainstream and less risqué, more conventional and less exotic' (Weiss, 2006:104). Admittedly, this is not pure SM but rather a version that has been normalised through its incorporation into existing normative structures. Weiss references the film *Secretary*, where 'a very conventional love story' is seasoned with 'some kinky bits of the other' (Weiss, 2006:112). To label SM aesthetics inherently queer, then, is problematic, especially if one believes queerness to be non-essential, context-dependent, and as much a product of interpretation as of any inherent quality.

Perhaps SM is more readily identifiable as queer when it appears outside of heterosexual male/'dom' to female/'sub' relations, which, of course, recall heteronormative relations to some degree.<sup>100</sup> And this becomes a crucial point with regard to the SM aesthetics informing 'HTG'. In an analysis of Prodigy's music video 'Smack My Bitch Up', Sullivan (2009)

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<sup>100</sup> Sullivan (2003) addresses this point, citing famous SM toast-mistress Pat Califia, who argues that male/female dom/sub relations are different from an abusive heterosexual relationship in one important way—the latter is consensual (Sullivan, 2003: 160–161).



observes that she did not see the sadomasochistic imagery in this music video as queer until she realised that the main character, who fights, snorts cocaine and engages in a sexual encounter with a 'gorgeous, lusty woman' (Sullivan, 2009: 435) is in fact also a (feminine) woman, not a chauvinist man.<sup>101</sup> Sullivan attributes her perception of the video as queer to the fact that feminine women are seldom portrayed (in mainstream culture or feminist texts, in fact) as 'actively involved in the eroticisation of power, in the use of controlled violence, and, more particularly, in the foregrounding of a woman's pleasure *as her own*' (Sullivan, 2009:436, author's emphasis). Along these lines, I find that it is not the depiction of SM aesthetics per se that makes 'HTG' queer as such. Instead, it is the nature of the SM relationship in the video, especially in a hip-hop context. Likewise, the video skirts SM's potentially problematic reproduction of heteronormative power relations because its SM relationship involves either two men or the women in KUUK as 'doms' and the men as 'subs'.

These SM aesthetics falls into the larger image of KUUK's transgressive aesthetics, and I find this to be part of their feminist politics. It is also a part of their play with horror aesthetics, in which abject femininity plays a large role. That is where I turn next.

### **Abjection and (queer) pleasure**

As mentioned above, while KUUK generally receives positive responses, it also seems to annoy and even disgust some listeners. How might we explain this reaction from a queer perspective? We could assume that it derives chiefly from their play with masculine signifiers, and especially their boastful and confrontational presentation of sexually explicit material and their pointed rejection of expectations regarding female behaviour (both of which align with their gangsta, mack or sista with attitude borrowings). I would

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<sup>101</sup> Another informative study addressing the intersections of BDSM and queerness is Bauer (2014), who studies 'dyke+queer BDSM' practitioners. Bauer, however, does not see queer primarily as a signifier of mobility, non-normativity and transgression that in theory can be applied to any practice but rather as an identity (ditto dyke), and sees BDSM as a practice that 'dyke+queer' people engage in.

suggest, however, that while their act certainly challenges some of the norms of femininity, it does not negate their female-ness or subsume femininity within masculinity in any way. In other words, it may instead be precisely their female and feminine bodies, not their play with masculinity, that accounts for their greatest queer potential—a potential they then realise through an abject and monstrous femininity they construct from the aesthetics of horror.

To prepare the ground for my discussion of KUUK's horror aesthetics and its connection to femininity, I will take a short detour into the domain of fem(me) theory. Despite KUUK drawing upon masculine imagery, they remain quite *femme*—easily identified as female and not shy about emphasising their female bodies. In their 'Fem(me)nist Manifesto' (2002), Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh characterise *femme*, a term originally used to describe a feminine lesbian, as 'a queer body in fem(me)inine drag' (Duggan and McHugh, 2002:165). At the same time they express concern about femininity itself, characterising it as a 'historically dated and utterly repulsive gender style' (Duggan and McHugh, 2002:168). Theorisation concerning butch/*femme* relations (Butler, 1993b; Halberstam, 1998) has long underpinned the queer theorisation of the feminine woman, but here we find *femme* separated from both female-ness and any relationship with butch and used instead to describe a gender style that resists normativity but plays both ironically and consciously with conventional feminine signifiers. *Femme* theory has met with some criticism. Lisa Walker (2012), for instance, points out that the radical rejection of femininity creates a dichotomy between the lesbian *femme* and the heterosexual woman, who is portrayed as a victim of a 'mainstream femininity'—often conceptualised as white, straight and middle class—that makes fem(me)ininity look like pure voluntarism (a bad reading of Butler's notion of performativity) and straight femininity look like pure determinism. The relationship between fem(me) and traditional femininity thus becomes a binary relationship invoking that of masculinity and femininity, with femininity still on the losing side. Clare Hemmings and Felicity Grace (1999) have also pointed out that the straight femininity against which fem(me) is assumed to define itself is in fact imaginary. Still, the description of *femmes* that Brushwood, Rose and Camilleri's offers – "femininity gone wrong" —bitch, slut, nag whore, cougar,

dyke, or brazen hussy' (Brushwood, Rose and Camilleri, 2002:13), remains a revealing characterisation of that aspect of KUUK's gender style that plays on markers of femininity. The femme sensibility in 'HTG' derives from its combination of parody and agency, especially in, for example, the fighting scenes, which are over the top and thus quite parodic. Other femme aspects include the lyrics, the way in which Refsum and Solbergnes use their voices, the way they adopt elements from mack and gangsta rap, the way they incorporate musical elements from horror films, and the visual stylisation of the bodies in 'HTG'. In all, this performance style plays with the stereotype of the 'disgusting feminist' as mean, demanding, castrating and anti-family in the interests of reclaiming or at least subverting the negative associations projected onto feminism and women in general. Importantly, their femme style, especially their play with feminine monstrosity, provides the ground on which they build their horror aesthetics, which in turn can be read as queer.

It is apparent that KUUK's audiovisual aesthetics and performance style play on signifiers of abjection. Kahn-Harris (2006) has argued that such an aesthetic approach is often transgressive, 'invoking the joys and terrors of formless oblivion within the collective, while simultaneously bolstering feelings of individual control and potency' (Kahn-Harris, 2006:30). Reynolds and Press (1995) link the abject—both the fear of and the attraction to it—to rock music throughout its history. The *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* defines *abject* as rejected, downcast, degraded or outcast.<sup>102</sup> For Ian Buchanan, the abject is 'not [...] an intrinsic quality of a thing, a being, or a state of affairs. It is rather a peculiar type of response, the strange power of which seems to suggest we are drawn to that which repels us' (Buchanan, 2010). Thus abjection is inherently paradoxical because, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White conclude, 'disgust always bears the imprint of desire' (1986:191).

Horror films frequently play on this paradox, as do musical genres such as extreme metal (Kahn-Harris, 2006), and KUUK is careful to

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<sup>102</sup> Available at:

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192830982.001.0001/acref-9780192830982-e-30?rskey=iaAY9b&result=3> [retrieved 12 April 2016].

incorporate such aesthetic signifiers into their rap tracks. 'HTG' is full of musical, aesthetic and narrative strategies that both titillate and repulse, even as the image of the band itself as strong, assertive and commanding is reinforced. For instance, 'HTG' opens with Mira and Ragna, seemingly out of breath and smeared with blood, sitting atop a pile of partly clothed women (fig.2.5). The scene foreshadows the outcome of the fight that is about to happen, but absent any other evidence at this point, it could as well be a pile of corpses, with the KUUK duo as the 'final girls', as described by Carol J. Clover in her description of modern horror cinema:

The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in memory is the image of the one who did not die: the survivor, or Final Girl. She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise and scream again. She is abject terror personified. (Clover, 1993:35)

The video, however, dispels this association quickly, revealing Mira and Ragna as not only survivors but also perpetrators. The pile of bodies is not the result of a killer on the loose but the result of a 'real bitchfight', says Supergimp. Thus, the familiar scene of girls in distress is subverted.

Another example of horror aesthetics is found right after the opening scene, which is immediately followed by still shots of different people shown in what appears to be a dark room (but is actually the boxing ring), some of them performing contorted body movements, accompanied by similarly 'contorted' voices. Flashes of light prompt the characters to suddenly appear and then disappear, recalling the style of zombie films, for example. Situated somewhere in the woods in the middle of winter, which supplies a 'cold', white light, both the cabin and the lake are familiar elements from horror movies. The big, black lake in the background evokes both horror films about monsters in the water (*Jaws*) and *by the water* (*Friday the 13th*). Even the supporting characters seem to be taken straight out of a horror film. Guy with Weasel is a good example. First seen kicking off the fight wearing just his underwear, holding a sign over his head that reads 'round 1' at 0:44 – which is clearly a subversive parody of the 'bikini girls' often seen doing the same thing in boxing and wrestling fights – and later seen stroking a stuffed

weasel (or the like) while staring into the camera with an empty look in his eyes, he is there to unsettle us. At another point (3:01) he is also shown drooling some kind of slimy goo, thereby capturing abjection's intimate connection to human bodily fluids.



Figure 2.5

'HTG' is also replete with specific musical elements that recall the horror film iconography. The heavy fuzz guitar chords that appear at 0:11 as a main element of the intro and choruses function like the 'stingers' that are frequently used in horror films for their shock value (Lerner, 2010:ix) to elevate the tension in the video's intro scene. Philip Hayward asserts that the 'use of rock music [...] has become a significant aspect of 1990s and 2000s horror cinema, linking the genre with aspects of rock and associated subcultures' (Hayward, 2009:11). The electric guitar chords work that way here, making the video at once heavier and also 'darker' through associations with goth, for example.



Figure 2.6

A synth theme that first appears at 0:33 (fig. 2.6) reoccurs throughout the verses but disappears in the choruses. It covers a major third (G–B) and contains two particularly interesting elements. First, it is characterised by a chromatic move from A  $\flat$  to G and back to A  $\flat$ , which, together with the F minor chord played in the guitar, introduces a subtle but palpable dissonance. Chromatics have a strong tradition of evoking the ‘eerie’ or supernatural. Second, because the fuzz guitar’s tonic is F, it forms a triton with the top note in the synth theme (B), which is the clichéd ‘devil’s interval’ used as a leitmotif to represent evil in several classic horror films, including Dracula in the 1974 Hammer vampire film *The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires* (Hannan, 2009:65). This synth theme therefore recalls and plays upon a long tradition of the musical intensification of a feeling of danger in popular culture.

The voices in ‘HTG’ invoke similar cultural codes. The first voice we hear features a filter that adds a slightly distorted robotic twist to Mira Refsum’s already child-like, eerie vocal production style and suggests horror’s evil doll or evil child stock types. This voice is then repeated with another filter that pitches it down significantly, adding a sort of hypermasculinity (it is lower than a typical masculine voice) that suggests monsters or demons or, more immediately, the vocal techniques exploited in certain kinds of heavy metal.

From a queer perspective, I read the appropriation of horror aesthetics in ‘HTG’ first and foremost as informing KUUK’s very calculated gender performance. In short, it infuses their fem(me)ininity with a touch of the monstrous, and thus summons the abject. While the duo is not depicted as outright monsters in this video, their bodies arguably play upon a type of monstrosity that is bound up in their femininity, emphasising body parts and functions of the female body that are seen as disgusting or shocking. This gesture towards monstrosity includes blood and spit; violence towards other women and towards the submissive male Kattebikkja; coarse, sexually explicit language with female ejaculation as a central theme; and non-retouched female bodies. With this I turn to Barbara Creed’s notion of the *monstrous-feminine*, which she develops to address the representation of female monsters in horror films. Grounding her arguments in Freudian psychoanalysis and Kristeva’s account of the abject, Creed argues that

femininity has a special place in horror movies: 'all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about a woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (Creed, 1993:1). Importantly, the monstrous-feminine is not simply a female version of a male monster: 'The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience' (ibid.:3). This is because 'when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions' (ibid.:7). In other words, the monstrous-feminine plays upon the abjection to which the female body is often subjected.

Creed argues, relatedly, that horror films invoke abjection to 'bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability' (Creed, 1993:11). Abjection arises at the boundary between, for example, the 'human and inhuman, man and beast, [...] normal and supernatural [...] and those who take up their proper gender roles [...] and those who do not' (ibid.). Interestingly, even conventional or 'straight' femininity is often associated with the abject, according to Ulrika Dahl, thanks to its association with negative values such as superficiality, artificiality, passivity and oppression, and to its nature as an 'obstacle to subjecthood' (Dahl, 2012:61). For Kristeva (1982), the abject is linked to the feminine because abjection ultimately derives from a subconscious recollection of escaping the womb, an experience at once terrifying and liberating. On a similar note, Jane M. Ussher, who builds her argument in part upon Kristeva's assertion that the proper body 'must bear no traces to its debt to nature' (Kristeva, 1982:102), explains femininity in relation to the abject fecund body and the 'excess femininity' it symbolises: 'The apparently uncontained fecund body [...] signifies associations with the animal world, which reminds us of our mortality and fragility, and stands as the antithesis of the clean, contained, proper body' (Ussher, 2006:6). Because the reproductive body is so central to the construction and regulation of femininity, 'the female fecund body [...] stands at the centre of surveillance and policing of femininity—both externally and from within' (ibid.:4). The boundaries of normative femininity change throughout the reproductive life cycle, and they regulate and control 'the unruly reproductive body' (ibid.:4)

through taboo and ritual. The monstrous-feminine appears when the boundaries of the 'clean and proper' female body are crossed.

In my opinion, KUUK's horror aesthetic clearly draws upon the notion of the monstrous-feminine. But how might this be indeed perceived as queer? In her seminal theorisation of the abject in *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva argues that

it is [...] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (Kristeva, 1982:4)

In this sense, then, the abject and queerness at least cross paths. On a similar note, Butler connects the abject to culturally unthinkable, 'unliveable' and unintelligible bodies (1993a:x)—that is, those bodies that fall outside of the heterosexual matrix:

[The] exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed [...] requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects', but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. (Butler, 1993a:xiii)

Because KUUK's audiovisual performance of femininity in 'HTG' removes their characters from the intelligible category of (proper) woman, they have entered the queer domain, even if—or rather precisely because—their bodies still come across as clearly female and feminine.

It is also evident that KUUK's display of and emphasis on the horrific and abject female body has important implications for the representation of female bodies in Western art in general, and in popular music and rap in particular. According to Ussher, such representations fulfil an important control function with regard to femininity:

the female nude, icon of idealized feminine sexuality, most clearly transforms the base nature of woman's nakedness into culture, into 'art', all abhorrent reminders of her fecund corporeality removed—secretions, pubic hair, genitals, and disfiguring veins or blemishes all left out of the frame. [...] This accounts for the ubiquity of the female nude in both 'high art' and popular culture; the fantasy of containment



requires revisiting of the image to keep anxiety about the unruly fecund body at bay. (Ussher, 2006:3)

As with much mainstream pop, rap culture heartily invests in the Western practice of scrubbing the female nude, and KUUK's feminine display presents a marked and remarkable counterpoint to this tradition. Perry notes that despite a feminist current in hip-hop since the 1980s, the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s saw yet another surge of music videos devotedly objectifying women, and particularly black women, by drawing on the visual aesthetics of strip clubs and pornography, among other things. As a consequence, Perry argues, even those female rap artists who self-consciously play on their sexiness are instantly objectified, even when they also cultivate a feminist image and write feminist lyrics. This is because 'the language of sexiness is also the language of sexism in American popular culture in general, and in hip-hop videos in particular' (Perry, 2003:140). While I hesitate to fully embrace Perry's concerns about the objectification of the self-consciously sexy—I think there is much to nuance regarding the subversion of the (at first sight) objectified or 'pornified' female body subversive—KUUK walks a fine line between confronting and endorsing these conditions in Norwegian rap, which is perhaps not so far gone as rap in the US.<sup>103</sup> Their bodies, for argument's sake, are not retouched, and this display of nudity—combined with the way they rap about sexuality—arguably establishes them as subject rather than object from the outset. They are not only to be looked at but also to be reckoned with, specifically in the narrative of the music video but also in the larger world of Norwegian rap music. They also signal through their lyrics that they are first and foremost *taking* their pleasure rather than only *giving* it. KUUK's claim to sexual agency through horror and the abject also builds up a dangerous amount of momentum within a music genre in which women are often presented as flawless and idealized, not dirty and violent. KUUK's evidently female bodies are the opposite of accommodating or nurturing—they are violent, dirty, out of control, non-apologetic and highly sexual. While a milder version of this

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<sup>103</sup> See, for example, Madcon's 'Liar', which is an example of a Norwegian music video that clearly take on the objectifying aesthetics often found in American gangsta rap videos.

might be acceptable in a liberal society such as Norway, KUUK makes many say 'enough is enough'.

Yet their humour and over-the-top crudity also brings pleasure and even joy to some, and in the KUUK's case, this double affect—disgust and pleasure—explains their notoriety and, by extension, their contribution to the scene. One might point out that violence and ruthlessness are not somehow 'better' just because it is women who are indulging in them. Likewise, their hypersexual message might be accused of doing nothing more than reproducing heterosexist imagery of women (after all, sex and scantily clad bodies do sell). Yet I would respond that the gender style of these protagonists in 'HTG' is constructive—that it makes the otherwise offensive at once empowering and pleasurable. It recalls, in fact, Butler's notion of 'misquoting', or 'repetitions of hegemonic forms of power that fail to repeat loyally and, in that failure, open possibilities for resignifying the terms of violation against their violating aims' (Butler, 1997:383). While KUUK is admittedly acting out an overly sexual and violent stereotype, and one often tied to men and masculinity, their performance makes its subversive impact because they cannot fully duplicate the stereotype using their obviously female and feminine bodies, and queer pleasure can be taken in the tension between those bodies and their very 'unladylike' behaviour.

## **Conclusion**

In considering whether KUUK's act takes the form of queer infiltration or mere appropriation of queer aesthetics, I find that their feminist politics, which apparently seeks to subvert certain aspects of Norwegian rap, certainly makes their act more calculated and infiltrative in nature. I would suggest that they infiltrate the heteromale rap scene, and during the process apply certain aesthetics that makes them cross over into queer domain. The duo demonstrates, in fact, how elements from third-wave feminism and queer ideas can be merged within contemporary mainstream Norwegian popular music, or at the very least highlights the connection between queer and feminist theory that is already there.<sup>104</sup> I locate the queer

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<sup>104</sup> See Mimi Marinucci's *Feminism Is Queer* (2010) for an in-depth analysis of the connection between queer theory and feminist theory.

pleasure in 'HTG' in its play with, and negotiation of, heteronormative understandings of gender, especially as the antithesis of 'proper' and clean femininity. The almost cathartic fight scenes in 'HTG' epitomises this, thanks to their tension between abject disgust and potential pleasure.

Ultimately, KUUK queers the rap scene. But the feminism they present is not for everyone. There is a sense of conflict, because the duo's queerness is convoluted with white and straight privilege. As such, their queer feminist potential extends only to the women who are like them – relatively privileged from the outset. Extending this argument, one might say that their queer antics actually mask their privileged position, which is certainly problematic. Yet this only allows the message to hit that much closer to home for many in their domestic audiences. This shows the importance of an intersectional perspective when dealing with any straight-queer performance that clearly sets out to be not only transgressive, but also subversive.

As I enter into chapter 3 with a study of Kaja Gunnufsen, a new shift in focus seems necessary. As outlined in chapter 1, KUUK and Kaja Gunnufsen are almost diametrically opposites – while KUUK are loud, in-your-face and confident, Kaja Gunnufsen appear as quiet, humble, with a distinct *lack* of confidence. As I leave behind KUUK's feminist politics of transgression, I will now explore how Gunnufsen's construction of ordinariness and normality can be read differently in a queer context.

## **CHAPTER 3. 'EVERYTHING I DO, I DO HALF WAY': QUEERING KAJA GUNNUFSEN'S ORDINARINESS AND 'NORMALITY'**

### **Introduction**

As the quote cited in the chapter title above suggests, Kaja Gunnufsen frames herself as quite unspectacular, and her act features prominent constructions of 'normality' and 'ordinariness'.<sup>105</sup> Framing herself as an everyday girl, Kaja Gunnufsen gives the impression of doing 'normal' things and making 'normal' mistakes which she then writes songs about and performs. Her official homepage describes her lyrics as 'unfiltered, frank, ironic and occasionally sad',<sup>106</sup> and her music and performances are described with adjectives such as soft, dreamy, nice and charming. Her lyrics are often about love—or, more specifically, about being young and trying to find (heterosexual) love, often without success. They are also about being a twenty-something woman trying to find her way in today's world. In other words, she comes across as personal, normative and apolitical, and her act has a distinct feeling of 'straightness' to it. As I suggested in chapter 1, though, it does not end there: her act embodies a certain 'weirdness' and ambiguity, as well, which are very interesting from a queer perspective. How does Kaja Gunnufsen construct this 'normality' while also queering her act? This is the main question I return to frequently during this chapter. But before that I want to explore some of the factors that arguably 'straighten' her.

### **Kaja Gunnufsen's straightness**

In chapter 1, I associated straightness with acts of performativity that actively construct her or him as heterosexual, and which largely conform to established gender norms. Kaja Gunnufsen engages ideas of straightness in

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<sup>105</sup> The quote in the chapter title is an excerpt from 'Hei Sveis'. Original: 'Og alt jeg gjør, det gjør jeg halvveis' [my translation].

<sup>106</sup> See <http://www.kajagunnufsen.no/info.html> [retrieved 15 August 2014] [my translation].

several of these ways. First, her style of femininity is relatively normative—she comes across as soft-spoken and humble and seems to play on being ‘cute’ rather than ‘sexy’. Second, she is clearly a singer-songwriter, which is often seen as a typical female genre. Within the singer-songwriter tradition, as Whiteley (2000:72) has noted, female singers with ‘sweet voices’ have long had a central place, and Kaja Gunnufsen fits well here. Her voice is high-pitched and slightly nasal, often shaky, and even occasionally frail, which fits the singer-songwriter stereotype and even invokes rock authenticity, as Moore argues ‘the “untrained” (“natural”) voice [...] is important in the ideology of rock as signifying “authenticity”, since the trained voice is clearly held to have been tampered with’ (Moore, 2002:45). Kaja Gunnufsen’s femininity is therefore introduced as ‘natural’ via her voice and reinforced through her physical appearance—she has long, natural-looking brown hair, uses makeup sparingly, and wears unspectacular and down-to-earth clothes. Her body movements on stage present her as reserved or even slightly shy—she generally remains behind the microphone, moving only sparingly to the beat and often smiling at the audience. Her physicality therefore reinforces her conservative melodies and general lack of improvisation in her singing, as well as her femininity and charm.

Third, her straightness is constructed through how she presents herself visually. At the time of writing, her Instagram account, for example—an important marketing tool for Norwegian artists—features a mix of promo photos for her new album *Ikke tenk på det*<sup>107</sup> (released in October 2016, too late to be addressed here). There are humorous images of her in awkward situations, and images of her in everyday situations—pulling her son on a sled along a snow-filled Oslo sidewalk or eating dinner at her living room table.<sup>108</sup> This platform presents her as a musician who is also a ‘normal person’—a mother and romantic partner who does ‘normal’ things. Kaja Gunnufsen seems eager to communicate that she is nothing spectacular, and, importantly in the context of this thesis, that she does not represent a threat to anyone or anything, including the status quo.

So while the members of KUUK forced their way into the rap scene and marketed themselves through their DIY aesthetic and political

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<sup>107</sup> Translation: *Don't Think About It*.

<sup>108</sup> See <https://www.instagram.com/kajagunnufsen/> [retrieved 25 October 2016].

engagement, Kaja Gunnufsen downplays her own convictions. Not even the politically conscious, countercultural aspects of the singer-songwriter stereotype are particularly present in Kaja Gunnufsen's music.<sup>109</sup> Instead, it is the more self-expressive aspects of this genre that seem to have had the greatest impact on her, as they have, writes Whiteley (2000:75), on female singer-songwriters since the 1970s and those invested in second-wave feminism as well. But while the feminist singer-songwriters of the 1970s emphasised community and identification with a group while relating their problems to existing social structures, Kaja Gunnufsen states flatly in one of her lyrics that 'it is nobody else's fault that life sucks',<sup>110</sup> expressing her alienation and signalling a more postmodernist take on identity that is 'constructed out of a recognition of otherness and difference' (Whiteley, 2000:217).

