RIOT GRRRL:
A POSTMODERN FEMINIST INITIATIVE

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Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter One Musical timeline – Meaning, Style and Violence 4

Chapter Two Autism, Understanding and the Deaf Masculine Ear 11

Chapter Three Expression, Gender, Identity, Progress? 16

Chapter Four ‘Self-cultivation’ or Self Care? 22

Chapter Five Reinvention, Regulation and The Scream I 27

Reinvention, Regulation and The Scream II 33

Chapter Six Community, Solidarity, Totalitarianism and the Media 37

Conclusion 45

Bibliography

Audio and Image CDs enclosed
Introduction

‘Voice! That too, is launching forth and effusion without return. Exclamation, cry, breathlessness, yell, cough, vomit, music’
Helene Cixous cited in Kemp and Squires 1997: 235

“Instead of clearly defined trajectories”, it has been said, “female rebellion” and arguably female-centred or feminine discourse “is a kind of subterranean river that wells up unexpectedly from time to time, seemingly out of nowhere, then disappears below the surface again” (Reynolds and Press 1995: 230). Music and language, according to Helene Cixous, are inseparably one and the same:

...writing and voice are entwined and interwoven and writing’s continuity / voice’s rhythm take each other’s breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries (Cixous cited in Kemp and Squires 1997: 233).

Together, voice, rhythm, writing, music spray forth from the body of the feminine, creating a monstrous ‘exclamation, cry, breathlessness, yell, cough, vomit’ emitted from the bowls of the oppressed and the ‘disabled articulate’1 (Cixous cited in Kemp and Squires 1997: 235). This description of the feminine, the woman discovering her voice – or opening her mouth for the first time, typifies the howling rage and ‘feminist fury’, adopted by Riot Grrrl bands such as Bikini Kill, Babes in Toyland and early Sleater-Kinney and which has come to be explicitly identified with the Riot Grrrl genre of the early 1990s. Challenging the binary metaphors of activity/passivity – man/woman, which ‘carries us beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organised’, the riot grrrls challenged the notions of place, sexuality, creativity and voice – confronting and defying the general consensus shared in the rock and roll elite and public audiences that, as Bob Dylan once said, “chicks” who perform “whore themselves” (Cixous cited in ibid: 232): (Bob Dylan cited in Carson et al: 42). Taking inspiration from the punks of the 1970s and rebelling against sexual stereotypes of women and the contradictions these stereotypes create, the riot grrrls played up the established notions of femininity and sexuality, and embraced the image of ‘chicks

1 I use the term to depict how women artists, writers and creators, arguably, can be described as the ‘disabled articulate’. Although they have a voice that deserves to be expressed, women can often find themselves disabled insofar as they can be and are often subject to oppression and silencing, something which is discussed later.
whoring themselves' on stage, inventing such fashions as the kinderwhore look and scrawling derogatory words such as ‘slut’ across their midriffs whilst performing. Arguably, riot grrrl, like punk, is a phenomenon that typifies the disillusion with ‘truth’ and the reassessment of interpretation which has emerged from the modern era. This genre, therefore, can be identified as postmodern. The postmodern period is thought to have began around the 1950s and is still occurring in the 21st century.

Generally speaking, postmodernity is considered to be distinct from the preceding (modern) period in a number of ways. As Terry Eagleton outlines, postmodernity is ‘suspicious of classical notions of…truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation’ associated with modernity, and views the world instead as

Contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities (Eagleton 1996: Preface).

According to postmodern theorist Zigmund Bauman, however there is an intricate relationship of continuity and discontinuity “between the present social condition and the formation that preceded and gestated it”, i.e. modernity (Bauman 1992: 238).

The term postmodernity renders accurately the defining traits of the social condition that emerged throughout the affluent countries of Europe and of European descent in the course of the twentieth century, and took its present shape in the second half of that century (Bauman 1992: 238).

Bauman identifies institutionalised plurality, variety, contingency and ambivalence, which he regards as fortunate unintended outcomes of modernity, as the key ‘defining traits’ of postmodernism. He regards these ‘useful deliveries’ as preferable to the intended outcomes: universality, homogeneity, monotony and clarity which constituted the goal of the linear, progressional enterprise of modernity, an enterprise which Bauman considers to have ‘lived in and through self-deception’ for most of its history (Bauman 1991: 10). To the extent that it produced desirable outcomes, Bauman sees the ‘self-deception’ as a benefit, ‘ignorance as a privilege’ (ibid.). To
some extent postmodernity for Bauman represents ‘modernity emancipated from false  
consciousness’.

This dissertation is primarily concerned with riot grrrl as a postmodern, feminist  
initiative. In this introduction I present two interpretations of postmodernity and  
situate riot grrrl as an exemplar of Cixous’ ‘feminine’ expression. Chapter one traces  
the genesis of riot grrrl in punk rock. The chapter addresses the meaning of style  
incorporated by the punk movement, and subsequently by the riot grrrl genre. The  
exploration exposes a dark interface of violence in relation to image in both  
movements. Chapter two queries the relationship between ‘masculine’ discourse, the  
male brain and receptivity towards the female and ‘feminine’, proposing an intrinsic  
link between empathy deficiency, autism and masculinity as normative influences in  
western society. Chapter three further explores the implications of gender  
constructions in identity and expression. Chapter four examines the phenomenon of  
‘self-cultivation’ and ‘the body project’ which is central to postmodern theory,  
paralleling an academic postmodern perspective, with an alternative understanding  
from a riot grrrl standpoint. The two sections of chapter five, deal with the reinvention  
and emergence of ‘new’ discourses, and examine the status of alternative expression.  
Chapter six discusses the negotiation of belongingness and interrogates the concept of  
community as an inclusive entity, with particular reference to the role of the media.  
The concluding chapter poses possible interpretations of the fate of riot grrrl as a  
subcultural phenomenon and comments on the current status of the genre.
Chapter One
Musical timeline – Meaning, Style and Violence

The flower children of the 60s had begun the process of experimentation and expression, which paved the way for the youth of the 70s – ‘the cult of the ugly’ – The Punks, a generation in which ‘beauty, like sex, was debased currency’ (O’Brien cited in Sabin 1999: 189). Although the 60s flower power, peace, love and ‘sexual liberation’ had begun the process of shedding ‘old values’, the punk era was as Lucy O’Brien describes it, the ‘test case, the first modern generation’ (ibid: 186). Despite some positive and liberating impacts of the movements that took place during the 60s, the feminist movement, which was most prominent in the early 70s – the first wave, inspired alternative interpretations of the so-called sexual liberation and the role women in particular had come to play.

Before the acid house boom of the late 80s and the second ‘summer of love’, it was presupposed that swinging 60s ideals had collapsed in the face of growing cynicism and materialism (ibid: 187). The purported sexual liberation movement was becoming known as a cheap con to try and get more women into bed: ‘to resist a potential lover, it seemed you were holding up the revolution’ (ibid: 188). Despite the proclamations of love, peace and equality women were still feeling the brunt of sexism. Contrary to the popular view that the 60s was an historical haven of serenity and tranquillity where ‘everyone’ was young and beautiful and in touch with nature, the ideological image of women as bare breasted, bare footed nymphs was only applicable to the ‘successful’ few.

...The most successful sixties women were scented, decorative and slender, voluptuously dressed in diaphanous chiffons, old embroideries, baubles, bangles, beads and boots, and spoke in blurred voices – if they spoke at all (McQuiston 1997 cited in Sabin 1999: 187).

The popularity of the ‘natural’, child-like look propelled the traditional, conventional interpretations of feminine beauty into the mid 70s. The punk era, with its redirection, current and tone, screamed out for a revised ‘visual vocabulary’ for women in particular, inspired by a rebellious attitude towards the preceding generation (O’Brien cited in Sabin: 188).

Conventional ideas of prettiness were jettisoned along with the traditional feminine lore of cosmetics. Contrary to the advice of every woman’s
magazine, make-up for both boys and girls was worn to be seen. Faces became abstract portraits: sharply observed and meticulously executed studies in alienation. Hair was obviously dyed (hay yellow, jet black, or bright orange with tufts of green or bleached in question marks), and T-shirts and trousers told the story of their own construction with multiple zips and outside seams clearly displayed (Hebdige 2005: 107).

Linda Sterling or 'Linder, art terrorist', front woman for the band Ludus remembers how the feminist movement of the early 70s inspired many women punks, so that there was ‘a neat collision’ of ‘anger and frustration and punk coming along’. With the arrival of punk, doors for expression began to open which rejected the pressure of perfection – where woman of all shapes and sizes felt inhibited and ‘glamorous’ (O’Brien cited in Sabin 1999: 191). In fact, ‘the perverse and the abnormal were valued intrinsically’ (Hebdige 2005: 107).

‘It was more about being a freak than a punk’, says Liz Naylor, co-editor of the Manchester punk fanzine City Fun, and later on, manager of the UK’s leading 90s Riot Grrrl band, Huggy Bear. She feels punk revolutionised her generation in the same way the Pill had done for women in the 1960s, and that women interpreted punk very differently from men. ‘It wasn’t immediately: “OK, I can form a band like The Clash”. It was about knowing you could escape to be something bigger’. It also gave women a place to rage. Before the mid-1970s women who expressed seething anger were ostracised as misfits...

The aggressive ‘tearing down’ and challenging of established views of femininity was met with extreme resistance and ‘for many punk women the streets became a battle ground’ (ibid: 193). It seemed as if ‘by dressing in a certain way you gave up your ‘rights’ as a woman to be respected and protected’. ‘We got picked on in the street, our singer Ari was stabbed – just because of what we looked like,’ recalls Viv Albertine the guitarist from influential, inspirational but largely underrated girl band The Slits (Images 06).

We’d be dressed up in bondage gear, half in Doc Martens with our hair all out there, scowling at everybody. People didn’t know if we were a pin-up or what. It freaked out middle aged men particularly. That mixture of rubber stockings,
DMs and fuck off you wanker what are you staring at. They didn’t know if they were coming or going (Albertine cited in Sabin 1999: 193).

O’Brien also remembers playing gigs in Kingston during the late 70s with her all-girl band the Catholic Girls, and ‘being bottled by an audience of skinheads’.

After the show a crowd of around 20 of them followed us outside and attacked us as we were loading up the van. During gigs there were regular cries of: ‘fuckin’ cows, who do you think you are?’, while at one pub gig we barely got through the first number before a brick was thrown through the front window, tables were overturned, and Wild West bar-room mayhem ensued (O’Brien cited in Sabin 1999: 193).

