

Bending the Body: A textual analysis of Stromae and Beyoncé's body politics

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INTRODUCTION:

Since the introduction of the music video format, visual culture has become increasingly important in the popular music industry. Particularly, the visualization of the performer's body is a key aspect of the industry's marketing strategies. Not surprisingly, popular and academic debates have scrutinized the role of these bodily representations. Within these discourses, a dominant trope has emerged, which stresses that the body is often sexualized, objectified and rid of any agency. Taking into account that most of the bodies on display belong to women, this discourse argues that these bodily representations serve the preservation of a patriarchal and heteronormative hegemony (e.g., Wallis, 2011).

Moreover, a polarization takes place when discussing these representations. Whereas female bodies are argued to be objectified, male bodies in videos are considered to be desexualized, displaced or disguised (Railton & Watson, 2011). These strategies ensure that the male body cannot become a tool of emasculation by becoming the object of sexual desire and guarantees that men can assert their agency. Additionally, these scholars argue that the dimensions of race and ethnicity further organizes these bodies into a hierarchy where white bodies are represented as superior to all bodies of color. As such, representations of black male and female bodies are more likely to be represented in a hypersexual way than white male bodies.

The paper we are going to present today aims to nuance these debates. Specifically, we want to demonstrate how the mediatized body can be used to articulate intersectional gender and racial subject positions and empowerment. To fortify our argument, we focus on two artists relevant to this topic, namely American female artist Beyoncé and Belgian male artist Stromae. Both artists engage in body politics that complicate the dominant assumption that black gendered bodies on display are per definition vulnerable, (hyper-)sexualized, or objectified. Based on a textual analysis of their latest video clips (two for each artist), we argue that Beyoncé and Stromae explore and embody diverse and complex subject positions in their media representations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To inform our research, we draw in the first place on critical theory. We will highlight a few key insights that help to nuance the dichotomous debates on the body. First, we want to underscore the importance of taking the material body into account. A lot of studies have only focused on the symbolic interpretations of gender, race, ethnicity and thereby ignored the materiality of the body. This links up to a dominant discourse that often makes a distinction between mind and body, whereas many argue to consider both as related to one another. Elizabeth Grosz refers to this as corporeality. A concept that goes beyond the dichotomy/distinction/dualism between mind and body. This concept is relevant for media studies as it allows to consider bodies, depicted on screen, as producing subject positions.

Further, she stresses the corporeality of both men and women, thereby challenging the hegemonic discourse that women are more biological and natural (and thus embodied) than men, which is often visible in the representations of women as more corporeal. Linda Alcoff agrees with Grosz on her interpretation of corporeality and extends it to race. Linda Alcoff: Both race and sex ... are most definitely physical, marked on and through the body, lived as a material experience, visible as surface phenomena and determinant of economic and political status". Like women, non-white subjects are often considered more corporeal than white bodies, again, reiterated in many representational practices.

Second, we want to stress the importance of looking at the body as inherently **intersectional**. Weiss exclaimed, among others, that there is no such things as "the body", as the body is always something more specific. When we talk about bodies, we talk about women's bodies, white male bodies, black female bodies, etc. The intersectionality of the body with one or more identities, draws on intersectionality theory (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989 and Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006) that pointed out that gender identities should always be understood in relation to class, age, sexuality and ethnicity as the body is always signified as well as 'embodied' in relation to one another. For this paper, we are particularly interested in the coming together of race/ethnicity and gender, although acknowledging the other identity axes at stake in this work (for instance class identities).

Third, when focusing on media studies, the attention to the representation of the black male and female bodies, especially in relation to body politics has been scarce. The few studies that did tackle the matter, often focused on the symbolic annihilation of non-white identities (and thus bodies)(cf. Larry Gross) or on the politics of othering non-white identities (in the tradition of orientalism and Said). We however want to counterargue that the black subjects within the text produce multiple and changing subject positions.

METHODOLOGY:

Our textual analysis was basically a close reading of two videos of each artist. We chose for both artists because they both can be considered successful and part of the mainstream who, nonetheless, publicly tackle gender and racial inequalities in the extra-textual context. We were therefore interested whether these engaged and critical subject positions, which they articulate in their artist personae, were also present within their own textual contents. Because of reasons we stated at the beginning of our presentation, we decided to focus on their latest music videos. Stromae's Papaoutai, Tous les memes en Beyoncé's Drunk in Love and Pretty Hurts. (all 2013)

Add Short summary of the four videos.

Tous Les Memes: In Tous Les Memes, Stromae impersonates two characters (a male and a female character, even though the main difference in embodiment is the haircut and gestures). He switches between the two characters even though the video is shot in the same setting. As a man, he is together with a white woman who does not mind being together with a cliché man. As a woman, he is together with a black man who is fed up with his clichéd masculine attitude.

Papaoutai: In Papaoutai, we see a boy who has no father. Nonetheless, in his imagination he has a father. Stromae performs the father, but the father is played like a lifesized dummie. He does not move and he thus, in fact, represents the absent father. Always present, but unable to act or do anything in the real life world of the boy.

Drunk in Love: In Drunk in Love, Beyoncé is celebrating her own sexuality by dancing on the beach. She flirts with the camera and, in the end, Jay-Z (her real life husband) does some rhymes and she hugs him. It is all set on the beach and it does not contain a specific narrative.

Pretty Hurts: In contrast, Beyoncé's last video contains a narrative of a girl (which she performs) who participates in a beauty contest. We see the emotional and physical labor these girls have to endure in trying to be able to participate and win. Beyoncé does not win.