Instead of a feminist, then, she appears to be more of a post-feminist. Angela McRobbie (2009) describes postfeminism as an unexpected turn of events in the history of feminism whereby feminist ideas have begun to be absorbed into political and institutional life and to take the form of 'common sense'. The product of the reappropriation of feminist ideas in an anti-feminist wrapper is, in McRobbie's words, *faux* feminism—one that seems to offer freedom to Western young women without actually challenging any governing structures, whether societal, cultural or official. In her analysis of the fictional character Bridget Jones, McRobbie sees postfeminism in the type of individualisation and ironic play with gender stereotypes that she represents—'gently chiding the feminist past, while also retrieving and reinstating some palatable elements, in this case sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent' (McRobbie, 2009:12). Like Bridget Jones, Kaja Gunnufsen embraces the role of 'liberated, postmodern woman' who embraces the Norwegian equality project while at the same time, as we will see, indulging in some traditional, outdated and highly stigmatised female stereotypes ('girl next door', 'woman

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<sup>109</sup> There are a few references to social and/or political issues, such as 'Vi vil kjempe for friheten til folket, men er opptatt av å sitte på Facebook og pøke' ('Faen Ta', second verse) [We want to fight for the rights of the people, but are more concerned with poking on Facebook] [my translation].

<sup>110</sup> Original: 'Det er ingen andres skyld at livet er fælt' ('Faen Ta', second verse) [my translation].

child', 'hysteric' and 'madwoman') and focusing her lyrics on the failures of her love life and her need to find a man.

### **Reading Kaja Gunnufsen, queerly**

How can a queer reading of Gunnufsen unravel her pervasive normality? We can sense the problematic aspects of this normality already via McRobbie's definitions of postfeminism, but there is more to this. Kaja Gunnufsen's performances, in fact, cultivate an engaging ambiguity between the 'extremely normal' and 'positively weird'. One example is her live performance of the song 'Au', which was filmed by a member of the audience at Café Mir in Oslo in October 2012<sup>111</sup>—a couple of months prior to her rise to prominence as 'Ukas Urørt' ('Untouched of the Week') on the radio show 'Urørt' at NRK P3 in January 2013—and shared as one of her earliest documented and publicly available performances (fig. 3.1).



Figure 3.1

Kaja Gunnufsen is seated behind a piano, then turns and says something unintelligible that may be the punchline of a joke, because people in the background start to laugh. She then faces the piano again and starts playing. The mood in the room is relaxed and informal, as audience members chat a bit and the piano theme settles into a slow, cyclical progression of eight

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<sup>111</sup> Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8COjhTvJJPA> [last retrieved 18 November 2016]

repeated chords. The audience falls silent as Kaja Gunnufsen begins to sing: 'Nå har snøen begynt å falle. Å faen ta alle'—which, loosely translated, means 'The snow has started to fall. Oh, fuck you all/to hell with you all'. Again, the audience starts to laugh. Kaja Gunnufsen continues to sing, seemingly unaffected by the reaction. The rest of the song centres on the same chord progression, while the lyrics range from personal experiences with rejection and unrequited love to general observations about Norwegians and the Norwegian mentality. The short chorus, sung between every other verse, consists of one word, 'au', or 'ouch'. This YouTube video has only two comments, the first of which wonders, tellingly, 'Are people supposed to laugh?' (fig. 3.2)

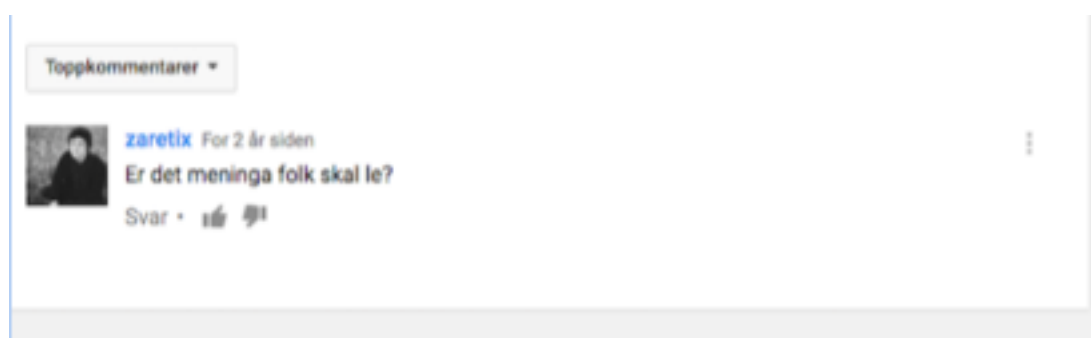


Figure 3.2

The misdirection and humour that are present in this live performance indicate that there is more to Kaja Gunnufsen's act than meets the eye (and ear). In fact, she often violates social mores to infuse her performance with a certain ambiguity that often translates into comedy. By including Kaja Gunnufsen in this study of straight-queering in Norwegian popular music, then, my prime intention is to examine and then problematise how the same act can come across as utterly normal, normative or ordinary and utterly strange and (straight-)queer at the same time. I will also engage with how an artist's use of strategies to create 'weirdness' complicates not only the act itself but also the gender performance of the artist, even when it is dominated by conventional hetero tropes. While applying a queer perspective to Kaja Gunnufsen will not 'make her queer' or liberate her from her straightness, it may nevertheless contribute to a deeper understanding of this artist and help explain the



source and impact of the ambiguities in her performances in relation to her Norwegian socio-cultural context.

In what follows, I will attempt to unpack Kaja Gunnufsen's musical and visual constructions of normality and ordinariness, on the one hand, and ambiguity and weirdness, on the other. The latter is particularly challenging, given her rather unspectacular demeanour, which runs counter to the stereotypical 'queer aesthetic'. While both KUUK and Lars Vaular deliberately incorporate queerness into their acts and challenge gender norms through over-the-top and transgressive aesthetics, Kaja Gunnufsen goes about things differently, as we will see. Exploring the straight-queer potential of an artist who bases her act on constructions of normality is, perhaps understandably, not a subject that has received much queer scholarly attention as of yet. Within the field of queer theory, in fact, it is safe to say that 'normal' has been a problematic term—one easily associated with both heteronormativity and gay assimilationism.<sup>112</sup> My own queer engagement with Kaja Gunnufsen's act has thus felt quite experimental. However, queer musicology has long foregrounded the unstable multiplicity of discourses that is present in popular music performances—in other words, the fact that music has always been a rich site for expressing gender, sexuality and desire, and therefore also a potentially rich site for queer representations.<sup>113</sup> I will use this as a starting point for exploring Kaja Gunnufsen as a performer. My intention here is not to argue that everything is queer (even normality), or that all popular culture or popular music is inherently queer. Instead, I will look at how the complex intertextual relations present in some musical performances create a sense of queerness, even when notions of normality, the unglamorous and the ordinary are the most readily visible (and audible) aspects of those performances. In Kalle Berggren's words, I will make the case for *reading queerly* and embrace the fact that '[q]ueer readings start from the assumption that cultural products are not necessarily heterosexual per se, even though they are often assumed to be in a heteronormative

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<sup>112</sup> For a thorough discussion, see Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (2000).

<sup>113</sup> Hawkins (2016); Jarman-Ivens (2011); Leibetseder (2012); McClary, ([1991] 2002); Taylor (2012); Whiteley and Rycenga (2006).

culture' (Berggren, 2012:53). While normality is sometimes rightly seen as antithetical to queerness, the aesthetic of ordinariness combined with strangeness that is realised in Kaja Gunnufsen's audiovisual appearance<sup>114</sup> warrants a closer look.

The rest of this chapter is divided into two parts. The first part is concerned with how ordinariness or normality and ambiguity or 'weirdness' is constructed in Kaja Gunnufsen's performance, particularly musically. I will describe the specific performance strategies that create a sense of ordinariness or normality in Kaja Gunnufsen's act, then pinpoint some of the ways in which this normality is disturbed. Towards the end of the first part, I will also look at the ways in which Kaja Gunnufsen's act might be seen as ironic and camp, and how this impacts her construction of normality and her queerness.

The second part of this chapter includes an analysis of the music video 'Faen Ta' from an alternative perspective that departs from Kaja Gunnufsen's persona and performance strategies to focus on the subjects in the music video and the ways in which they, in spite of their straight ordinariness, fall short of, and in this sense queer, heteronormative standards.

### **Constructions of ordinariness and ambiguity in Kaja Gunnufsen's act**

Kaja Gunnufsen uses her imperfect self for all it's worth.

—*Dagbladet* music journalist Ragnhild Falkenberg-Arell  
(Falkenberg-Arell, 2014)

Preceding the release of new material, Kaja Gunnufsen has often put out promo videos on YouTube that feature short interviews and musical excerpts. Ahead of her debut album, *Faen Kaja*,<sup>115</sup> she prepared a seven-minute 'mockumentary' that depicts her desperately trying to avoid the pressure of her upcoming album release by escaping Oslo and travelling to her family vacation house in northern Norway. While there, she sleeps a lot

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<sup>114</sup> 'Within a background of straightness', as Burns and Veri state when framing their analysis of the TV show *Flight of the Conchords* (2013:3).

<sup>115</sup> 'Faen Kaja', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fnkdOPWp9c> [retrieved 9 September 2014].

and makes plans to write music (though she never does), while her managers and bandmates try to reach her by phone (which she ignores). Throughout the video, the music from her upcoming album functions as an effective soundtrack, both lyrically and musically, for the storyline and visual aesthetic. The final scene underscores the tongue-in-cheek sadness that underpins the video, when the only song on the film soundtrack that is not her own composition—an instrumental version of ‘Isn’t She Lovely’—accompanies an image of Kaja Gunnufsen curled up on the sofa, apparently sleeping, as the words ‘Kaja Gunnufsen - Faen Kaja’ [‘Damn it, Kaja’] (the name of the album) appear on the screen (fig. 3.3).



Figure 3.3

The way in which this film portrays Kaja Gunnufsen—as an unpolished, down-to-earth, cute, whimsical and perhaps slightly lazy young woman with some self-esteem issues—sets up the persona that is presented to listeners throughout her debut album. Of course, this is a paradox: though we are introduced to Kaja Gunnufsen as a woman who does not seem to be able to create anything, we are likewise well aware that she made this album, and its accompanying audiovisual promotion piece. Addressing queer appropriation in pop music, Hawkins has argued that the ‘queer artist cannot be taken at face value when he or she designates an act of transgression’ (2009:105). Similarly, as this promo video shows, we cannot take Kaja Gunnufsen at face value when she purports to be an underachiever.

This promo video also points to the fact that Kaja Gunnufsen's effort to come across as 'just a normal girl' is in itself a construction—normality, that is, demands as much effort as anything else in the scope of an artist's agency. Just because Kaja Gunnufsen poses as normal and ordinary does not mean that her act is any less performative, or any more honest or true to her real self, than the acts of KUUK or Lars Vaular. Instead, her image is likewise a result of conscious marketing decisions. In his PhD thesis on the pop duo M2M and the solo careers of band members Marit Larsen and Marion Ravn/Raven, Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik reaches a similar conclusion: while Marit Larsen in particular appears to be natural and honest in presenting her act 'as an (ideal) image of her own life [...], she cannot at any point be perceived as honest or true' (Ålvik, 2014:209). With this in mind, I will move on to the ways in which Kaja Gunnufsen deliberately balances signifiers of ordinariness and a sense of ambiguity which in turn impacts how we see her as a gendered being.

### **Creating ordinariness through intimacy**

In her performance, Kaja Gunnufsen's assertion of normality and ordinariness seems to be particularly bound up in her ability to create a sense of intimacy with her audience. This intimacy starts with her band, which is comprised of a drummer, a bass player, a guitarist and a backup singer; Kaja Gunnufsen herself sings and alternates between acoustic/half-acoustic guitar and keyboard/piano. The aesthetic of the stage shows is also rather plain: none of the musicians have special stage outfits or wear any particular kind of makeup; they typically play in jeans and t-shirts, as though they have come straight from the rehearsal space. This look communicates their agency in the music business—they are simply who they are, not the creation of their management. Moreover, 'down to earth' is an apt description of not only the band's fashion sense but also Kaja Gunnufsen's mode of communication with the live audience. She is known for her conversational asides between songs, when she explains what the next song is about or tells little stories, jokes or anecdotes in a way that feels

improvised and often provokes laughter.<sup>116</sup> In short, Kaja Gunnufsen is masterful at embodying first-person authenticity—that is, the ‘authenticity of expression’ (Moore, 2002) which is tied to the rock and singer-songwriter traditions. As I noted in chapter 1, first-person authenticity arises when the artist ‘[successfully conveys] the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience’ (Moore, 2002:214).<sup>117</sup> Kaja Gunnufsen’s deployment of first-person authenticity in her act communicates a sense of intimacy and kinship to her audience, as though she is one of them. Thus, the way she performs live—how she looks and how she addresses her audience—contributes to the feeling of normality or ordinariness that surrounds her.

This feeling of intimacy and first-person authenticity arises not only in Kaja Gunnufsen’s live shows but also through the production techniques she uses on her album. In what follows, I will present a few examples of how intimacy is created in the recording of *Faen Kaja*, and how this contributes to Kaja Gunnufsen’s ordinariness. I will frame these techniques according to Moore’s theory of *proxemics*: ‘proxemics describes and analyses the distances (social, public, private, intimate) between individuals in interaction’ (Moore, 2012b:186). Within the field of musicology, Moore’s proxemics allows one to systemise and classify the degree to which musical and production decisions affect the perceived distance in recordings between (1) the persona (the singer or song character) and the listener, and (2) the persona and the environment (the instrumental track or accompaniment). Regarding the degree of proximity between the persona and the listener, Moore proposes four ‘proxemic zones’: public, social, personal and intimate (Moore, 2012b:187). The production techniques employed on *Faen Kaja* mainly correspond to the personal and intimate zones, both of which are characterised by a relatively short distance between

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<sup>116</sup> See, for example, this live performance from the Øya festival in Oslo in 2013: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaTlpI\\_5jV4&spfreload=10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaTlpI_5jV4&spfreload=10) [retrieved 7 July 2016].

<sup>117</sup> Related is the notion of the rock *auteur*, which Richard Middleton describes as an idealised persona that is historically connected to rock culture through the singer-songwriter tradition and the folk revival of the 1960s. The rock *auteur* is supported by an ideology of authenticity that frames the composing artist as someone who speaks from his/her own, honest experience (Middleton, [1995] 2009:54).

persona and listener and a relatively high degree of separation between the persona and the environment. In practice, this means clear, easily distinguishable vocal sounds, the occasional audible intake of breath, lyrics that address interpersonal relations, and an impression that the artist persona is positioned at the front of the *soundbox*<sup>118</sup> and very close to the audience. Throughout *Faen Kaja* the lead vocals are foregrounded and Kaja Gunnufsen nearer to the listener than the rest of the band.<sup>119</sup> Seemingly minimal technological manipulation makes Kaja Gunnufsen's voice sound 'natural'—there are no audible pitch corrections, robot voices or any other 'extreme' vocal effects, and the main vocals are quite dry. This does not mean that the record is underproduced, however, but that the chosen effects are subtle. Examples include barely audible double-tracking ('Faen Ta'), overdubbing of main vocals to create several layers of voices and vocal harmonies, slight metallic effects in the vocals ('Borghild' and 'Uke53/LOL'), slight reverb in the backing vocals ('Faen Ta') and slight reverb in both main vocals and backing vocals ('Vær så snill'). The simple melodies, paired with Kaja Gunnufsen's seemingly untrained voice, add to the production's feeling of intimacy. In all, she comes across as 'real' and unpretentious but still very capable (that is, not DIY or punk in her ability or aesthetics).<sup>120</sup> This makes

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<sup>118</sup> Moore describes the soundbox as a 'virtual spatial enclosure for consideration of the location of sound-sources' (Moore, 2012a:100) —that is, an aural-made-visual snapshot of the recording at any given time, organised in three dimensions: 'Laterality of the stereo image; perceived proximity to a listener; perceived pitch-height of sound-sources' (ibid.). The soundbox is 'filled' when the sound is particularly dense.

<sup>119</sup> 'Nattønsket' is an exception, in that the drums, guitar and synth seem to be in front of the main vocals.

<sup>120</sup> While a deep dive into the field of psychoacoustics is beyond the scope of this thesis, Nicola Dibben has useful insights into the way in which a feeling of physical proximity in recordings cultivates a sense of *emotional* authenticity and intimacy between the artist and the listener. In a 2009 article titled 'Vocal Persona and the Projection of Emotional Authenticity', Dibben argues that emotional authenticity can be achieved through two psychoacoustical strategies. First, 'sounds which are louder in the mix in a recording tend to be heard as being nearer the listener than sounds which are quieter' (Dibben, 2009:320). Second, timbral qualities are important, and in particular, the amount of reverb that is present tends to impact our impression of proximity—the more reverb there is, the further away the sound source seems to be. Thus, 'sounds recorded close to a microphone contain more of the recorded signal direct from the source and less reflected sound (reverb), suggesting that the listener is in close proximity to the sound source' (ibid.). As

her appear personally available to her audience, as opposed to the more distant 'pop star' stereotype.

As briefly discussed in chapter 1, Kaja Gunnufsen has been associated with the normcore trend. However, while 'normcore' is definitely an apt description of Kaja Gunnufsen, her act also seems to resonate with a couple of much more local discourses. First, as mentioned previously in this chapter in my discussion of Kaja Gunnufsen as a post-feminist phenomenon, she resonates with the Norwegian ideal of gender equality, as her persona is constructed to portray a young woman who enjoys considerable (sexual) freedom. Second, and more interesting, is that her act resonates with the Law of Jante. The Law of Jante was formulated by Axel Sandemose in 1933 in *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks* in an effort to describe the way Scandinavian communities, in the interests of equality, are suspicious of and even hostile towards anyone who is or tries to be extraordinary. The Law of Jante has ten proscriptions, the first being 'You should not think that you are better than us'. The Law of Jante thus prescribes normativity and conformity, and to me it seems as though Kaja Gunnufsen balances a desire to keep within the Law of Jante and its normative standards of gender behaviour and exaggerated humility, and a desire to indulge in just enough ambiguity to make things interesting for her audience. The result is that Kaja Gunnufsen performs humility to the point of parody in a way that makes her harder to grasp and then categorise. It also affects her gender performance by introducing an agency which in many ways negates her cute, whimsical, soft-spoken femininity. It also makes her act seem slightly ironic, a quality she has also associated with her own music. I will return to Kaja Gunnufsen's irony later in this chapter. First, however, I want to point to a few concrete ways in which ambiguity and a sense of 'weirdness' emerge as qualities in her music.

### **Ambiguity in Kaja Gunnufsen's act**

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Dibben explains, the effect of these intimacy-producing production techniques is twofold. First, the implied physical proximity of the singer makes listeners focus their attention on the lead vocals. Second, listeners are more likely to conclude that the song reflects the artist's inner thoughts and feelings (Dibben, 2009:320).

One of the ways ambiguity is created in Kaja Gunnufsen's act is through banality and humour. Although they often portray quite serious and slightly depressing issues such as loneliness, failure or lack of self-esteem, Kaja Gunnufsen's lyrics have been lauded for their simple, almost childish directness and their often humorous twists.<sup>121</sup> She seldom uses metaphors, preferring a clear and unaffected language that also complements her simple melodies and chord progressions.<sup>122</sup> Hawkins notes in his analysis of the Pet Shop Boys (2002) that musical simplicity is too readily dismissed as trivial, especially by music scholars and critics who invest in a traditional perspective on musical quality. Hawkins contends that banality has, in fact, a great discursive power: 'popular musicians often invest great craftsmanship to produce material which conveys a high degree of simplicity' (Hawkins, 2002:143). Banality also caters to 'in groups', in that it 'functions to underpin the inference of irony' (ibid.). In other words, while banality comes across as effortless it is not; it works like irony and holds meaning for those who 'get it'. In Kaja Gunnufsen's case, banality definitely helps her to position herself as ironic (and normal), a point to which I will return. Even more, the forthright banality of Kaja Gunnufsen's music and lyrics works together with her humorous, tongue-in-cheek attitude to create a sense of ambiguity and even a certain 'weirdness' to her intimacy and authenticity that her audience apparently picks up on. Consider these lines from the song 'Jævlig Lei' [Fucking fed up]:

Og du er det eneste jeg tenker på,  
[You are the only thing I think about]  
og det gjør så vondt,  
[and it hurts so much]  
at jeg ikke kan forstå,  
[that I cannot understand]  
hvordan det her skal gå.

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<sup>121</sup> See, for example, this review: <http://gaffa.com/anmeldelse/80721> [retrieved 29 August 2016].

<sup>122</sup> See, for example, this interview at nrk.no: <http://p3.no/musikk/10-kjappe-kaja-gunnufsen/> [retrieved: 22 April 2016].



[how this will end]  
Alle de andre tar livet så greit,  
[Everyone else thinks their lives are okay]  
og jeg lurer på hvorfor jeg synes alt er teit  
[and I wonder why I think everything is so lame]  
Er det fordi jeg er litt feit?  
[Is it because I am a little bit fat?]

This song is about the pain of unrequited love, but not entirely. First, the listener is introduced to a string of clichés which, together with the strict rhyming, makes the lyrics appear quite banal. Yet the last line is almost humorous and even mocks the singer-songwriter herself. As Hawkins interprets Morrissey, Kaja Gunnufsen seems to ‘parod[y] the very individual [s]he sets out to characterise’ (Hawkins, 2002:83). It can be hard to tell whether she is ever serious, even down to the album cover of *Faen Kaja*. Its motif, a picture of Kaja Gunnufsen’s face, is quite familiar from many other album covers by solo artists. Some might even recognise the positioning of her face and upper torso against a simple, blue background as a reference to the cover of Prince’s self-titled second album from 1979. Yet Kaja Gunnufsen’s face is captured with her eyes half-closed, as if she is blinking. Perhaps she wants to stress that she is not a neatly styled, airbrushed pop diva, or perhaps she is just having fun, or even acting out, just as she does in her music, and especially her live performances. It certainly adds a sense of theatricality to her act which in turn negates the image of her as a ‘real’ and ‘honest’.

Again returning to Moore’s account of proxemics, I will now inspect the ambiguities in the relationship between the artist persona and the instrumental track in ‘Faen Ta’. As Moore has stated, ‘[m]eaning is [...] not dependent simply on what is sung, but also how. [Furthermore], the voice is mediated by what accompanies it’ (Moore, 2012b:189). Moore explains how his model of proxemics accounts for ‘the audible distance of a persona from the listener’s position (i.e., loudness and degree of reverberation)’, as well as ‘the degree of congruence between a persona and the personic environment’ (Moore, 2012b:186). Congruence in this context describes the ability of the environment (the instrumental track) to impact the persona, for example by

complicating the lyrics that are sung ('happy' music for sad lyrics, for example). While I want to avoid the essentialism of assigning specific meanings to particular musical elements, I would like to activate Moore's model to concretise how musical elements can work in tandem with lyrics and a performance's visual aspects to convey the sense of ambiguity in Kaja Gunnufsen's act which derives from incongruities between the subject matter of the lyrics, Kaja Gunnufsen's vocal delivery and certain elements in the accompaniment (or environment). To unpack these relations, I will briefly consider three aspects of 'Faen Ta',<sup>123</sup> the second track on *Faen Kaja*: Kaja Gunnufsen's singing style, the meaning of the lyrics, and the instrumental track (that is, the environment).

