

TAKE THAT: DANCING THE RHETORIC OF POST-FORDIST MASCULINITY

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The paper argues that changing socio-economic ideologies can be detected in the dance and performance style of contemporary male vocal groups and more particularly I will compare the performances of artists working within the pop and dance genres during the 1960s with those described as boy-bands whose work spans the period from the 1990s to the present day.

I will show how the embodied gestures of 1960s male vocal harmony groups articulate the prevailing notions of acceptable masculinity in the Fordist era of mass production. Fordism, which dominated American industry from the 1940s to the 1960s, promoted conformity, uniformity and rationalism - values which are reflected in dance moves of the era notably in the dance performances of male artists working for the Tamla Motown record label in the 1960s. Following Butler's (1990) important work on the performative nature of gender, the paper will demonstrate the extent to which the dance moves and performance of the new wave of boy-bands in the period post 1990 express the transformation of post-war masculinity in the wake of Post-Fordist economic restructuring.

The stylizing of the body has a history where gender limits its conditions and possibilities by compelling it to become a socially sanctioned cultural sign. Through repeated performance, these signs are naturalised and because gender can be seen to be a survival strategy within a historically determined system of compulsory hetero-normativity, those who fail to offer an appropriate performance are punished either by subtle rejection, marginalisation or more outright hostility and censure. Drawing on David Harvey's argument that: "The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms" (1989: 156), I will show how the dance routines, fashions and gestures of Take That in the period between 1990 and the present day, mirror the move away from the Fordist masculine aesthetic of corporate and controlled uniformity towards more vulnerable and submissive expressions of masculinity. It is my contention that their pop dance routines embody social and economic changes emanating from the crisis of capitalism and subsequent modifications to the economic system. Through the presentation of the male body and their signature dance routines, in common with other boy-bands of the 1990s, they illustrate the impact of these changes on gender relations.

If we look at the backdrop to the economic regimes of Fordism and Post-Fordism, the first system is associated with the production methods introduced by the American industrialist and car manufacturer Henry Ford, whose success was epitomised by the hugely popular Model T car design which dominated the automobile market during the 1920s. Defined by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin as, "a model of economic expansion and technological progress based on mass production: the manufacture of standardized products in huge volumes using special purpose machinery and unskilled labour"(1987: 1), Fordism was designed to increase productivity in the car industry but the process was quickly applied to other areas of manufacturing as industry geared itself for the demands of the mass market.

Post-Fordism refers to a more recent system of production and related socio-economic activities currently dominating Western industry and culture. In this system, the impact of new

electronic and information technologies de-centralizes the workplace allowing for a greater element of flexibility and individuality. While there is no consensus as to the precise origins of the phenomenon, schools of thought are primarily divided between those who see the defining characteristics as a result of the post 1970s shift from monolithic mass production to more flexible specialization (Piore and Sabel 1984) and others, working within a Marxist framework (Aglietta 1979; Lipietz 1989) who view the changes as a compensatory mechanism relating to capitalism's inherent instability. Furthermore, where Fordist production methods were able to match the consumer demands emanating from the spectacular economic growth which followed the Second World War, Post-Fordism was more able to accommodate the impact of the worldwide economic recession of the 1970s which followed the consumer boom of the 1950s and 1960s. For the majority of industrialised countries in the West, the 1970s saw the first signs of economic stagnation, a threat to the progress of capitalism which was to have a significant impact on the nature of the workplace as well as established gender relations.

