

Applying Feminist Rhetorical Theory to the Music Industry

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The music industry is an umbrella term that refers to the distribution, production, and entertainment aspect of music and its main goal is profit. The music industry is a global industry that brings in millions of dollars per year and contributes to the “20-billion-dollar global concert industry” (Shaikh 2021). While many consider concerts or music festivals, “social, cultural, economic, spiritual and political phenomenon” and a place for a “counter-culture desire for social change”, others feel excluded and underrepresented in these communities, such as women (Larsen & Hussels 2011). Women have played huge roles in the music industry for decades. From Joan Jett in rock music to Britney Spears in pop and Lauryn Hill in R & B, women have been typhoons in the music industry for years yet are still underappreciated and not taken seriously in this male-dominated industry. Women only make up about 28% of artists in the industry, during a good year (Smith, Pieper, Choueiti, Hernandez & Yao 2021). The underrepresentation of women in the music industry can, in part, be attributed to the lack of women on music festival lineups. While the music industry encourages inclusivity to appeal to the masses, Mary Daly’s ideas about foreground and Background disprove their efforts and provide ways in which women can be treated equally in society as well as within the music industry.

Mary Daly was a prolific woman’s studies professor at Boston College known for infamously not allowing men in her feminist ethics classes. In being a pioneer of the second wave of feminism, she is most known for her ideas on two literal spaces within the genre of rhetoric and gender: foreground and Background (Borchers & Hundley 2018). The foreground is used to describe the space “that silences and oppresses women”, which is where Daly believes

our society exists (Griffin 2009). On the flip side, she also believes in an alternate realm of rhetoric known as the Background “in which women act as communicators” (Griffin 2009). For Daly, the foreground is the space in which “continued scapegoating of women as passive and compliant objects in every conceivable context” exists, whether it be within a family dynamic or our patriarchal society (Hendrick 2013). The foreground in the context of the music industry is very prevalent and is seen very easily from the outside looking in. Examples include, like mentioned previously, the lack of women in music lineups, but even the language in which we talk about women in the industry. Look at any magazine article in the past 10 years. They are always speaking about women in a disempowering way, calling them crazy, fat, ugly, etc., when their male counterparts are not spoken about in that way. A normal response to instances of oppression is revolution, though, in this case, that may not be possible.

Rhetorical Techniques Used to Keep Women in foreground

Foss, Foss, and Griffin, three other influential women in the feminist movement, comprised a list of “six rhetorical techniques that are used to keep women in the foreground” (Borchers & Hundley 2018). They include ritualistic violence, silencing women’s voices, fixing women’s images, refusing to see the problem, reversal, and elementary terms. Ritualistic violence can be seen in violence toward women, but mostly refers to the normativity of this violence. In some instances, it is seen as okay because it is justified as ‘culture’. One prominent example of this in recent human history is the Salem Witch Trials. Women were ignored and cast to death at the hands of men because it was seen as normal at the time. Other examples include “African female genital mutilation, European witch burning, and American gynecology. Silencing women’s voices is another rhetorical technique used to oppress women, sometimes unknowingly. It is not just telling a woman to be quiet, rather it could be using masculine

pronouns to refer to something. The most influential example of this that I can think of is in the Declaration of Independence within the first line that reads; we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” (National Archives and Records Administration 2022). This is one of many examples of exclusive language within the foreground. The next rhetorical technique is fixing women’s images which can be seen on the front pages of magazines with this astonishing idea that women are only fit for the spotlight if they are highly edited. Refusing to see the problem is the next rhetorical technique and can be divided into four different responses: depreciation, particularization, spiritualization, and universalization. These are all responses from the foreground used to deny the idea that women are oppressed in the first place. Depreciation is diminishing the thoughts of women in saying or implying that ‘there are much bigger problems’. Particularization is used to narrow down the concerns of women to a much smaller segment to make it seem like less of an issue. Spiritualization is used in theological arguments to say that God is not male or female, though this argument fails when considering that the universal default image of God is male, though he is described as omnipotent. Finally, universalization is used to silence because it exemplifies the idea that inequality is universal, and many other groups are oppressed. Reversal is the next rhetorical technique used by the foreground. Reversal highlights Daly’s ideas of “doublethink”, which is the use of conflicting concepts (Borchers & Hundley 2018). An example of this paradox is when people refer to guns as “peacekeepers” or when they fetishize pain and encourage women to think that pain is desirable for their own selfish needs. Finally, elementary terms are used in the foreground to “dull the senses and discourage critical thinking” (Borchers & Hundley 2018). This could include a word like *history*, encouraging the idea that ‘his story’ is important in regard to the past, rather than ‘her story’. Elementary terms are also used as substitutes for other words to

make the concept sound better, such as using the word ‘plant’ for a nuclear power plant (Borchers & Hundley 2018). While these rhetorical elements can exist anywhere in the foreground, there are many instances of them seen in the music industry.