Kaja Gunnufsen's vocal delivery is, as one might expect, quite straightforward. She seldom overemphasises any words, introduces any big dynamic shifts, uses any vocal embellishments/melismas or experiments with non-verbal sounds. In addition, she has a rather limited vocal range, which gives the impression that she thinks of her voice as a story-telling vehicle, not 'an end in itself' (Moore, 2002:212). Moreover, her slightly nasal singing voice, which can even sound like speech at times, adds to the impression of childlike bemusement and always foregrounds the lyrics, which have their own idiosyncrasies. Her singing style and the way her voice is produced in the recording, allows the lyrics to take centre stage. This is the first verse of 'Faen Ta':

I mars satt vi på St. Halvards plass  
[We sat on St. Halvard's square in March]  
Vi så på livet vårt gå i dass  
[Watched our lives go to pieces]  
Jeg tenker ofte på Neil Young

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<sup>123</sup> 'Faen Ta' is approximately 3:45 minutes long and structured as verses, pre-chorus and chorus, framed by a short intro (two bars) and an outro that is an extension of the last chorus. The first and second verses are played sequentially (16+16 bars), followed by what I perceive to be a bridge (16 bars). The bridge actually consists of the same chords as the verse, but the melody is altered and 'lifted' into the subdominant. The bridge is followed by a pre-chorus (6 bars) and a chorus (16 bars). The cycle is then repeated, except that there is only one verse before the bridge in the second cycle. The second and last chorus is extended and played 2.5 times as an outro.

[I often think about Neil Young]  
Og på å gjøre noe med min fasong  
[And about doing something about my body shape]  
Snart er det bikinisesong  
[Soon it will be bikini season]

Centred upon failure and one's inability to live up to society's demand for perfection, these lyrics are both congruous and incongruous with Kaja Gunnufsen's voice and the simple, lilting melody. On the one hand, the sudden changes in subject seem to be there mostly to accommodate the rhyme scheme, which adds to the banality of the lyrics but also contributes a whimsical cuteness that resonates well with Kaja Gunnufsen's frail, childish voice. On the other hand, the melody and Kaja Gunnufsen's delivery seem *too* light, *too* childish, for the quite depressing subject matter—not 'fitting in', feeling unsatisfied with one's body, thinking that life is against you. A similar incongruity between the childish and the grown-up can be found in the song 'Desp', which also feature her quirky sense of humour:

Du er ikke snill, du bare later som  
[You are no good, you are only pretending to]  
Det samme gjorde jeg da jeg sa jeg kom  
[I did the same when I told you I came]  
Du era v typen alle mødre anbefaler  
[You are the type every mother recommends]  
Men du er kjipere enn lunken Clausthaler  
[But you are lamer than luke-warm Clausthaler]

While the reference to a non-alcoholic beer may be a nod toward Kaja Gunnufsen's childish qualities, the brand name also rhymes with the preceding word 'anbefaler' [recommend]. The rhythm of these phrases recalls a nursery rhyme or playground song, and it is jarring that such a platform contains a stinging critique of a past fling.

Another example of the musical ambiguity in 'Faen Ta' involves the relationship between the instrumental track or accompaniment and the lyrics/persona. Particularly relevant to this discussion is Moore's

observation that the environment can '[undermine] the persona, and thus [move] listeners into distrust' (ibid., 190–91). In a sense, the musical environment in 'Faen Ta' is, in Moore's words, *inert* (that is, 'contributing nothing specific to the meaning of the song') (Moore, 2012b:191) or *quiescent* ('merely setting up the [largely attitudinal] expectations through which a listener may listen' (ibid.)). In other words, the music establishes the genre and supports the form of the song (its textural density increases as the chorus approaches, for example). It is not dissonant or otherwise aggressive in its content. Yet a couple of musical elements do work to disrupt the mood and return the listener to Kaja Gunnufsen's underlying banality. First, there is a guitar figure that is introduced before the last line ('Snart er det bikinisesong') in the verse. Second, there is the backup singer's 'ooo', which begins at the same time (fig. 3.4).

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system is labeled 'Electric Guitar' and 'Voice'. The Electric Guitar part is in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 4/4 time. It features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes: G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter), B3 (quarter), A3 (quarter), G3 (quarter), F#3 (quarter), E3 (quarter), D3 (quarter), C3 (quarter), B2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), F#2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), D2 (quarter). The Voice part is in the same key and time, with a melodic line: G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter), B3 (quarter), A3 (quarter), G3 (quarter), F#3 (quarter), E3 (quarter), D3 (quarter), C3 (quarter), B2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), F#2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), D2 (quarter). The second system is labeled 'El. Guit.' and 'Vo.'. The Electric Guitar part starts with a measure rest, then has a melodic line: G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter), B3 (quarter), A3 (quarter), G3 (quarter), F#3 (quarter), E3 (quarter), D3 (quarter), C3 (quarter), B2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), F#2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), D2 (quarter). The Voice part starts with a measure rest, then has a melodic line: G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter), B3 (quarter), A3 (quarter), G3 (quarter), F#3 (quarter), E3 (quarter), D3 (quarter), C3 (quarter), B2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), F#2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), D2 (quarter). A measure rest is shown above the guitar staff in the second system, and a measure rest is shown below the voice staff in the second system.

Figure 3.4

These two elements take centre stage alongside the main vocals, while the bass guitar and drum kit continue the basic groove in the background. The downward motion of the guitar figure and the shaky, trilling quality of the backup singing contributes a whiny feel to these ornamental additions. The backup vocals glide repeatedly over the semitone between tonic and seventh, creating a sound that recalls crying. The guitar figure, on the other hand, is subtly reminiscent of the downward chromatic sound effect that

often accompanies classic cartoon characters when they fail at something.<sup>124</sup> In Moore's model, they are *interventionist*—that is, 'going further than what is specified in the lyric by amplifying what is signified' (Moore, 2012b:191). They intervene by drawing attention to the sadness in the lyrics, but also by adding a parodic touch, because both elements seem slightly exaggerated.

Ultimately, these musical elements may or may not impact most listeners' interpretation of the lyrics, but they indicate, at the very least, some wry awareness on Kaja Gunnufsen's part regarding the musical refraction of her artist persona. Moore notes that if the persona might be understood as analogous to a person doing the speaking (or singing), the musical accompaniment might be understood as analogous to that person's body language. He adds, 'where the person and the environment are at odds, we tend to trust the latter, in the same way that we would trust body language over direct speech' (ibid.:202). In the present case, the guitar line and backing vocal gestures, together with Kaja Gunnufsen's delivery, demonstrate that 'the environment sometimes suggests the listener occupy a subject position that disbelieves the persona, reminding us that all may not be as it seems' (ibid.:202). In the case of 'Faen Ta', this all comes together to reinforce the banality of the song while introducing a touch of gallows humour and self-deprecation. It is perhaps even a case of authentic inauthenticity, as Gunnufsen almost seems to 'fake it without faking the fact that [she is] faking it' (Grossberg, 1993:206).

Particularly important in the context of a queer reading of Gunnufsen is her play on ambiguity, which affects the way we see and hear her as a gendered being. In particular, her play with certain markers of parody, excess and exaggeration is important. For example, this is a backup singer's line in the chorus of 'Faen Ta': 'Fuck, Kaja, pull yourself together. You are better off than you will ever understand'.<sup>125</sup> This performative gesture—from a bandmate, no less—creates a certain drama to which Kaja Gunnufsen returns at the end of 'Faen Ta' by stating: 'I like when things go to pieces. Melancholia is

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<sup>124</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sC75aU47GRk> [retrieved 11 July 2016].

<sup>125</sup> Original: 'Faen, Kaja, ta deg sammen nå. Du har det bedre enn du kan forstå'.

good/cool/exciting'.<sup>126</sup> She enjoys wallowing in her own misery, she suggests, and probably should not be taken too seriously. This concluding statement is emphasised by the dropping out of the other instruments. This playful exaggeration might even recall stereotypes such as the 'drama queen' or 'hysteric', or even the 'madwoman', as theorised by McClary ([1991] 2002), who argues that women's madness in music (and specifically opera) is connected to its traditional associations with an excessive female sexuality (p. 84): 'madwomen strain the semiotic codes from which they emerge, thereby throwing into high relief the assumptions concerning musical normality and reason from which they must—by definition—deviate' (McClary, [1991] 2002:86). Kaja Gunnufsen's 'madness' and deviation from normality is not tied to excess through any particular technical mastery, as it is with McClary's operatic madwomen, who demonstrate their madness through instances of 'coloratura delirium' (ibid. 92), among other ways. Instead, Kaja Gunnufsen demonstrates her excess by juxtaposing elements that do not belong together—the childish voice expressing the singer-songwriter's world-weariness and frank sexuality, or the mixture of regret and pleasure regarding life's misfortune or unfairness. Kaja Gunnufsen certainly plays with elements associated with a passive child but also embodies a powerful sense of agency and control. This girly tone of voice, that is, negotiates very non-girly things: femininity, sexuality, irony and ambiguity.

Kaja Gunnufsen's employment of somewhat oppositional discourses also distances her from the role of singer-songwriter, or, more specifically, from some of the gendered expectations of what one might see as the stereotypical female singer-songwriter. Reynolds and Press (1995) characterise the folk singer-songwriter as a 'confessional animal' whose subject matter 'has always been equally divided between heartbreak and hardship' (Reynolds and Press, 1995:250). Sometimes, they continue, the confessional female singer-songwriter also assumes the role of the wise 'earth mother' (ibid.)—think of Joni Mitchell, Carol King or Sandy Denny, all of whose 'sweet voices' nevertheless sounded like they came from the body of a grown woman. Kaja Gunnufsen rejects the implied authority of this role

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<sup>126</sup> Original: 'Jeg trives når ting går trått. Melankoli synes jeg er rått'.

and cultivates something much more whimsical and even absent minded. In 'Faen Ta', for instance, she sings, 'I am never safe (than sorry), I am (only) sorry'.<sup>127</sup> Reynolds and Press (1995) also find the confessional singer-songwriter to be typically less sexually explicit than performers from other genres within popular music. Kaja Gunnufsen's lyrics, however, speak openly and pragmatically about sex, or not having it: 'the lack of sex has made me a loser'.<sup>128</sup>

Thus, we see that Kaja Gunnufsen posits quite intentionally a girly, childish image, which is especially pronounced in the way her lyrics are constructed and the way she uses her voice. In his analysis of Björk's music video 'It's All So Quiet', Hawkins examines the implications of the artist's choice of a girly image. On the one hand, Björk seems to deny the overt sexualisation brought about by the 'male gaze'. On the other hand, the imagery she conveys 'is easily turned into another form of male fantasy—one which *infantilises* the female persona' (Hawkins, 1999:45). In the case of Kaja Gunnufsen, however, there is a difference and I would argue that her play with signifiers of both childish 'girlyness' and grown-up sexuality creates an ambiguity that in turn communicates a strong sense of agency which counteracts the passivity that is often associated with a girly image. Thus, Gunnufsen takes control over the sexualisation of her persona by regulating her expression in a way that refuses, or at least minimises, the infantilising gaze. Moreover, this strategy permits her to express herself, and particularly her sexuality, in an ambiguous, non-threatening way which resonates with the Norwegian discourse of the Law of Jante.

So far, I have discussed how Kaja Gunnufsen creates normality and ordinariness by fashioning her gender performance in accordance to normative expectations of femininity while at the same time creating a sense of intimacy with her audience. I have also discussed several ways in which her normality and ordinariness are infused with ambiguity, or a form of

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<sup>127</sup> Original: 'Jeg er aldri føre var, jeg er etter snar' ('Faen Ta'). The phrase is a bit tricky to translate, but it is based on a Norwegian saying that recalls the English 'better safe than sorry'.

<sup>128</sup> Original: 'Mangel på sex har gjort meg til en taper' ('Faen Ta').

straight-queering. Her self-proclaimed ironic stance, to which I will turn now, furthers that straight-queer sensibility.

### **Queering her act: Gunnufsen's ironic play and 'camp normality'**

Kaja Gunnufsen herself has called her music 'ironic'.<sup>129</sup> How might we read her act queerly, however? Irony is often utilised as a queering strategy, because it, in Leibetseder's (2012) words, 'shake[s] up the certainty of social order and suspend[s] all final truths' (Leibetseder, 2012:17). Leibetseder thus associates the political function of irony with its ability to destabilise interpersonal power relations. Does this mean that Kaja Gunnufsen's self-proclaimed irony is a queering strategy, or that it is subversive in any other way? To frame her argument, Leibetseder draws on Linda Hutcheon's (1995:45) matrix displaying the different forms of irony on a scale from weak to strong. Here, subversion is a specific function of irony—one Hutcheon associates with the 'ability to contest dominant habits of mind and expression' (ibid.:49), and categorises it as stronger than irony that is 'playful', 'humorous', 'teasing' or 'offering a new perspective'. Of course, subversive irony can also be humorous, but it must be much more as well, argues Leibetseder, leading her to link its success directly to its 'sender's clarity' of intention (Leibetseder, 2012:19). Leibetseder would appear to be saying that an artist performing a queering irony must do so with the intention to queer. Similarly, in his notes on the mash-up phenomenon<sup>130</sup> Michael Serazio's (2008) concludes that the embrace of the mash-up demonstrates a culturally fundamental ironic attitude (recalling in turn Grossberg's (1993) authentic inauthenticity in the 1990s) but perhaps not a political one: 'is there a real cause here, beyond irony—a genuine call to arms toward something rather than a simple wink-wink, tongue-in-cheek prank about nothing?' (Serazio, 1993:91). Serazio's question recalls a question I asked earlier in this thesis about whether any performance strategy could subvert norms inadvertently—that is, without the artist explicitly setting out to do so. Serazio seems to think not, whereas I wonder

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<sup>129</sup> See <http://www.kajagunnufsen.no/info.html> [retrieved: 15 August 2014].

<sup>130</sup> Serazio writes, 'In its most basic form, a mash-up (also called "bootleg" or "bastard pop") is simply two samples from different songs blended together to create a new track' (Serazio, 2009:79).



whether apparently ‘apolitical’ irony might in fact have a potential for subversion that relates to notions of identity. In this way, while Kaja Gunnufsen may not have explicit political motives, like for instance KUUK, or even Lars Vaular, as we will see in the next chapter, I propose that her own characterisation of herself as ironic nevertheless embodies a sense of queerness because it makes her harder to categorise, which adds to the confusion surrounding her persona. An important point Serazio makes is that he sees the ironic appropriation of different genres and styles as a means of exposing their arbitrariness, ‘which is an apolitical way of making a political statement’ (Serazio, 2008:92). Perhaps, then, Kaja Gunnufsen’s audiovisual display presents a ‘discursive mash-up’ that both establishes her normality through its play with established codes of authenticity and exposes the fragmented-ness of her artist persona through the calculated insertion of humour and irony. Hers is a way of performing that creates small queer moments, in terms of genre-related gender conventions and especially larger notions of traditional femininity. I find that the constructedness of Kaja Gunnufsen’s act is most clearly revealed in those moments of comedy when the audience feels the ‘weirdness’ and starts laughing at (or with?) it. While some of her lyrics are obviously jokes—though they too seem slightly ironic<sup>131</sup>—her comic appeal also derives directly from the mismatch between what is expected of her feminine display and the content of her lyrics (recall, for example, the performance of ‘Au’ that I discussed earlier in the chapter). Combined with her play with the gendered genre conventions

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<sup>131</sup> In ‘Uke53/LOL’, she says, ‘aldri før har jeg vært så trist, det skal være Snickers og Twist’. The meaning of this sentence easily gets lost in translation. It is comical because the two chocolate brands, Snickers and Twist, share a similar pronunciation as ‘sikkert og visst’, which means something like ‘that is for sure’. In addition, in ‘Jævlig Lei’, she employs a series of so-called teasing rhymes, or rhymes that are only suggested (but left unsaid) because the rhyming word is ‘naughty’ or taboo. For example, in the first verse, she sings, ‘jeg røyker til mine fingrer blir gule, men skal ikke vi to snart pu . . . ste’. As she starts the word ‘pu—’ the audience probably expects her to say ‘pule’, which means ‘fuck’. Instead, she says ‘puste’, which means ‘breathe’. I read this as ironic because both the ‘snickers og twist’ joke and the employment of teasing rhymes seem old fashioned and sort of dry. In a Norwegian context, the teasing rhyme is strongly associated with the entertainer Arnie ‘Skiffle Joe’ Norse’s ‘Bært-bært visa’, which belongs to a segment of popular culture that is often seen as uncool, or ‘harry’, as the Norwegians would say. Thus, I see it as likely that a young urban musician such as Kaja Gunnufsen would only wield this kind of humour from a certain ironic distance.

associated with the singer-songwriter tradition, a resulting 'collision of discourses' creates the comic effect that makes her audience laugh.

Another way of framing Gunnufsen's irony queerly is to see it through the notion of opacity. As briefly discussed in chapter 1, Hawkins (2016:62-70) has applied his theory of opacity to an examination of David Bowie as an example of how strategies of disidentification function in pop. Opacity is about not telling the whole truth, and in the case of Kaja Gunnufsen, irony serves as a tool to create opacity that has several implications. First, by claiming an ironic position, she introduces a certain distance in relation to the singer-songwriter tradition, which typically values first-person authenticity. Second, it introduces a certain distance between Kaja Gunnufsen herself and the artist persona she offers the audience, which otherwise appear to be closely aligned. By self-identifying as ironic, she escapes the charge often levelled at her singer-songwriter peers—that they are overly emotional and self-absorbed. Instead, she gets to exercise the full scope of her narcissism while appearing both clever and funny. One of the important ways pop music satisfies its audience is through playfulness, and irony is crucial to this dynamic (Hawkins, 2002:19). Kaja Gunnufsen embraces this playfulness and keeps things tongue in cheek as well, so it is never clear when she is being ironic as such. She presents ordinariness while not being particularly ordinary (she is, after all, a celebrity of sorts); she presents as a singer-songwriter but undermines that role's gravity; she is at once girly and jaded, even foul mouthed.

When it comes to irony's political potential in popular music, Hawkins (2002) notes that the effect of irony is never actually straightforward (and therefore able to be harnessed)—it depends upon the artist's intentions but also the mindset of the audience and the context of the given performance. An ironic statement can appear insightful, wry, mocking, or hostile, as Hawkins observes: 'While irony might work for some as a powerful political tool, it holds for others a destructive function' (Hawkins, 2002:20). In the case of Kaja Gunnufsen, I would suggest that irony is a strategy to camp up her act, making it interesting and infusing it with a sense of mystery. Thus, while she is not obviously queering her act (the way Bowie does), her self-proclaimed irony allows her to play with identity queerly, infusing her act with a sense of queer 'trickery and deceit' (Jarman-Ivens, 2011: 15).

Another way of reading Kaja Gunnufsen as embodying a straight-queer sensibility is through the notion of her *visibility*, and to this end Jarman's (2006) work on rap masculinity contributes a valuable insight. As mentioned in chapter 1, Jarman argues that the insistent and almost militant straightness of much rap music does not automatically exclude the notion that it may contain some form of queerness. Instead of seeing hypermasculine, misogynist lyrics as exclusively problematic and heteronormative, she argues that it is instability (not stability) of identity that is revealed in such verbal displays:

The male body and ego become [...] so hypernormatively masculine that they spill over into the grotesque. And, in the raucous play of such masculinity [...] rap artists descend into an extravagant display verging on the positively camp. (Jarman-Ivens, 2006:211)

Here, Jarman activates the idea that the overly normative gender performance impinges upon queerness because of its high visibility, which reveals its constructedness as a consequence. Alternatively, one might conclude that normativity is invisible—that is, the defining characteristic of those gendered displays we do not notice because they are not unusual. So, while Kaja Gunnufsen's gender display is in many respects quite normative, her act is definitely visible, and even striking at times, which suggests that she in one way or another brushes up against the boundaries of normative behaviour. Her deceptively complex persona, with its stereotypical gender display, crude lyrics, girly voice, easy, almost offhand intimacy and insistence on audiovisual ordinariness, presents mismatches that make her stand out and demand attention. Furthermore, her calculated insertion of irony into this mix serves, I would suggest, to camp it all up, making her ordinary display seem over the top. While the connection between camp and queer, and the question of whether or not camp is in any way political (like queer), has been thoroughly debated over the years,<sup>132</sup> Jarman (2009) suggests in

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<sup>132</sup> Susan Sontag's famous essay 'Notes on "Camp"' ([1964] 1983) marks the notion's introduction to popular culture following its long association with gay male subcultures (Sullivan, 2003). After Sontag's essay, camp aesthetics became popularised in relation to artists such as Andy Warhol, Bette Midler and Liberace.

her 'Notes on Musical Camp' that camp's political potential in popular culture might be due to precisely the fact that it comes across as non-political. In other words, camp works through infiltration, 'posing as valueless, while presenting a parodic challenge to presumed norms of gender/sex relations in particular' (Jarman-Ivens, 2009:193). This idea of the infiltration or hidden subversion and negotiation of norms represents a useful framework for understanding Kaja Gunnufsen. In other words, her mode of performance camps up her normality, and this 'camp normality' exercises its non-normativity by revealing and emphasising the performativity of her 'normal' persona, queering it in the process. Thus, I would suggest that irony and a camp sensibility are for Kaja Gunnufsen what transgression is for KUUK—the main means of crossing over into straight-queer territory. While KUUK queers their act by deliberately and aggressively challenging norms of femininity in the hip-hop scene, then, Kaja Gunnufsen queers her act by seemingly seeking to avoid any strict definitions at all.

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Sontag describes camp as a sensibility or style that is 'a variant of sophistication, but hardly identical with it' ([1964] 1983:105)—a mode of disengaged and depoliticized aestheticism with a large dose of artifice, exaggeration, androgyny and theatricality. Sontag argues that while camp may be both intentional and unintentional, it is always more about style than content, and thus it is apolitical. Andrew Britton problematizes camp in turn in the essay 'For Interpretation: Notes Against Camp', deciding that it works as 'a kind of anaesthetic, allowing one to remain inside oppressive relations while enjoying the illusory confidence that one is flouting them' (Britton, [1978] 1999:128). In his introduction to *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1994), Meyer counters that camp-as-critique should be reclaimed by returning queerness to its definition. Meyer argues that there can be no such thing as non-queer camp, and that everyone who performs/signifies camp also signifies queer, because it is in queerness that camp has its roots. He insists, 'there are not different kinds of camp. There is only one. And it is queer' (Meyer, 1994:4). Meyer thus sees queer as a prerequisite for camp—a performance is camp because it is queer and not queer because it is camp: 'because camp is defined as a solely queer discourse, all *un-queer activities* that have been previously accepted as "camp", such as pop culture expressions, have been redefined as examples of the appropriation of queer praxis' (ibid., my emphasis). Meyer's understanding of what qualifies as queer or camp seems predicated upon the performer's outward performance of this identity, whereas he would place performances such as Kaja Gunnufsen in the category of 'some kind of unspecific cognitive identification of an ironic moment' (Meyer, 1994:4).

So far in this chapter I have discussed Kaja Gunnufsen's persona and the ways in which she creates a sense of normality and ambiguity in her act. The remainder of this chapter will consist of a reading of the music video 'Faen Ta'. One particularly interesting aspect of this music video is that although the lyrics are written by the typically self-absorbed Gunnufsen about herself, the video does not feature Gunnufsen at all. Instead, the viewer is introduced to a series of characters. As I will argue, this has important implications for how this song could be read from a queer perspective.

### **Queering 'Faen Ta'**

'Faen Ta'<sup>133</sup> is directed by Thea Hvistendahl and produced by Andrea B. Ottmar from the Oslo-based production collective Frokost Film and was named 'best music video' at Grimstad Kortfilmfestival (the Norwegian Short Film Festival) in 2014. The visual narrative of this music video is not directly connected to the narrative of Kaja Gunnufsen's lyrics, but the images and the music still work together to establish the characters and even set up relations that, as I see it, encourage queer interpretations.

