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Analytical Research Project: Indie Rock Bands' Reconstruction of Hegemonic Masculinity

The following image of the indie rock band Grizzly Bear, which first appeared in the New York Daily News, demonstrates a provocative trend within this musical culture of expressing gender fluidity. The band formed in 2002, and this photograph taken in 2011 presents the physical appearance of the group's members. In the upper right hand corner of the photograph rests a male with hazel blue eyes and medium-length black hair. Directly below him sits another male with hazel blue eyes and medium-length brown hair. To the left of the second person is a baby blue-eyed male with shorter hair on the sides and medium-length hair on the top, which is combed neatly to the left side of his head. There is a male with brown hair and baby blue eyes in the upper left corner. He wears shorter hair on the sides with medium length hair on the top, which is combed to the left side of his head. While these musicians show an affirmation of hegemonic gender by existing physiologically as males, they also stray away from stereotypical masculine traits by embodying a specific brand of indie rock masculinity. It seems that there is a pattern of men in indie rock bands refusing to conform to hegemonic masculinities. Moreover, this effect creates alternative masculinities, or "brands," which the artists use as a way to influence viewers. This purposeful use of alternative masculinities in public arenas, like photos published in a daily periodical, emphasize how masculinity is fluid for these musicians and their fan base.

Due to various cultures prescribing conflicting attributes to masculinity and femininity and the highly contested nature of sexual orientation, it is helpful to define these terms as they will be used in the following pages. Homosociality will be defined as well for comprehension

purposes. This paper uses a definition of masculinity most often found in modern western cultures, which includes characteristics such as apathy, aggression, strength, competitiveness, independence, and rebelliousness. As University of Chicago sociologist Richard Houston noted in his 2003 study of hegemonic masculinity, “strength, competition, violence, prestige, rationality, heterosexuality, sexualization of women, homophobia, and suppression of emotion (unless angry)” remain the most “honored” form of manliness (Houston 159). This is one specific definition but it is not exact or essential to everyone. The definition of femininity most often found in modern western culture includes, joyfulness, affection, and sensitivity. Houston also defines modern western femininity as behaviors which conform to gender standards with qualities that express emotion like, “caring, joy, sadness, anxiety, and fear, as well as being openly affectionate with peers.” These acts are possibly but not necessarily limited to “engaging in beautification practices like styling ones’ hair and adorning the body with accessories; and performing the activities that sexualize the body” (Houston 159). Additionally, Houston argues for the prevalence of homosociality, the strong bonds between people of the same sex. For Houston, homosocial relations among men create “spaces for defining, maintaining, and redefining what it means to be a man” though gender similarities, which can then be “socially shared” among those in the group.

Indie rock rejects these ridged notions of masculinity and femininity and produces an area for gender fluidity through the promotion of homosociality, despite the fact that the indie rock scene is a “male dominated” industry (Ramirez 109). This makes it a prime space for male homosocial relationships, which can either “reinforce” or “weaken” modern western masculinities (Houston 158). Commonly, one sees contradictions through the inclusion of both masculinity and femininity in displays of “emotional and artistic vulnerability” (Ramirez 117).

Musicians of this genre use the music world as a place to “purposely play with gender” (Ramirez 117). For the indie rock musicians, this site indeed enacts stereotypical femininities, although it can be acknowledged that hegemonic masculinity remains in parts of this space. This vestige likely stems from its construction during the musicians’ childhood and from their desire to include both types of traits in their life. While one cannot help but notice how indie-rock musicians often “maintained a masculine front externally,” it also should be acknowledged how they also “simultaneously highlight their emotional vulnerability” (Ramirez 118) through their body language, naming convention, and applied beauty. The indie rock sub culture contains a pattern of mixed hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine attributes, which commonly conflict with one another. In addition to displaying this on album covers and merchandise, the musicians clearly display this mix in the interviews, studies, and data collected in the scholarship of Ramirez and Houston. The exploration of gender fluidity is apparent within the music genre through the displays of indie rock bands themselves.