While there are dangers in oversimplifying gender relations within binaries of oppression and domination, there are clearly some tangible connections between economic independence and social change. For women, access to employment has enabled them to choose whether or not to marry and divorce has become a viable option. More flexible modes of production certainly created new employment opportunities, many of which were of benefit to women. While the nuclear family model dominated by a full-time working father and a full-time stay at home mother flourished under Fordism and was promoted as an ideal by social conservatives, the concept relied on women's exclusion from well paid jobs and the appropriation of their domestic labour by men in support of corporate objectives. In this system the stability of the nuclear family went unchallenged but Post-Fordist economics posed a challenge both to the hegemony of the nuclear unit and to patriarchy's economic oppression of women. Gary Becker for example, suggests that "the breakup of marriage is related less to progressive legal reforms than it is to the significant growth of women's earning power since the 1960s" (1991: 331). In the system where men were sole breadwinners and women were excluded from the paid workforce divorce rates were low but as women have gained more power in the workplace, the incidence of divorce has soared. As a result, modern families are no longer compelled to conform to the nuclear model and although marriage remains popular and men derive significant benefits from the union as their position is less certain as women continue to make gains in the spheres of education and employment.

In post-Fordist society, the nature of culture and cultural production also illustrates the shift away from standardised to flexible modes in a zeitgeist where variety and difference are welcomed. The economic changes have not just affected the production of consumer goods and the overall cultural mood, for as Robert Connell argues, the new era heralds a change in the collective process of gender construction and more particularly, it has witnessed a direct challenge to traditional working class masculinity (2000). Linda Mc.Dowell explains how at the turn of the millennium, the advantages previously bestowed upon white males of working class origin are threatened by the success of girls in the workplace arguing how their success is: "... related to if not the cause of, growing uncertainty among young men about their place in the world and their ability to fulfil traditional notions of masculine responsibilities and the provision of support for dependants" (2003: 20).

With the arrival of birth control, greater acceptance of divorce and a wider range of models of living, women no longer depend on men as the sole breadwinner and for the younger generation, relationships with men are forged more around mutual interests, sexual compatibility, friendship and a sharing of domestic responsibilities than they were in the past.

The Fordist approach also informed the cultural products of its era and for detractors of the system, the resulting output lacked individuality and quality. Philosopher and social critic Theodor Adorno was deeply critical of the output emanating from the mass-production system complaining that, "...products which are tailored for consumption by the masses,...are manufactured more or less according to plan" (1975:12). Lamenting how, 'culture today is infecting everything with sameness', he pointed to the bland undifferentiated nature of contemporary broadcast and print media (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 94). Those influenced by Adorno blamed the pervasive uniformity of contemporary production methods for the resultant homogeneity of everything from high rise housing to formulaic television programmes.

The Dance Routines of the Production Line

While arguments concerning uniformity may be supported by an examination of the products of the production line, there is some evidence that a similar level of standardisation was applied to the sphere of popular music performance. Although dance is an art form with enormous capacity for individuality and freedom of expression, it is possible to detect the influence of the Fordist preference for standardisation in the style of movement adopted by artists working for the Tamla Motown record label, an organisation famed for the formulaic production of catchy soul music designed to please the masses. During the 1960s, Motown's ambitions were homologous with the portmanteau associations of its name which linked together the words 'motor' and 'town' in order to reference the label's links to its hometown Detroit, a centre of Fordist car manufacturing. Like the techniques used on the production lines, the dance steps of the male artists at Motown were carefully synchronised to produce a symbolic uniformity. On the one hand this was reflective of the standardisation of the company's music but it also articulated a more generalised demand for unthreatening and understated masculinity within the corporate sphere of the era.

Groups such as The Four Tops, The Temptations and the Miracles were encouraged to minimise differences between individuals by dressing alike under the instruction of house choreographer Charles Atkins (Lyman 2011 web). The routines were a key part of the company's mainstream refinement strategy, designed to enable the groups to overcome the racial barriers of the day by enabling them to mirror the bland corporate aesthetic of American industry. By wearing smart suits and dancing in neat, orderly formation, the artists' performance effectively embodied the contemporary work ethic in the sphere of mass-production where men sacrificed their individuality in support of collective goals (see fig. 1). The short, closely cropped hairstyles, shiny shoes, shirts and ties worn by male Motown artists mimic the uniform of the white businessman in an aspirational display of corporate masculinity.