'Faen Ta' (see fig. 3.5 for a visual representation and complete lyrics) comprises a sequence of scenes featuring six white, presumably Norwegian people of different genders and ages. Notably, only one character is present in each scene, and the characters are filmed in a different location each time we see her/him (with a few exceptions). There are no suggestions of any connections among the characters or the scenes. The music video includes both an intro and an outro without music, and when the music starts, it is implied that one of the characters, who is shown standing beside stereo equipment, has started it. The video's construction seems devoted to sharing snippets of each character's lives that they have chosen, as they (mostly) face the camera directly, often holding a symbolic object or doing something that seems to represent them and/or their location. There also seems to be a dialogue underway before the music starts, suggesting that the person behind the camera is engaged in interviewing the characters (we do not hear the questions, only the answers). Four of the characters are talking into the

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<sup>133</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqiYY0Pu5fY> [last retrieved: 18 November 2016].

camera at the beginning of the video, apparently answering questions related to who they are—their personalities, likes and dislikes, and hopes for a partner. We soon gather, then, that the video documents the process of filming a set of video-based personal ads that are based on a ‘day in the life’ of each character. We only see selected moments but easily imagine the characters moving from location to location, and the lighting in the video suggests that we go from morning to evening as well.

As the video narrative plays out, the music seems at first to be simply accompaniment, thanks in particular to the absence of Kaja Gunnufsen herself (as well as her actual band). Likewise, the images we see do not seem to support or emphasise any particular parts of the song as such. Rhythmically, the first four scenes appear in turn on the first beat of every second bar, but even this implied alignment between video and music only lasts for a few seconds before the timing slips and the various scenes begin to appear more randomly in relation to the song’s rhythm. Because the sequence of scenes is at once random and even handed (nothing is emphasised over anything else), the images do not add much to the song’s rhythmic, dynamic, or textural changes (to the guitar themes and keyboard accompaniment, as well as the density and volume of the backup vocals). Through their clothing, demeanour, and lighting, the characters in ‘Faen Ta’ are presented as common people, or *folk flest*, as the Norwegians would say, thus resonating with Kaja Gunnufsen’s persona. And their ordinariness is further supported by the song’s uniform arrangement and production aesthetic. The building blocks of ‘Faen Ta’, which Kaja Gunnufsen has called a ‘tribute to self-pity’,<sup>134</sup> include a straight 4/4 backbeat groove, a percussive bassline groove that is positioned in the bottom front of the soundbox, and the always central lead vocals. Musical fillers, including keyboard chords, a six-bar melodic guitar theme that anticipates each chorus, and various guitar fills scattered throughout the song, provide subtle but never profound dynamic shifts.

In addition to enhancing the characters’ ordinariness, the soundbox and the video work in tandem to reinforce the slightly claustrophobic feeling found throughout the album *Faen Kaja* that makes Kaja Gunnufsen seem

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<sup>134</sup> See <http://www.730.no/musicitem.aspx?newsId=15129>. [Retrieved: 2 November 2016].

literally and figuratively close to her audience. As mentioned, the bass in 'Faen Ta' comes across as being in the bottom front of the soundbox, and the voice is situated in the middle front, along with the snare drum. The backup vocals seem slightly higher up and further back in the box but are still very much in focus. These three elements are the principal contributors to the song (and the video's) feeling of intimacy. The soundbox features little to no reverb or stereo effects—that is, all of the musical elements seem to be equally panned to left and right. This soundbox, then, first and foremost creates contrast in the two dimensions of foreground/background (intimacy and distance) and up/down spaces. In the same way, the video is spatially restricted by the camera, which faces straight ahead and does not move throughout the video.

This is not to say that the images have nothing new to offer the song. On the contrary, the music video introduces elements that Kaja Gunnufsen's voice and lyrics by themselves are not able to provide, such as a particularly profound, even existential loneliness, even beyond that already set up by the personal ad conceit of the introduction. There are few others in any given scene, even where we might well expect them—for example, there is nobody in the room where the young man is a DJ at 1:15; there are no cars in the garage facility where he is standing at 3:10; and there is nobody in the auditorium where the young woman sits at 0:35. While there are three people behind the counter at the sushi bar where the woman sits at 1.23, but they are barely visible and do not interact with her. Likewise, the characters' smiles seem fake and strained amid the melancholy 1970s interior design aesthetic and thin, dim lighting.

Diegetic sounds continuously return our attention to the video narrative in particular, but Kaja Gunnufsen's voice abandons all of its musical accompaniment to mimic this effect at two points in the song. At the end of the first verse, she sings, 'Fuck, Kaja, you are still alone,'<sup>135</sup> and at the end of the second, she sings, 'I like melancholia'.<sup>136</sup> Both phrases also reappear twice each over the course of six bars, now accompanied by backup vocals and guitar. The heightened focus on the lyrics at these particular points reinforces the song's two main messages: 'I am lonely' and 'I also like being

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<sup>135</sup> Original: 'Faen, Kaja, du er fortsatt alene'.

<sup>136</sup> Original: 'Melankoli synes jeg er rått'.

sad'. The potential irony of these focal phrases transfers to what is happening in the video at these moments. For example, when Kaja Gunnufsen sings, 'I have started to work out, but fuck, Kaja, you are still alone'<sup>137</sup> (1:30), we see the blonde, middle-aged woman who told us at the beginning of the video that she is interested in working out, but now she is sitting alone at a sushi bar drinking a beer. If Kaja Gunnufsen's lyrics are mostly about her and her problems, the music video normalises her, in a sense, by linking those problems to a range of different people, none of whom recalls her in the least.

There are several other moments where the characters or scenes directly reference the lyrics. For example, we see a young girl holding a Neil Young biography while Kaja Gunnufsen sings, 'I often think about Neil Young, and about doing something about my figure. Soon it will be bikini season.'<sup>138</sup> Only seconds later we see another character (a young man) sitting on a mattress with a couple of hand weights by his side, apparently embodying her plans to work out ahead of bikini season. These sudden shifts in subject position, from Kaja Gunnufsen's own story to all of these other stories, is that we experience the commonality of the struggles that Kaja Gunnufsen writes into 'Faen Ta', even if these characters never do. We feel better, in a way, for this shared misery.

While the video represents people of different ages and genders (and note the man in women's clothing who emerges from the closet at 2:35), the characters are all white, which is to say stereotypically Norwegian. Thus, they also mirror Kaja Gunnufsen's construction of ordinariness. Still, they are all, seemingly paradoxically, quite queer. First of all, there is the male character who emerges from the closet (pun probably intended!), wearing a dress, makeup and women's shoes. Beyond that, I would claim that all of the characters in 'Faen Ta' embody 'queer temporality' (Halberstam, 2006), because despite their apparent (white) normality, none of them are where people of their age and gender are 'supposed to be', which is to say married or at least not alone. Instead, they are all 'outside of the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death'

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<sup>137</sup> Original: 'Jeg har begynt å trene, men faen, Kaja, du er fortsatt alene'.

<sup>138</sup> Original: 'Jeg tenker ofte på Neil Young, og på å gjøre noe med min fasong. Snart er det bikini-sesong'.



(Halberstam, 2006:4). Moreover, a closer look at them reveals that each embodies a specific negative stereotype—the nerdy outsider, the feminised man, the old or ‘outdated’ female, the fading beauty/middle-aged woman, the friendless twenty-something and the desperate, unhappy young woman. Within Western popular culture, which prizes the extraordinary and successful, these characters are all lacking, even beyond their absent attachments to others. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam (2011) argues, ‘success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation’ (Halberstam, 2011:2). The way to resist such heteropatriarchal norms, argues Halberstam, is to fail to live up to their ideas of success, and failure (or stupidity or forgetfulness, for example) can be used to queer such success-driven models: ‘while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative effects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative effects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life’ (ibid.:3). From this perspective, failure can be seen as liberating, and perhaps the characters in ‘Faen Ta’ become somehow empowered as a result. If nothing else, they are given a new means of interacting and relating to others through their resistance. Halberstam concludes with his case for ‘failing well, failing often, and learning, in the words of Samuel Beckett, how to fail better’ (ibid.:24). Perhaps Kaja Gunnufsen is saying the same.

In addition, the way in which the video is narrated showcases the characters’ constructedness, which points to a central issue in queer theory—the fluidity of identity. As noted, the characters stage themselves in order to make video-based personal ads, and from a queer perspective the video can be read as challenging the idea of sexual difference, because they all struggle (and fail) to live up to their own goals and intentions. Like Gunnufsen’s persona, then, the characters in ‘Faen Ta’ are at once normal, unglamorous, ordinary *and* obviously constructed at the same time.

Despite the feeling of loneliness and hopelessness this video potentially evoke then, the viewer might take from it both queer hope and a sense of relief, and a queer reading of the song/video title ‘Faen Ta’ might be the last word on the subject. *Faen ta* is a Norwegian exclamation with two connotations. One way of using it is analogous to saying ‘damn it’ when one

fails or things go wrong. Another way of using it, and in this context, perhaps a queer way, is analogous to saying 'fuck it' when one expresses resistance and abandonment or surrender or letting something go, connoting in turn a much greater degree of agency and relief.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have sought to make sense of Kaja Gunnufsen's 'normal' albeit 'positively weird' persona and unpack her performances from a queer perspective. While Kaja Gunnufsen seems to fit into the normcore style by constructing her persona as normal and ordinary, her weirdness/irony/parody destabilises her normality, adding a certain straight-queer sensibility to her act. Kaja Gunnufsen continually eludes definition. While I do not see her performances as intentionally straight-queer, her fragmented, somewhat confusing persona arguably embodies identity queerly, which resonates with Edelman's notion of queerness as something that 'can never define an identity; [...] only ever disturb one' (2004:17). She illustrates how creating ambiguity by playing with different aesthetic signifiers applied with an ironic, humorous twist, may translate into gender ambiguity – and hence queerness. Nevertheless, she positions herself within normative boundaries, especially in relation to the discourse of the Law of Jante—her image as a person that is 'nothing special' makes her likable for the Norwegian audience.

A key theme in my discussion of Kaja Gunnufsen has been ambiguity, and I would like to reiterate the three points that I have stressed throughout this chapter. First, I argued that her apparent normality is contingent upon employing strategies that create intimacy, which, as a consequence, also grants her first-person authenticity. Second, Kaja Gunnufsen cultivates an apparently apolitical image, with consequence for her performance of gender. Her self-proclaimed irony, which introduces a sense of comedy into her act, opens up a queer space that undercuts her own traditional femininity. Third, through my analysis of 'Faen Ta', I demonstrated the potential of a music video to provide a song with several layers of meaning. In this case, the sense of failure that fills Kaja Gunnufsen's 'ordinary' persona is magnified and queered, to the point that it becomes a badge of pride or

honour in relation to being an outsider, and (especially) to being outside of the heteronormative notions of success.

While Kaja Gunnufsen's queering of gender norms might come across quite subtle and not necessarily constitute a conscious effort on her part, I have attempted to argue how gender norms are unstable entities in her performances. In the next chapter I offer a reading of an artist that explicitly sets out to queer through my case study of Lars Vaular, where one of the central themes revolves around the connection between homosociality and queerness.

## CHAPTER 4: 'MY BODY IS SO POLITICAL': THE QUEERING ANTICS OF LARS VAULAR

### Introduction

With my third and final case study, another hip-hop act enters the stage: Lars Vaular. As I mentioned in the introduction, Lars Vaular is a white rapper from Bergen, Norway. He has produced music since 2003, including five studio albums and four EPs (the most recent released in 2015), as well as a long list of singles. He has enjoyed great mainstream success and won a couple of Spellemann awards (Norwegian Grammys)—notably 'lyricist of the year' in 2011—and he has earned almost entirely enthusiastic reviews for his music. In particular, he has been praised for his extraordinary language skills, and his richly poetic lyrics have been applauded in the national rap scene and beyond. On his Facebook page, he describes his music as 'post hip-hop', and his YouTube channel states that he 'makes music inspired by hip-hop, rap and pop'.

Particularly interesting in the context of this thesis is Lars Vaular's unique ability to play with both gender conventions and musical style while at the same time keeping his act within certain key boundaries of accepted gender behaviour. In this chapter I will suggest that while his performance certainly challenges some norms, it does so only to a certain point. He has developed a performance style that is queer in some respects and normative in others, balancing a traditional take on gender and hip-hop with selected queer expressions and strategies.<sup>139</sup> My argument is that this fascinating duality

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<sup>139</sup> Although Lars Vaular has yet to be extensively studied, I am not the first scholar within popular musicology to engage his work. Hawkins will publish his research on Lars Vaular in the forthcoming *The Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in the Nordic Countries* (Hawkins, 2017). In her PhD thesis on masculinity in Norwegian rap, Sandve (2014) also dedicated a full chapter to an analysis of Vaular's act. Though Sandve does not employ an exclusively queer perspective, she argues convincingly for Vaular's queering, noting several elements that destabilise the notion of compulsory heterosexuality in Vaular's act. She does not, however, look at how he also actively shapes his act in accordance with existing gender norms. As I

qualifies his act as decidedly straight-queer. While it is generally assumed that performed queerness disrupts the conceit of an essential gender identity—that is, queering is some kind of protest or revolt (historically tending to lead to the social exclusion of many queer subjects)—‘queering one’s act’ can also take on the guise of conformity to certain performance conventions, even producing a display of political correctness that arguably abides by existing power structures. Hawkins has even observed with regard to contemporary male pop stars that ‘male queering in pop culture seeks entry into mainstream culture through acceptance as much as resistance’ (Hawkins, 2006:279). As a white, straight, middle-class male with a blossoming mainstream music career, Lars Vaular is in many ways the epitome of hegemonic heteromascularity, and his act represents a fascinating embodiment of many of the problematic aspects of straight-queering in popular music that I outlined in chapter 1.

One of the focal points in this chapter is homosociality—in this case, the way in which Lars Vaular approaches and queers his performance within the largely homosocial space of Norwegian hip-hop, especially in relation to his label and music collective, the NMG/G house or NMG/G gang. Throughout Lars Vaular’s career, the NMG/G house has been a key component of his artistic identity while making its mark on his music through collaborations with other house members, as well as frequent shout-outs in his lyrics and live performances. Nevertheless, Lars Vaular is very much an independent artist who has, particularly in recent years, found fans from well beyond the hip-hop milieu. The way he utilises both rebellion and compliance in relation to the NMG/G house’s homosocial space impacts how one might read him as queer.

In his study of masculinity in indie guitar rock, titled *White Boys, White Noise* (2006), Matthew Bannister has written extensively about how homosociality works within male-dominated music scenes as a performative and ongoing process deployed to promote the continuous creation and assertion of heteromascularity ‘in the presence of an audience that

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will argue throughout this chapter, Vaular’s ‘straightening’ is as central to his act as his queering.

“feminises” (Bannister, 2006:92). I will return to homosociality shortly but want to remark upon one point in particular that Bannister makes—that is, that homosocial music milieus tend to rigorously police style, both in terms of how the music sounds (by maintaining strict genre boundaries) and who listens to it (by frowning upon commercialisation and ‘selling out’, and by idealising the notion of the ‘autonomous artist’) (ibid.). If masculinity is policed and maintained according to these ideals, then any male artist who eludes or undermines them may be read as queer. This, I will argue, is exactly what Lars Vaular does.

This brings me to another focal point in this chapter—namely how Lars Vaular’s play with musical and performative conventions affects his gender expression. I will suggest that he is consciously queering his act through gender play, by which I mean that he seems to employ an untraditional approach to genre and musical style, as well as gender conventions in hip-hop, in an effort to, as he has insisted, ‘challenge people’s insecurities’.<sup>140</sup> To develop my argument, I will activate the term *discernment*, as used by Nikki Lane (2011) in an article about how Missy Elliot queers hip-hop through performance (the notion was first theorised by Mary Bucholtz in her article ‘Shop talk: Branding, consumption and gender in American middle-class youth interaction’ as a means of describing how rap artists use particular stylistic elements to create the desired hip-hop sensibility). As Lane explains it, ‘Discernment is a basic knowledge of what one is supposed to like based on their membership to [sic] a social group’ (Lane, 2011:786). Discernment is a key feature of Lars Vaular’s hip-hop sensibility, and it foregrounds his awareness of just how far he can go in terms of gender behaviour before has gone ‘too far’ into queer territory. Drawing upon his discernment, he expands and varies his performances and challenges certain norms while keeping his act within the limits of hegemonic masculinity and hip-hop’s homosocial space. In this regard, I will be particularly interested in how Lars Vaular’s *hybridisation* of the hip-hop genre influences his brand of masculinity and impacts the queering of his act.

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<sup>140</sup> ‘Det er jo bare folks egen usikkerhet det er snakk om. Du må jo utfordre den’. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0C4nU6if6A> (2.47). [Last retrieved 1 September 2016]

To approach these issues, I have selected two contrasting music videos for analysis. They originate in different periods of Lars Vaular's career and further differ in terms of their personal narrative, thus facilitating the construction of respective aspects of his life and persona. The first music video is 'Mye mere', a single released in 2012 that is not included on any of his albums or EPs. The second music video is 'Det ordnar seg for pappa', which at the time of writing this chapter in the spring of 2016 is one of the most recent of Lars Vaular's releases (followed only by a fall 2015 album titled *666 MENING*). The track is featured on the mini-album *666 GIR*, which was released in spring 2015.

I will begin this case study with an introduction to Lars Vaular and his milieu.

### **Lars Vaular and the NMG/G house**

When encountering Lars Vaular for the first time, one might first hear that he is from Bergen. As Hawkins (2007) observes, where performers are located regionally in Norway often represents a central aspect of their (and their fans') identity: That said, Norwegian artists draw on 'a large pool of national and international codes, which reminds people of their connections to, as much as their detachment from, others' (Hawkins, 2007a:180). Identity's dependence upon geography is central to hip-hop culture in Norway, as elsewhere (Brunstad et. al, 2010), and activates multiple discourses around authenticity. U.S. hip-hop performers have derived authenticity from the 'blackness' of urban, inner-city environments and especially the stereotypes of the (black male) underdog, hustler, pimp and general outlaw.<sup>141</sup> As hip-hop has spread throughout the world, of course, connections between authenticity and ethnicity (particularly regarding American stereotypes) have become somewhat less clear.<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, hip-hop has remained closely connected to an acutely localised sense of geographical belonging—to specific places and neighbourhoods, and to the people living there.

Socio-economic status also remains important to rappers' staging of their authenticity, and it is also tied to the geographical space with which they identify. In tandem with Hawkins, Anne Danielsen (2008) has argued

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<sup>141</sup> Dyndahl, 2008; Rose, 1994; Perry, 2003.

<sup>142</sup> Dyndahl, 2008; Hess, 2006; Kitwana, 2005.

that a connection to a specific place is key to the rap artist's 'performance of marginal identity'<sup>143</sup> (Danielsen, 2008:201). The staging of marginality is perhaps particularly important to Norwegian artists, who are typically not as evidently marginalised as their precursors from poor urban neighbourhoods in the United States. Indeed, as Danielsen has argued, a lack of street credibility has been an overarching challenge for Norwegian rappers (ibid.:213), and her analysis of the rap group Tungtvann demonstrates the members' efforts to rework notions of authenticity stemming from U.S. rap to suit the Norwegian context. She finds that Tungtvann claims its marginality, and therefore authenticity, on the basis of being from the rural north and playing on associated stereotypes of the northern Norwegian person as barbaric and uncivilised (Danielsen, 2008).

Also relevant to the viability and authenticity of Norwegian rap is the use of language. Norwegian rappers in the 1990s primarily rapped in English, but the next generation has embraced Norwegian language as an important marker of 'realness' and credibility. Furthermore, while ethnically mixed urban hip-hop groups are common, especially in larger Norwegian cities, and English words remain in the lyrics as well, there is a significant movement in Norwegian hip-hop that is centred upon rural lifestyles and local dialects (Brunstad et al., 2010:223).

While the Bergen hip-hop scene is decidedly urban, its distance from the 'cultural elite' in the capital city of Oslo still marks it as somewhat provincial. A widespread stereotype of Bergensians is their local loyalty—the saying in Bergen is 'I'm not from Norway, I'm from Bergen'. This traditional alignment likely prepared the ground for its highly productive and Bergen-centric music milieu, which features several bands and artists that sing/rap in Norwegian and can claim national renown.<sup>144</sup> The Bergen hip-hop scene is a big part of this milieu, and over the past fifteen years or so, Lars Vaular has been a central figure within it. The Bergen dialect is one of his music's distinguishing characteristics, and he has cultivated his Bergen association throughout his career despite relocating to Oslo several years ago.

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<sup>143</sup> My translation: 'Iscenesettelse av marginal identitet'.

<sup>144</sup> John Olav Nilsen og Gjengen, Razika, Gabrielle, Fjorden Baby! and Lars Vaular are among the Bergen stars.



The Bergen identity is most evident in his lyrics, in two ways. First, he uses slang and local words. Norwegian dialects are quite different from one another, and the Bergen dialect is often described as crude, harsh and ugly, primarily due to its characteristic guttural R sound. As a rap device, however, the Bergensian dialect's relative monotone and hard consonants work well and complement Lars Vaular's working-class, street-smart persona.

Second, he often refers to places and people in Bergen in songs that reminisce about his childhood, teen years and young adult life—a time when he 'roamed the streets of Bergen' with his 'gang' (usually called 'klikken', or 'the clique'), doing petty crime, looking for love and partying. Though many of these stories involve hardship, they are delivered with a nostalgic, almost romantic feel.<sup>145</sup>

Lars Vaular publishes his music on the indie label 5071-NMG/G-huset [5071-NMG/G house], which he helped to found. For Vaular and his labelmates, both '5071' and 'NMG/G' are significant. The former is the old postal code for Loddefjord, a suburban area a couple of miles outside of Bergen. Even though Lars Vaular is not from Loddefjord, he has identified with the music milieu that arose there in the early 2000s, and some of his labelmates grew up there (including John Olav Nilsen og Gjengen and most of the members of Fjorden Baby!). References to postal codes are recurring devices in the Norwegian rap scene that resonate with the overarching dictates of localised identification and representation in rap (Brunstad et al, 2010:230). Moreover, Loddefjord in particular facilitates the construction of authenticity for the bands and artists that identify with it, because it signifies both 'hood' and, more abstractly still, creativity. Though Loddefjord is known as a 'poor' part of Bergen, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, Norway remains one of the wealthiest countries in the world and boasts a reasonably functional universal social care system as well, so this must be framed as a relative designation. Still, surveys assessing living conditions (*Levekårsundersøkelser*) note that Loddefjord inhabitants have lower incomes, less education and poorer health than those in other parts of town. Interviews with the 5071-NMG/G bands include statements associating

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<sup>145</sup> For example, see 'Denne byen e vår' [This city is ours] from *1001 Hjem* (2013), 'En eneste' [Only one] from *Helt om natten, helt om dagen* (2010) or 'En liten historie' [A little story/tale] from *D E Glede* (2009).

Loddefjord's challenges—in particular, a lack of publicly developed and funded activities for young people (such as youth clubs)—with the rise of the creative milieu there, simply because there was nothing else to do there.<sup>146</sup> As the 'slum of Bergen', then, Loddefjord's relative poverty has been exploited by the bands themselves, as well as their music critics and fans, to authenticate the music that originates there.

The NMG/G house (NMG/G gang, or even nm666jeng), the other signifier in the label name, refers to what Lars Vaular describes as both a 'boys' club' and a 'mental state'<sup>147</sup>—it is also, of course, a music/art collective and a record label.<sup>148</sup> The NMG/G logo appears on his album covers, merchandise and websites, and there are related 'shout outs' (to NMG, '*gjengen*' [the gang], '*klikken*' [the clique]) on every Lars Vaular album. The NMG/G gang has existed since the beginning of the 2000s, and Lars Vaular, alongside rap group A-Laget, is considered a founding member and remains among the most central and high profile acts on the label. In recent years, a new generation of (male) up-and-coming rappers has joined the label's ranks, including Mike T, Arian, Mats Dawg and FL3X.

The mystique that has arisen around Loddefjord is a good example of the performance of marginal identity that Danielsen (2008) described. Tying themselves to notions of working-class kids from a less-than-fortunate neighbourhood, Lars Vaular and the other bands on the 5071-NMG/G label lay claim to the countercultural position of the double 'outsider'—in this case, in relation to the rest of Norway (through their Bergensian identity and dialect), and in relation to the wealthier areas of Bergen. Bannister (2006), however, argues that viewing musical countercultures only in terms of resistance masks the way in which they also reproduce hegemonies, particularly in terms of gender (Bannister, 2006:xv). This, then, returns me to my concerns in this study—the NMG/G house is an all-male space, and one that asserts a traditional view of masculinity, but it is also the immediate

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<sup>146</sup> See, for example, this mini-documentary featured on the music TV show *Lydverket* in January 2009: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-OVqbzVLZU>. [Last retrieved: 1 September 2016].