ANALYSIS:

- **Use of the material body**

First, let us first describe how the material body is used. What we noticed is that in the four videos the performative body is used in quite different ways. First, we have Stromae's performance of the body of the father figure in Papaoutai. He embodies an almost complete passivity in this video, posing as a life-sized puppet. Even in the small dance sequence in which his body comes to life –imagined by the boy who longs for his absent father– his gestures can be described as robotic. This stands in great contrast to his video for Tous les Memes in which he bends his body in such ways that in a few scenes it embodies an exaggerated masculinity and in other scenes an exaggerated femininity while, at the same time, not hiding the fact that he has a male body.

Beyoncé presents us in the music video of Pretty Hurts with an active body –in the basic sense of the word– albeit a body that is docile, malleable and self-disciplined in the sense that she shapes her own body to meet the standards set out by Western beauty ideals (e.g., plastic surgery). In Drunk in Love she is also quite active (crawling, dancing, flirting with the camera and her husband, sexualized gestures). In this video, her body is sexualized and object of the gaze by means of close-ups and fragmentations of her body.

- **Intersectionality**

Secondly, Beyoncé not only emphasizes the femaleness of her body but also the blackness. Drawing on critical theory that emphasizes an intersectional approach, our reading of the body politics in the videos of both artists sheds a light on the way bodies are never just bodies: they are male, female and, at the same time, racially and ethnically marked. In the case of Beyoncé's Drunk in Love, we witness an embodiment of the sexualized exotic other: the video is set on the beach, Beyoncé's semi-clothed – lingerie and a see-through gown - while moving animal-like on the sand and in the water. On the other hand, blackness is represented as hegemonic; the video reads as a black reinterpretation of Chris Isaac's Wicked Game (1990), having two main black characters (herself and her partner Jay Z), having it shot at night instead of daylight and having Beyoncé as the dominant character. Even though she uses her body in a similar way as the model in Chris Isaac's video, she controls the gaze: she wants you to look at her "beautiful black body". In Pretty Hurts, the black identity is less

emphasized but is nonetheless present in the way it is juxtaposed to a nationalist white beauty ideal, something she expresses in the lyric that reads: “perfection is the disease of a nation”. Even though the contestants are ethnically diverse, the winner is nonetheless a white female whose face looks like it had several plastic surgeries.

In Stromae’s videos as well, ethnic and racial diversity is integrated. In *Tous les Memes*, we see Stromae he/she character involved with a black guy and a white girl, while his alter ego character is also non-white. It represents mixed racial intimacies and a multicultural society as a natural setting instead of being a politically correct statement. *Papaoutai* differs from this video by presenting us a community in which black is hegemonic, which is stressed by situating the characters (the father, the son, the neighbors) in a white suburban setting. Like Beyoncé’s *Drunk in Love*, we see a reversal of a white text/setting into a non-white text/setting.

- **Interpreting the different subject positions**

Since our starting point was to counterargue the idea that bodies are often used in dichotomous gendered ways, we want to interpret these representations of the material body as offering different subject positions. Starting with Beyoncé, it is correct to point out that Beyoncé reiterates the stereotype of exotic black femininity, but looking at how she embodies that stereotype reveals a clear agency. She controls the gaze: she directs the camera (following her on the beach, towards the sea) and she addresses the camera – emphasized by her lip-syncing to the video. What we see are, indeed, hypersexual practices but they are not used to objectify her body nor to stress a distinction between her mind and her body. Instead, she reclaims her body as both material and sexual – which we consider a female pleasure strategy – and thereby it can be interpreted as a form of female corporeal empowerment. In contrast to *Drunk in Love*, *Pretty Hurts* offers two subject positions: the first subject position corresponds to the docile body that is disciplining her own body, the second subject position is linked to the character that resists the disciplining by smashing the pageants awards which symbolize the beauty hierarchies in Western societies. Nonetheless, both subject positions are used in a text that, as a whole, critiques the way femininity is often equalized to an exaggerated femininity where femininity becomes a masquerade. Besides, the emphasis of the physical transformations the body has to go through to embody the hyperfemininity is challenged. As such, both videos – in quite different ways – engage in an active female empowerment. The videos embrace the material body and advocate female agency.

Stromae is not concerned with self-empowerment but is rather interested in the construction of masculinity and femininity in relation to class and race. In *Tous Les Memes*, two subject positions are offered, both embodied by Stromae as either male or female, which are continuously swapped throughout the video, which also mirrors the shifting subject positions in the lyrics of the song. The articulation of the images to the lyrics allows the video to be interpreted as a critique of traditional gender roles and embodied performances. This becomes accentuated in the moment in which a physical female alter ego of Stromae is introduced that allows to re-read the video from ‘her’ perspective as a he/she character. It might well be that there is a countersong to this song, performed by this female character who embodies both a

male and female side, that questions clichéd feminine behavior.

Whereas TLM scrutinizes masculinity and femininity, Papaoutai mainly focuses on masculinity and in particular fatherhood. The narrative depicted in the video offers two subject positions; one embodied by the absent/present father figure (performed by Stromae) and one by the young son who 'imagines' his father as being part of his life, albeit as a passive and lifeless figure. Besides both subject positions imagined in the video, it is important to stress that the lyrics also offer a third subject position in the chorus, namely society who is asking the boy where his father is; as such, the video not only critiques the absent father but as well society who upholds specific family norms and imposes them onto those who do not comply.

CONCLUSION:

Reflecting on the body politics displayed in the work of both performers, we concluded that the representations of the non-white material body is political in the sense that it offers subject positions that advocate empowerment and agency, even though more explicitly in the work of Beyoncé. With the exception of *Drunk in Love*, they also embody a form of critique of traditional masculinity and femininity, parent relationships and society. They however use different strategies in using the non-white material body. Beyoncé is mostly concerned with using her own body to critique hegemonic discourses on the body, whereas Stromae uses his material body as a leverage for sociocultural issues that may relate to the body but not necessarily.