Fig. 1 The Temptations

In some of their routines, the small, synchronised hand gestures resemble the actions of those performing routine tasks in factories on the Fordist production lines. In “Baby I Need Your Loving” (1964), The Four Tops alternate between polite handclapping to brief air tugging, and circular hand movements, at all times remaining upright with heads held high. Although there are occasional spins and turns, the overall impression is one of restrained virility as the men concentrate on the regular work of toe tapping and subtle shifting of weight from one side of the body to the other¹.

At the company’s zenith in the mid-1960s, in a historical and cultural environment of deep intolerance towards alternative expressions of sexuality, Motown had to be careful to ensure that their artists looked sufficiently ‘manly’ to avoid any undesirable connotations of homosexuality. Furthermore, by aligning their artists to mainstream white dress code the potential stereotypical fears relating to black male sexuality and sexual prowess was minimised.

The company also enforced clear boundaries between the appearance of male and female artists, with men wearing suits and women adopting smart casual dresses or evening gowns. The culturally constructed fiction of male and female genders set in opposition to one another insists that the diametrically opposed identities are ritually performed as distinctively different to one another. Thus men must not dress or act in a feminine manner and vice versa, women must be careful to ensure that they perform an acceptable form of femininity. Therefore by adopting the dress sensibilities of the sphere of business and avoiding any hint of effeminacy, the male Tamla Motown artists were able to offset any assumptions regarding the masculinity and sexuality of their performers.

However, despite these efforts all men engaged in exclusively male dance performance encounter problems regarding the issues raised by the masculine homosocial spectacle and those in male vocal harmony and dance groups occupy a particularly problematic space. This is because, as John Benyon points out, “...in spite of its grace and athleticism, male dance is widely viewed as an invalid expression of the masculine” (2002: 22), largely because it is the antithesis of such manly’ activities as rugby or boxing. In the micro-politics of popular music, male dancing presents a similar challenge and in order to assert dominant masculinity, many artists choose to avoid the feminising connotations of dance. Instead, they secure and bolster their masculinity by making use of a range of instruments as phallic appendages and symbols of strength. Citing the example of Jimi Hendrix as a “master of the sexually inspired guitar spectacle”, Andre Millard explains how: “In several genres of rock, especially heavy metal and hard rock, the way of holding and moving the guitar was closely connected to its phallic symbolism” (2004: 158).

In Western dance tradition male bodies are generally presented to be seen and understood in a particular manner which should enforce dominant ideologies regarding identity under patriarchy. In order reinforce patriarchal values men are expected to embody qualities which ensure that they appear to be dominant and in control over those who may pose a threat to hegemonic masculinity. In Ramsey Burt's (1995) opinion the portrayal of masculinity in dance is mediated through a range of signifying systems and while some of these are shared with other cultural forms such as advertising imagery or film, others are more specific to dance. For example, the gender-coded moves of shoulder shaking and hip swivelling so often seen in dance, are seldom encountered in other contexts as they may be interpreted as unmasculine. In a similar manner, male dance groups who make use of the 'wrong' moves offer an unacceptable performance of masculinity particularly if they incorporate other, even more submissive gestures in their routines. Hip swivelling, head flipping, body dipping and spinning all transgress a central requirement of hegemonic masculinity because they are in opposition to the conventional upright and firm bodily displays of assertiveness and aggression normally associated with male physical representation. Furthermore, where the female body is regarded as a fluid and soft terrain and it is acceptable for women to dance in ways which emphasize these qualities, men are traditionally encouraged to use organised exercises or drills to develop a hard body signifying autonomy and strength.