<sup>147</sup> See <http://www.peikestokken.no/vordende-vaular/> [Last retrieved: 1 september 2016].

<sup>148</sup> See its Facebook page:

[https://www.facebook.com/nmgghuset/info/?entry\\_point=page\\_nav\\_about\\_item&tab=overview](https://www.facebook.com/nmgghuset/info/?entry_point=page_nav_about_item&tab=overview) [retrieved 24 June 2016].

context within which Lars Vaular's straight-queer sensibilities must be unravelled.

### **Homosociality and queer desire**

With regard to the concept I outlined at the start of this chapter, a central part of the academic discussion about the ways in which hegemonic, normative (hetero)masculinity is created, proliferated and maintained involves the prevalence of homosociality.<sup>149</sup> This sociological term denotes a platonic relationship between members of the same sex. In popular culture, including movies and popular music,<sup>150</sup> homosociality has become common currency through the 'bromance' (and its female though less-established counterpart, the 'womance').<sup>151</sup> Entering this discussion from a queer and feminist angle, I am interested in how male homosociality relates to the construction of gendered power structures in popular music, often at the expense of women and sexual minorities—in other words, its negative aspects. But I am also interested in its queer aspects—how these relations often have a certain ambiguity embedded in them, one that is connected to desire. In an effort to frame Lars Vaular's relationship to the NMG/G gang, I will begin by summarising some important debates in the theorisation of homosociality, from both within and outside of popular music scholarship and queer theory.

Much of the theorisation on homosociality is formed on the basis of masculinities in the United States, and the image that emerges is not a very positive one. Michael Kimmel (1994) once described the creation of

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<sup>149</sup> Bannister, 2006; Bird, 1996; Kimmel, 1994, 2008; Sedgwick, [1985] 1992.

<sup>150</sup> Hawkins, for example, discusses the 'bromantic' aspects of the rock band as exemplified by the relationship between Bruce Springsteen and the rest of his group, in particular Clarence Clemons (Hawkins, 2016:180–84).

<sup>151</sup> Alison Winch discusses the phenomenon of the womance in length in her book *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood* (2013). She describes womance as a central ingredient in 'girlfriend flicks', an alternative to the traditional 'chick flick' whose main focal point is the relationship between girlfriends as opposed to the heterosexual romance. Though these films have often been heralded for their apparently feminist sensibility, Winch problematizes this view by arguing for the womance as an expression of postfeminism and neoliberalism, noting that these films often portray the 'female self as entrepreneurial self-project' (Winch, 2013:93).

hegemonic masculinity as a process whereby men seek approval from other men in order to buttress their own masculinity: 'We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood' (Kimmel, 1994:129). In a survey conducted amongst men in an academic environment in a small Northwestern city in the United States in 1992, Sharon R. Bird (1996) distinguished three central aspects of hegemonic masculinity that were reinforced through homosociality: emotional detachment, competitiveness and the sexual objectification of women (p. 122). Bird concludes that '[h]egemonic masculinity is consistently and continually recreated despite individual conceptualizations that contradict hegemonic meanings' (Bird, 1996:130), and that '[v]iolations of the norms of hegemonic masculinity [...] result in penalties to violators' (ibid.).

Homosocial relations are also thought to be an important component of the gendering of popular music, through which certain genres, such as rock and hip-hop, have been coded as masculine, with a resulting marginalisation of women and everything considered feminine or effeminate. Bannister (2006) notes that this gendering work is often accompanied by an inherent fear of homosexuality:

Homosociality is a male-defined social hierarchy based around one's susceptibility to accusations of homosexuality. It engenders a split between male friendship and homosexuality: one is properly masculine, the other effeminate and taboo. (Bannister, 2006:92)

This is in line with Bird's observation that 'homosociality promotes clear distinctions between hegemonic masculinities and non-hegemonic masculinities by the segregation of social groups' (Bird, 1996:121). Bannister also argues that homosociality aids in the creation of a hegemony in which 'feminised' cultural work is frowned upon:

Homosociality is not just understood in explicit statements about 'faggots' but is more generally applicable to an implicitly gendered worldview that argues for the superiority of cultural work that is masculinised. (Bannister, 2006: 92)

In his work on masculinities in popular music, Oakes (2009) has pointed out, pace Bannister, that ‘the dominance of the rock aesthetic (reposited as “artistic expression” versus “mass culture”) was established in large part by linking it with masculinity and with homosocial settings’ (Oakes, 2009: 225). One consequence of this has been, in Oakes’s words, that ‘in rock and in other masculinist popular cultures, women are both desired as the sexual Other, and reviled as the Other who threatens the homosocial sphere of the musician and the “serious” music fan’ (ibid. 225).

The past forty years or so have seen the women’s movement bring great change to Western women’s lives, and therefore changes to men’s lives as well. Kimmel argues in his book *Guyland* that these changes have resulted in the delayed onset of adulthood—that is, in a heterosexual temporality, getting a ‘real’ job, getting married, starting a family—and introduced a new phase in young men’s lives that he calls Guyland. As male privilege has waned in the wake of feminism’s efforts, a retreat into homosocial relations is seen as a way to restore a sense of control and purpose. That is why, Kimmel asserts,

Guyland revolves almost exclusively around other guys. It is a social space as well as a time zone—a pure homosocial Eden, uncorrupted by the sober responsibilities of adulthood. The motto of Guyland is simple: ‘Bros before Hos’. (Kimmel, 2008:13).

Moreover—and this resonates with Bannister’s (2006) observation regarding male-dominated music milieus—in Guyland masculinity is policed according to a deep fear of being mistaken for gay:

[E]verything that is perceived as gay goes into what we might call the Negative Playbook of Guyland. Avoid everything in it and you’ll be all right. Just make sure you walk, talk, and act in a different way from the gay stereotype; dress terribly; show no interest in art or music; show no emotions at all. Never listen to a thing a woman is saying, but express immediate and unquenchable sexual interest. (Kimmel, 2008:49–50)

Although Kimmel’s inquiry into Guyland is undertaken in a U.S. setting, similar phenomena can be found in other Western countries, of course—

Kimmel mentions the *bamboccioni* or *mammoni* (mama's boys) of Italy, and the 'lads' of England and Australia (ibid.:13). I would add to this global discussion the related phenomenon of retrosexuality as well. When I introduced Lars Vaular in chapter 1, I referred to Langeland's (2014) doctoral work on masculinities in Norwegian popular culture, and especially his use of the term retromasculinity to denote a type of 'laddish' masculinity that was widely disseminated in the 2000s, particularly by TV shows such as *Manshow* and magazines such as *Mann* and *FHM*. According to Langeland, retromasculinity appeared in Norwegian popular culture as a reaction to the more politically correct, 'softer' metrosexuality that entered the cultural stage towards the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s to gravely challenge traditional masculinity's hegemony. Retrosexuality exhibits clear similarities to Kimmel's Guyland. In an article analysing the Norwegian version of *Manshow*, Langeland describes how traditional masculinity is depicted there as threatened by femininity in the form of metrosexual men as well as women, and how the show actively laments the apparent loss and marginalisation of 'traditional masculinity'. Aimed at white heterosexual men, *Manshow* is described as 'counterbalancing a society where things apparently (no longer) take place according to men's premises' (Langeland, 2011:281).<sup>152</sup> *Manshow* presents itself as the remedy for this situation, via the homosocial community represented by the show. Importantly, as Langeland stresses, this message is communicated through 'representations that intersect irony and nostalgia' (ibid.:277),<sup>153</sup> or what he calls *masculinity's reflexive nostalgia*.<sup>154</sup>

The NMG/G gang is an example of a uniquely Bergensian, hip-hop/alternative rock-oriented Guyland, or retromasculine space, a purely homosocial setting where men in their late teens to mid-thirties can play out their 'Guyhood'. Of course, the masculinity they 'perform out' and the attitudes they convey are mediated to the public through music and public appearances. This setting is not perfect—some of Kimmel's Guyland requirements, such as dressing badly and expressing disinterest in music,

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<sup>152</sup> My translation: 'som en motvekt til et samfunn der ting tilsynelatende ikke (lenger) foregår på menns premisser'.

<sup>153</sup> My translation: 'representasjoner i grenselandet mellom ironi og nostalgi'.

<sup>154</sup> Or *maskulinitetens refleksive nostalgi*.

obviously do not jibe with the Bergensian hip-hop context—but it is clear that a fear of homosexuality, contempt for anything feminine, and dominance of what Kimmel calls the ‘guy code’—‘Bros before Hos’—are enforced with great rigour and even topped up with Langeland’s reflexive nostalgia.



Figure 4.1. Interview with A-Laget.

In an interview recently released on YouTube,<sup>155</sup> Lars Vaular’s rap group labelmates A-Laget (the three rappers Vågard, Girson and Store P) perfectly illustrate Kimmel and Langeland’s various points, in just the first few minutes of the interview emphasising their close friendship, heterosexuality and distance from ‘feminine music’ (fig. 4.1). The interviewer begins by wondering how the members of A-Laget met, and Vågard explains that he met Girson when Girson was already a local ‘star’, and that they clicked instantly because they ‘liked the same kind of rap’. Girson immediately chimes in, ‘We liked girls too’, and this is enthusiastically echoed by Vågard (at about 0.00–0.33 seconds into the video). About 4:30 into the video, Vågard starts describing the group’s music. Characterising it as good and honest, he then contrasts it with all of the ‘whiny bitches with guitars’ that he finds to be ubiquitous in both Norway and abroad. He states that A-Laget communicates an attitude best described as ‘shut your pussy

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<sup>155</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-QKvxl\\_k0M&spfreload=10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-QKvxl_k0M&spfreload=10) [retrieved 24 June 2016].

and stop whining—here is some real good music’. This claim is accompanied by laughter from the other two group members.

Rather than appearing to be outright hostile towards women, gayness and femininity, then, this type of exchange is veiled in a humorous ‘laddish banter’, one that is slightly tongue-in-cheek, which makes it hard for a critic to point to its problematic aspects without coming across as a humourless buzzkill. This tone is quite typical of the culture found in the NMG/G house and has contributed to making it somewhat unimpeachable, at least until Lars Vaular, an insider, began to jump the tracks of acceptable gender behaviour with his experimental style and performance strategies, apparently confronting the tropes of masculinity in the ‘house’ from the inside. I will return to this shortly in my analyses of ‘Mye mere’ and ‘Det ordnar seg for pappa’. First, however, I will look at how queer theory might nuance the feminist approach to male homosociality.

As already discussed, male homosociality is often read as both sexist and homophobic, and as a backlash against feminism. Moreover, for men cleaving to a hegemonic masculinity, a retreat into homosocial relations has been seen as a way to counter unsettling changes in gender roles, one that is often paired with a fear-based rhetoric concerning the ‘crisis of masculinity’ when faced with the ‘feminisation of society’. In other words, male homosociality is often understood as the crocodile tears of angry white men who insist on their own (imagined) oppression. Some scholars, however, have pointed out that homosociality also has a real potential to buttress resistance to repression and marginalisation, particularly for those men who belong to ‘minorities’ of some sort. Because of the commercial success of gangsta rap in particular, hip-hop as a homosocial space has gained a broad reputation as being misogynist, violent and homophobic. Some scholars have attempted to nuance this negative image, however, in some cases relating the homosocial relations between black men depicted in much gangsta rap to issues of race and racism in the United States (Rose, 2008; Perry, 2004; Oware, 2011). From this perspective, homosociality appears aligned less with hegemonic masculinity than with the act of reclaiming power in the ‘overwhelmingly powerless context’ (Perry, 2004:104) faced by American black men. Along these lines, Matthew Oware (2011) argues that while certain aspects of



homosociality in gangsta rap are problematic in their endorsement of violence against women and any 'gender deviants', the positive aspects of this homosociality, including its expressions of 'brotherly love' and celebration of community, are also important and too often neglected. As a *white* male, however, Lars Vaular does not exactly qualify to be viewed through the lens of hip-hop scholars theorising marginalised black hip-hop masculinities. Instead, I suggest that one looks at his relationship to the NMG/G gang through *queer* theorisations of homosociality in the interests of capturing the subtle nuances and ambiguities embedded therein.

Kimmel's notions of Guyland principally address the aspect of power in relation to homosociality and largely bypass the aspect of intimacy there, particularly in terms of how it problematizes masculinity. In an effort to address homosociality as a site of *both* power and intimacy, Nils Hammarén and Thomas Johansson (2014) argue that the use of homosociality as an almost 'descriptive term that is used to describe how men bond, build closed teams, and defend their privileges and positions' (Hammarén and Johansson, 2014:1) is somewhat simplistic. They prefer Sedgwick's theorisation of 'homosocial desire' as a means of nuancing the feminist approach, deeming it an 'interesting and useful theory of gender and masculinity' (ibid.), and it is useful to this discussion as well. While homosociality has traditionally been thought to denote strong social connections between individuals of the same sex in a *non-sexual* manner, Sedgwick instead unpacks the instability and potential erotic undertones of these relations. By coining the term 'male homosocial desire', Sedgwick ([1985]1992) problematizes the clear distinction between male homosocial (men promoting the interests of men) and homosexual (men loving men) relationships:

To draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire', of the potentially erotic [...] is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society is radically disrupted. (Sedgwick, [1985]1992:1-2)

In Sedgwick's language, then, 'male homosocial desire' refers to the potentially erotic side of male homosocial relations. Sedgwick stresses, however, that the term 'desire' is not meant to imply that all male

homosocial relationships are also sexual in nature. Instead, the term describes the 'social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility, or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship' (ibid.:2). Whether or not this force is sexual, then, depends on the specific situation. Moreover, as Hammarén and Johansson point out, 'even though we have an underlying stream of homosocial desire, there are also constant attempts to suppress and rein in these streams in the heterosexual and normative order' (Hammarén and Johansson, 2014:4). The *potential* eroticism embedded here cannot be written off, however, and in Sedgwick's eyes, it is the attempted disruption of the continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual in male-male relationships that has rendered them so heteronormative and homophobic (ibid.:3). In contrast, the relationship between the homosocial and the homosexual for women has historically not been dichotomised to this degree in Western culture (Sedgwick, [1985]1992:2).

As I have set out to show so far, some models of homosociality emphasise hegemonic masculinity's role as an upholder of the relatively stable power structures of the patriarchy. However, as scholars such as Kimmel (1994; 2008) and Bannister (2006) also emphasise, a central aspect of homosociality is a fear of failure regarding the correct *performance* of masculinity, which signals its inherent instability. One important advantage of Sedgwick's theorisation of this term is that she makes this instability explicit without downplaying the significance of patriarchal structures to society, and to the marginalisation of minority groups. As such, she allows for a consideration of 'the relation between different types of desire and intimate relationships between men' (Hammarén and Johansson, 2014:1). She also implies that queerness is always an inherent part of hegemonic masculinity, through homosociality and in the form of desire. Jarman (2006) used these insights to deconstruct heterosexist music cultures, including American gangsta rap, and as I discussed earlier, in my analysis of Kaja Gunnufsen, Jarman suggests that the 'hypernormativity' of this type of rap masculinity is sometimes so over the top that it verges on 'positively camp' (Jarman-Ivens, 2006:21), thus again rendering it unstable. As Jarman argues, 'extreme heterosexual masculinity blends smoothly into gay style, and the

bonding of multiple such men blurs the gaps between the homosocial and the homosexual' (ibid.:214).

While Sedgwick readily acknowledges a process through which the homosocial-homosexual continuum is 'radically disrupted', she does not provide a detailed model of exactly how this process unfolds. Berggren (2012) picks up on this issue in his queer reading of Swedish rap lyrics. Co-opting Jonathan Potter's term 'stake inoculations', Berggren coins 'straight inoculations' 'as a way of understanding the rhetorical negotiations involved in maintaining a heterosexual identity in a contested terrain' (Berggren, 2012:51). Berggren finds that there are two types of straight inoculations in his analysed material. Type 1 is the frequent mention of women, primarily portrayed as objects of desire and delegated a secondary role in relation to their male companions—for example, men will be addressed by name, women by a generalised, often diminutive term such as 'girls'. A-Laget performed a Type 1 straight inoculation in the interview mentioned above when they first implied the intimacy among them, then qualified it by invoking their heterosexuality. Type 2 is the disavowal and rejection of homosexuality, quite bluntly through repeating the phrase 'no homo' in conjunction with an utterance that might be read as homoerotic, but also more subtly by rejecting 'gay' activities such as ballet dancing, or by naming homosexual acts as metaphors in the interests of demeaning or dominating one's rivals. In the interview with A-Laget, I interpret Vågard's rejection of 'feminine' music as a type 2 straight inoculation, because of the gay connotations of possibly endorsing 'whiny girls with guitars' as decent or desirable music.

### **'Mye mere'**

My discussion up to now attempts to demonstrate how theories of homosociality problematize gender relations by exposing well-established hegemonic masculinities as unstable and in constant need of reestablishment. At the same time, I have shown that homosociality is also an important factor in the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. These two positions can be viewed as opposite sides of the same coin—one points to how gender roles are solidified, the other to how they are potentially

destabilised. In Lars Vaular's music video 'Mye mere', the tension between these two aspects of homosociality is vividly illustrated.

'Mye mere' [Much more]<sup>156</sup> was shot in the fall of 2012 at a remote location in Øygarden, outside of Bergen (see fig. 4.2 for visual representation). Situated by an abandoned wave power farm, the video's location evokes both urbanity and rurality. The song, as mentioned earlier, is not featured on any of Lars Vaular's albums but was instead marketed as a comeback single after he had been away from the spotlight for a while, due to the birth of his son.<sup>157</sup> The song is a collaboration between Lars Vaular and the then up-and-coming rapper Jonas V. The music video was directed by Andrew Amorim, the drummer of the alternative pop band Jon Olav Nilsen og Gjengen, a 5071-NMG/G-huset labelmate of Lars Vaular's before it broke up in 2013. In a press release, Lars Vaular states, '[T]he video has no deeper meaning than the ocean being powerful and that pearl jewellery is nice'.<sup>158</sup> Later, he describes the music as 'a bass-heavy thing about limited abilities for moderation'.<sup>159</sup> I see much more there, and the following analysis will explore how Lars Vaular and Jonas V perform conventional masculinity by drawing on classic gangsta rap tropes, and how this 'hard' masculinity is disturbed by Lars Vaular's mixing of genres, personal style and peculiar mannerisms.

'Mye mere' does not display a narrative storyline. Instead, according to a classification system provided by Mathias Korsgaard (2013), it recalls the 'intimate lo-def live performance video', which is characterised by 'the use of everyday locations, handheld cameras, extreme close-ups, and a grainy and haptic image quality' (Korsgaard, 2013:505). The beautiful scenery that constitutes the backdrop of this video is consistently out of focus, whereas Lars Vaular and Jonas V are in focus, generally directly in front of the camera, trading places between foreground and background depending upon who is rapping. The camera indeed seems hand-held as it

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<sup>156</sup> The music video can be viewed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDOKGZ5rQeg> [Retrieved 2 June 2015].

<sup>157</sup> See <http://www.kingsize.no/News.aspx?ArtNo=26198> [retrieved: 2 June 2015].

<sup>158</sup> My translation: 'Det er ikke noe stor mening bak videoen annet enn at havet er mektig og perlesmykker er flotte'. See <http://www.bt.no/kultur/Her-er-Vaulars-nye-video-2771126.html> [retrieved: 2 July 2015].

<sup>159</sup> My translation: 'En basstung sak om begrensede evner til måtehold'. Ibid.

bounces and twitches, zooms in and out and moves from side to side, all in time with the music. There are two settings in Øygarden that supply the background, however blurry—one is a panorama of flat rocks upon which Lars Vaular and Jonas V stand with the bright sun and ocean beyond, and the other is hillier terrain with a steeply inclined rock on the viewer's right and a narrow strait, and the remains of the wave power plant, on the left. The locations switch off seamlessly and do not impact the video's focus upon the faces of the rappers. Despite this 'jumping' between physical settings, the filming technique still gives the impression that Lars Vaular and Jonas V are performing live.

'Mye mere' is structured in a verse-chorus alternation, as follows: verse 1 (rapped by Vaular), chorus (Vaular), verse 2 (Jonas V), chorus (Vaular), verse 3 (Vaular), and a final chorus (Vaular). Though the track is announced as a collaboration, it is clear that Lars Vaular is the main performer and Jonas V is the guest. Stylistically, according to Krims's (2000) classification system, 'Mye mere' most resembles 'reality rap'—'rap that undertakes the project of realism' (Krims, 2000:70), as its lyrics centre upon a classic gangsta rap theme of drugs and money, fame and material abundance, though in this case with the slightly humorous or ironic twist that it is all filtered through Lars Vaular and the NMG/G gang's particular brand of success. The rappers boast about their 'drug stamina'—that is, the great quantities of drugs they are able to take—with Jonas V announcing, 'We've got clips bags as large as (potato) chips bags, full of nice colours, brown, green, blue white, pink'.<sup>160</sup> Other lines include 'We call it a smoking break when we are not smoking',<sup>161</sup> and 'If we're talking about "white weeks" [a term used in Norwegian to describe a week of sobriety] it is not because we have taken it easy'.<sup>162</sup> Lars Vaular follows up with describing an extravagant lifestyle: 'More shows, more Spellemann awards, more helicopter rides, more zeros on the invoice'.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> My translation: 'Vi har clips-poser store som chips-poser, full a fine farger, brunt, grønt, blått, hvitt, rosa'.

<sup>161</sup> My translation: 'Vi kaller det røykepauser når vi ikkje røyker'.

<sup>162</sup> My translation: 'Snakker vi om hvite uker, esje det fordi at vi har kult 'an'.

<sup>163</sup> My translation: 'Mere shows, mere Spellemannspriser, flere helikopterturer, flere nuller på faktura'.

## **Constructions of masculinity and ambiguity in 'Mye mere'**

With their chests stuck out as they swagger and preen, Lars Vaular and Jonas V seem to fully embody the stereotypical 'hypermasculine' male gangsta rapper, and they perform their lyrics with a marked sense of confidence and pride in their linguistic proficiency. This hypermasculinity is also created musically. Krims (2000) argues that rap production techniques have clearly gendered implications that point to the masculine domain, and that the related instrumental tracks signify 'hardness', aggression and 'realness' through a certain technique which he has named the 'hip-hop sublime'. He locates this in the dense layering of musical elements in the instrumental tracks, which suggest the common interpretation of rap music as aggressive by infusing the tonal and timbral properties of the track with tension and conflict. The 'hip-hop sublime' can first be heard in the tonal relationships among the different musical layers:

All of [the different layers] reinforce the four beat meter, but in the domain of pitch they comprise a sharply dissonant combination, even by standards of jazz, or soul, harmony. In fact, layers tend not even to be 'in tune', so to speak: they are separated by intervals that can only be measured in terms of fractions of well-tempered semitones. The result is that no pitch combination may form conventionally representable relationships with the others; musical layers pile up, defying aural representability for Western musical listeners. (Krims, 2000:73)

It can also be heard in the timbral relationships among the different musical layers: '[T]he layers tend to be marked by clashing timbral qualities, often associated with varying sound sources' (ibid.:73). With regard to 'Mye mere', the bass line and its relation to the other elements in the track, orchestrates these clashes—during the course of the song, it changes timbral texture several times, alternating between being sharp/gritty and soft/muffled, usually in opposition to what is happening around it. The pitch of the bass also seems slightly flat in relation to the other layers of the song, and particularly the high-pitched elements. In the context of the overall soundscape, however, the bass also comes across as quite homogenous in relation to all of the other, exclusively electronic sources (except for the

vocals). There are also elements in 'Mye mere' that contribute to its slightly aggressive feel without being part of the 'hip-hop sublime', such as the snare drum whose sudden bursts of sound dominate the first half of the choruses. This element, in other words, is not 'aggressive' due to its dissonance in relation to any other element but instead due to its explosive character. In addition, the fast-paced drum machine beat that underpins the entire song arguably introduces a certain restlessness that reinforces the generally frantic themes of male bonding, excessive partying and rap star fame.