Once an image is created it becomes indelible, and its viewers are free to superimpose their preformed notions and expectations of gender and sexuality onto the image’s subjects. This can be seen clearly in a close examination of the four male musicians in the photograph of the band Grizzly Bear. The way in which the band members chose to portray themselves reflects both their own perceptions of themselves as well as their desire to project a certain image to the viewer. Their blank stares into the camera are void of any facial expression and underscore the air of passiveness, leaving the beholder with a sense of the musicians’ ambiguity and emptiness.

The expressions on the faces of the artists suggest a characteristic most often associated with a patriarchal view of women, that of being seen as an empty vessel. Similarly, a patriarchal society prefers a woman who is passive, an object who can be molded according to the socio-

historical role of an empty vessel to be filled by the man. According to Houston, “gender and masculinity theorists have focused on the body as a “vessel” for reinforcing gender norms” (Houston 161). In this way, the body can be used as a tool to create a new reality. In this way, the four band members evoke a gender reversal, four men allowing the viewers to make of them whatever they imagine. The image appears to question normative gender identity by blurring boundaries when male subjects turn themselves into objects. These musicians’ masculinity remains reflected only in their assumed stage name, “Grizzly Bear.” In turn, naming convention and gender convention collide as the visual image contradicts the mental image of the name. While Grizzly Bear conjures a ferocious animal to one’s mind, the name bearers themselves aim for the opposite of the association triggered by the name. The animal with very specific traits juxtaposed with an image of musicians with unspecific gender traits exhibits this indie-culture’s proposition of a more fluid gender construction.

When the image is viewed as a marketing tool designed to appeal to an existing and potential fan base, it seems that the band’s target demographic largely views masculinity and femininity as societal constructions rather than biological certainties. Accordingly, Ramirez inferred that “men in music scenes enacted a range of masculinities that incorporated both traditional and nontraditional qualities of masculinities” including “hyper masculine and hyper feminine attributes” (116). Furthermore, a significant percentage of musicians acknowledge their diversification of gender branding within their band dynamic, within themselves, and within their subculture. In the photograph, one notices the man in the upper left wearing a bow tie, all the men have shaven faces, with two wearing medium-length hair, and all have slender body builds. Numerous indie rock musicians talk about body representations being significant with in gender identity, Corey being one of them states, “I think especially when I shave and with my

long hair, my body type not being hugely muscled” allows for one to look more like a woman. He also mentions how he likes to “wear really tight jeans.” Indie rock musicians demonstrate this gender fluidity with many acknowledging they feel that they have a more “feminine” body type and appearance (Houston 167). This also proves that some indie rock musicians seem to believe that stereotypical gender clothing and body displays still apply. Initially marking a break with traditional gender norms, this gender diversification has since become a widely accepted as well as an expected trend. While indie rock bands like Erasure appeared unique in blending masculinity and femininity when they debuted in the 1990s, by the 2000s the style had been copied by countless bands within the genre. In this process, blended gender traits became a new norm and even a branding standard set by the indie music scene.

Body language is a form of expression in which identity and emotion are often displayed. Grizzly Bear can be perceived as defying traditional notions of masculinity through the body language they display in this photograph. A band member in the upper right corner of the image rests closely behind another directly below him. He rests his head relaxed on top of another band member, with his chin caressing the hair of the other man’s head. Three band members are slightly hunched and are taking up as little space as possible. These traits tend to be in line with modern western femininity, but we also see the fourth member in the upper left corner taking up roughly forty percent of the photograph. He is the only one standing and towering over these other three men. This demonstration of taking up more space contrasts with the others’ slumped posture and reflects modern western masculinity. As in, most of the members here take on effeminate postures, but one doesn’t. This mixture of masculinity and femininity is common in the indie rock sub culture. One band interviewed by Houston states how they also like to demonstrate hyper masculine behaviors such as, “Beatin’ around, screaming, yelling, flexing”

(Houston 165). These extensions of space practices are used as a tool to “get attention” from peers and their viewers “through the use of his physical and vocal power” (Houston 165). This significantly demonstrates normative acts of the male sex not only taking up space through physical means, but also through noise signals. We can notice in the photograph some members taking up space and shrinking in space, the members also have their mouths closed completely as if not wanting to make any type of noise to gain attention. Other interviewed indie rock musicians describe hosting events outside of the indie-rock scene such as “fight clubs” (Houston 166) and other acts that “project strength” (Houston 166).