In different historical periods, male dance acts have used a variety of strategies to enforce acceptable displays of masculinity. Following the success of the Tamla Motown acts, some white artists modelled themselves on the singing and dancing formula. During the 1970s the clean living Osmond Brothers epitomised the ideal American boy next door. The groups played instruments but wanted to include dance routines as part of their stage show and in order to conform to acceptable mainstream masculinity they called on the services of martial arts expert Chuck Norris who toughened up their act with the addition of some karate moves designed to secure their masculinity. During the 1990s, some of the popular white boy-bands such as 'N Sync and Backstreet Boys incorporated dynamic, acrobatic break dancing moves as a strategy to deflect any queer interpretations of their homosocial performance. For the audience the performance of gymnastic feats with a toned muscular body invites admiration, connoting both health and strength without implying the domination or subjugation suggested by the phallic strutting of the guitar virtuosos. By borrowing dance moves from black street culture of the 1970s and 1980s they were able to draw on longstanding cultural stereotypes regarding black hyper-heterosexuality (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988) thereby diluting the potential for homosexual readings of their performance.

In Burt's (1995) view there is continuity in the representation of masculinity in different dances from the same historical period therefore, if we turn now to the dance routines of the pop group Take That it should be possible to detect aspects of post-Fordism and the challenge presented to the conformist, heteronormative masculinity of previous generations. According to Craig Jennex (cited in Patten 2010) the boy-bands of the 1990s changed society's view on what is considered 'masculine'. The lyrics, vocal and dance style, bands such as Take That and 'N Sync challenged views on masculinity by breaking the codes which traditionally define what it is to be a man. For example by singing in an open manner about emotional issues and making use of feminine coded vocal techniques such as 'modulation', where emotions are highlighted by shifting to a higher key. In doing so they effectively erode the boundaries of sexuality and gender, opening up the possibility of homosexual readings through movements and gestures of submission where

members of the group express vulnerability and sensitivity as they offer their bodies for erotic spectatorship and possession. When watching male dancers performing in concert or in pop videos we bring to the performance our own beliefs regarding gender and masculinity.

Take That: Dancing Post Fordism

The dance routines of the British boy-band Take That show a high level of congruence with the feminisation of culture which characterises the post Fordist era. Now that mass production plant and machinery has been replaced by 'intelligent systems' of machinery capable of more flexible modes of manufacture there has been a shift away from the production of identical goods to more variable small batch production. This in turn places different requirements on the work force who must bring to their jobs a greater degree of flexibility and a broader mix of skills. Changes in the gender composition of the workforce are reflective of women's ability to meet these needs and their growing participation in the workplace as more part time, service oriented employment opportunities have appeared.

For men labouring under capitalism's relentless momentum, masculinity must constantly be reconfigured and the politics and the shifting dynamics of gender relations in the workplace are expressed via the body which acts as a representational medium. The presence of women in the employment sphere and the associated orientation towards more feminine aesthetics and strategies has heralded the decline of the 'hard boiled masculinity' (Breu 2005) of the Fordist years. Physical strength and 'manly' personal characteristics such as dominance and autonomy are less in demand in the contemporary culture and service industries where modern men are compelled to employ feminine aesthetic codes and less traditionally 'masculine' behaviour to adapt to an increasingly feminized working environment.

Where Fordist ideology found expression in the production line dancing and dress code of the Tamla Motown acts, contemporary boy-bands offer a more fluid, quirky and softer articulation of masculinity, more congruent with the feminized and image conscious working environments of the late twentieth century. If we look at Take That as archetypal of this cultural sea change, their appearance in recent publicity shots indicates that the band members seem to be comfortable in expressing their individuality, each showing distinctive characteristics in dress and manner. This is reflected in publicity shots where the boys are dressed differently and sport a variety of carefully coiffeured hairstyles. The band's dress code is casual, their facial expressions are open and the body language is relaxed. No one in the group is wearing a tie therefore, rather than connoting a corporate ethos, their style resonates more with the dress code of the contemporary 'metro-sexual' man.