However, the various layers of meaning embedded in this song are far from univocal, and this renders the surface masculinity of this track rather ambiguous as well. In line with Jarman (2006), one could say that the 'gangsta' masculinity pictured here borders on camp, but even the meaning of the lyrics is not as obvious as it might seem, as we hear in the chorus.

*Mange, mange, mange, mange, mange*  
*Mye vil mer i denne trange tankegangen*  
*Mye mere, mye mere*  
*Mye vil mye mere, la oss repetere*

Many, many, many, many, many  
Much wants more in this narrow mindset  
Much more, much much more  
Much wants much more, let us repeat

The chorus of 'Mye mere' is an example of the kind of wordplay and teasing out of cultural codes that is prevalent throughout the rap genre. It can also be seen as an example of the characteristically devious poetics which are often found in Lars Vaular's lyrics, and which have granted him the status of a poet, as much as rapper, in mainstream Norwegian society. 'Mye vil ha mere' is a Norwegian idiom that translates literally to 'much wants more' but is better translated as 'give her/him/it an inch, and her/him/it will take a mile'. This bravado, then, is also a sort of warning about the pitfalls of a party-filled lifestyle, suggesting vulnerability rather than strength. It almost has a masochistic touch, because he willingly exposes himself to this lifestyle. However, as Jarman has pointed out in regards to Eminem, while male masochism may be seen as a way of undermining the heteromascularity of

the rap act, 'male masochism is also a strategy by which superior masculinity has been constructed' (Jarman-Ivens, 2006:204). Drawing on Halberstam, who has argued that in popular culture 'masochism is built into male masculinity. [...] The winner is always the one who has been beaten to a pulp but remains standing long enough to deliver the knockout punch' (Halberstam, 1998:275), Jarman points to one instance in the self-biographic film *8 Mile*, where Eminem uses self-deprecation as a strategy to get the upper hand on his opponent in a rap battle, preventing him from attacking Eminem's credibility: 'Because Rabbit [Eminem] has subjected himself to all the humiliation possible, Doc [his opponent] no longer has any tools to use against him and is forced to surrender' (Jarman-Ivens, 2006:2004). In the case of Vaular, a similar effect occurs as he seemingly exposes his vulnerability, allowing him to get the upper hand on those critics who might doubt his authenticity as a white, Norwegian, rapper embraced by the mainstream cultural elite. From this perspective, that is, Lars Vaular depicts himself as an artist living this type of 'hard life' and therefore establishes himself as an authentically masculine rapper, outsider and rebel, despite his mainstream success.

### **EDM and masculinity in 'Mye mere'**

Ambiguity can also be located in the musical and visual parts of the music video. In this regard, I would propose that the way in which Lars Vaular draws upon other genres in 'Mye mere' can be read as a queering of his hip-hop expression. Specifically, I would suggest that 'Mye mere' embodies elements of at least two other genres, electronic dance music (EDM) and British alternative rock, which significantly impact his gender expression.

Visual cues that draw upon EDM iconography include the club feeling created by the way in which the music video is produced. At times (see 1:01, for example), sharp lights appear, blinking in sync with the drum roll that leads into the chorus. The sudden appearance of this strobe effect seems to transform the outdoor scene into a club setting and foregrounds the range of musical elements that are attributable to EDM. Even the industrial feel of the rusty iron remains of the wave power plant recalls the settings of rave parties.



These EDM elements can be considered in relation to Eirik Askerøi's (2013) concept of 'sonic markers' – 'musical codes that have been historically grounded through a specific context, and that, through their appropriation, serve a range of narrative purposes in recorded music' (Askerøi, 2013:17). Askerøi asserts that sonic markers 'connote principal narratives of authenticity and authorship as well as gender, sexuality, space and place' (ibid.:2). For me, many sonic markers from EDM are discernible in the soundscape of Vaular's song, despite the fact that it lacks the classic four-to-the-floor drum pattern found in house and techno. The dark, distorted, gritty bass sound to which the audience is introduced, for example, can be read as an infusion of dubstep. This sound later morphs into a muffled, dub-inspired bass as the song approaches the first chorus, then returns to its dubstep tendencies again. The 'hoover' sound (also often called 'mentasm' or 'dominator') that is introduced as blurts in the chorus functions both as a rhythmic element and as a stylistic reference to house music. The highly syncopated, break beat-infused drum patterns also evoke dubstep, or perhaps drum'n'bass, or even be interpreted as a reference to the 'big beat' associated with bands such as Prodigy and Fatboy Slim, among others. Lastly, the heavy use of percussive claps also points to an influence from EDM.

While it would be problematic to claim that musical eclecticism signals queerness in and of itself, I would nevertheless suggest that the somewhat contrasting evocations of gender and sexuality associated with hip-hop and EDM in this music video create an interesting mix of discourses. Fast (2012) develops a similar argument by associating the perceived queerness of Jackson with his approach to rock as an outsider—a black artist with a peculiar gender expression that derived from soul, funk and pop. She writes, 'he used rock either to upset normative gendered and racialized codes or to exaggerate them in order to play with hegemonic power' (Fast, 2012:288). Fast credits Jennifer Rycenga (2006) with anticipating her thinking some years before. Rycenga explores how breaking with the conventions and predictability of musical form can be understood as queering, noting that 'the authority of the form' behaves reproductively: 'they tell us that a certain musical train of events is predictable, that it resembles its parent with but small variations' (Rycenga, 2006:236). In contrast, a queering of form

‘nudge[s] us forward and backward, to other songs, sounds, images, moments and structures’ (ibid.:237). Analysing music of Yes and PJ Harvey, Rycenga proposes that musical form can be oriented towards interests beyond the mere reproduction of a preconceived template. In essence, both Fast and Rycenga’s discussions deal with how musicians and artists may co-opt preconceived templates (whether genre or form-based) and then change, resist, shake up or otherwise disturb them. This parallels the ways in which the notion of queer arguably impacts heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality as well.

I would argue that, as with Michael Jackson, Lars Vaular queers by not only stretching the boundaries of his genre (rap) but also introducing elements from genres that could be seen to conflict with or even undermine rap masculinity, such as EDM. It is true, of course, that EDM has long been male dominated and articulates a traditional take on gender norms (Bradby, 1993). But it can also evoke the queer and transgressive, due, among other things, to its association with gay club scenes. Notably, Lars Vaular incorporates EDM in a gangsta-infused rap track, which has implications in itself, given the controversies associated with this genre within mainstream U.S. hip-hop over the last decade. According to Joel Penney (2012), the frequent incorporation of British electronic pop and EDM into U.S. rap signals an ongoing renegotiation of masculinity there—a development that prompts identity crises in rappers otherwise ‘invested in conflating the genre with aggressive hyper-masculinity’ (Penney, 2012:322). This renegotiation of masculinity also relates to fashion, Penney suggests: ‘the recent popularity of queer-friendly, fashion-obsessed rap superstars [...] threatens to destabilize the hyper-masculine identity associated with mainstream hip-hop culture’ (ibid.). Further,

the gender-specific codes established within mainstream hip-hop fashion follow a distinct pattern: the black male body is cloaked in fabric, often from head to toe, while the black female body is revealed with tight-fitting outfits and positioned as an object of sexual desire. (Penney, 2012:325)

Penney points out that the covering of males and exposure of females is a trend in Western society at large, and not particular to hip-hop. And,

interestingly, a similar form of ‘panic’ concerning Lars Vaular’s style and masculinity—which will be demonstrated more clearly in my reading of ‘Det ordnar seg for pappa’ later in this chapter—has arisen among his Norwegian fans, friends and audiences, both within and outside of the Norwegian hip-hop scene. The one Lars Vaular fashion statement that to this date has received the greatest deal of attention, is a classic 1990s style bowl cut hairdo that he sported in 2015. On 4 June 2015 he even reached the front page of *Dagbladet*—his image flanked by the headline ‘Can’t stand the bowl-cut hairdo’ and a reference to a two-page (!) article inside the newspaper.<sup>164</sup>

Vaular, of course, is well aware that his sense of fashion carries great cultural significance. In the song ‘Stilen’ [The style], featured on his recent album *666 GIR* (2015), he states that his ‘body is so political’, then refers to his ‘flashy’ style and unconventional hair.<sup>165</sup> While Lars Vaular as a white Norwegian is in many ways far removed from black American reality, and therefore also hip-hop culture, then, the way he uses style and fashion statements does still in a sense mirror the discourses of style and masculinity in contemporary US hip-hop. However, his play with style (and consequently his play with gender expression) is perhaps better explained by his affiliation to ‘whiter’ popular music traditions such as British alternative rock. Specifically, he embodies a sense of ‘pop dandyism’ (Hawkins, 2009) that emphasises his allegiance to British popular culture. This is the theme I turn to next.

### **Epitomising the ‘Bergensian hip-hop dandy’**

Lars Vaular and other members of the NMG/G house sport a fashion style inspired by the 1980s and 1990s. Beyond the infamous bowl cut, this style incorporates college sweaters, bomber jackets and Adidas tennis shoes. For Lars Vaular’s generation, born in the 1980s, it must feel quite nostalgic, and it is a style worn by both Lars Vaular and Jonas V in ‘Mye mere’. Vaular’s cap is also interesting—by featuring the logo of the Russian aircraft

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<sup>164</sup> Vaular posted an image of the front page on his Instagram account. See <https://www.instagram.com/p/3gokSFEZZE/?taken-by=larsvaularnmg> [Last retrieved: 7 November 2016]

<sup>165</sup> My translation: ‘Min kropp e så politisk’.

manufacturer Irkut, he seems to point to an era when Russia (and the Soviet Union before that) demanded much more attention than it did in the 2000s. His fashion style is also a nod to music cultures other than (U.S.) hip-hop, including the British alternative pop and rock of the Manchester/Madchester scene from the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>166</sup> Other factors evoke this scene as well. For example, Madchester bands were known for incorporating EDM into their music (Luck, 2002). With regard to ‘Mye mere’, the style of filming and cropping, including the close-up shots and blinking lights—recalls that era’s music videos, such as Happy Mondays’ ‘Halleluja’.<sup>167</sup> In addition, the way in which Lars Vaular moves in this video—propelling his arms and jumping up and down—is less a somewhat failed attempt to appropriate the ‘blackness’ of U.S. hip-hop dancing and arm movements than an intentional emphasis on his ‘whiteness’ that evokes the ‘dancing like a monkey’ style (Luck, 2002:10) of many participants in the Madchester scene.

Lastly, Lars Vaular has a fondness for Mod-inspired clothing, and particularly that of Fred Perry. He often wears Fred Perry shirts on stage and has mentioned the brand in his songs as a sign of his cultural sensibility regarding British pop/rock subcultures.<sup>168</sup> He even contributed a custom t-shirt design for the Fred Perry sixty-year anniversary—a plain white t-shirt with ‘5071 NMG-G-huset Bergen’ embroidered on the front pocket. On the back, it said ‘Since a long time ago’ in Norwegian (‘Siden lenge siden’). This shirt obviously evokes the tightly knit homosocial milieu with which he identifies, but it also speaks to Lars Vaular as an artist who has constructed an image around not being new to the game but instead firmly grounded in tradition and intimately familiar with its cultural codes. Importantly, Lars Vaular’s embrace of this particular style in his overall performance has implications concerning ethnicity and ‘race’—it distances him from the blackness of (American) hip-hop and aligns him with ‘whiter’ musical subcultures.

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<sup>166</sup> My colleague Daniel Nordgård pointed out this connection.

<sup>167</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMjg-yldw9w> [retrieved: 9 February 2016].

<sup>168</sup> See, for example, Store P’s verse in Vaular’s song ‘Full Effekt’, from the album *D E Glede*, which features this line: ‘I’m not cheap, ‘cause I wear Fred Perry’ (‘Eg ekje gjerrig for eg går i Fred Perry’).

While his style links his performance to the past, it also has implications for how one might read his gender expression in the present. First of all, his explicit interest in style arguably feminises him, making him more metrosexual (Langeland, 2011; 2014). Through his peculiar mannerisms; cheeky, humoristic, and often-ambiguous lyrics; play with genre conventions; and fashion style, he is also 'dandified'. He fulfils, in Hawkins's (2009) words, all the criteria of

(...) a creature of alluring elegance, vanity, and irony, who plays around with conventions to his own end. At the same time he is someone whose transient tastes never shirks from excess, protest or rebellion. (Hawkins, 2009:15)

Hawkins's discourse on dandyism underlies the importance of fashion and how this is decisive in the making of the British pop dandy, who uses it as a 'structuring tool', because 'fashion exposes class identities and positions' (ibid.). What is particularly interesting about the British pop dandy is that his staging of himself is so obviously performative—given that masculinity is often seen as natural/authentic and therefore *non*-performative, the British pop dandy therefore often comes across as queer. The dissonance that arises in the British pop dandy's gender performance is perhaps most visible when played out within musical genres where 'realness' (or authenticity) and masculinity go hand in hand, as in rap. As Hawkins describes it, the British pop dandy chips away at the notion of an authentic artistic self by processes of self-fashioning: 'Challenging through stereotypes, numerous artists refuse to play out one single identity. Rather, they open a space for redefining masculinity and contesting gender norms' (Hawkins, 2009:185).

Vaular shares striking similarities with Hawkins's British pop dandies, particularly in his use of fashion to establish himself as a Bergensian, a working-class individual and an outsider with close ties to other outsiders from the same city. He is further dandified by refusing to identify himself as strictly hip-hop, instead claiming the label post-hip-hop, and by injecting EDM qualities into his music. And, as he demonstrates in 'Det ordnar seg for pappa', a music video to which I will shortly return, he is dandified by the way he uses media, and especially social media, strategically to create a

debate centred on his gender identity. One might, then, label him a 'Bergensian hip-hop dandy'.

The 'dandifying' of Lars Vaular's display showcases his allegiance to British pop culture, which in turn supplies a sense of playfulness to certain aspects of American gangsta rap. In 'Mye mere' both Lars Vaular and Jonas V give the impression that they are boasting about their actual lives, but there is also an ironic distance. For instance, at 2:50 in the video, Lars Vaular responds to those 'idiots wondering what the hell we [he and the NMG/G gang] are doing' by stating: 'Don't they know who the fuck I think I am?'<sup>169</sup> The word 'think' in this sentence is a retort full of irony and self-deprecation. Also, the 'bling' around his neck is not real but rather plastic, which appears to send up the excesses of gangsta rap. These small gestures signal an ironic distance with regard to hip-hop tradition, but I do not see him as mocking that tradition or undermining his own authenticity as rapper. On the contrary, his tongue-in-cheek play with rap (and gender) signifiers allows him to stake out, in Grossberg's (1993) words, a type of 'authentic inauthenticity'. As outlined in chapter 1, authentic inauthenticity refers to a postmodern ideological shift which views authenticity as a social construct as opposed to an objective, 'true' quality. As Grossberg notes, this form of authenticity 'is to know and even admit that you are not being authentic, to fake it without faking the fact that you are faking it' (Grossberg, 1993:206). Through his dandified display, Lars Vaular demonstrates that play with gender identity and queer expression is not merely a means of overturning the status quo and established norms but also an important part of an authentication process—of establishing oneself as a viable participant in popular culture.

The personal narrative presented in 'Mye mere' emphasises Lars Vaular as rap 'star' and loyal member of the NMG/G gang, both in the semantic content of the lyrics and in the knowledge that this track is a cooperative effort between two NMG/G rappers and others at the label. At two points in the video, in fact, the person behind the camera—presumably Andrew Amorim, who directed the video—reaches out and touches both Jonas V and Lars

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<sup>169</sup> My translation: 'Vetsje de kem faen eg tror eg e, eller?'.

Vaular. The first time this happens, Amorim touches Jonas V's face, presumably to brush away some white powder that has stuck to his face and sweater (1:50) (fig. 4.3)



Figure 4.3

The second time, Amorim grabs Lars Vaular by the shoulder (3:19) and holds on to him for several seconds while Lars Vaular faces away from the camera. These moments, though small and apparently random, seem quite significant. For the viewer/listener who knows that Amorim is also a NMG/G member, they represent a reminder that the NMG/G gang is not only in front of the camera but also behind it, and therefore behind the scenes in Lars Vaular's career. The acts of touching also add an informal, down-to-earth, DIY feel to the video, signalling to the viewer that this music video is the product of friendship and cooperation rather than strict professionalism. It also adds a sense of intimacy which, following Sedgwick ([1985]1992), reminds us that homosocial relations often cross into the potentially erotic.

As with many of Lars Vaular's songs, a shout out to the NMG/G house appears at 'Mye mere' as well:

*NMG/G gjeng, mer kaos, mye mere spenn. Mer gelter, mere drama, mye mer respekt for min baby mama.*

NMG/G gang, more chaos, much more money. More money,<sup>170</sup> more drama, much more respect for my baby mama.<sup>171</sup>

Sharing of material goods is highlighted by Oware (2011) as one of the central means through which homosociality is articulated in rap lyrics, and he has also suggested that this aspect of homosociality can be considered part of the ‘counter-hegemonic “forces of love”’ (Oware, 2011:31) that are often at play beneath the surface in rap songs. Looking again at the excerpt above, one might notice that the last phrase, ‘much more respect for my baby mama’, seems slightly incongruous in the context of the gang, drugs, money, fame and success. It is also the only phrase that points to Lars Vaular as a new father and thus recalls that this single was framed as a comeback after the birth of his child. It suggests a ‘soft’ masculinity in its own right. After rapping about success in the form of unlimited access to drugs and money, this ‘shout out’ to his ‘baby mama’ nudges the listener out of the all-male universe that has been communicated throughout this performance. Yet it does *not* necessarily entail a challenge to either its hegemonic masculinity or the homosocial setting. In fact, it seems to reinforce it. For one thing, Lars Vaular does not seem to consider his ‘baby mama’ to be a part of his gang. The dichotomy of male and female is thus maintained, as the female is mentioned in relation to her function—being the mother of his child—not her actual identity. Homosociality is thus maintained and reinforced by this indication of the female as an outsider. Secondly, Vaular uses this gesture to state his heterosexuality and thereby steer clear of any potentially homoerotic or queer undertones in his relationship to the members of the NMG/G gang, including his co-rapper. We might frame this phrase in relation to Berggren’s (2012) type 1 ‘straight inoculation’ in rap lyrics—Vaular is ‘inserting women [...] but [they] seem to play a secondary role’ (Berggren, 2012:58).

‘Mye mere’ demonstrates numerous ways in which hegemonic masculinity is at once created and destabilised through audiovisuality within a homosocial space, although the video’s undermining of gender norms is subtle, and its queerness and heteromascularity are quite ambiguous.

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<sup>170</sup> *Spenn* and *gelter* (from the German *geld*) are both slang words for money.

<sup>171</sup> My translation.



Sometimes, in fact, the reception of a song is the best means of assessing whether or not it radically challenges norms concerning gender and sexuality, and Lars Vaular's gender performance in this video did not garner a lot of attention. Thus, he seems to be on the normative 'safe side' in his gender expression here. The next music video I will analyse, however, certainly caused a stir. In 'Det ordnar seg for pappa', Lars Vaular took his gender play to a whole new level.

### **'Det ordnar seg for pappa'**

Many dandies queer their performance, and the valorization of masculinity through homosocial behavior accents gender anxiety in a variety of ways. (Hawkins, 2009:185–86)

It's people's own insecurity we're talking about here. You have to challenge it!<sup>172</sup>—Lars Vaular, in conversation with fellow NMG/G house member and NRK journalist Leo Ajkic

My second analysis centres on the song 'Det ordnar seg for pappa' [It will be okay for Daddy / Daddy will be okay] and its music video.<sup>173</sup> This song is featured on one of Lars Vaular's most recent albums, *666 GIR*, which was released in May 2015. *666 GIR* is the second in a 2015 trilogy of mini-albums whose titles start with 666.<sup>174</sup> Like most of Lars Vaular's other albums, *666 GIR* had great reviews in the mainstream Norwegian media, and 'Det ordnar seg' was called out as one of the album's best tracks—*Dagbladet* journalist Mathias Rødahl called it one of 'the most beautiful of Lars Vaular's

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<sup>172</sup> 'Det er jo bare folks egen usikkerhet det er snakk om. Du må jo utfordre den'. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0C4nU6if6A> (2.47) [retrieved: 25 June 2015].

<sup>173</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdCd60xAfwo> [retrieved: 25 June 2015].

<sup>174</sup> The titles encouraged much speculation. Was this the 'number of the beast'? Was it Vaular's anticipation that they would all receive a 6 (the highest number on a dice) from their reviewers? And what about the words following the number? ALT and GIR do not make sense on their own, after all. It was the third mini-album of the trilogy, released in November 2015, that cleared things up in terms of the text: *666 MENING* completed a phrase that translates to 'everything makes sense'. The numbers remain unexplained.

creations'.<sup>175</sup> Many noted that the overall sound of the album showcased a 'softer' Lars Vaular who was relying more on 1980s synth-pop than on hip-hop, while still keeping the rap at the core of the music. Lars Vaular's 666 *GIR* press release said, 'if you're going to compare me to someone, I hope it will be the Pet Shop Boys'.<sup>176</sup> In interviews, he also mentioned Prince as an inspiration for the 666 trilogy.<sup>177</sup> He thus not only asks music journalists to see his music in a pop rather than hip-hop continuum, which has gendered implications in and of itself, but also chooses to evoke quite queer artists as the most relevant peers for this effort.

Around the time of the release of 'Det ordnar seg', a news report featuring Lars Vaular aired on the national broadcaster NRK<sup>178</sup> that covered his involvement with Amnesty International, and especially the situation surrounding imprisoned Saudi Arabian blogger Raif Badawi.<sup>179</sup> In the report, Lars Vaular explains that 'Det ordnar seg for pappa' was inspired by his engagement with this particular case.

He [Badawi] is a human who wanted to express himself. And [...] he is simply not allowed to. It is impossible to comprehend [...] must be horrible. How do you explain that to your children? I think it was a connection there, that I recently had become a father, perhaps.<sup>180</sup>

As this excerpt suggests, Lars Vaular expresses a sense of identification with Badawi through their shared roles as fathers, and as public voices and people who express themselves creatively. In a recent *Aftenposten* interview, Vaular

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<sup>175</sup> See

[http://www.dagbladet.no/2015/05/28/kultur/musikk/musikkanmeldelser/anmeldelser/lars\\_vaular/39388315/](http://www.dagbladet.no/2015/05/28/kultur/musikk/musikkanmeldelser/anmeldelser/lars_vaular/39388315/) [retrieved: 11 February 2016].

<sup>176</sup> Mentioned at <http://p3.no/musikk/det-sjette-giret/> and at <http://www.dagsavisen.no/kultur/musikk/popmelankoli-fra-vaular-1.360789> [retrieved: 25 June 2015].

<sup>177</sup> See this 08.08.2015 interview in *Aftenposten* at <http://www.aftenposten.no/amagasinet/Ordner-det-seg-egentlig-for-Lars-Vaular-8118117.html> [retrieved: 26 August 2015].

<sup>178</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5deLlAlzJpM> [retrieved: 26 June 2015].

<sup>179</sup> Badawi's crime was arguing for freedom of speech on his blog, and as of this writing he is facing ten years in prison and one thousand lashes.

<sup>180</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5deLlAlzJpM> 0.53-1.12 [retrieved: 26 June 2015].

noted that 'Det ordnar seg' is also about the prospect of fatherhood, saying, 'there is no greater shame than not being able to care for your child'.<sup>181</sup> While 'Mye mere' also nodded towards Lars Vaular's fatherhood, 'Det ordnar seg' seems more wholeheartedly dedicated to this part of his life—he is a father, a person engaged with human rights causes, a solo artist—and normative comments such as this one also 'straighten' him by evoking the masculinity inherent in the capable male provider. Lars Vaular is 'doing the right thing'. Interestingly, this framing of 'Det ordnar seg' does not resonate with the gender aesthetics he employs in its music video.

