

Pop and Postfeminism: Female Dandyism in Popular Music by Nathalie Weidhase, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2024.

Sumyat Swezin¹

Nathalie Weidhase's *Pop and Feminism: Female Dandyism in Popular Music* published by Bloomsbury Publishing House in late 2024, undertakes an intellectual meditation on the intersected picture of postfeminism and the metamorphic impact of the female dandy as the artistic spectacle across the cultural landscape. The book cover displays Lady Gaga in a sparkling metallic dress and a wig against a vibrant purple-pink background with colourful polka dots and yellow titles; the choice of this image and layout underlines the purpose of Weidhase's ambitious work – the creative self-presentation of “female dandyism” and the performance of an unapologetic self and assertiveness that depicts postfeminist narrative. The female dandy, historically correlated with the “quaintrelle,” was perceived as a mimicry of masculine figures stylised in sophisticated attires, stirring the sentiments of gender polarisation and giving an androgynous impression. Weidhase, in contrast, argues that dandyism in gendered disposition might be a variable way of transgressing the performance of gender essentialism. Subsequently, she reconstitutes the essence of the dandy's self-fashioning as an influential narrative in current popular culture, politicising the aesthetically constructed persona of selected female artists through the lens of postfeminism.

From the dawn of the #MeToo cultural movement to Greta Gerwig's recent *Barbie* (2023), the growing attention to the postfeminist resilience narrative paves the path for the debate on the intersectional predicaments and discords regarding female identity, their autonomous role, and navigating systemic barriers within the neoliberal framework. Pop stars, such as Amy Winehouse, Rihanna, Lana Del Rey, and Lady Gaga, labelled as “unruly women” by Weidhase (8), defiantly redefine what it means to be an empowered subject by engaging with their over-aestheticised performances threaded into the festive spectacle of precariousness,

¹University of Debrecen, sumyatswezin111@gmail.com

absurdity, illness, suffering, and loss, obscurely against the mainstream thoughts of explicit “becoming.” Weidhase’s discussion revolves around audiovisual culture, problematising the liminality between the objectification of patriarchal media dynamics and the potentiality of agentic artistry of female pop dandies.

In the introduction of the book, Kristeva’s abject theory as the subversive tool in feminist performance is mentioned to illustrate that not only female artists but also pop music genres are feminised, excluded, and perceived as abject in the cultural realm (6). Arguing that the concept of “dandy” is associated with empowerment and transformative contributions compared to “diva,” while both are in the category of abject, Weidhase frames the conceptual foundations to navigate and reinforce her engagement of dandyism (11). In the world of aesthetic styling in female dandyism, the transgressive identity might also adopt hyperfemininity that goes beyond cross-dressing, yet it is challenging for female dandies to surpass the sexualised gaze (20–21). While postfeminism ambiguously supports and questions heteronormativity, the portrayal of queerness does not seem to rebel against the gender binary but instead exposes the shallowness of the ornamented image. However, the theatrical self-creation fused with spectatorship manifests the idea of gender performativity, and consequently, decorative femininity integrated with strategic control enacts semiotic defiance of traditional gender norms.

Besides, the conscious practice of aestheticising the abject features of femininity as a female pop dandy confronts the commodification of women in the entertainment field. This perspective is explored in Chapter 2, discussing how Amy Winehouse’s hybrid representation of “otherness” among the pop icons and her “traditional Jewish persona” convey a distorted postfeminist femininity (41). Angela McRobbie’s “postfeminist disorders” that refer to self-destruction committed out of anger at the restrictive norms of idealistic productivity for contemporary women are transformed into artwork by Amy Winehouse’s fragile, underweight bodily performance in the music video “Rehab,” externalising her rage, mental health issues, and addiction (59–60). As a female dandy, by embracing abject failure to conform to socially normative physical form, she challenges the neoliberal narrative of rejuvenation and empowerment written for women, rejecting the desire for self-repair (61). In the case of Rihanna, the focus of Chapter 3, a common trait that she shares with Winehouse is that both explore the negative dimensions of love and attempt to subvert the ideals of romantic relationships within the landscape of heterosexuality by portraying a

queer sensibility associated with the female dandy. Rihanna's theatrically stylised persona, imbued with her business-minded spirit and her authorship constrained by collaborative composers despite personal confessions in artistic space, prompts a contemplation of her authenticity and reveals a conflicted identity (70-71).

In Chapter 4, in connection with Lady Gaga, Weidhase highlights the dandy's balanced approach to subversion, arguing that Gaga's monstrosity, rather than embodying resistance, is celebrated as a form of motherhood, affirming the authoritative and effective role of femininity as an idealised gender empowerment within neoliberal culture (102). In the case of Gaga, mainly her music videos "Born This Way" and "You and I" are discussed, examining how she reimagines postfeminist maternity, self-defined kinship, and reproduction beyond the involvement of a father. Another trait of the postfeminist dandy is her ability to interpret and question the current sociopolitical system and ideology through her stylised performances, thereby enacting a multidimensional artistic persona. Shifting the attention to Lana Del Rey, Chapter 5 describes that her relentless embrace of the failure of romantic expectations challenges and contaminates the idealised heteronormative dynamics promised in the American dream. Her dandy persona employs nostalgia to bridge the idealised past with the unstable reality of contemporary American society and the vulnerability of postfeminist women (133).

In the last two sections of the book, Weidhase examines authenticity, authorship, and the performance of corporeality in postfeminist dandies, who emerge as a liminal space between the dominant and superior sentiment of art and popular culture, which is often stereotyped as inconsistent and overly feminine. In embodying femininity through bodily performance in the era of postfeminism, the dandy's nonconformity and rebellion are still affected by the gaze of media and conventional sociocultural norms and practices, resulting in a nuanced conception of authenticity. Music videos provide a spectacle in which the postfeminist dandy crafts her abject femininity and transgressive performances, constructing a complex structure of identity and authenticity while simultaneously challenging the normative idea of authorship as a singular personal creation of artistic work (178).

In *Pop and Postfeminism*, Weidhase illuminates how the female pop dandy questions and comments on the notion of "too much" and "not enough" in visual consumerism by adopting a subversive identity. Unruly contemporary female artists embracing dandyism in the feminised pop music industry problematise the idea of

authenticity and the spectacle exerted by the male gaze, bearing double exclusions, thereby fostering the more nuanced understanding of the conversation between being exploited as a neoliberal product and the act of sublimation. Ultimately, Weidhase's *Pop and Postfeminism* introduces a novel approach to the performative aspects of female artists' personae and their abject "other" roles in the contemporary audiovisual culture, contributing significantly to the field of gender studies, postfeminism, and celebrity studies.