Rhetorical Techniques As Seen In the Music Industry

Through the ideas of Foss, Foss, and Griffin, various forms of disempowerment have been shown within the music industry. Using the six rhetorical techniques Foss, Foss, and Griffin outlined in their book, “Feminist Rhetorical Theories”, connections can be made between those and the music industry beginning with their first rhetorical technique, ritualistic violence. Let’s begin by defining both the word ritualistic and violence to ensure we make valid connections. Ritualistic is “always done or said in the same way”, and while there are some definitions pertaining to ritual, ritual can also refer to something being repeated over and over again, rather than a set tradition (Oxford Dictionary 2022). Violence is defined as “the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy” (Merriam-Webster 2022). The key word in that definition is abuse. Violence is not always seriously harming someone and fighting them. Abuse can pertain to sexual harassment, mental abuse, emotional abuse, etc, which is how ritualistic violence is so prevalent in the music industry. Women are said to make up a third of all musicians and 67% of them report that they have been victims of sexual harassment (Krueger 2018). Not to mention the physical violence, such as rapper, Megan the Stallion being shot by fellow rapper Tory Lanez in August of 2020. This was a horrific experience, but the action of her being shot wasn’t even the worst part. It was the abuse that followed. She was taunted and made fun of by many people in the industry and online, and believe it or not, people still chose to support Tory Lanez following the incident, which shows that women are objects and jokes within the industry. From blaming the situation on Megan to staying radio-silent about the issue,

women have not been respected in the slightest, rather they are seen as crazy (Curto 2021).

Rather, Tory Lanez has been featured on even more songs than ever before and the incident is making its way into other rapper's lyrics, Drake saying in his new song, "This b*tch lie 'bout getting shot but she still a stallion/she don't even get the joke but she still smiling" (Drake 2022).

While incredibly disrespectful, this isn't the first-time women have been victims of ritualistic violence in the music industry. There are countless amounts of sexual assault allegations that go ignored. Those who are not directly involved in the music industry have been taken advantage of by those who are in a position of power, members of a band or a solo artist, who are primarily male. There are hundreds and hundreds of cases of this, but more recently, allegations surfaced against the popular band, All Time Low. The guitarist of the band, Jack Barakat, was alleged to have had sexual relations with people who were minors at the time of the incident. One woman, in particular, spoke about sharing her story with the world when it was met with backlash immediately. She states that she was "met with influxes of hatred from the masses" and was "threatened with legal action" (Legaspi 2021). She was not met with sympathy as a victim of sexual assault should be and was therefore met with violence. This is why women don't speak up. The music industry is giving power to men who abuse that power and fail to strip that power away from them by refusing to book them on lineups. Ritualistic violence victims are often met with backlash, which just attributes to the silencing of women's voices.

The silencing of women's voices within the music industry is shown through gatekeeping and the downfall that the consequences of abuse are not worth reporting the abuse (Baah, Ewens, Haidari, Kasambala 2022). Gatekeeping is "when an individual or group controls access to goods and services but particularly to information and people with power" (Bell 2022). This gatekeeping is shown through streaming apps, record labels, and music festival lineups. The

lineups for music festivals are missing women and non-binary individuals, though women top the charts. Gatekeepers cannot control who streams music, which is why women top the charts, but they can control the lineups of these music festivals, causing there to be a lack of women or women being further down on the lineup. Through advocacy, lineups have been improving slowly, but there is still more that can be done, especially since 51% of festivalgoers are women (Levy 2018). While only 27.1% of lineups consisted of women or non-binary acts in 2019, that number increased to 36% in 2021, so progress is being made (Book More Women 2021). This gatekeeping present in music festival lineups makes it harder for women acts to gain recognition and a new audience, so it's up to them to get booked and seen by others, even though music festivals are the biggest way for artists to be discovered. Unfortunately, women are brought to a much higher standard than men and being booked on music festival lineups may have to be accomplished by changing the appearance of the women acts.