It was necessary therefore to don a mask, or as Albertine described ‘We’d have Hell’s Angels and skinheads coming to our gigs. If you don’t show fear they’re not a problem. You had to have a hell of a front’ (Albertine cited in Sabin: 193). The assimilation of a tough persona in many cases symbolised the real violence confronting the performers, in the streets and on the stage, both verbally and physically. For instance during the recording of The Slits live at the Gibus Club Ari-Up, sometimes gibbering in French and frequently coughing violently, interrupts Enemy Numero Uno² (track one) to tell the bouncer to “Fuck off you prostrated bouncer shit-arse... go to the bog and have a wank”. “Slime” she sneers at the audience “there’s quite a few here”. Shock was incredibly useful in taming and often silencing rowdy and rough audience members, the most extreme example being 14-year-old Ari-Up urinating on stage during a performance. Other times the shock element was applied to illustrate a political point and often to ridicule the ignorance of exploitation in the process: as in Linder’s case.

Bucks Fizz had just won the Eurovision Song Contest. At the end of their song the men pulled of the girls’ skirts and that ticked off an outrage in me. Oh no, I thought it’s still going on. At the same time at the Hacienda they were showing lots of soft porn and they thought it was really cool. I took my revenge. I was a vegetarian, I got meat from a Chinese restaurant, all the discarded entrails. I went to a sex shop and bought a large dildo. I didn’t tell anyone about it (Linda Sterling cited in Sabin: 197).

² The Slits (2005), Live at the Gibus Club, on Sanctuary Records Group Ltd
Before the show, Linda and some friends decorated the Hacienda with tampons which dangled from the balconies and handed out little packages of pigs entrails gift wrapped in images of soft core porn. Ludus went ahead and played the gig, with their singer Linder fronting in all her butchered glory. And at the right moment, just like the girls on the Eurovision, she stripped herself of her skirt revealing a big, shiny, black dildo (ibid).

I remember the audience going back about three foot. There was hardly any applause at the end. And that was a crowd who thought, nothing can shock us, we see porn all the time, we’re cool. When that happened, when they stepped back I thought, that’s it, where do you go from here? (ibid)

‘Linder had done the ultimate in making the implicit explicit, her imagery not acceptably contained on the video screen’. Linder revealed the fundamental ‘reality’ of womanhood using the tampons and meat, which are misrepresented by the clean cut and airbrushed women in conventional porn (ibid).

The symbolic violence adopted by the female punks in some cases, was revived in the later Riot Grrrl genre in the 90s. A strategy that women rockers have employed to control their own sexuality for example has been, according to Luce Irigaray, ‘mimicry’ (Irigaray 1977). Irigaray argues that exaggerated gender behaviours can undermine gender stereotypes by making the performative nature of gender itself visible. By mimicking ‘manhood, the invisible man of pornography’ Linder showed that it can be reduced ‘to this, a thing that sticks out like a toy’ (O’Brien cited in Sabin 1999: 197).

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it... To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it (Irigaray 1977: 76).

Carson, Lewis and Shaw, authors of Girls Rock! identify a more playful use of mimicry with Courtney Love’s use of gauzy feminine dresses which contrast with her sexually raw performance and overtly feminist lyrics (Images 03, 04, 05). Although the issue is debatable, it is widely accepted that Kat Bjelland, the growling, screeching frontwoman and lead guitarist of musical pioneers Babes in Toyland (Images 01 and 02), was the original instigator and defined the ‘kinderwhore’ or Baby Doll look.
which Love subsequently popularised. Bjelland is famous for performing in baby doll dresses, often torn or ripped, with lipstick smeared on her mouth and leather boots. It works in two ways: as a DIY punk subversion of the prom queen while also mimicking how a child might dress up, playing on stereotypical and reductionistic representations of femininity. This incongruous dress code contrasts with Babes in Toyland’s aggressive, hardcore music and Bjelland’s piercing and growling vocals, for which she is renowned. Kinderwhore however controversial is not illustrating the sexualisation of children but conversely is a statement of how women are desexualised. Similar to the nymph-like portrayal of women privileged by the hippies in the 60s, traditional interpretations of femininity are often closely associated with some aspects of prepubescent youth: virtuosity, purity, innocence, children are creatures to be protected and cared for. Women are often categorised with children as apart from men, and women like children, as the saying goes, should be seen and not heard. Kinderwhore ridicules the portrayal of women as prepubescent children. Conversely, this controversial and ambiguous pose, despite being intentionally ironic, is subject to misconception. Mavis Bayton explains:

The image of Riot Grrrl (and particularly Courtney Love’s ‘kinderwhore’ look) was studied, ambiguous and polysemic, but it was also open to misinterpretation, employing a supposed irony which could be easily lost on some segments of the audience, most of whom be only too delighted to give her an ironic fuck (Bayton 1998: 79).

It is unsurprising that both Bjelland and Love adopted similar ironic tactics of mimicry, considering they were musical colleagues early in their careers and played together in a band appropriately named Sugar Baby Doll. Who the original creator of kinderwhore is however, has been left unresolved. The look died out quickly, but it has been suggested that bands, Frankenstein Drag Queens From Planet 13 as well as The Murderdolls were the last to adopt an image like that of kinderwhore, albeit with different agendas considering they are both entirely male bands. Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when Riot Grrrl began, or trace the movements origins, it has been suggested that the notoriety garnered by Babes in Toyland formed a foundation for growing interest in female or female fronted bands.
Inspired by their musical ancestors, the Riot Grrrl bands engaged in similar symbolic violence or aggressive acts, and paralleled the use of symbolic violence, with reference to real violence. Unlike the punks, this new breed took control of their situation to a greater extent and in some cases dictated to the audience rather than managing unruly spectators through methods of shock. In outrage against the sexism and sexual abuse affecting female gig-goers, riot grrrl bands utilized ‘mosh tactics’. Segregating the audience, the male members were ordered to stand at the periphery of the room, allowing the females to ‘mosh’ and dance inhibited, unrestrained and safe.

Normally at punk and indie gigs, the immediate front of stage space (‘moshpit’) is home for a seething mass of adolescent boys, energetically (and often aggressively) slam-dancing and pogoing in a scrum of male bonding which pushes girls out to the margins, for fear of being injured or groped (Bayton 1998: 76/77).

The UK riot grrrl scene started around 1991 when some feminist students from Sussex University formed the punk band Huggy Bear (Bayton 1998: 76). As Reynolds and Press explain, Huggy Bear had an explicit feminist agenda, challenging male domination of space by urging girls to invade the male territory of rock bands, rock journalism, and more controversially, the taken-for-granted gendered spatial configurations of the gig.

On their 1993 UK tour, Huggy Bear encouraged girls to take over the moshpit and requested the boys to move to the back, often sparking trouble. In Wales, no one complied and a riot ended the gig while at another gig, Jo (the bass player) was hit. In fact, hardly any of Huggy Bear’s gigs were women-only, but, as the attempt to improve girls’ visibility and safety was critically misinterpreted as the exclusion of male, it was strongly resisted, provoking a misogynistic backlash... some boys attended Huggy Bear gigs just to give them a hard time (ibid: 77).

Ironically, as Reynolds and Press observe, the exhortation ‘riot, girls!’ is one of the challenges Iggy Pop threw at a crazed audience during the gig documented on the Stooges’ live album Metallic K.O. A comparison between Bikini Kill and the Stooges, they say, reveals some of the differences between male and female rebellion.

Iggy turned self-mutilation and reciprocal abuse between audience and singer into a grisly theatre; Bikini Kill sing about unsolicited, real life abuse over
which they have no control. Iggy, following Jim Morrison, envisioned incest as the ultimate symbol of transgression/transcendence in his Oedipal fantasy ‘Sister Midnight'; for the Riot Grrrls, incest isn’t a metaphor, but an omnipresent threat. It haunts their imagination as a symbol of patriarchal domination (Reynolds and Press 1995: 329).
Chapter Two
Autism, Understanding and the Deaf Masculine Ear

’Punks are not girls. if it comes to the crunch we’ll have no options but to fight back.’
Seminal punk fanzine Sniffin’ Glue, 1977

’Death to all fucker punk boys who refuse to acknowledge the girl punk revolution.’
Riot Grrrl, 1992

Female rebellion, or the feminine message in this respect, can be lost on what Helene Cixous describes as the ‘deaf masculine ear’ (Cixous cited in Kemp and Squires 1997: 233). In Sorties, Cixous argues that ‘logocentrism subjects thought – all concepts, codes and values – to a binary system, related to the couple, man/ woman (?)’.
Through this oppositional relationship of binary terms in language, she argues that organisation by hierarchy makes all conceptual organisation subject to man, and male privilege can be identified in the opposition between ‘activity’ and ‘passivity’, which he uses to sustain himself (ibid: 232). Philosophical discourse, she claims, both arranges and reproduces all thought and is marked by an absolute constant that orders values which “is precisely this opposition, activity/ passivity” (ibid). In The Newly Born Woman (1975), Cixous argues that phallocentric epistemology depends on positioning the feminine as ‘Other’. She shares the belief that there is an area of textual production that can be called ‘feminine,’ that it exists beneath the surface of masculine discourse, and only occasionally comes to the fore in the form of disruptions of the ‘masculine’ language, “a subterranean river” (Cixous cited in Gamble 1999): (Reynolds and Press 1995: 230).

Despite the recurrent media crazes for ‘women in rock’, the position of female artists has always been as precarious as in male-dominated movements like Surrealism... and counterculture (ibid).

A further assumption is that woman is given a specific identity within the masculine structures of language and power, and that she must strive to challenge it (Gamble 1999). In the fanzine Bikini Kill #2, Kathleen Hanna, lead singer of riot grrrl band Bikini Kill, makes a plea to girls and young women to examine their situation as

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3 Fanzines are homemade publications with limited distribution.
females who adopt and assimilate 'standards' which have been deliberately taught and instilled in them directly and indirectly by western society, particularly men.

Why're we always explaining ourselves and our projects to boys? I'm serious. I have wasted more time and emotional energy doing this than I even want to admit. And see, I have come to the conclusion that we are banging our heads against a big wall. We are trying to fit thru the doors of a clubhouse that is smelly and gross inside anyways... we only want in cuz we've been taught to want in... we change ourselves to fit, alter what we say, how we say it, just hoping, hoping they will change their rules... and all the while the clubhouses we could be building are going unbuilt and us girls are knocking one by one, on a door that will never ever open (Hanna 1992: Bikini Kill #2).