According to Brunstad and colleagues (2010:230), explicit social critique in rap has not been as prevalent in Norway as it has in other European countries, such as France. Lars Vaular is somewhat exceptional in this regard: 'Kem skjøt Siv Jensen' [Who shot Siv Jensen], from the album *Helt om natten, helt om dagen*, imagines the assassination of a prominent Norwegian right-wing political leader and caused quite a stir upon its release. But whereas 'Kem skjøt Siv Jensen' was quite explicit, 'Det ordnar seg' is quite abstract and ambiguous, including its very subtle references to the Badawi case, for example.<sup>182</sup> In terms of its gendered performativity, however, 'Det ordnar seg' is very explicit, even politically charged. The jarring way in which Lars Vaular's body and voice are stylised and staged draws heavily upon queer iconography, even as his normative role as a father and his upstanding engagement with Amnesty International lurk in the background. 'Det ordnar seg' therefore comes across as having several layers of meaning, related to what it means to make political music, and what it means to be male in contemporary Norwegian society. In terms of hip-hop culture, in addition, 'Det ordnar seg' sees Lars Vaular distancing himself a bit from the NMG/G gang. While the gang is certainly involved in this video as well, members now take the role of antagonists who are somewhat sceptical and hesitant about embracing Lars Vaular's new musical and gender expression, in turn recalling Bannister's (2006) observation about the ways in which homosocial milieus police style.

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<sup>181</sup> See <http://www.aftenposten.no/amagasinet/Ordner-det-seg-egentlig-for-Lars-Vaular-8118117.html> [retrieved: 26 August 2015].

<sup>182</sup> 'When slime and knuckles become skin and bone', for example. My translation: 'Når slim og knokler blir til skinn og bein'.

## Synopsis

Before considering the reactions to 'Det ordnar seg', I want to provide a more detailed account of the audiovisual elements of this music video (see fig. 4.4 for a visual representation). Stylistically, according to Krims's classification system, 'Det ordnar seg'<sup>183</sup> falls within the jazz/bohemian subgenre. As the topic of the song is more 'politically conscious' than most other Lars Vaular songs, it evokes the jazz/bohemian rap's 'thinking person's artist' (Krims, 2000:69). Like many of Lars Vaular's song lyrics, the lyrics here are poetic and somewhat abstract, again a trait of this subgenre (ibid.:69). Interestingly, Lars Vaular introduces much less slang and sociolect-based words than elsewhere, thus appearing to seek a wider audience for this message.

The musical style of 'Det ordnar seg' is characterised by a certain eclecticism and playfulness that is also compatible with the jazz/bohemian style, foregrounding 'both irony and cultural mastery' (ibid.:66). The several styles represented recall different eras in pop history, starting with the several layers of synthesiser, which contribute to the harmonic, melodic and rhythmic fabric of the song. The synth chords engulf the whole song in an ambient, 'floating' timbre, recalling 1980s synth pop and artists/bands such as Gary Numan, Ultravox, and The Human League. Another dominant aspect of the music is the drum machine, especially during the frequent rhythmic breaks which allow the song to escape the circular, sample-based groove feel that is common to most rap tracks. Instead, 'Det ordnar seg' appears to be based on the linear compositional principles of many pop songs, and the catchy, melodic refrain and overall production values make the song sound more like pop than rap as well.

Synths and drum machine point to synth-based or 1980s pop. The song's electronic soundscape could also be read as a nod to EDM. Yet the bass guitar sounds like it is live, and the 'slapping' technique is a sonic marker of genres such as funk and disco. Moreover, the sax line introduced at 2:50 seems to be acoustic, and its sound and melody recall other famous pop/rock sax lines, such as the one in 'Your Latest Trick' by Dire Straits or George Michael's 'Careless Whisper'. In short, 'Det ordnar seg' provides a mix

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<sup>183</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdCd60xAfwo> [retrieved: 16 September 2015].

of styles, genres and production techniques that is rich in its connotations, but the aesthetic of the 1980s synth is the most dominant feature of the song.

The way in which Lars Vaular uses his voice is also interesting in a gender perspective, because it is very different from the rap style of his previous recordings: The lyrics in the verses are half sung, half rapped, and several layers of vocals, combined with pronounced reverb, introduce a quality that is similar to the synths and resonates with Krims's account of jazz/bohemian rap as featuring 'singing in places, including but not limited to refrain and choruses' (ibid.:66). The vocal delivery also features a rhythmic flow that might be described as 'between sung<sup>184</sup> and [rhythm-]effusive<sup>185</sup> [...], [creating] polyrhythms with the musical tracks and surrounding lines' (ibid.:67). However, while the production and Lars Vaular's vocals in this track seems to render it significantly less 'hip-hop' than his previous work, some of the characteristics of the lyrics position it firmly within rap, given all of the wordplay, double meanings, and send-ups of cultural codes, wrapped in the distinctly rhythmic delivery associated with rap.

Like 'Mye mere', 'Det ordnar seg' is non-narrative. However, while the former showcased the cooperative and homosocial aspect of Lars Vaular's artistic life by incorporating contributions of Jonas V and the interaction with Amorim behind the camera, the latter depicts a solo artist, both aurally and visually: Lars Vaular sings and raps the entire song and is the only person present in the video. This makes Lars Vaular, his voice and body, the obvious centrepiece.

While 'Det ordnar seg' is not a dance track to the degree that 'Mye mere' is, it is a dancing body that claims the majority of the audience's attention, even at the expense of the music. Remarkably, in this case, the dance here is modern and lyrical, not hip-hop, and the performer is Lars Vaular himself. And if 'Mye mere' at least managed to evoke a club setting,

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<sup>184</sup> This is not to say that the lyrics appear to be sung, but that they possess rhythmic qualities similar to those of pop/rock vocals, including on-beat accents and pauses, repetition and strict couplet groupings (Krims, 2000:50).

<sup>185</sup> 'Effusive' here refers to 'a tendency in rap music to spill over the rhythmic boundaries of the meter, the couplet, and [...] of duple and quadruple groupings in general' (Krims, 2000:50).

'Det ordnar seg' takes place in an actual dance studio. The first scene shows Lars Vaular entering the studio, wearing tight black jeans and a blue and red striped t-shirt. He immediately goes over to the barre, places his leg on it, and gracefully bends over and stretches (fig. 4.5).



Figure 4.5

As the first verse begins, he moves onto the floor and begins his dance while miming the lyrics. The dance, choreographed by Gull Øzger, follows the song's ups and downs in terms of dynamics and represents the only activity taking place before the simple white walls. In Lars Vaular's words, this choreography is a way of 'interpreting the song with body and soul' (Uldbæk Stephan, 2015). This description is in itself notable, because it removes him from the hard-boiled masculinity he showed in 'Mye Mere'—it makes him appear more 'in touch with his feelings', more vulnerable perhaps, and definitely less heteromasculine. Featuring a wide array of quite advanced moves, including several floor rolls and slides, split jumps and extensive arm choreography, the routine is an opportunity to show off Lars Vaular's versatility (as well as physical flexibility), not least as a dancer, which may have come as a surprise to a large portion of his audience. This music video certainly got a lot of diverse reactions, and before I turn to how 'Det ordnar seg' can be read in a queer perspective, I will consider shortly some of the reactions to this music video.

## Reception and reactions

The mode of address through which Vaular stylises his body in this music video prompted much reaction among fans, journalists and fellow rappers, including members of the NMG/G gang. A quick scroll through the commentary field beneath the video on YouTube reveal comments that are either ecstatically positive or very negative. Most concern the visual aspects of the video—that is, Lars Vaular’s dancing. On the one hand, Inghild Härstöm writes, ‘Next level shit. Brave, gorgeous, on point’; Point Blur thinks that ‘this is some of the coolest that has been done within Norwegian hip-hop’; and HynnFTW exults, ‘Break the stereotypes! You go!’ On the other hand, Tha King found it to be ‘terrible [...]Just sickening to watch’, and Chimp Anzee asks, ‘what happened to Norwegian hip-hop? Seems like it’s turning into GayHop like in the US’ (fig. 4.6, in Appendix).

Lars Vaular posted another video on YouTube the day that ‘Det ordnar seg’ was released. This video, titled ‘Første visning: [First screening:] Det ordnar seg for pappa’,<sup>186</sup> features three central figures in the Norwegian hip-hop scene watching the music video for the first time: Chirag, from the Oslo-based rap group Karpe Diem; Leo Ajkic, not a rapper but still a member of the NMG/G gang; and Oslo-based rapper Kenneth Engebretsen. This video seems to be filmed by Lars Vaular himself, whom we see rigging up the computer and headphones before he seems to step behind the camera and await their reactions. The video starts, and it is only a few seconds before they break into smiles and giggles. ‘Where have you learned this?’ Engebretsen asks. Ajkic wonders, ‘Is this really your video?’ Chirag, laughing, says, ‘This is really good. But you obviously cannot return to Loddefjord after this, Lars’. Ajkic, when asked by Lars Vaular what he thinks about ‘his moves’, seems almost resigned as he responds, ‘You want me to be honest? It’s gay moves, man. Fuck, man. This is soft, man’ (figs. 4.7-4.9).

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<sup>186</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qmr-nfLjkgE> [retrieved: 15 September 2015].



Figure 4.7. Lars Vaular (left) and Kenneth Engebretsen, before Vaular steps behind the camera



Figure 4.8. Chirag R. Patel (Karpe Diem) and Kenneth Engebretsen laughs when watching 'Det ordnar seg'



Figure 4.9. Leo Ajkic, seemingly in disbelief.



The reactions to 'Det ordnar seg' in both this promotional video and the YouTube commentary fields demonstrate that Lars Vaular has pushed the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable masculinity, both within the homosocial space of the NMG/G house and the wider rap community, and in relation to fans and other listeners. He has clearly queered his act here. The promo video, of course, also indicates that Lars Vaular not only anticipated the potential negative responses brought about by this performance but also wanted to get ahead of them by publishing the criticism himself. This gesture could be seen as an effort to 'straighten' his performance, restore his hegemonic masculinity, or at least undermine the threat there. I will return to these possibilities following a brief review of the queer elements of 'Det ordnar seg'.

### **What is queer about 'Det ordnar seg'?**

While the topic of the song is fatherhood and the fight for human rights—topics linked to a normative understanding of what it means to be a 'natural' man (that is, a brave, responsible provider)—the visuals of the video do not reinforce this. Instead, Lars Vaular's performance signals artificiality, performativity and effeminacy. The way in which he dances and moves his body draws on queer iconography as it relates to ballet, and it shares some similarities with vouging. He becomes a spectacle and a body-to-be-viewed-at, which in turn feminises his act. As Walser argued in relation to heavy metal, 'spectacles are problematic in the context of a patriarchal order that is invested in the stability of signs and that seeks to maintain women in the position of object of the male gaze' (Walser, 1993:108). Here Lars Vaular challenges his heterosexuality and subjects himself to the possibility of fans seeing him as gay or effeminate. As Chirag from Karpe Diem commented, he risks losing his 'street cred' and ability to 'return to Loddefjord'. And it is perhaps this that proves problematic for his peers in the promo video and YouTube commenters such as Tha King.

However, Lars Vaular queers his act not only through the way he moves his body but also through the appropriation of 1980s synth-based pop, which blurs the line between hip-hop and mainstream pop. In a way, then, the visuals of the video reinforce what is already there in the music, and particularly the 'queerness' in his vocal performance. First, he does the

singing himself, which disrupts the gender convention in hip-hop and R&B which 'pits female singing against male rapping, reinscribing a longstanding [...] stereotyping of music as feminine, concerned with senses, and of language as masculine, a rational structure' (Biddle and Jarman-Ivens, 2007:10). Bannister has also argued that 'the singer occupies a more sexualised position than the other musicians' (Bannister, 2006:101). Lars Vaular also queers his obviously male voice by making it somewhat airy and sometimes slightly strained and nasal, especially during long notes in the middle to upper range.

The fact that Lars Vaular pairs this heavily synth-pop-infused song about fatherhood and human rights with a video featuring contemporary dance, which first and foremost—as witnessed by the reactions of his 'gang' and his fans—signals 'gayness' or effeminacy (remember Ajkic's comment about Vaular's moves being gay), may seem peculiar. But seen in light of Vaular's association of this song with the case of Badawi, one could choose to see 'Det ordnar seg' as a gesture toward freedom of expression—a freedom Lars Vaular exercises through his queering as well. Moreover, the music video seems to say that these apparently opposing discourses are in fact linked by association: fatherhood is associated with childrearing, which is associated with femininity. Femininity is tied to dancing, which is tied to effeminacy, which is tied to 'gayness' and pop, and Vaular consciously links up with queer artists such as the Pet Shop Boys, Bowie, and Prince. By drawing on these different but interconnected discourses, Lars Vaular cleverly manipulates his expression of gender. For the gang and his fans, this means he is distancing himself from the rap genre and moving into new, more feminine, 'softer' territory. For some, this prompted negative reactions, perhaps a feeling of betrayal as Lars Vaular failed to meet their expectations. For others, it signalled a breath of fresh air, something new, cool, and very peculiar.

### **Reconsidering Lars Vaular's queer antics**

Hawkins has theorised the pop dandy's peculiarity, stating that it is 'governed by intricate practices that are transmitted through media hype' (2009:184–85). In the case of Lars Vaular, social media, and particularly the promo videos he posts on YouTube, play a key role in the negotiation of his

artistic identity and gender expression. As the reception of 'Det ordnar seg' shows, Lars Vaular is seemingly balancing on a knife's edge with regard to how he presents himself, as the act of pushing the boundaries of gendered behaviour entails the risk of losing his position as a central and respected figure in the Norwegian hip-hop milieu.

Within the context of international rap, Vaular's gender play is peculiar on a number of counts. Returning to Jarman's analysis of Eminem and 50 Cent, Jarman suggests that blackness in the context of rap culture 'serves to confer authority upon [50 Cent] as a rapper, while also implicitly confirming his heterosexuality' (Jarman-Ivens, 2006:213). Arguing that 'the apex of rap masculinity is arguably embodied by the straight black man' (2006:213), Jarman then turns to the white rapper Eminem's extreme homophobia and over-the-top masculine display, suggesting that this may be a strategy to counter his own perceived inferiority as a white man in rap, serving as a 'defense against his whiteness in a black-dominated genre' (ibid.). As previously shown in my analysis of 'Mye mere', Lars Vaular, unlike Eminem, does not draw heavily on the mannerisms associated with blackness in rap. Quite the contrary, he draws on other, 'whiter' genres such as EDM and alternative rock, which shows his allegiance to British pop culture, and also infuses his act with a certain queer sensibility, or at least a sense of genderplay. While Eminem is retromasculine and traditional, Lars Vaular is a soft, 'new male' metrosexual. Yet this ready opposition is deceptive: Lars Vaular's play with genre and gender representations, as well as his media manipulation, signals agency and autonomy which in turn reinforces his 'masculine authority'. Another factor that helps to sustain his hegemonic position despite his queering antics is his reputation for being a 'king of language'. Lars Vaular has always been praised for his lyrics, and as long as communicative language is seen to be a masculine domain (Jarman-Ivens, 2006), his masculinity and heterosexuality are safe.

A couple of weeks after the release of the first promo video, another appeared on the same YouTube channel, featuring Lars Vaular and fellow NMG/G member Leo Ajkic. The video portrays them talking on the phone about the comments field below the 'Det ordnar seg' music video.<sup>187</sup> In this

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<sup>187</sup> The video is called 'Leo leser høyt kommentarer på musikkvideoen til "Det ordnar seg for papa"' [Leo reads out loud commentaries on the music video 'Det

video, Vaular sets out to explain himself to his fans and his gang. As in the previous video, Ajkic, representing the NMG/G gang, plays the homophobic devil's advocate: 'Do you think it's okay that people think you're a fruitcake?' he asks. 'Not all PR is good PR, you know'. Ajkic then starts reading some of the comments out loud. Lars Vaular laughs a bit at some of them, then becomes put out (fig. 4.10). 'People are disappointed in you, Lars', Ajkic concludes. Vaular scoffs and says, 'But you know what? That is really good. People need to be challenged [...] It's people's own insecurity we're talking about here'. 'I don't know', Ajkic answers.



Figure 4.10: 'The video looks fucking faggot, faggot!'

In an article titled 'Queer Masculinities of Straight Men', Robert Heasley (2005) argues that self-identified heterosexual males who perform masculinities that deviate from hegemonic heteromascularity often go unrecognised by queer theorists. To 'begin to give voice and legitimacy to the queerness that exists within the straight male world' (Heasley, 2005:319), Heasley proposes a typology of straight-queer males. Within Heasley's typology, Lars Vaular falls into the category labelled 'social justice straight-queer (SJSQ)—straight males who 'take action publicly and at the risk of

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ordnar seg for pappa']. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0C4nU6if6A> [retrieved: 16 February 2016].

being responded to as if they were gay'. A key characteristic of the SJSQ is that he expresses himself 'verbally or through action, in ways that disrupt both heterosexuality and masculinity'. It seems as though this is what Lars Vaular sets out to do. However, while I agree that it is important to both acknowledge and theorise the queer aspects of heterosexuality it seems to me that Heasley does not take into account how the queering of one's act—in the sense of playing on weirdness and otherness through gender performance—often seems to sustain hegemony rather than subvert it, when carried out by individuals who are already in hegemonic positions. This is particularly relevant to popular music, where play with otherness is more the norm than the exception. As Bannister observes,

Through [...] flirtation with otherness they enhance their subcultural capital, giving rise to the apparent paradox that 'gender-bending' male rock stars may perpetuate, rather than challenge, patriarchal values. (2006:26)

'Det ordnar seg for pappa' and the subsequent promo videos are good examples of just how thin the line is between subverting gender norms and conforming to or even reinforcing them.

While there are some negative comments below 'Det ordnar seg', their presence does not indicate that Lars Vaular is not in control of his image. In fact, his agency in this regard seems obvious. Posting the promo videos is not merely a means of documenting his peers' adverse reactions to 'Det ordnar seg' but also a way for Lars Vaular to show that he knows what he is doing. Instead of risking the possibility of coming across as someone who inadvertently violates gender codes, Lars Vaular makes it clear that he is *deliberately* challenging those codes in an effort to push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable gender behaviour. He is self-conscious, especially among his immediate labelmates, as is clear from the fact that he feels compelled to explain himself to such a degree. But his use of the promo videos equally obviously pertains to the way in which 'male queering in pop culture seeks entry into mainstream culture through acceptance as much as resistance' (Hawkins, 2006:279). The promo videos allow Lars Vaular to co-opt the role of the progressive, while the naysayers are caricatured through their dismissive homophobia.

There is a turning point towards the end of the last promo video, when Leo Ajkic suddenly seems to change his mind: ‘Honestly, Lars, I think what you are doing is good’, he admits. ‘I think it is good that you are breaking stereotypes, that you dare to do that, and that you don’t give a damn about what other people think’. And just like that, Lars Vaular is reinstated as part of the NMG/G gang and further authenticated as a figure of ‘realness’ and integrity—he is a rapper who does his own thing without regard for what others might say about him, and he dares to position himself against the mainstream. As such, his performance becomes an exercise in (masculine) autonomy while at the same time strengthening his ‘subcultural capital’, in the words of Bannister (2006:26). If queering ‘acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm’ (Halperin, 1995:62), then these promo videos could be understood as a means of ‘straightening’ ‘Det ordnar seg’. They make its quite queer performance less oppositional, less provocative, and thus arguably less subversive. Or, in the words of Berggren (2012), they function as a ‘straight inoculation’. As self-serving promotional moves, as well, both ‘Første visning: Det ordnar seg for pappa’ and ‘Leo leser høyt kommentarer på musikkvideoen til “Det ordnar seg for pappa”’ were brilliant, as they countered the critique that was surely to come anyway, while at the same time giving massive publicity to the song.

In sum, Lars Vaular's straight-queering is articulated through peculiarity, which manifests in both mastery of and playfulness towards genre and gender conventions and discourses of authenticity in Norwegian hip-hop. Like Hawkins's British pop dandies, Vaular's peculiarity evokes a sense of (straight-)queerness that 'prescrib[es] difference at the same time as upholding dominant values' (Hawkins, 2009:105). But while the British pop dandy is firmly grounded in British culture (the Thatcher era, the art school tradition and the strong influence of Warholian aesthetics, for instance), Lars Vaular is—while obviously inspired by British pop culture, as well as the U.S. rap tradition—firmly grounded in the Norwegian context. Lars Vaular's peculiarity is forged by drawing on discourses that already circulate in contemporary Norwegian society: the notion of the 'new man', men's role in childrearing, the relationship between men and women in heterosexual relations, expectations of fatherhood, gay rights—and he engages (often critically) with the (hetero)masculinity that dominates the contemporary

Norwegian hip-hop scene. Perhaps then, Lars Vaular is not merely a Bergensian hip-hop dandy—bound to both location and genre—but also an example of the quintessential 'Norwegian pop dandy'.

## Conclusion

[Lars Vaular] pushes boundaries and gets away with almost anything.  
—NRK music journalist Ali Soufi on *666 GIR*<sup>188</sup>

During the course of this chapter I have considered how Lars Vaular navigates the balance between being one of the most central and respected figures in the highly heteromasculine and homosocial space of Norwegian rap and at the same time pushing the boundaries for gendered behaviour in his performances. I have argued that he in fact sustains his heterosexuality even as he playfully engages in alternative representations of masculinity through 'straight-queering' and genderplay. By providing readings of two very different music videos from different stages of Lars Vaular's career, I have engaged with some of the ways Vaular plays with gender.

'Mye mere' is an example of how queering occurs both *in spite of* and *because of* a homosocial setting. Granted, some of the performative elements in this music video build on classic gangsta rap tropes. However, its several layers of meaning also expose the potential instability embedded in the performance. Through body movements and mannerisms, lyrics, his fashion style, playfulness in approaching genre conventions, and a blurring of the lines between hip-hop, alternative rock and EDM, Lars Vaular's masculinity is queered and dandified, but subtly rather than confrontationally. In this sense, 'Mye mere' is an example of how even the slightest musical element can alter our perception of the artist as a gendered being. Moreover, 'Mye

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<sup>188</sup> See <http://p3.no/musikk/det-sjette-giret/> [retrieved: 11 February 2016].

mere' exemplifies how the homosocial setting both aids in the creation of and then destabilises hegemonic masculinity.

'Det ordnar seg' is an example of (and perhaps a recipe for) how to queer in a male homosocial environment without losing one's position. Here we see how Lars Vaular seemingly goes off on his own path, then reels himself in again. He is apparently rebelling against the narrow frames of heteromascularity but also participates in the sustaining of it through the exploitation of his close ties to the all-male space of the NMG/G gang. It seems as though Lars Vaular's relatively secure position as an insider in the rap milieu allows him the opportunity to play with convention without losing his position, at least to a certain point. 'Det ordnar seg' was a bit too much to handle for some of his fans, because it shook their notion of what rap should be, and how male rappers should stylise their bodies. For others, though, it further authenticated him, because he seemed comfortable performing from a place of 'being true to himself', and from a place where he deliberately challenges stereotypes. Perhaps most interesting is Lars Vaular's own discernment in these various contexts. While 'Det ordnar seg' seemed to destabilise his image and threaten his position at the centre of the Norwegian hip-hop scene, Lars Vaular took action to re-stabilise the situation by drawing on established discourses to buttress the image of himself as an autonomous artist. Thus, 'Det ordnar seg' provides a striking example of how queering in popular culture is often about claiming one's authenticity.



## CHAPTER 5: FINAL THOUGHTS

### Findings and conclusions

Hawkins (2016) has demonstrated from a musicological perspective that queerness is not fixed or static but rather changes with time, place and space. My work builds upon this premise, albeit within in a vastly different cultural context where strategies of queering do not work in quite the same ways as the queering of, for example, David Bowie, Prince or Annie Lennox. Popular culture in Norway maintains its own distinctions. While Norwegian artists are indeed part of an international community, in the sense that they pick up on and aestheticize discourses that are already circulating in Western popular culture, they are also very much part of their local and national discourses. As my analyses indicate, this local alignment makes for quite complex and fascinating constructs that are, in fact, decidedly transcultural in nature.<sup>189</sup> It is therefore crucial to frame Norwegian popular music in the context of Norwegian gender politics as well as the larger Western popular music discourse, and that is what I have done in this thesis.