Adding to this complicated depiction of gender, a third band member leans against the arm of another band member. In the photograph, he appears to be leaning in and depicting the band’s formation as one that invites sensitive, nurturing community as well as unity. This is not unusual in the indie rock community. As Logan, an interviewed band member by Houston states, “It’s one of the fewest cultures where like the less masculine you are, the fucking, more of a man you are (Houston 166). Many indie rock musicians poke fun at modern western masculinities by demonstrating modern western femininity with their friends through sensitivity, flirtation, and nurturing acts. Furthermore, others interviewed claimed that they like to get “homoerotic” with their friends (Houston 170) by sometimes “just getting gay” with one another. They perceived this as normal, even “cool,” and talked about how through their homosocial relationship they could not only “joke about” being gay with one another, “but also express it” together (Houston 170). Houston elaborates on how the band members “homoerotic participation” was a means of showing affection and “rebelling against the masculine norm” (Houston 170). The statements of indie rock musicians interviewed by Houston only reinforce the multi-gendered language seen in this specific artifact of Grizzly Bear.

Cosmetics are beautification practices commonly applied by women to create a more gorgeous physical image. Thus it is notable that the indie-rock musicians in this photograph are wearing cosmetics. Significantly, they are not simply wearing cosmetics to offset the harsh lighting of professional photography. Three of the four band members wear black eyeliner in the image. The eyeliner is not heavily applied, and they put on just enough to highlight natural features. Nevertheless, it serves as a stark deviation from the more normative practice of using cosmetics in professional photography only to counteract harsh lighting. The use of eyeliner by the members was an intentional choice, and one made to beautify them. Rock bands commonly have created a physical stage identity through cosmetics, but there is compelling evidence that numerous indie rock musicians use their bodies to convey symbolism against definitive gendered traits and stereotypes. Houston expands on how bodies are used to display gender traits stating, “Gender and masculinity theorists have focused on the body as a “vessel” for doing gender and reinforcing gender norms.” By wearing makeup, these musicians are essentially defying the taboo of males wearing make up to enhance their physical appearance (Houston 161).

Through intentional decisions like body language and cosmetics, indie rock musicians have progressed beyond demonstrations of pure masculinity or pure femininity. Particularly within the subculture of indie rock, musicians appear to embrace the idea of vulnerability. Musicians then can capitalize on this through branding a new style of what it means to be a man. In other words, these deliberate decisions to exhibit gender fluidity elicit questions about whether or not there is one specific 'type' of masculinity. Cosmetics could simply be a sign of the artists highlighting their natural appearance, leading to revealing its full potential: An implication that it is acceptable for men to wear make up too and express themselves in ways that do not meet a broad expectation or standard of masculinity. The time and energy dedicated to beautifying

oneself demonstrates initiative and focus, a stereotypically feminine trait in modern western society. In this way, indie rock bands are taking a lead in redefining hegemonic gendered rules.

The combinations of observations made by scholars, interviews with indie rock musicians, and photographs of indie rock bands all culminate to prove the acceptance of the fluidity of gender among indie rock musicians, as well as the view of gender as a construction rather than a purely biological trait. The band members of Grizzly Bear demonstrate hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine characteristics in their image, sub-culture, and identity through homosocial connections, body language, cosmetics, and their very choice of name. The image of Grizzly Bear studied here represents a larger trend among indie rock bands, a determination to stand up to conformity in gender and advocate for inclusive gender fluidity instead.

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