Kim Gordon has talked of how she 'always idolized male guitar players', however Hanna, by contrast 'sees this as a half measure' (Reynold and Press 1995: 326)

What other (female) bands do is go, "It's not important that I'm a girl, it's just important that I want to rock." And that's cool. But that's more of an assimilationist thing. It's like they just want to be allowed to join the world as it is; whereas I'm into revolution and radicalism and changing the whole structure. What I'm into is making the world different for me to live in' (ibid).

As Reynolds and Press point out, Riot Grrrls attempt to create a supportive environment in which girls can have a go. They argue that in Grrrl bands, it's the men who are tokens, like Billy (Karren) Boredom, the male guitarist in Bikini Kill (ibid).

'By writing herself', Cixous claims, 'woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her' (Cixous cited in Gamble 1999). By inventing her own discourse, woman can activate a process of reclamation and self-definition, which has previously been taken from her. By creating and establishing their own discourse and confronting the often unspoken 'rules' of 'place' and expression, the Riot Grrrls validated the existence and experience of other young girls and women as being 'Other', in their unified struggle under the oppressive and silencing culture that is contemporary western society. Cixous attempts to describe what she identifies as a feminine practise of writing, ecriture feminine. She believes that unlike the absolutism and universalism propelled by masculine writing, feminine writing is indefinable, fluid and transient, which is typically postmodern in description.
At the present time, defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible, with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be theorised, enclosed, coded which does not mean it does not exist (Cixous cited in Kemp and Squires 1997: 233).

Similar to Hanna’s observation, Cixous’ claims that woman’s ‘word’ almost always falls on ‘the deaf masculine ear, which can only hear language that speaks in the masculine’ (ibid). Simon Baron-Cohen approaches a comparable issue from a psychological perspective. In 1987, he notes, Vancouver psychologist Doreen Kimura asked the question

Are men’s and women’s brains really different... It would be amazing if men’s and women’s brains were not different, given the gross morphological and often striking behavioural differences between women and men (Doreen Kimura cited in Baron-Cohen 2003: 6)

Baron-Cohen suggests that Kimura is a good example of a traditional interpretation of this difference, which identifies the female brain as having superior language capabilities and the male brain as having superior spatial ability (Baron-Cohen 2003: 6). Baron-Cohen proposes that two neglected dimensions of cranial investigation are the differences between the male and female brain in relation to systematising and empathising. Exploring the experience of autism, Baron-Cohen suggests the autistic condition is ‘an extreme of the male brain’ (ibid: 7). According to his theory, autistic individuals may have an extraordinary talent for systematizing. For instance, people who can work out the rules governing calendars to an extraordinary degree of detail e.g. could tell you, if March 22 is a Tuesday, then so will November 22 be (Baron-Cohen 2003: 6). On the other hand however, autism is an empathy disorder. Those with autism, Baron-Cohen explains, have major difficulties in “mindreading” or putting themselves into someone else’s shoes, imagining the world through someone else’s eyes and responding appropriately to someone else’s feelings. He has previously referred to autism as a condition of “mindblindness” (ibid: 137).

Autism spectrum conditions also appear to affect males far more often than females. In people diagnosed with high-functioning autism or AS (Asperger Syndrome), the sex ratio is at least ten males to every female. This too suggests that autism spectrum conditions are heritable’ (ibid).
Baron-Cohen looks at the evidence for the male brain having slightly lower empathizing skill and slightly better systemizing skills, and vice versa for the female brain, which he claims are ‘normal sex differences... small but real (in the sense of being statistically significant)’ (ibid).

Baron-Cohen goes on to describe how people with autism or AS, while they can be talented in attention to detail and retrieving information in an exact manner, also love to predict and control the world (ibid: 139). Describing the behavioural traits of autistic children:

Phenomena that are unpredictable and/or uncontrollable (like people) typically leave them anxious or disinterested, but the more predictable the phenomenon, the more they are attracted to it... when they are required to join the unpredictable social world, they may react by trying to impose predictability and “sameness,” trying to control people through tantrums, or insistence on repetition (ibid).

Baron-Cohen uses computers as an example of a predictable thing that would attract an autistic person. Unlike people, he says, computers follow strict laws. They are a closed system and in theory they are knowable, predictable and controllable. People's feelings, thoughts and behaviour, he says, are ultimately unknowable, less predictable and less controllable open systems (ibid: 140).

People with AS have their greatest difficulties on the playground, in friendship, in intimate relationships, and at work... In sum, one can think of people with autism and AS as people who are driven by a need to control their environment (ibid).

Control of the environment is a key theme in the work of Michel Foucault. In *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault identifies how western society tries to regulate people by ‘normalization’ through an enterprise of disciplinary power, which he refers to as ‘the science of discipline’. Foucault argues that discipline is not merely an area of knowledge and its associated expertise, but it is also a mechanism for exercising power (Foucault 1977). Writing of the relationship between power and knowledge:

We should admit ... that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Foucault 1977: 27).
The principles of disciplinary power include spatialization, where there is ‘a place for everyone and everyone in his place’, where people are categorised, such as wards in hospitals or streamlining in schools (Fillingham 1993: 121). The minute control of activity, especially using timetables. Repetitive exercises too, serve to both standardise and individualise according to rate of progress. Sufficient repetition creates automatic reactions to stimuli (ibid: 123). Detailed hierarchies which consist of a complex chain or authority and training. Each level of the hierarchy keeps watch over the lower ranks and the normalizing of judgements, which is a continual analysis of whether the disciplined one deviates in any way from normality. This is a society which supports, privileges and nourishes autistic, mechanistic and robotic behaviour (ibid: 125).

Could it be, therefore, that we live in an autistic society? One that promotes and propagates highly masculine attributes and ultimately attempts to extinguish or subsume alternative understanding, interpretation, expression and knowledge. Is there an available space for feminine irregularity and fluidity, unlike the absolutism and universalism reinforced by and through masculine discourse? Is western society weaning out feminine influence? Or was there ever a place for the feminine? Baron-Cohen’s theory, that autism is a form of hyper-masculinity, or on a smaller scale, his claim that the male brain significantly lacks the capacity to empathise when compared with female brain functions, if one chooses to accept it, offers a fascinating perspective on the intrinsic link between male mentality, male discourse and feminine expression. This theory, coupled with Cixous’ description of the female ‘word’, which ultimately falls on ‘the deaf masculine ear’, implies that feminine woman-centred creativity and discourse is essentially misunderstood or significantly under-acknowledged by westernised dominant masculine, male-centred discourse and arguably, the male himself (Cixous cited in Kemp and Squires 1997: 233).

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4 This is not to say that all males lack an empathising ability or all females lack a systematising ability, but that according to Baron-Cohen’s research, there is a significant difference.
Chapter Three
Expression, Gender, Identity, Progress?

In the predominantly male sphere that is rock and roll, the feminine message of frustration, alienation and justified rage can be and often is brushed off, disregarded or simply deemed non-existent when confronted by the ‘deaf masculine ear,’ therefore threatening the validity of its survival, which is undermined and even lost in the shadow of privileged and dominating masculine, male-centred discourse. Neil Nehring, author of *Popular Music, Gender and Postmodernism: Anger is an Energy* (1997) suggests that this ‘deaf masculine ear’, is conditioned and not just a matter of philosophical contemplation or psychological fact. He claims that any ‘sensate, honest man knows full well that supposedly wild-eyed radical feminists are absolutely right about our culture’:

Women are constantly on display, everywhere, as semen receptacles. The “gaze,” when it comes to women, is real; Riot Grrrls write BITCH, RAPE, SLUT and WHORE on their bodies because that’s what a lot of men already see there. ... the problem is how “normal” guys have learned to look at women – as well as how not to hear them, a problem women in punk rock are obviously working on (Nehring 1997: 153).

‘They’re not preaching to the converted’ he says; ‘even at shows by female-led punk bands, I’ve heard men in the presumably progressive audience enthuse about the performers’ breasts’ (ibid). Kathleen Hanna (Image 07) explains the irony behind the ‘physical graffiti’: ‘When you take off your shirt (onstage) the guys think “Oh, what a slut” and then it’s really funny because they think that and then they look at you and it says it’ (Reynolds and Press 1995: 340): (ibid: 325). American riot grrrls seemed to refuse to worry about these problems. Amelia Fletcher, from professional mixed indie pop band Heavenly, notes:

Kathleen Hanna is a striptease artist and I think two out of three of Bikini Kill work at the striptease club and one of the girls in Bratmobile, which is a really peculiar thing for me, that the main feminist inspirations in America strip at this strip club (Bayton 1998: 113).

In *Bikini Kill #2*, in the article entitled ‘Lots of girls get bad reputations’, Hanna challenges North American ‘victimising’ feminism:
It is really obnoxious when feminists assume that sex trade workers don’t know what they are doing, and have been “duped” by the patriarchy. I mean, do they honestly think that you take off your clothes and get up naked in front of a room full of men who wanna stick dollar bills in your butt, and ARE UNAWARE that you are being exploited? Come on... It’s a fucking job, and like all jobs, it sucks. I, personally, decided to become a sex trade worker cuz I feel a lot less exploited making $20 an hour for dancing around naked than I do getting paid $4.25 an hour (and being physically, psychologically and sometimes sexually exploited) as a waitress or burgerslinger...’ (Hanna 1992: Bikini Kill #2)

In Bikini Kill’s Jigsaw Youth⁵ (track two), the topic of sex working is approached directly:

I can sell my body if I wanna
God knows you’ve already sold your mind
I may sell my body sometimes
But you can’t stop the fire that burns inside of me
You think I don’t know
I’m here to tell you I do
U think that I don’t know
I know the truth about you

Mavis Bayton observes that Courtney Love has also made money from stripping with which to finance her musical career. After such experience, she says, expressing your sexuality on stage does not seem such an issue (Bayton 1998: 113). Is Bayton distinguishing between erotic sexual expression and political sexual expression? It could be argued that the male audience members in question were having a ‘normal’ sexual response, within the context of western society. Or is the alleged ‘normal’ response conditioned, as Nehring (1997) suggests? In White Boy⁶ (track 3), Bikini Kill attack this notion of men having ‘normal’ sexual responses, which have been used to justify the sexualisation of women. Kathleen Hanna sings:

I’m so sorry if I’m alienating some of you
Your whole fucking culture alienates me
I can not scream in pain from down here on my knees

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⁵ Bikini Kill (1992), Bikini Kill, CD version of the first two records, on Kill Rock Stars
⁶ Bikini Kill (1992), Bikini Kill, CD version of the first two record, on Kill Rock Stars
variations, fragmented identities and discontinuous or conditional understandings of our gender identities based on a wider variety of identifications, beyond the idealised triangle of mother, father and child.