Fixing women's images is the next rhetorical technique used to disempower women in the music industry. While no one outright tells women to change their appearance in the industry, it is an underlying assumption when the media normativity is that sex sells. Women have no other choice but to use this to their advantage in order to gain popularity and recognition. While sexual objectification is commonplace in media, music videos are the most potent example of it (Aubrey, Frisby 2011). When you compare male artist music videos to female artist music videos, the difference is glaring. In Aubrey & Frisby's analysis of music videos, female artists were more "sexually objectified, held to stricter appearance standards, and more likely to demonstrate sexually alluring behavior" (Aubrey, Frisby 2011). The pressure to conform to the sexual obsession of the industry takes a toll on women and can cause body dysmorphia, eating disorders, and mental health issues. The fixation on sex in the music industry

is harmful to women and causes pressure to change their appearance and therefore is a rhetorical technique used to disempower women in the music industry but shining a light on this issue does no good if those in a position of power refuse to see the problem.

Refusing to see the problem in a systemic flaw is another rhetorical technique used to disempower women. There are four different variations of this, but all fall under the 'refusing to see the problem' category. The first is depreciation. Depreciation is making a woman's problem seem like it is small compared to other issues. This can be seen when talking about music festival lineups when saying that there is a lack of women and the response being that 'there are much bigger issues' than the number of women on a music festival lineup, therefore dismissing the problem at hand. The next form is particularization. This is used to narrow down the issues of women to make them seem like less of an issue. This can be shown through music festival lineups yet again by focusing in on a specific music festival rather than music festivals as a whole. Spiritualization, while not directly related to the music industry, can be connected in a way that shows how women are seen in the eyes of others. For example, when thinking about God, the normal response is to picture a male because every picture of God is shown with distinct masculine features, even though he is thought to be omnipotent. Relating this back to music, though not as severe, is asking people to picture a drummer in their minds. Most people will think of a male, though drummers can be females. It is the social norm, so our minds are filling in that picture for us, similar to the picture of God that we have in our minds. The last way that others refuse to see the problem is through universalization, which just uses the argument that inequality and oppression happens to more people than just women, which is an irrelevant argument but is used to ignore the problem. This can be seen when looking at a music festival lineup and advocating for the lack of women, but someone points out that there is a lack of POC

as well, which is true in its own right, but put up against the argument for women seems like the problem is being pushed to the side. Refusing to see the problem contributes to the mindless disregard shown by those in a position of power within the music industry and can be used alongside reversal and elementary terms to skew understanding from the standpoint of language.

Reversal, as shown in the foreground, refers to the idea of ‘doublethink’, which is when the way something is described is flipped and used to the advantage of the masculine figure. The example given by Borchers & Hundley is Adam & Eve and how Eve was born from Adam’s rib and therefore, Adam was the first mother (Borchers & Hundley 2018). Very clearly, this disregards women as being mothers and downplays the role. An example within the music industry brings to light someone that inspired this paper in the first place. Taylor Swift. Taylor Swift has dominated the Billboard charts for years and is thought to be one of the most successful female artists of all time. Yet, every time someone brings up her success, the focus is shifted to her ex-boyfriends. There are an endless number of male artists who sing about their past relationships, but Taylor is the only one who is patronized by doing the same. This corresponds with the idea of elementary terms, which is another form of language oppression. Daly defines elementary terms as either, masculine phrases that encourage the status quo or as degrading labels or acronyms that “hide or improve the original term” (Daly 1978). For example, the word ‘forefathers’ implies that men are typically in those roles, which is not wrong in our patriarchal society but disempowers women in thinking they do not belong in those roles. An example within the music industry falls within the genre of rock and roll. While rock and roll portrays itself to be welcoming of all demographics, women are often excluded from this ‘everyone is welcome’ mindset. A hurtful, degrading term about women stems from rock and roll when a woman is referred to as a ‘groupie’. A ‘groupie’ is defined as “a person, especially a

young woman, who regularly follows a pop music group or other celebrity in the hope of meeting or getting to know them” (Oxford Dictionary 2022). Yes, even a trusted dictionary included “especially a young woman” in the definition of a groupie, which further encourages the use of elementary terms within the foreground. While the foreground, or the space that we exist in currently is constantly improving in terms of gender equality, there are still various things we can do to empower women within the Background.