Fig 2. Take That 2011

Their objectification illustrates Margaret Gullette's (1997) argument that modern masculinity has become a signifier of desire and pleasure and men are now experiencing the same degree of stylised representation as women as changing gender politics force them to resort to strategies of beautification such as the use of cosmetics and body modification. In their dance routines, Take That employ many of the submissive gestures identified by Erving Goffman (1959) in his sociological studies of the presentation of self and symbolic interaction. He categorises certain actions as lacking in dominance and in the video for "Pray" (1993) Take That perform some of these deferential gestures such as face and chest touching, head canting, kneeling and full body prostration all the while gazing longingly at the camera. Where the dance performance of the Tamla Motown artists of the 1960s suggested discipline, restraint, conformity and control, Take That's dance movements connotes sensuality, hedonism and an individualism more resonant with the feminized culture of post Fordism. Instead, through visual display, they offer the pleasure of looking and by exposing the body to erotic spectatorship, their routine can be linked to the rise of the related phenomenon of male striptease, something which has grown in popularity since the 1980s. While striptease has traditionally been a female performance for male gratification, as John Berger argues, women are depicted in a different way from men, not because of any essential differences between the sexes but because in the visual culture of the West, the ideal spectator is male and there is an assumption that the female body should provide visual pleasure (1972: 64). By reversing the rules of gendered spectatorship, boy-bands automatically challenge heteronormativity and the authority of the male gaze. For, as Steve Neale (1983) reminds us, in a patriarchal and heterosexual society, the male body cannot be objectified for erotic gratification of other men.

The video for their single "Shine" 2007 shows the boys in a fantasy environment which recreates the Busby Berkeley musicals of the 1930s and '40s. Here the boys, dressed in top hats and tail coats step down a staircase in unison and at different points in the song, they are seen

skipping, clapping and dancing on top of a grand piano in a playful and light hearted manner. Their individuality is maintained as the camera focuses on each artist and although their clothing has similarities, each wears a distinctive outfit. While their dance routines lack the physical displays of strength exhibited in the early years of their career, they make occasional references to their break dancing past. For example at one point a b-boy spin is briefly performed on top of a grand piano – a playful nod to the dance style of their youth. In previous historical periods, the desire to stay young and to appear youthful were coded as feminine pastimes and a requirement of femininity forcing women to adopt rigid diet and exercise regimes or to resort to plastic surgery. However in the culture of post-Fordism, although women are still under pressure to stay thin and to look young, men are increasingly expected to conform to the same unachievable and idealised image of youthful perfection.

In a video for their more recent song “Patience” (2009) the group trudge sadly with their microphone stands across a bleak, rocky seascape, pleading for understanding as they try to deal with hurt feelings after a broken romance. With pained expressions, they assemble to sing in unison at the end of the song as the wave’s crash around them and dancing is hardly evident beyond subtle swaying movements. Drained by the emotional labour which is now a substitute for the more sustained physical labour of previous generations of men, their performance reveals the vulnerability and fragility of modern masculinity. Although they are a group, they seldom look at one another and their collective grief is displayed by gazing sadly in different directions. The suffering of the Motown artists was presented in a unified manner with neat hand gestures and synchronised steps, thereby reinforcing male solidarity but for the post-Fordist male, in an environment which places greater emphasis on individuality, group identity is minimised and each man must suffer alone, revealing their vulnerability for all to see.

In conclusion, in common with other manifestations of culture, the changing nature of dance routines is illustrative of the impact of social and economic shifts on gender politics and associated power relations. As such the subtle differences in the dance performances of artists in male vocal groups from the two historical periods studied clearly articulate Judith Butler’s argument that gender, rather than being a fixed entity, exists as, ‘a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts’ (1990). In other words, rather than being a fixed attribute in a person, gender should be seen as a fluid variable which shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times. Where the ideal performance of American masculinity during the 1960s necessitated deference to the corporate sphere, a clear disavowal of the feminine or any potential for homosexual interpretations, from the 1990s the ‘metrosexual’ performances of contemporary boy-bands invite a very different set of readings. Through the use of feminised gestures, lyrics and vocal inflection and by embracing the fashion sensibilities traditionally assigned to women and homosexual men Take That perform a destabilized and less hegemonic version of masculinity, more contingent with the impact of post-Fordism on gender roles.

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Notes

- 1 (See The Four Tops performing *Baby I Need Your Loving* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HQEhuyIZmg&feature=related>>).