Butler understands gendered subjectivity as

A history of identifications, parts of which can be brought into play in given contexts and which, precisely because they encode the contingencies of personal history, do not always point back to an internal coherence of any kind (ibid: 331).

She accuses Freudian psychoanalysis of excluding ideas of simultaneity and multiplicity in gender and sexual identity, to maintain the coherence and unity of its argument. According to Freud, you either identify with a sex or you desire it; only those two relations are possible. Thus it’s not possible to desire the sex you identify with, for example, if a man desires another man, Freud would say that is because the individual concerned really identifies with women. Butler examines how Freud proposes that fantasy identifications (identifications that happen in the unconscious) shape our identity. When we identify with someone else, we create an internal image of that person, or, more precisely, who we want that person to be, and then we identify with that internalised and idealized image. Our own identity, then, is not modelled on actual others but on our image of their image, on what we want the other to be, rather than what the other really is.

Gender, then, is the identification with one sex, or one object, the mother for example, as a fantasy, a set of internalised images, and not a set of properties governed by the body and its organ configuration. Rather, gender is a set of signs internalised, psychically imposed on the body and on one’s psychic sense of identity. Gender, Butler concludes, is thus not a primary category, but an attribute, a set of secondary narrative effects. Arguably therefore, gender is a fantasy enacted by “corporeal styles that constitute bodily significations” and can be interpreted as an act, a performance or a set of manipulated codes, rather than ‘essential’ identity. All gender, according to Butler, is a form of “Drag”, i.e. dressing like or imitating a person of the “opposite sex”. There exists no “authentic” gender. However convincing Butler’s argument, western patriarchal society privileges a depiction of gender as set of properties governed by the body and its organ configuration. The application of Butler’s
interpretation of gender would require a non-linear and non-binary understanding – a complete reassessment of western, eurocentric convention.

Similar to Irigary’s ‘mimicry’, in her essay ‘Female Grotesques’, Mary Russo writes,

Deliberately assumed and foregrounded, femininity as a mask, for a man, is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition; for a woman, a similar flaunting of the feminine is a take-it-or-leave-it possibility. To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off (Russo cited in Reynolds and Press 1995: 316).

In relation to spectacle:

Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of exposure. Men, I learned somewhat later in life, ‘expose themselves,’ but that operation was quite deliberate and circumscribed. For a woman, making a spectacle of herself had more to do with a kind of advertency and loss of boundaries (ibid: 335).

Anxiety of embarrassing oneself, she points out, leads to a life of ‘silence, withdrawal and invisibility.’ However, it can also be assimilated into ‘the bold affirmations of feminine performance, imposture, and masquerade’ (ibid). In Western society, therefore, is it really a choice between diverting the fear of embarrassment into a feminine performance or expose oneself, and be viewed as a sexualised subject, rather than aspiring to share an experiencing of mutual freedom in ‘pure ethereality’ (Reynolds and Press 1995: 336)? Progressive bands, such as The Smiths, have challenged the traditional phallocentric imagery and ‘phallic model of rebellion’, exposing the experience of ‘body-trouble’ and the ‘hidden truth of adolescence: awkwardness, sexual incapacity, neurasthenia, emasculation’ (ibid: 332). However, as Reynolds and Press explain,

...(Morrissey’s⁷ flirtation with being feminised is just a new twist on the old business of boys misbehavin’. Rampant or ravished, virile or vulnerable, the adolescent male body has continued to occupy the centre stage of rock’s imagination: boys keep swingin’, to the exclusion of female experience (ibid: 332/333).

⁷ Morrissey is the lead singer from ‘progressive band’ the Smiths.
I’m so sorry that I think
White boy... Don’t laugh... Don’t cry... Just die!
The fact that these women practised stripping does not justify being sexually harassed or objectified by audience members. Whilst performing, Courtney Love has been called ‘slut’, ‘dirtbag’, and ‘whore’ and when stage-diving she has been sexually assaulted. Is this the risk female performers run when dealing with a male audience?

In the context of power, gender and sexuality, Catherine MacKinnon maintains that the male perspective enforces women’s definition: “the male point of view as fundamental to the male power to create the world in its own image, the image of its desires” (MacKinnon 1989). She further argues that concepts of male and female are created through the eroticisation of dominance and submission, with sexual objectification of women central to the process and that therefore:

The propensity to rape is not only widespread but also normative sexual behaviour in the male population.

How does this relate to the issue of expression, gender and identity? Judith Butler uses fragments of Freudian psychoanalytical theory to think about gender in a post-modern form and to question gender as an aspect of essence. She challenges the seemingly normal categorisations that a person is male or female, ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’, distinctions that are fundamental to Freud’s theory. Butler argues that gender is not just a social construct but also a performance – a set of signs we adopt, or a costume of sorts.

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: 25).

Instead of considering “woman” as a universal, Butler suggests that we should consider “woman” as multiple and discontinuous, not as a category with “ontological integrity”.

She then considers psychoanalysis as a “grand narrative” about how “woman” as a unitary category is formed, a process which she accuses of giving “a false sense of legitimacy and universality to a culturally specific and, in some cases, culturally oppressive version of gender identity”. Unlike Freud’s “grand narrative”, which privileges a particular situation (the nuclear family) Butler claims that there are
Reynolds and Press go on to point out that recently women artists have tackled specifically female experience of adolescence:

where the body figures as the source of desire, embarrassment and anxiety, and as an object of disgust and self-directed aggression. Where rock once aimed to liberate sexuality, these women want to liberate themselves from being sexualised, from the pressure to meet quotas of health and beauty (ibid: 333).

According to Naomi Wolfe in *The Beauty Myth*, ‘the beauty cult’ is nothing less than a patriarchal conspiracy to distract young women from feminist politics, propagating the belief that ‘their dreams will be realised if they can just reach that perfect body weight, that ideal facial profile’.

The beauty cult is perhaps the most extreme example of a general trend in Western society in which therapeutic solutions, rather than political involvement, are promoted as the key to a better life... The focus, and onus, for improving life falls on the individual, not society (Wolfe cited in Reynolds and Press 1995: 333/334).
Chapter Four
‘Self-cultivation’ or Self Care?

‘BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalisation of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousism and self defeating girltype behaviours.’
Kathleen Hanna, ‘Why Riot?’

In postmodern society ‘the body project’ constitutes a primary means through which identity can be expressed. In relation to identity and self-formation, significant parallels and contrasts exist between postmodern theory and ideas promoted in riot grrrl publications. From a postmodern point of view, Bauman claims that identity is neither given nor authoritatively confirmed but must be constructed in the social context he refers to as ‘habitat’. However he stresses that while ‘no design for the construction can be taken as prescribed or foolproof’, it is now the ‘incessant (and non linear) activity of self-constitution that makes the identity of the agent’ (Bauman 1992: 242). He claims that this formulation and construction of the agent’s identity ‘has no visible end; not even a stable direction’ but rather

... is conducted inside a shifting (and... unpredictable) constellation of mutually autonomous points of reference, and thus purposes guiding the self-constitution at one stage may soon lose their current authoritatively confirmed validity. Hence the self-assembly of the agency is not a cumulative process; self-constitution entails dissembling alongside an assembling, adoption of new elements as much as shedding of others, learning together with forgetting (Bauman 1992: 243).

Access to resources, and knowledge in particular, greatly influences the capacity to choose, to self-assemble. Self-constituting entities, ‘agents’, seek confirmation and reassurance in the tribal politics of collectivities. Reassurance becomes a substitute for absent certainty and is sought in the authority of the expert or in mass-endorsement:

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8 Chris Shilling coined the term ‘body project’ in his book The Body and Social Theory (2003)
Information becomes a major resource, and experts the crucial brokers of all self-assembly (ibid: 244).

Bauman describes the human body as the only visible element of continuity, the ‘sole constant factor... container carrier and executor of all past, present and future identities’. Self-constitutive efforts, thus

focus on keeping alive (and preferably enhancing) the capacity of the body for absorbing the input of sensuous impressions and producing a constant supply of publicly legible self-definitions (ibid: 243).

In this regard Bauman refers to the centrality of ‘self-cultivation’ in the postmodern context, typified by jogging, dieting and slimming etc., and the acute attention devoted by the postmodern agent to everything “taken internally”, including food, air, drugs among other things, and everything that comes into contact with the skin too, on ‘the hotly contested frontier of the autonomously managed identity’ (ibid). This cultivation of self Bauman sees as replacing the ‘panoptical drill’ in the factory, school or the barracks of the modern era, the new form of heteronomy, which ‘once blatant through coercion, now hides behind seduction’ (ibid):9

The most conspicuous social division under postmodern conditions is one between seduction and repression: between the choice and the lack of choice, between the capacity for self-constitution and the denial of such capacity, between autonomously conceived self-definitions and imposed categorisations experienced as constraining and incapacitating (ibid: 245).

In contrast to Bauman’s view, that ‘self-cultivation’ has replaced the ‘panoptical drill’ of the modern era, Kathleen Hanna claims that taking care of ourselves is the “loudest, most obnoxious “Fuck You” we can possibly scream at the people + institutions that hurt us (Hanna 1992: Bikini Kill #1). In Bikini Kill fanzine, April Fools’ Day issue, in an article entitled ‘Destroying the tape loop that sez self destruct’, Hanna writes:

A lot of straight world type ideas about detoxing or getting clean focus too much on the individual, I think, and not enough on the fact that we are individuals who live in a sick, addictive society. I am interested in the

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9 This preoccupation with the 'body project' is a central concept in Foucault's goal of creating "a history of the modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made into subjects" (Foucault 2002: 326). One of the most important of these modes is 'self-formation', the "way a human being turns himself or herself into a subject" (ibid). Self-formation is an active process, involving a variety of conscious operations on people's own physical and mental states, and on their own conduct.
intersections between oppression & addiction cuz I think it is entirely political and specific WHO is most susceptible to certain addictions, and, I also think internalised oppression (think self hate) and emotional/spiritual bankruptcy, has everything to do with it. Making these connections... HELP KEEP ME SOBER (ibid).

She goes on to say that there are lots of reasons why the people who profit from “THE AMERICAN WAY” would love to watch those who recognise it for the sham that it is, “DESTROY OURSELVES”, ‘(Running around in my hamster wheel of drunk-sober-hungover drunk-hungover sober again)’ (ibid). She concludes the page by stating ‘It gives me great pleasure to not let anyone trick me into ruining my own life’. On the opposite page, she continues to discuss addiction, stating that in a society that ‘tells us and shows us thru brute force, that we do not own our own bodies, addiction can be a way for us to claim that we do (ibid):

It’s my body I can put this in it if I want. It’s my body I can destroy it with too much alcohol. It’s my body I can deny “it” delicious food and nourishment. And while these things might make us feel in control for short periods of time, they do not contribute towards ending oppression in any real way (ibid).