Rhetorical Techniques Used to Empower Women in the Background

The Background is defined by Mary Daly as the “divine depth of the Self” (Daly 1978). Foss, Foss, and Griffin strengthen her argument by adding eight rhetorical options that lead to liberation. These include “metaphor, redefinition, capitalization, spelling/be-spelling, grammar/sin-tactics, pronunciation, spooking/sparking/spinning, and be-laughing” (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 1999). While all these techniques would prove helpful within the Background, not all would be as successful within the music industry as others, so the most prominent and relevant techniques will be expanded upon, those being redefinition and spooking/sparking/spinning.

Redefinition would be successful in empowerment by redefining all the words used in the music industry used to put women down. Ysabel Gerrard wrote about several words used in the music industry that directly disempower women, those being ‘groupie’ and ‘fangirl’. The word ‘groupie’ could be redefined as “someone who is a big fan of a specific artist’s music and therefore, wants to meet them”, rather than unnecessarily adding gender to the definition, though it shouldn’t be seen in a negative way in the first place. The next word that Gerrard explains could be changed is the word ‘fangirl’. Fangirl has a negative connotation toward the way women consume media and reinforces stereotypes against women, therefore it should be redefined in the Background (Hannell 2020). While redefining would be a step in the right

direction, the real issue is with the word ‘fangirl’ is that it implies only women can be a ‘fangirl’. Therefore, the word should be changed to be genderless, like many other words in the foreground. Along with redefining words that we find oppressive, capitalization plays a role in the understanding of words, which is why Daly capitalizes Background, rather than foreground. By capitalizing the word Background, it refers to the Self and therefore is bringing emphasis and awareness to background, whereas foreground is oppressive, so it should not be given the same respect. To stand with Mary Daly and her ideas about feminist rhetoric, I have done the same. While changing the way we define things is crucial to the societal structure, the effective way to empower women through rhetoric is to explore spooking/sparking/spinning.

Daly delves in and describes spooking/sparking/spinning as three separate entities that can impact one another, beginning with spooking. Spooking is the foundation of this idea because if there were no issues, there would be no change to enact during the sparking phase. Lucky for Daly, there are plenty. Spooking is described as “women are spooked by patriarchal males in a variety of ways” (Daly 1978). The examples she provides include “implicit messages of their institutions, through body language”, through media, technology, education, grammar, and even through “their sublime music” (Daly 1978). Women can also be spooked by other women, causing apprehension and complicity. An example of both genders contributing to spooking appeared at the 2009 VMAs when rap superstar Kanye West interrupted the winner of the best female music video award, Taylor Swift during her acceptance speech. This is a direct way of spooking which causes women to second guess themselves and live in fear of this happening to them within the music industry. An indirect aspect of this situation is the number of women that stood by Kanye West, rather than denouncing him for how he treated a woman which shows how women can contribute to spooking. To combat spooking, sparking is utilized and necessary to

ignite the fire. The main aspect of sparking is Female Friendship (Daly 1978). Sparking is used to uplift femininity and women by creating room and space for one another to exist comfortably and without spooking. Creating a spark can be difficult because masculine figures are constantly trying to prevent these friendships to extinguish the threat of Female Sparking. An example of this within the music industry is between Katy Perry and Rihanna. The two used to be really good friends and unfortunately, the friendship ended because Rihanna got back together with Chris Brown, a known abuser (Wendroff 2017). While it was Rihanna's choice to get back with him, he was ultimately the cause of ruining a Female Friendship. Following lighting the spark and becoming enlightened, Spinning is the end goal. This is the complete disregard of a male-oriented society and is ultimately the end goal where none of the decisions a woman makes involves men. In order to reach this ultimate vision, we must first acknowledge the existence of foreground and Background.

Mary Daly's vision of a perfect feminist society is ambitious, especially when applied to the music industry as we know it. Daly's arguments were seen clearly through a music industry lens and the music industry, unfortunately, encourages the patriarchal society we are living in. By implementing redefinition and spooking/sparking/spinning within the background, women can become more empowered within the music industry and therefore become more successful as the patriarchy is the only thing holding them back. Also inviting women to speak up about the issues and having a conversation is a form of invitational rhetoric that could prove to be helpful when it comes to the music industry. While the music industry is active in encouraging gender equality, the efforts they are putting forth are not enough to make up for the obvious gender disparities present throughout the industry, such as lineups for music festivals and the language

we use to talk about women. Solutions to these issues exist in the Background, it's just up to those in power to use those resources and implement social change.

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