Throughout the analyses presented in the cases studies, I have explored how three very different supposedly 'straight' Norwegian pop artists queer their acts. I have drawn upon methods used in popular musicology and audiovisual studies to articulate the ways in which queerness can arise as part of a musical performance. Queer theory has informed my inquiries, first of all by reminding me not to take anything for granted but rather to always look beneath the dominant or immediately available narrative. I have sought to draw attention to how queerness arises audiovisually in performances, often as the product of quite complex interactions between different aspects of the performance, including its genre conventions, production, lyrics, and body stylisation. Moreover, I have endeavoured to problematize and relate these queer, or straight-queer, expressions to a larger socio-political context. This is because I see queering

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<sup>189</sup> For more on popular music, gender and transculturality, see the work of Stan Hawkins, Mats Johansson, Birgitte Sandve and Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik connected to the research project *Popular Music and Gender in a Transcultural Context* at the University of Oslo (completed in 2014).

as a political act that in one way or another pushes the boundaries of acceptable gender behaviour; I also feel that queerness is performative and thereby belongs to anybody, regardless of sexual or gender identity.

A central aim of this thesis has been to investigate the political potential of straight-queering in mainstream expressions, as well as taking up the debate of why queer aesthetics influence public discourses of gender and sexuality. I approached this issue via existing popular musicological research that has focused on queering as infiltration<sup>190</sup> and/or appropriation.<sup>191</sup> My intention has been to de-essentialise gender norms, showing that it is not possible to label the straight-queering of any of my case studies as either of the above options alone. Instead, my case studies generally embody both a sense of queer appropriation and a sense of queer infiltration in turn, depending upon what part of a given performance one focuses upon. I will extend this point by drawing a few further conclusions in what follows below.

I started this project by hypothesising that the reason there are so few 'out' queer artists in Norway is because Norwegian gender politics have been and remain both heteronormative and homonormative. Assuming that the performances of Norwegian artists supply a window into the gender discourse in Norwegian society, what does my study achieve? On the one hand, though genre conventions impact this dynamic too (in these cases, those of hip-hop and the singer-songwriter tradition), my case studies' playful engagement with sometimes quite sexually explicit expressions (KUUK, of course, but also Kaja Gunnufsen) implies that the Norwegian public discourse on gender and sexuality is both open and very liberal. Moreover, all three of my case studies suggest that new ideas about masculinity, femininity and sexual identity are in fact entering the mainstream and available to be aestheticized through performance. As mentioned in chapter 1, the mainstream public discourse in Norway has started to move beyond an exclusive focus on gay/lesbian identity into other gender constellations, such as transgenderism. Insofar as KUUK, Gunnufsen

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<sup>190</sup> See Jarman-Ivens, 2009; Kerton, 2006.

<sup>191</sup> See Jarman-Ivens, 2004; Hawkins, 2009.

and Vaular engage in this discourse, they are participants in the queering of Norwegian gender norms.

On the other hand, it could be argued that their straight-queering is not an effort to disrupt gender norms but instead simply the 'politically correct' way to engage in gender politics in contemporary Norwegian popular culture. As discussed in chapter 1, Norway is a highly normative society with great demands for conformity, including to gender norms. Granted, the policing of gender norms often manifests in bullying of queer people, especially children and youth in schools. However, the values of tolerance and equality are equally a part of normative society, which also manifests in the school curriculum (at least in public schools). Paradoxically, then, normative society seems to encompass both compliance with strict gender norms *and* a tolerance towards people who are 'different'. Importantly, because queer expressions often are included in the expressions that are encompassed by the tolerance ideal, they become bound up in Norway's normativity. This implies that artists queer their acts because it is 'politically correct', not necessarily because they want to challenge gender norms. It is not that all straight-queering is corrupted or 'un-queer' but that straight-queering and the application of queer aesthetics within a frame of straightness often signal both queerness (rebellion against gender norms) and conformity (to a norm of tolerance and openness) *at the same time*. Importantly, as my case studies exemplify, straight-queering often becomes problematic in the sense that queerness feels 'hijacked' and made straight.

Another dimension of straight-queering that emerges in my case studies is that queerness is only applied and accepted *to a certain point*. An even more recent example will illustrate this further: as I was completing my thesis in June 2016, the tragic massacre of mostly gay men at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida, supplied a stark reminder of the persistence of queer phobia all over the world. Though such an act is in many ways far removed from the Norwegian reality, it sparked renewed discussion of the ways in which queerness remains marginalised in Norway as well. Following the

tragic news, journalist Morten Hegseth (2016) identified the ‘new homo hatred’ in Norway:<sup>192</sup>

Lately I have often been told that I am ‘the kind of gay man that people like’. I am sure these kinds of utterings are supposed to be a compliment, but this attitude is part of the new homo hatred. Several famous gay men also often talk about how uncomfortable they find expressive gay behaviour to be. There is something deeply reactionary about this [...] It is not the comfortable and conforming gay men who have changed the world. It is the outrageous people in the gay community who have moved, and continues to move, boundaries [...] The answer must be that we continue to make out, hold hands, and shout about how much we love to love someone of our own gender. (Hegseth, 2016)<sup>193</sup>

The premise that there are acceptable and unacceptable forms of queerness resonates in my analyses,<sup>194</sup> especially concerning Lars Vaular and KUUK. While support of gay/lesbian rights is considered acceptable in principle, more radical queer expressions are often toned down, aestheticized and otherwise made acceptable to the largest possible audience. Straight-queer performances, then, are not merely about queering normativity but also about balancing queer and straight signifiers in a way that plays on deviance or difference while remaining within accepted norms. The point I am arriving at is that such a play with gender norms creates a sense of ‘fake queering’—queerness bound up in normativity. This notion of ‘fake queering’ converges on Ålvik's (2014) theorisation of ‘fake naivety’ in Norwegian pop music. In his controversial study of Marit Larsen, Ålvik

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<sup>192</sup> See <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/orlando-massakren/det-nye-homohatet/a/23711173/> [retrieved 13 June 2016].

<sup>193</sup> My translation. Original: Den siste tiden har jeg ofte fått høre at jeg er en ‘sånn homo som folk liker’: Jeg er ikke så homo at det vekker ubehag. Og selv om uttalelser som dette sikkert er godt ment, er denne typen holdninger en del av det nye homohatet. Flere kjente homofile snakker også ofte ut om hvor ubehagelig de synes ekspressiv homofil oppførsel er. Det er noe dypt reaksjonært over det. [...] det ikke de komfortable og konforme homsene som har forandret verden. Det er de grenseløse i homokulturen som har flytta, og fremdeles flytter, grenser. [...] Svaret må i hvert fall være at vi fortsetter å kline, holder hender og skriker høyt ut hvor mye vi elsker å elske noen av det samme kjønn (Hegseth, 2016).

<sup>194</sup> Beasley and colleagues (2015) also make this point. See my discussion of straight-queering in chapter 1.

argues that Larsen is 'faking naivety as part of her persona, first and foremost in order to equip it with an appeal that is not hampered by displays of power' (Ålvik, 2014:91). Like fake naivety, fake queering functions as a form of masking. Whereas fake naivety disguises agency (ibid. 93), I would argue that fake queering disguises the dullness often associated with normative identity. Moreover, as with fake naivety, fake queering is an intentional ploy for manipulating one's gender expression. So, while Marit Larsen employs fake naivety as an important ingredient in her forging of the feminine stereotypes 'girl next door', 'girl-child', and 'housewife' (ibid. 91), my case studies demonstrate how fake queering serves to instate a sense of camp, weirdness and transgression. In terms of popular music performances in particular, as I discussed in chapter 1, gender and sexuality are closely tied to notions of authenticity—that is, queering often translates to authenticity, in that it contributes directly to an artistic persona that stands out from the crowd. A similar point is posited by Ålvik when he argues that Larsen's fake naivety 'situate(s) her project in a lineage of rock nostalgia that certainly enhances her credibility in fans' eyes' (ibid. 93). My conclusion, then, is that 'fake queering' challenges certain aspects of traditional gender norms while also sustaining the relatively narrow framework of a Norwegian gender discourse. Artists, then, may queer their acts without necessarily having a political intention.

The case studies I have analysed demonstrate the different ways in which queerness and normativity are bound up in one another. KUUK queers femininity by actively refusing to obey its norms in hip-hop. From a feminist perspective, their act helps to open the rap scene to female participation and makes a strong statement against anti-feminist voices as well as conventional ideals of beauty. At the same time, however, KUUK capitalises on traits that reinforce a dominant identity (they are white, well educated and well spoken). I question, then, whether they actually challenge normativity or simply demonstrate their already acquired privilege.

When artists employ irony and playfulness in their acts, gender ambiguity sometimes seems to follow, as is the case, I have argued, with Kaja Gunnufsen. She is popular not because she is necessary 'normal acting' but because she queers normality by infusing it with weirdness. Still, while her







weirdness, her playful, ironic take on artistry, and her 'campness' add a queer twist to her persona, her feminine display is still in many respects quite normative.






Lars Vaular's visual style, which transitioned from a traditional heteromascularity associated with gangsta rap to a more metrosexual orientation, clearly sets out to challenge gender norms. His music, which transitioned from traditional beat-based rap to a style much more inspired by pop and electronic music, likewise impacts his gendered persona. Of my three examples, he most obviously queered his act but also most obviously policed his queering, demonstrating a unique mastery of the discourses of authenticity.

While all three case studies demonstrate that straight-queering might well problematize gender norms in a number of ways, the fact that straightness remains quite visible and audible in these acts as well makes them less threatening and more acceptable to the mainstream audience. In general, the fact that all of my cases have received excellent critical reviews in Norway, and are relatively popular, suggests that they are queering within the boundaries of what is considered acceptable. Their straight-queering, that is, relies on a cunning negotiation of a set of discourses that not only queers straightness but also straightens queerness. While the cases I have analysed provide valuable information about the state of the discourse on gender and sexuality in contemporary Norwegian society, more studies are clearly warranted to fortify my general conclusions. Hence, understanding the processes of queering in a Norwegian context requires further research. Granted, my analyses were fully embedded in my own perspectives, theoretical and methodological choices. Other voices have to join in. My hope is that the exploration of Norwegian artists I have conducted and their antics of straight-queering will inspire future critical research into queerness and other issues of gender and sexuality as they evolve in contemporary Norwegian popular culture.

## APPENDIX

Fig. 2.1: Video table for 'HTG'

SCREENSHOT	LYRICS (EXCERPTS)	MUSICAL ELEMENT	VISUAL ACTION	DURATA
	No lyrics	Intro No music. Sound of water	Camera panning upwards. Revealing bloody M and R	0.0-0.49
	Voice effects. Not able to make out what is said	Music starts	Camera zooms out, revealing a pile of people. Visual disturbance	(0.09)
		Beat sets in as an attack. Percussive Breathing, fuzz guitar sounds and synth theme is introduced	A series of people moving in the ring. Blinking lights.	(0.21)
			The plot of the "bitchfight" is introduced	(0,40)
	S: "Hvis du skal ut.."	Verse 1 Fuzz guitar disappears. Synth theme continues	Refsum and Solbergnes (R & S) comes out of house as leaders of a all-female gang.	0.49-1.18
	S:"Du leter meg opp som Tore på Sporet.."	Synth theme	The fight starts. S is fighting another girl, seemingly losing	(1.00)

	R:"Ekke sånn jente som flørter..." S: screaming voice on 'flørter' R: 'cute' speaking voice	Chorus Fuzz guitar is reintroduced . Bass intensified.	The fight intensifies. S seems to win after pep-talk from R	1.18-1.30
	R:"Vil du ha rassa..."	Verse 2 Dynamics brought down. Fuzz guitar disappears, synth theme continues.	R raps, flanked by two naked men in shower	1.30-1.58
	S:"Sette meg oppå deg..."		Back to the fight. R joins in, protecting S from an ambush	(1.41)
	R:"Ekke sånn jente som flørter..."	Chorus 2 Fuzz guitar is reintroduced . Bass intensified.	Chaos, as the fight spins out of control. R&S raps into the camera in front of ring	1.58-2.13
	R:"Du starter noe i meg..."	Verse 3 Dynamics brought down. Synth theme continues.	A sudden cut back to the shower scene	2.13-2.28
	S:"Ikkje prøv å lek HTG..."	Post chorus/bridge	R&S in a hot tub	2.28-2.40
	S:"...når du veit du vil være med"		'Guy with weasel' suddenly appears	(2.34)



	R:"Ekke sånn jente som ..."	Chorus 3 Fuzz guitar is reintroduced . Bass intensified. Dynamics maintained to the end of the song	Party in hot tub with all the girls	2.40-2.54
	R:"Ekke sånn jente som..."		Cutback to shower scene	(2.47)
	S:"Ikkje prøv å lek HTG..."	Post chorus/bridge	R&S alone in the hot tub. Flashes of man with weasel	2.54-3.03
	R&S:"Money, dick, weed..."	Outro	Back to the ring, fighting continues. R&S raps into camera	3.03-3.20
	R&S:"Money, dick, weed..."		The dominating man and 'kattebikkja' in hot tub	(3.05)
	R&S:"Money, dick, weed..."		Guy with weasel joins in, appears as the dark voice echoing R's "money, dick..."	(3.14)
			R & S dancing among the passed out bodies.	(3.20)










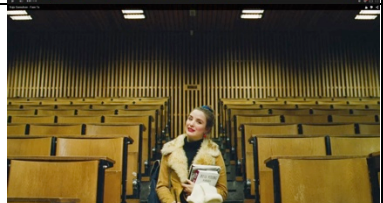











	Song ends with a scream		Video finishes as R punch the seemingly terrified "kattebikkja" in the face	(3.24)
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Fig. 3.5: Video table for 'Faen Ta'








SCREENSHOT	MUSICAL AND VISUAL ELEMENTS	LYRICS	DURAT A
	Intro without music	<i>Woman in video:</i> Jeg er opptatt av helse, og kosthold. Og å holde meg i form (I am interested in health and diet, and to stay in shape)	0.00-0.26
		<i>Georg:</i> Jeg heter Georg. Jeg er 19 år. (My name is Georg. I am 19 years old)	
		<i>Man in the video:</i> Ehh..jeg liker musikk. (Ehh..I like music)	
		<i>Woman in video:</i> Å være sosial. Å like å ta seg et glass eller to. (To be social. To like having a drink or two)	
		<i>Woman in video:</i> Men han må like å gå tur i skog og mark. (But he has to enjoy hiking)	

		<i>Georg</i> : Jeg vil ha noen å dele livet med (I want someone to share my life with)	
	Music starts	<i>Man in video</i> : Det er veldig fint om hun liker å danse (It is nice if she likes to dance) <i>Kaja G</i> : I mars satt vi på St. Hallvard's (In March we sat at St. Hallvard's..)	0.26-0.51
		..plass (..square)  Vi så på livet vårt gå i (we witnessed our lives fall into..)	
		dass (..pieces)  Jeg tenker ofte på Neil.. (I often think about Neil..)	
	The three first scenes follows a rhythmic pattern appearing on the first beat of every second bar.	..Young (..Young).  Og på å gjøre no' med min fas.. (and about getting into sha..)	
	Scenes lose strict rhythm  Backup singing and guitar theme is introduced (see fig. 3.2)	..ong (..pe)	
	Percussive breathing sound introduced  Overdubbing of voices	Snart er det bikinisesong (Soon it will be bikini season)	
			



	Second verse starts	Og vi vil kjempe for friheten til folket, men er opptatt av å sitte på Facebook å pøke. Det er ingen andres skyld at livet er fælt. (And we want to fight for people's rights, but are preoccupied sitting on Facebook pøking. It is nobody's fault but or own that life sucks).	0.51-1.14
		Problemet er hos oss primært (The problem is primarily within ourselves)	
			
	Pre-chorus	På trikken er det ingen som prater og mangel på sex har gjort meg til en taper (On the tram there is no one talking, and the lack of sex has made me a loser)	1.14-1.46
		Og jeg har begynt å trene for å bli en av de pene, men faen, Kaja, du er.. (and I have started to work out to become one of the pretty, but fuck, Kaja, you are..) (Break)  .fortsatt alene (...still alone)	
	6-bar guitar theme signals the upcoming chorus	Ja, du er fortsatt alene (Yes, you are still alone)	
	Chorus begins Slight increase in dynamics because of intensification of backup vocals.	Jeg er blå fra topp til tå (I am blue from head to toe)	1.46-3.07

		<i>Backup-singer:</i> Faen, Kaja, ta deg sammen nå. Du har det bedre enn du kan forstå (Fuck, Kaja, pull yourself together. You are better off than you will ever understand)	
		Jeg er blå, hvordan skal det gå (I am blue, how will this end)	
		Hvordan skal det gå? Hvordan skal.. (How will this end? How will..)	
	Dynamics brought down for the verse. Bass, drums and Kaja Gunnufsen's voice dominate yet again.	..det? I januar følte jeg mer rar. Jeg dro til legen og fikk noen.. (..this? In January I felt weird. I went to the doctor and got some..)	
		..kjipe svar. Livet er ikke hva det en gang var. (..crappy answers. Life is not what it used to be)	
		For jeg er aldri føre var, jeg er etter snar. (Because I am never safe (than sorry), I am (only) sorry.)	
	The image of the man coming out of a closet is dwelled on. Density increased by reintroducing several layers of vocal.	Da jeg var barn ble jeg fortalt at jeg tenker for mye, og det er aldri bra. Men det er noe de ikke har forstått, jeg trives når ting går trått. Melankoli.. (When I was a child I was told that I think too much, and that is never a good thing. But there is something they do not get. I like it when things go to pieces. I think melancholia..) (Break)	
		..synes jeg er rått (..is exiting)	

	<p>6-bar guitar theme signals the upcoming chorus</p>	<p>Jeg er.. (I am..)</p>	<p>3.07-4.08</p>
		<p>..blå fra topp til tå (..blue from head to toe)</p>	
		<p><i>Backup-singer:</i> Faen Kaja, ta deg sammen nå. Du har det bedre enn du kan forstå (Fuck, Kaja, pull yourself together. You are better off than you will ever understand) Jeg er blå..</p>	
	<p>Chorus transitions directly into outro</p>	<p>..hvordan skal det gå? Hvordan skal det gå? Hvordan skal det gå?</p>	
		<p><i>Backup-singer:</i> Faen Kaja, ta deg sammen nå. Du har det bedre.. (Fuck, Kaja, pull yourself together. You are better..)</p>	
		<p>..enn du kan forstå (..off than you will ever understand) Jeg er blå fra topp til tå. <i>Backup-singer:</i> Faen Kaja, ta deg sammen nå. Du har det bedre enn du kan forstå (I am blue from head to toe. <i>Backup-singer:</i> Fuck, Kaja, pull yourself together. You are better off than you will ever understand)</p>	
			

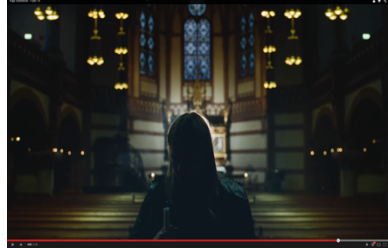







	Music tones out. Deceptive cadence, followed by fermata, that 'leaves us hanging'.		
	Boy in the video who loses his food on the ground. The words "Faen ta" appears on the screen		4.08-4.38
	The boy turns around and walks into the night. The sound of his fottsteps fades out.		

Fig. 4.2: Video table for 'Mye Mere'

SCREENSHOT	LYRICS (EXCERPTS)	MUSICAL ELEMENT	VISUAL ACTION	DURATA
		Intro  Only bass	Lars Vaular (LV) is filmed looking down	0-0.12
	LV: 'Han var en negative mann...'	Verse 1	LV raps into camera. Jonas V (JV) in background	0.12-0.50
	LV: 'Så hardt, samme som i går...'	Bridge  Drum beat is removed, only bass and clap sound remaining	LV raps into camera. JV in background	0.50-1.02



	<p>LV: 'Mange, mange...'</p>	<p>Chorus 1</p> <p>'Hoover'-sound is introduced</p>	<p>LV raps into camera. JV in background</p>	<p>1.02-1.26</p>
	<p>JV: 'Mørke, tomme blikk...'</p>	<p>Verse 2</p> <p>Dynamics brought down: Dark, gritty bass.</p> <p>Drum beat introduced after 4 bars</p>	<p>JV faces the camera and starts rapping</p> <p>LV waves his arms in the background</p> <p>Amorim stretches out an arm, touching JV</p>	<p>1.26-1.52</p>
	<p>JV: 'Eg blir aldri lei denne dansen..'</p>	<p>Bridge</p> <p>Drum beat is removed, only bass and clap sound remaining</p>	<p>JV in focus, LV in the back dancing/waving his arms</p>	<p>1.52-2.03</p>
	<p>LV: 'Mange, mange...'</p>	<p>Chorus 2</p> <p>'Hoover'-sound</p>	<p>JV in focus, LV in the back dancing/waving his arms</p>	<p>2.03-2.27</p>
	<p>LV: 'NMG-G gjeng, mer kaos, mye mere spenn..'</p> <p>LV, at 2.37: 'Mye mer respekt for min baby mama....'</p> <p>LV, at 2.49: 'Vetsje de kem faen eg tror eg e eller?'</p>	<p>Verse 3</p> <p>Dynamics brought down, as in verse 2.</p> <p>Break at 2.37, (all other instruments than voice is removed), creating a break.</p> <p>Break at 2.49</p>	<p>LV in focus. JV in the background</p>	<p>2.27-2.51</p>















	'Mange, mange...'	Chorus 3  'Hoover'-sound	Blinking lights in second half of chorus, adds a 'rave feel'	2.51-3.17
		Outro  Bass and drum beat	LV looks down. Video ends abruptly.	3.17-3.32

Fig. 4.4: Video table for 'Det ordnar seg for pappa'

SCREENSHOT	LYRICS	MUSICAL ELEMENT	VISUAL ACTION	DURATA
		Intro. 80s synth, sustained chords. Drum machine Heavy reverb in drums,	Vaular walks to barre, stretches his leg	0-0.20
	'Dette må finnes en ordning på...'	Chorus 1 Several layers of vocal 80s synth sustained chords	Dance choreography on the floor	0.20-0.58
	'Eg våknet opp...'	Verse 1 Snare drum 'attacks' with heavy reverb. Synth fillers (chords disappear).		0.58-1.20

			Scene shifts as Vaular pulls back curtain in front of a mirror	
	'I sideleie, likevel ustabil'	Snare drum 'attack' as lights goes off.	Scene shift from floor to chair. Lights go off.  Dance choreography sitting on chair	1.20-1.27
	'Dette må finnes en ordning på..'	Chorus 2 Several layers of vocal 80s synth sustained chords		1.27-2.05
  	'Eg vil bare leve mitt liv..'	Verse 2 Snare drum 'attacks' with heavy reverb. Synth fillers (chords disappear).	Scene shift, from chair to room with door  Standing dance choreography. Characterised by more jumps and kicks.	2.05-2.34
	'Dette må finnes en ordning på..'	Chorus 3 Several layers of vocals 80s synth sustained chords	Scene shift, from room with door to dark room with 'stars' and lamps	2.34-3.15



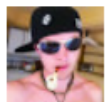
		Saxophone line is introduced	Vaular sings directly into the camera. Choreography mostly consistent of arm movements.	
		Outro. No music	Vaular turns the light off and walks away.	3.15-3.40

Fig. 4.6: Online comments to 'Det ordnar seg for pappa'



**Tha King** For 1 år siden

Elendig... Rett å slett kvalmt å se på...  
Han kan så mykje bedre.  
Terningkast null.

Svar •  



**Chimp Anzee** For 1 år siden

Hva faen skjer med den videon? Hva skjedde med norsk hiphop? Virker som det går over til GayHop som i USA

Svar • 1  



**Point Blur** For 1 år siden

Dette er noe av det kuleste som har vært gjort innenfor norsk hiphop. Ellers er det jævlig kul musikk.

Svar •  



**HynnFTW** For 1 år siden

Break the stereotypes! Stå på!

Svar •  

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KUUK *Hor*, Bangles & Brass Records

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