However, Hanna’s interpretation of ‘self-cultivation’ is unlike Bauman’s understanding of the term insofar as she does not promote ‘publicly legible self-definitions’ or the commodification of self-care (Bauman 1992: 243). Hanna writes:

Yeah I know we are supposed to stay drunk and depressed and immobile and fucked up so that the rich educated writers that we imagine are watching us from the inside of our heads\textsuperscript{10} can come in and write about how tragic and beautiful we are... Yeah, we are supposed to stay self hating and gross so we’ll be desperate enough to accept their “Highway to Heaven” version of reality, instead of creating new visions with and beside our friends... we are supposed to stay so disconnected from our bodies that we won’t be able to tell the difference between sick and well to the point where we get so sick that we have to go to their doctors for their fifty dollar an hour cures and their thirty five dollar medicines... we are supposed to keep searching the aisles and check out lines for that ten percent juice that’ll make us feel better, that

\textsuperscript{10} Interesting that Hanna refers here to a panoptical concept in the form of ‘the rich educated writers that we imagine are watching us from the inside of our heads’.
hairstyle that'll make me us "feel" sexy and that drug that'll make us "feel" more at peace... with the world... whatever you do, gurl, just DON'T strip down nude and be bare assed lovin' it, cuz if you feel good in yr body you won't need that perfect victoria secrets ensemble... and DON'T think about why "certain" people get raped and beaten and are constantly harassed, underpaid, ignored, fucked over, or how we all feed into this one way or another, cuz if you do you might stop watching Oprah... looking, just looking, looking for answers... The answers that will never satisfy (Hanna 1992: Bikini Kill #1).

While Bauman embraces postmodernity as an emerging and ‘kaliedoscopic’ phenomenon worthy of a new social theory free of the concepts and metaphors characteristic of classical social theory, Jameson regards the emergence of postmodernism as ‘late capitalism’ which has become integrated into commodity production generally and which he considers inevitably compromises ‘aesthetic production’ (Jameson 1993: 66, 69, 78):

... every position on postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatisation – is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today (ibid: 64).

In this new stage of capitalism, Jameson contends, the mass, dominant culture and so-called high culture are one and the same without a distinguishable depth between them. Jameson sees the subsumation of art as commodity form as an ‘increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation’:

... this whole global, yet American postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and horror (ibid: 65).

Jameson observes that offensive features of the postmodern, including obscurity, sexually explicit material, psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance,

... no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalised and are at one with the official culture of Western society (ibid: 65).
For Jameson the postmodern era has brought about several negative consequences, including the deconstruction of expression, the waning of affect and the loss of the radical past (ibid: 66, 69, 78).
Chapter Five Section One
Reinvention, Regulation and The Scream I

'It is in writing from woman and toward woman, and in accepting the challenge of the discourse controlled by the phallus that woman will affirm woman somewhere other than in silence, the place reserved for her in and through the symbolic. May she get out of bobby-trapped silence! And not have the margin or the harem foisted on her as her domain!'

Helene Cixous, Sorties

Do they call Dylan cranky for making social commentary? It's like an angry man is an angry man, and an angry woman is a bitch.

Joni Mitchell

Jameson’s perspective is applicable for a number of reasons. Firstly, he is a postmodern theorist, who is preoccupied with the changes which have occurred in society through postmodernism. Secondly, he identifies these changes as being a result of ‘depth modes’ being replaced by ‘intertextuality’ – a surface or multiple surfaces – where the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject. Thirdly, Jameson explicitly refers to Edvard Munch’s The Scream, as an exemplar of an expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, which he privileges. However, in contrast to Jameson’s identification of what he refers to as the ‘Waning of Affect’, it is through this exact fragmentation and intertextuality that a particular kind of ecriture feminine, Carol Churchill’s Theatre of Empowerment has emerged. The Theatre of Empowerment is comparable to the women’s movements in alternative rock, i.e. women in punk and riot grrrl, insofar as these women were attempting to ‘create their own ways of seeing’ and beginning to integrate a new reality. ‘The Scream’, it seems is not only an expression of alienation exclusive to the modernist era.

Jameson refers to Edvard Munch’s The Scream, to illustrate what he describes as an expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation, ‘a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety’ (Jameson 1993: 69). He reads it
... not merely as an embodiment of the expression of that kind of affect, but even more as a virtual deconstruction of the very aesthetic of expression itself, which seems to have dominated much of what we call high modernism, but has vanished away... in the world of the postmodern (ibid: 69, 70).

Jameson proposes that concepts such as anxiety and alienation are no longer appropriate in a postmodern context. He argues that the 'great Warhol figures', such as Marilyn Monroe, the 'burn-out and self-destruction cases' and the 'great dominant experiences of drugs and schizophrenia' in the 1960s, seem to have no relation to Freudian pathology of neurosis and hysteria, nor do they bare any similarity to 'those canonical experiences of radical isolation and solitude, anomie, private revolt' or 'Van Gogh type madness' which he claims dominated the period of high modernism:

This shift in the dynamics of culture pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject (ibid).

This, Jameson claims is as a result of the 'death' of the subject itself, which means the 'end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual' and what he refers to as the decentring of the formerly centred subject or psyche. Jameson suggests that what he calls the 'fundamental depth models' have generally been repudiated in contemporary theory. These 'fundamental depth models' include the dialectical one of essence and appearance; the Freudian model of latent and manifest, or of repression; the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity, and 'finally, lowest in time, the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified...' (ibid: 70). What replaces these 'depth models' he suggests is

... a conception of practices, discourses and textual play... surface or multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth)' (ibid.).

Reynolds and Press identify screaming within music as being a particularly 'feminine' principle, a 'non-verbal singing' which some women musicians have taken to far reaching extremes, that they propose parallel Arthur Janov's Primal Scream Therapy (Reynolds and Press 1995: 380). The writers identify Yoko Ono and Diamanda Galas as being the two premier exponents of this approach, both of whom are from avant-classical backgrounds. Reynolds and Press profess that these women turned an Edvard
Munch like scream into an ‘opera of the deluge’ (Celine cited in ibid). Speaking of Galas:

Her gamut of split personae – crackling crones, afflicted lepers, cajoling child­women, hectoring hierarchs, professional mourners – requires a dizzying array of vocal techniques (gospel, opera, Dadaist sound-poetry) and a battery of distorting studio effects. Animating abjection, giving it voice, Galas incarnates the maelstrom – the abyss into which male artists from Edgar Allan Poe to Iggy Pop made ‘heroic’ descents (ibid: 381).

After her ‘vocal terrorism’ on the *London Jam* tracks, Yoko Ono decided to become more listener-friendly, explain Reynolds and Press. Sacrificing her formerly spontaneous, unrehearsed technique, Ono adopted a more methodical approach, writing lyrics in order to express more overtly her political and feminist agenda.

The poignant choice Ono felt she had to make – between being a dignified, assertive spokeswoman who deals with issues in clear language, or a bawling, babbling hysterical breaking the barriers of sound with her pre-verbal anguish and anger – is one many female artists face. In the event, what Ono lost in artistic intensity, she never gained in political influence: nobody was listening (ibid: 383).

The writers go on to point out that this dilemma, of whether to speak suffering or to speak about suffering, to voice or to verbalise – remains a profound one for female artists. They ask ‘is it better to sacrifice aesthetic power for the sake of political explicitness or opt for purity of artistic expression, at the expense of being understood?’ (ibid: 383/384).

It was this very quandary which has faced women musicians dating back to the 1970s. For example, musician Dory Previn sings about screaming and the consequences of doing so, rather than actually screaming. In her song Twenty-Mile Zone11 (track 4), Previn describes how she is ‘taken in’ by a police officer for ‘doin’ nothin’, just ‘lettin’ it out’. Previn questions the notion of appropriateness and expressive ‘release’, pointing out to the officer that men scream at their games, ‘when the quarter back breaks an elbow, when the boxer beats and maims’. She sings ‘animals roar when

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11 Dory Previn, *In Search of Mythical Kings (The UA Years)* 1993, on EMI
they feel like... why can’t we do that too?’ According to Cixous, the relationship between woman and voice is privileged for this exact fact, because

...no woman piles up as many defenses against instinctual drives as a man does (Cixous cited in Kemp and Squires 1997: 235).

Twenty-Mile Zone illustrates, that women are not only being misunderstood but are also repressed by having their behaviour regulated, to conform to what men deem appropriate. Screaming is easily scrutinised as deviating from ‘appropriate’ or ‘normal’ behaviour, even appropriate ‘feminine’ behaviour:

...lets have no more screamin’, like your outta your mind! (Previn 1993: Twenty-Mile Zone)

People therefore, are not only regulated physically or behaviourally, but also through expression. Regulated expression is typified in the appealing ‘1, 2, 3'12 (track 5) on Free Kitten’s Unboxed13. Regulated by the drummer counting metrically in beats of three, controlling the pace with her sticks, Free Kitten, incorporating the audience, scream, stop and once again repeat the count-in. Although screaming is considered a most primal retort, it is can still be kept under wraps, through rhythmic principle or officers on patrol.

Louis Marin is concerned with what he refers to as the “irreducibility and the interrelation of two forms of representation, image and text” (Marin cited in Chartier 1997). These phenomena he refers to as “the visible” and “the legible”: that which is seen and shown on the one hand and that which can be said on the other. Marin refers to “the visible” and “legible” as registers with a space between them, a gap, which is a site both of opposition and exchange (ibid). According to Marin it is in this space that ‘the highest meaning operates’. This ‘highest meaning’ he equates with a question – the ‘what is this?’ question – which arises from the fact that these two forms of representation always exceed each other. For example, a painting shows what cannot be expressed in words, and so represents ‘the failure of words’. Inversely, the ‘failure of the visible in text’ makes image foreign to the logic of discourse (ibid). Screaming, it could be argued, is a phenomenon, which bridges the supposed ‘gap’ between ‘the visible’ and legible’. It presents both a screaming image, such as Munch’s The

12 Free Kitten, Unboxed on WIIIJA Records
13 Free Kitten is Kim Gordon from Sonic Youth’s second band, with fellow female musician, Yoshimi.
Scream or a ‘conjurable’ image of ‘screaming person’, and arguably, presents a ‘non-verbal’ logic compatible with the logic of discourse.

Reynolds and Press suggest that screaming, or ‘non-verbal singing’ can be interpreted as an intentional, political and highly systematised approach to expression, as they point out in the chapter entitled ‘Dyslexic Divas’ (Reynolds and Press 1995: 378). ‘Non-verbal singing’ accommodates some female musicians who are reluctant ‘to stand on a soap box: their rebellion against diction goes hand in hand with a refusal to dictate’ (ibid: 378). The so-called ‘rebellion against diction’ can also be interpreted as evading categorisation: ‘...they will not have their utterances broken down, set into a context, analysed’ (ibid). Riot Grrrl however, juxtaposed their rage and ‘feminist fury’ epitomised by the scream with overtly political and militant feminist lyrics, which arguably, can be interpreted as an exemplar to the ‘intertextuality’ and ‘fragmentation’ which Jameson considers are consequences of the decentring of the formerly centred subject or psyche.

It is Jameson’s references to ‘intertextuality’ and the ‘fragmentation of the subject’ that leads me on to discuss the role of the Theatre of Empowerment and in particular, the methods adopted by Caryl Churchill, who writes from a socialist feminist perspective and who acts as another exemplar of Cixous’ ecriture feminine. Churchill combines both ‘intertextuality’, for example her use of ultra-realism and the interplay of voices in her play ‘Top Girls’, and attempts to remedy the experience of fragmentation with particular regard to women’s being-in-the-world.

Her plays offer fragmentation instead of wholeness, many voices instead of one, demands for social change instead of character development, and continuing contradiction instead of resolution (Howe Kritzer, 2004: 2, 3).

Churchill uses Brechtian techniques such as distancing the audience from the action on stage to encourage a critical attitude, encapsulating the power relations of a particular situation in the simple action of the social gest, or of disrupting the flow of narrative through episodic structure and songs. Churchill above all aims to empower her audiences against oppression rather than encourage serene acceptance of an apparently inevitable fate (ibid). Feminist historian and social theorist Sheila Rowbotham describes the role of art in this empowerment as that of oppressed people creating ‘their own ways of seeing’ and beginning to integrate a new reality. In this
respect, female artists and writers, such as Churchill run the risk of rejection 'by supposedly neutral arbiters of artistic taste... on the grounds that it is stridently ideological, even as the ideological nature of patriarchal works go unnoticed (ibid: 6)'
Therefore, working in theatre as a socialist feminist means 'working both in and against the dominant culture and to alternate cultures that can only be theorized or imagined' (ibid: 7).

The 'fragmentation' that women experience in contemporary society is by no means an exclusively postmodern phenomenon. The feminist movement of the mid twentieth century represented resistance to a universalised patriarchal dominance and a systemic and organismic gendering of politics. Ironically, stereotypical feminism (e.g. white, middle-class, academic, European and North American) in turn fell into the trap of universalization and was subsequently challenged to acknowledge its dominant imperialist tendency, particularly by women of colour and women of the so-called 'majority world'. These difficulties notwithstanding feminism can still be identified as postmodern movement in its resistance to the masculist, technological mindset of modernity. In many respects, it was not until the 'death' of modernity and the establishment of postmodernity that women could begin to access public arenas in art, theatre and other creative spheres. Amelia Howe Kritzer describes in her article Theatre of Empowerment how from the advent of the female player, the stage has idealised and fetishised female physicality, excluding those women who do not construct themselves as ideal feminine objects. She argues that the feminist playwright must 'simultaneously use and disrupt the doubleness of theatrical representation to create the possibility of a non-patriarchal subjectivity. Feminist theatre must attempt to deconstruct the socially constructed wholeness of the gendered subject. To do so, it must break down the masculine/feminine opposition reified in the player/role division, theatricalising the possibility of a subjectivity based in multiplicity and relationality rather than binary opposition and separateness. In the deconstructed space they themselves create, feminist imaginings of women can then make, in Cixous' evocative phrase, 'the shattering entry into history' (ibid: 11).
Both punk and riot grirl presented an opportunity for women to express anger and rage but they also provided a prospect for reinvention. It is this way that women’s emergence in punk and riot grirl are comparable to Churchill’s theatre of empowerment insofar as they were an oppressed minority trying to create ‘their own ways of seeing’ and attempting to integrate a new reality and a new vocabulary into the male-dominated musical sphere. The songs and image not only spoke out against the status quo in tongues of political outrage, but both intentionally and unintentionally created an alternative rhythm which took a drastic turn from the standard rock’ n ’roll time, similar to Churchill’s rejection of Aristotelian convention, and punk provided validity to do that:

‘We were trying to find a way of looking at the world which was personal and different’, says the Raincoats’ founder member, Gina Birch, of their scratchy, cyclical, compelling sound. ‘We’d improvise around things, pull them out and make spaces. We wanted to bring in an element of discovery and discomfort (Gina Birch cited in O’Brien cited in Sabin 1999: 196).

Whereas the Raincoats’ purposefully veered away from the conventional interpretations and methods of rhythm and time, their fellow female band the Slits, although they “consciously thought about getting girl rhythms into music”, it was through a process of experimentation and DIY learning, that they came to the conclusion that female rhythms were “probably not as steady, structured or contained as male rhythms”. “We wanted to keep the rhythms skippy and light” says guitarist Viv Albertine (The Slits A). Their idiosyncratic style was at the start anyway, partly down to incompetence, the first time they performed for an audience, was the only the second time they had played their instruments. “None of us were trained musicians,” says Albertine. “We’d not spent ages in our bedroom twanging away like the boys did. So when punk started to happen, it felt like a space had opened up. At last you could do it without being able to play, so we grabbed some instruments and thrashed
away. But because we didn’t know how to play 12-bar blues or ‘Smoke On The Water’, we couldn’t base our songs on those structures even if we’d wanted to” (ibid).

It is unfortunate however, that bands such as the Slits, unlike their punk counterparts – the Sex Pistols and the Clash – never achieved commercial success, since they were fighting commodification and sexism when record companies wanted to change their image. As Catamero and Handren point out, they were never given any real recognition of being part of London’s 70’s punk pioneers and were viewed subordinate because they were an all female band (www.kittymagik.com). In an interview for Kitty Magik Magazine Ari-Up, now going by the name of Medusa spoke of how it was difficult for a female band like the Slits to gain commercial success, since the music business was dominated and controlled by men:

We had such a rough time being 20 years ahead of our time, being the women that we were, politically, and just sabotaged so bad in the music business and society at the time. It was rough. Men were still really running the business… you know, it was alright for guys like the Pistols or the Who to smash up their instruments on stage and it’s alright for the Clash to be in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The boys could be boys. They could be punks. They could be naughty. It was accepted... And the Slits, or any other female band, of course weren’t acceptable (ibid).

Smashing instruments is and always has been a familiar spectacle throughout the history of rock and roll. This particularly aggressive manner of expression it could be said, is analogous to screaming as an idiom in rock and roll, especially within the grunge era during the 1990s, where screaming and growling, and other forms of ‘non-verbal singing’ were employed to a large extent (Reynolds and Press 1995: 380). Although it was in the style of punk and riot grrl music to use aggressive vocals, the scream has an important role in expression. “Screaming” says Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth, “is a kind of vehicle for expressing yourself in ways society doesn’t let you” (Kim Gordon cited in Nehring 1997: 154). For women in particular screaming can be an emotional and transient experience according to Cixous, but also one that is often interpreted as being primal, childish, unsophisticated and ironically inarticulate. However, Neil Nehring claims that any words one might choose to use to ‘condemn’ particular injustices in the world, ‘have already been taken and twisted’,
...the only thing left for any sensible person to do is scream, which is exactly what a lot of young people are doing. They're not worrying about a “message”... Pure screaming is what grunge, hip-hop, metal, punk, and Riot Grrrls have in common – not scream therapy, either, for the point isn’t letting it out and feeling better (or a catharsis) but enlisting other screamers – and they’re doing it in the public eye, which the authorities hate (ibid).

Cixous too describes how ‘speaking out loud’ for a woman ‘is experienced more as a tearing away, dizzying flight and flinging oneself, diving. Cixous says woman does not ‘‘speak’ but ‘throws her trembling body into the air, she lets herself go, she flies, she goes completely into her voice, she vitally defends the ‘logic’ of her discourse with her body; her flesh speaks true’ (Cixous cited in Kemp and Squires 1997: 233).

The depiction of feminine voice according to Cixous, is an extreme ‘exclamation, cry, breathlessness, yell, cough, vomit, music’, like the screeching, howling, growling, spitting and coughing voices of ‘feminist fury’, and the rage of ignored and oppressed alike, thrown from the body of the screaming Riot Grrrls and the disillusioned youth of grunge, who, like women writers, must open their mouths for the first time and feel the ‘torture of beginning to speak aloud, heart beating as if to break, occasionally falling into a loss of language...’ (ibid: 235): (ibid: 233).

In the same way as women must invent their own identity in opposition to patriarchal standards and definitions, women must learn how to scream on their own terms, a “form of expression both denied to women in public (screaming is unladylike) and devalued in private (women are so emotional)” (Gottlieb and Wald cited in Nehring 1997: 155). Punk and Riot Grrrl challenged conformity and the role of women in western culture as the silent sufferers, brushed under the carpet of societal injustice. Many young people, as Nehring points out may not be fully aware of good reasons for screaming, ‘and many of them are trying like mad to dredge up those reasons out of a swamp of incoherence the culture’s inundated them with’ (Nehring 1997: 155). Punk supplied youth with an anger access point, and particularly provided women with a place to rage. It was acceptable to be angry and rebellious and therefore screaming did not need to be justified on a punk stage, in a punk realm and screaming in this respect was an access to strength and power. Sleater-Kinney, a product of the Riot Grrrl genre and today one of the most respected female groups in alternative rock, address the
power gained through screaming in The Last Song\textsuperscript{14} (track 6). Vocalist Carrie Kinney sings:

\begin{verbatim}
You said this would be the last time you'd hurt me
You said this would be the last time I'd cry
Last time I didn't know – how was I supposed to know?
This time I found it – I know how to scream
\end{verbatim}

Then bursting open in a cacophonic tremble:

\begin{verbatim}
I don’t owe you anything
I’m not a part of you
You can take away everything
I’m not a part of you!
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{14} Sleater-Kinney (1995), Sleater-Kinney, on Matador Records
Chapter Six
Community, Solidarity, Totalitarianism and the Media

The riot grrrl movement is a self-declared form of feminist activism, distinct from academic feminism. This argument can be justified to the extent that the movement creates an agenda and a forum for feminist consciousness raising, questions dominant modes of organisation and their exclusion of women and identifies an experiential learning through the punk movement. Riot grrrl succeeded in creating a political agenda and a feminist forum, especially for girls and young women who were dislocated from the accessible and visible activism of the 70s, or who viewed the feminism of their mother’s generation as too rule bound. Because there seemed to be a confusing forest of things that you should not do or say unless you wished to be judged ‘politically incorrect’, they felt dispossessed and so they rewrote the feminist script for the 1990s (Bayton 1998: 80). Corin Tucker of Sleater-Kinney explains:

The whole point of riot grrrl was that we were able to rewrite feminism for the 21st Century. Feminism was a concept that our mothers and that generation had, but for teenagers there wasn’t any real access to feminism. It was written in a language that was academic, that was inaccessible to young women, and we took those ideas and rewrote them in our own vernacular (www.emplive.com).

Or as Alison Wolfe from riot grrrl band Bratmobile puts it,

…it was really exciting for people to have something new, modern and handy that they could take those words and use it for themselves (ibid).

The majority of riot grrrls defied standard hierarchical and definitional conventions. Instead, they promoted the notion that each person could be a leader who had the power to take control, be it starting a band or creating their own manifesto, among other things. Importantly, instead of clearly identifying or attempting to define the riot grrrl movement, they encouraged people to take what inspiration they wanted from the issues presented by the movement, validating a variety and multitude of interpretations, opinions and views - often stating in their publications that not everyone might share their views - and persuading others to compile their own policies and proposals.
An outgrowth of the meetings that Jenny Toomey, who ran the Arlington, Virginia-based indie label Simple Machines, had organised for young women, Riot grrrl meetings were as important as riot grrrl music (www.emplive.com). Initially, the meetings were held at Arlington’s “Positive Force House” a place where activists gathered to strategise (ibid). As they gained popularity, individual groups held the meetings in any place of convenience, in different areas.

Topics for discussion included conversations about music and bands etc., but the occasions were also used to tackle more serious issues such as violence against women, eating disorders and the forms of abuse that affect people, particularly women. In this way, ‘the riot grrrl meetings were similar to the consciousness raising sessions held by seventies-era feminists – with the added desire to create music’ (ibid). Sharon Cheslow, a former member of Chalk Circle DC’s first all-female punk band in the early eighties, identifies the punk rock world as a microcosm, the sexist world order reproduced ‘here in our community’:

They thought, ‘Oh no! We’re not sexist!’ And they had to take a look, because so many of us women were saying, ‘There’s something wrong here, we’re noticing these differences. We are not getting the encouragement and support that we need.’ And how can we change things on this bigger level if we can’t change things right here in our community? (Cheslow cited in ibid).

But ‘community’ is not an unproblematic concept and independently of the riot grrrl movement has been the subject of considerable interrogation, not least in regard to the potential for totalitarianism in common understandings of the term.

Postmodern theorist Jean-Luc Nancy traces the gestation of the notion of community to concepts of experience, discourse, and the individual, which he argues, have dominated modern thought. Nancy redefines community through its political nature in its resistance to immanent power, rather than as a project of communal production or fusion (www.wikipedia.org).

The community that becomes a single thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader…) necessarily loses the in of being-in-common. Or, it loses the with or the together that defines it. It yields its being-together to a being of togetherness. The truth of community, on the contrary, resides in the retreat of such a being (ibid).
Examining restorative justice, George Pavlich reviews both justice and community through a deconstructionist lens and considers restorative justice as a way of challenging, continuously, any given calculation of justice or collective solidarity (Pavlich 2003: 451ff). He highlights the serious danger of totalitarianism inherent in the appeal to homogeneous, consensual and unified images of community.

Marked by identity through exclusion, the basic and definitional requirement of community involves a responsibility to the like, effectively fortifying against the unalike, carrying the threat of totalitarian refusal to take responsibility for the excluded other (ibid cited in McDonnell 2003: 79).

Exploring the dynamics of community in Europe during World War I, Michael Kane (1999) observes that war held out the possibility of a return to a sense of community among men based on the following:

... (a) a clear definition of the boundary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’, i.e. clear relationships of allegiance, (b) feudal or strictly hierarchical relationships of allegiance and property, and (c) feudal relationships of allegiance between men, whose role as warriors was clearly distinct from the domestic duties of women – a return in other words, to the security of the unquestioned authority, blind belief and hierarchical structures of the patriarchy. This would be a symbolic battle to defend the patriarchy against the encroachment of modern ‘anarchy’ and ‘chaos’ (Kane 1999: 167).

With the clear definition of an outside enemy, and of the frontier between ‘us’ and ‘them’ he says, people could suddenly rejoice that they belonged together (ibid).

Twentieth century totalitarianism is a central issue for theorists Adorno, Horkheimer. As critical writers they are concerned with the fact that society functions under repression. The essence of their argument is that twentieth century totalitarianism is not a problem related exclusively to modern capitalism or fascism, but that totalitarianism reproduces itself within mentality producing a western state of mind on a global scale. The theorists do not see history as the gradual emancipation of humanity, but the tightening grip of control, of a ‘totally administered society’. The concept of totalitarianism, they conclude, is that we live in a repressed ‘democratic unfreedom’ (Marcuse, 2002).
As far back as 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno concluded from their research that U.S. popular culture consisted 'of routinized forms that diminish the complexity of human experience and serve the interests of powerful corporations' (Rivkin and Ryan 2004: 1242). Relying on the rhetoric of supply and demand to legitimate their enterprise of production and reproduction, corporations exploit a cultural industrial fusion in which people become subsumed into the consumer culture where 'something is provided for all so that none may escape'. Linking a technological rationale to domination and alienation, Horkheimer and Adorno see technology in the culture industry as having achieved no more than standardization and mass production, ‘...sacrificing whatever involved a distinction between the logic of the work and that of the social system’, a topic approached in Bikini Kill’s ‘Reject All American’15. They identify an ‘aesthetic barbarity’ which establishes culture as common-denominator in a system about which they conclude as follows:

By subordinating in the same way and to the same end all areas of intellectual creation, by occupying men’s senses from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock in again the next morning with matter that bears the impress of the labour process they themselves have to sustain throughout the day, this subsumption mockingly satisfies the concept of a unified culture which the philosophers of personality contrasted with mass culture (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2004).

This theory is of particular relevance to the experience of riot grrrl, specifically concerning their relationships with the media.

From the moment of inception, riot grrrl suffered from intense media scrutiny. The mass media used the term “riot grrrl” to described what they perceived as the seemingly “new” arrival of angry women in rock. However, as with much analysis by the mass media, the mainstream take on riot grrrl was flawed. Jean Smith observes:

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15 Bikini Kill’s Reject All American promotes the denunciation of this concept of community Hanna referred to as ‘the American way’, claiming that it propagates self-deception and self-destruction (Hanna 1992: Bikini Kill #1):
Regimented, Designated, Mass acceptance, Over rated... LIP SYNCH, Apology, LIP SYNCH, Salutations, LIP SYNCH, Teen anthem, LIP SYNCH, Obligation... Reject all American, Reject all American, Reject all American, Reject ALL AMERICAN.
The media... and language in general, tends to streamline thinking, and the simplest way to get across an idea is to eliminate every other idea (www.emplive.com)

Corin Tucker of Sleater-Kinney identifies ‘a really intensely deliberate pattern of trivialising the whole movement’:

I think they were really threatened by the idea of these young girls using our sexuality in ways that were outrageous to them... it was deliberate that we were made to look like we were just ridiculous girls running around in our underwear. They refused to do serious interviews with us or they misprinted what we had to say, they took our articles and our fanzines and our essays out of context. We wrote a lot about sexual abuse and sexual assault for teenagers and young women. I think they are really important concepts that the media never addressed (ibid).

Sharon Cheslow agrees:

There were a lot of very important ideas that I think the mainstream media couldn’t handle, and so it was easier for them to focus on the fact that these were girls who were wearing (barrettes?) in their hair or writing ‘slut’ on their stomach (ibid).

In reaction against this treatment the riot grrrl women to a large extent withdrew from interaction with the media:

Around the time when riot grrrl was becoming aware that the media was going to play a role in their history and their evolution, how much of their evolution would be misinterpreted or impeded by media concerns, they became apprehensive about entering into any sort of dialogue with journalists (Jean Smith cited in ibid).

By the fall of 1992 a “media blackout” had been declared (ibid). Another consideration in this decision, arguably, was the refusal to ‘totalitize’ or dictate closed definitions of the riot grrrl movement, described as the ‘rebellion against diction’ in chapter five (Reynolds and Press 1995: 378). It could also be said that by rejecting the media, riot grrrl were ultimately rejecting Foucault’s ‘disciplinary power’ of ‘spatialization’, refusing to be ‘put in their place’. The freedom for the individual offered also accords with the aspirations of radical feminist Valerie Solanas, who
defines ‘true’ community as consisting of individuals16 (Solanas 2004: 49). Nikki McClure sees this refusal as being an advantage to the movement in this respect and also as a means of avoiding commodification:

Seeing there was that media blackout or whatever for Riot Grrrl... it was kind of a good thing in this way because it let Riot Grrrl become whatever each girl who heard about it wanted it to be for them and finding whatever power message they could find in it, then they could use it without it being like a media like “This is what riot grrrl is... It’s about... You should buy it, it’s for sale right now!” (McClure cited in www.emplive.com).

Obviously, coverage was hindered by the fact that many women involved in riot grrrl declined to speak to the media. Despite this, they continued to be written about, misinterpreted and trivialised ‘from an all-too-familiar stereotypical perspective’ (www.emplive.com):

*Newsweek* called riot grrrl “feminism with a loud happy face dotting the ‘I.’” while *USA Today*’s coverage came off sounding like an amused parent: “From hundreds of once pink, frilly bedrooms comes the young feminist revolution. And it’s not pretty. But it doesn’t wanna be. So there!” (ibid).

While Melody Maker, the leading music journal in England, wrote:

The best thing that any Riot Grrrl could do is to go away and do some reading, and I don’t mean a grubby little fanzine (Leonard 1997: 243).

In the inlay of Bikini Kill’s self title CD version of the first two records, released in 1992, Tobi Vail declares ‘BIKINI KILL IS MADE UP OF FOUR INDIVIDUALS, kathi, tobi, billy and kathleen’. Addressing the fans, she describes their relationship with the media:

We have been written about a lot by big magazines who have never talked to us or seen our shows. They write about us authoritatively, as if they

Radical feminist Valerie Solanas claims that our society – western society – is not a community but ‘merely a collection of isolated family units’. Instead, Solanas defines ‘true’ community as consisting of individuals:

...not mere species members, not couples – respecting each others individuality and privacy, at the same time interacting with each other mentally and emotionally – free spirits in free relation to each other – and cooperating with each other to achieve common ends. Traditionalists say the basic unit of “society” is the family; “hippies” say the tribe; no one says the individual (Solanas 2004: 49).
understand us better than we understand our own ideas, tactics and significance... Their idea of punk rock is not based on anything they have ever experienced directly or even sought an understanding of by talking to those who have, yet they continue to write about it as if their stereotypical surface level view of it is all it is... As a rule we don’t do interviews with mainstream newspapers or magazines. In the few cases where we did do them we feel like we were totally fucked over by the way our words were framed to back up ideas that weren’t our own... When we have granted these sources interviews it made us look like everything they said about us was done with our cooperation... This is really frustrating but what is even more frustrating is when people who should know better, other punks for instance, believe these takes on who we are as being based on reality rather than on conjecture and in most cases on ill intentions of the writer/magazine (Bikini Kill A)

Instead of media promotion, riot grrrls relied on cheaply produced photocopied fanzines and pamphlets as an alternative method of communication, ‘unhampered by corporate structure, cash and censorship’ (Burchill and Parsons 1978: 37). Reading fanzines (sometimes referred to as girl-zines within the riot grrrl context) enabled teenage girls and young women to view their experiences of sexual abuse, racial prejudice, harassment etc., as being political issues rather than isolated personal incidents. As the popularity of this subcultural infrastructure spread, relaying uncensored versions of adolescent girls’ experiences, more girls were encouraged to reach out to each other through the fanzine network:

In zines, (girls) are finally free to express themselves fully, to be heard, and also to realise they are not alone (Carlip 1995: 34).

When Sassy, a popular teen magazine from the early nineties published the addresses of several riot grrrl zines, many of them were forced to cease production because they just could not handle the flood of mail they received. This was seen as a testament to how the issues dealt with in the zines validated these largely neglected experiences. They also prompted other people to start their own fanzines. Andrea, of semi-riot grrrl band Mambo Taxi describes:

There were fanzines springing up. There were little clubs springing up. There were hundreds of female bands springing up, really unknown ones... We used to get passed fanzines and sometimes women used to write and say, ‘I’m
setting up a club to celebrate women in my town. We want you to support it and obviously you’d be there... (Bayton 1998: 77).

It has been argued that ‘as a result of the media gaze, riot grrrl was never given the opportunity to fully develop’ (www.emplive.com). Gottlieb and Wald conclude their article on Riot Grrrl stating, that if Riot Grrrl truly wanted to offer its form of feminism to the masses, they needed to abandon their belief in the power of the subculture and start working with the media (Gottlieb and Wald 1994: 271). It is mistaken to presume that riot grrrl refused to cooperate with the media, it was in fact the media who refused to cooperate and respect the interviewees as representatives of the movement and opted instead to translate the phenomenon as a fashion show and not a political revolution:

The whole conversation became one of identity instead of one about activism or music or culture (Tobi Vail cited in www.emplive.com).

As Marion Leonard notes:

The goal of many of those involved was not to gain mass attention but to encourage girls and women to communicate with each other (Leonard 1997: 247).

As with almost all media frenzies, the attention paid to the riot grrrl movement eventually depleted and stories and articles declaring the ‘death’ of riot grrrl began to appear in 1995/ 1996.
Conclusion

'Rimbaud writes this letter and he says... in the future when women get away from their long servitude to men... they're going to have new music, new sensations, new horrors, new spurts...'


Her discourse, even when 'theoretical' or political, is never simple or linear or 'objectivized', universalised; she involves her story in history

Cixous cited in Kemp and Squires 1997: 233

From the symbolic 'death' of the riot grrrl movement, emerged a breed of 'angry women', including such successful artists as Alanis Morissette, who at 21 years of age and a relatively unknown performer, sold 48,000 copies of her album Jagged Little Pill in 1995 alone and was suddenly being hailed as a new feminist heroine (Borzillo 1). With Morissette came other 'angry' young females, Tracy Bonham, Meredith Brooks and Fiona Apple and The Spice Girls to name but a few. Although the 'angry women' presented issues similar to those dealt with within the riot grrrl genre, the new feminist 'heroines' were far more commercially successful. It has been suggested elsewhere that one reason for this was their presentation. As noted by Gottlieb and Wald, signing to major record labels would compromise the riot grrrls integrity, and fundamental, political message (Gottlieb and Wald 1994: 251). In an interview with Rolling Stone, for example, Fiona Apple acknowledged that she had a very carefully constructed image. She told Chris Heath that her goal is to "start out being lean and the absolute perfect marketing package," after gaining enough fame, she can dress and look how she wants (ibid: 68).

It has been argued, that by not conforming to traditional beauty standards, riot grrrls and riot grrrl associated bands, such as the Slits, appeared too threatening to major labels. Morissette and the other performers who were grouped with her, as one argument goes, were all on major labels from the start and who's music was produced, packaged, censored and radio friendly, very unlike the explicit riot grrrls.
In her article "Men Making a Scene: Rock Music and the Production of Gender," Sarah Cohen notes that women are often associated with pop music and mass commercial entertainment while men are associated with rock and authenticity (Cohen cited in Whiteley 1997: 17-36). However angry Morissette and her contemporaries, they were still operating within the area of pop music in which their political message was second to their record sales. Riot grrrl bands on the other hand, stepped into the ‘forbidden’ and ‘exclusive’ male sphere, and as Norma Coates describes threw ‘the category of ‘rock’ in flux by transgressing and threatening to explore the artificial gender boundaries erected by the technologised machinations of power’ (Coates cited in Whiteley 1997: 50 - 64). Dick Hebdige argues that in order to render a subculture non-threatening, it must be subsumed into the mainstream and commodified (Hebdige 1979: 3-4). The new ‘angry women’, it has been argued, typifies the incorporation of a radical movement. Their type of female empowerment, or ‘power message’, manifested itself in the form of a CD, rather than something to ‘actively produce’.

The media, despite the disapproval of certain bands, are still in the habit of dubbing all-female bands ‘riot grrrl’, even in Dublin, Ireland in 2005. Bassist and Guitarist Adele and Mary from all girl, Dublin based rock group Medea explain their political stance:

It’s not a political act that we actually play in a band... It’s incidental that its political because none of us ever decided to be musicians because we wanted to change anything, it’s more along the way people put this slant on it... and it also occurs because there’s so few of us (female musicians)... We do stand out, especially with three girls in one band, that’s rare... (being female musicians) stops becoming an issue for you... (Personal communication 2005)

And in regard to being in an all female band, rather than a mixed band:

There’s a different dynamic with all women absolutely... I find it less intimidating... still now we’ll make these exaggerations ‘Oh this is not really finished’... (men) are probably weary of ‘girl bands’ if you like, and I hate that term. Some guy recently asked us ‘What’s it like to be in a ‘chick’ band?’... it’s a very sexist thing... it’s actually a way of reacting against... ‘Why do you need to stereotype us into terms of gender?’... We get called riot grrrl and we’re not, but we do. When we play a gig and they’re like ‘Oh,
Medea – riot grrrl, Playground Psychotic – riot grrrl’ and we not. It’s a label straight off! (ibid)

Despite the arguments against riot grrrl, and the generalized use of the label, it is through the so-called ‘death’ of riot grrrl that something new can emerge. In Kathleen Hanna’s case, it was through her movement away from riot grrrl that she established herself as an electronica musician, with commercially successful band Le Tigre. Hanna continues to pioneer feminism, but in a more public light: Le Tigre has recently signed to Universal records in order to reach a global audience. In an interview in GCN, Mary Considine argues that Le Tigre’s recent jump from a radical lesbian label, Mr. Lady records does not mean that they are ‘leaving their political roots behind’. ‘If anything’ she says ‘they’re more radical then ever...’ Hanna describes how she has found the change:

I have to say It’s been great. I just love not having to do as much work as I had to do before. I’m 36 and I’ve been doing this since I was 19, so I’ve been touring and in bands for 17 years. All those years the most we ever had on tour with us is two people, a roadie and a sound woman. You have to do the jobs of a publicist and manager, as well as being in the band. I was close to burning out... having extra help has been really great because we can concentrate on the music more. I just realised that what we do is important enough that we need it to be sustainable and I think our fans understand that. Universal have been cool and they actually wanted us to put out New Kicks, which is a really strong anti-war song, as our first single. It’s really challenged a lot of images I had about major labels. And it’s so great to be able to have our music further out there in the world.

Considering Hanna’s background and already established fan-base and image, it is unsurprising that Universal records have agreed so readily to Le Tigre’s terms and conditions.

Although the original riot grrrls moved away from the movement, the phenomenon, ultimately left undefined, is available for future female musicians to take from it what they will. Despite the predominantly positive impacts, unfortunately, and due to the limited number of references and official research into the movement, riot grrrl is still subject to the criticisms originally levelled against it, based now as then, largely on
misperception and misunderstanding. Chief among these criticisms is the allegation that, as a result of the riot grrrls condemnation of the media, they ultimately failed. This 'mindblindness' to the positive elements of riot grrrl, in itself can be seen a certain subsumation of a threatening subculture (Baron-Cohen 2003: 137). Success, as viewed by Sartre, automatically implies failure. For the moment 'closure' can be applied, according to Sartre, is the moment we sacrifice freedom. Instead, Sartre suggests, we should be in constant revolt, continually reinterpreting and revaluing, incessantly exercising our freedom to choose, challenge and apply meaning. Riot grrrl, I propose, 'held the moment and let the moment move through' in what Marion Woodman identifies as the essence of the conscious feminine, 'a moment of presence' in an addictive culture based on greed, consumerism, the future and control. Woodman suggests that we must recognise and nurture the conscious feminine, emerging on the planet from the first time now at the end of the millennium:

If we don't recognise it in our own matter, name it and honour it, it will slip through our fingers and we will lose it (Woodman 1998).
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www.emlive.com

**Selected tracks audio CD included taken from the following albums:**

The Slits (2005), *Live at the Gibus Club*, on Sanctuary Records Group Ltd

Bikini Kill (1992), *Bikini Kill*, CD version of the first two records, on Kill Rock Stars

Dory Previn, *In Search of Mythical Kings (The UA Years) 1993*, on EMI

Free Kitten, *Unboxed* on WIIIJA Records