

Dawid Kaszuba

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

ORCID 0000-0001-7868-4818

“I Disagree”: Narratives of Empowerment in Poppy’s Project**Introduction**

Poppy commented on her album – *I Disagree* – in the following way:

The album as a whole is just about not stepping to anyone and disagreeing with people in positions of power and not accepting “no” for an answer or “you can’t.” And sometimes when people tell you [that], or at least when I’m told that I can’t, it makes me want to have it more. It’s all about burning down the music industry in a way and stepping out of any box that anyone might have tried to lock me up inside. The message is empowerment, not gender specific. Just empowerment.¹

There is no doubt that discourse of disagreement, as well as questioning the authorities, has been recalled in a popculture quite willingly and in many ways. However, Poppy’s bold declaration is not only a result of current trends. Its primal source is biography of the artist, who, throughout her career, struggled with various forms of oppression. The aim of this article thus is to examine sources of this oppression in her work, as well as her individual strategies of resistance. I shall try to show how Poppy’s project, using precisely performed persona (according to Philip Auslander’s category) creates complex narrative of empowerment, that tends to cover more than only one (gender related) aspect of emancipation. To do so, I shall recall the context of her early work, centered around dehumanized android figure, and critical irony, aimed at the Internet culture.

I shall focus especially on her third album – *I Disagree*. In my analysis I shall examine how this LP combines various narrative forms – lyrical, visual and audial – to point out, in a transgressive way, the questions of female presence within musical field. What I find important is Poppy’s position as an artist, who uses metal music conventions – and that is why I aim to reconstruct gender paradigm of the genre, not only as a field of teenage male emancipation, but also as place of oppression based on rigid norms regarding femininity. I shall describe the way her individual “post-genre” strategy challenges conservative and strict paradigm of metal culture and creates a new model of feminist presence within heavy metal discourse.

¹ Poppy’s interview for Altpress, 06.01.2020 <https://www.altpress.com/features/poppy-i-disagree-track-by-track-interview/> (access: 26.06.2021).

I'm Poppy – Internet Culture's Critique, Android Persona and Titanic Sinclair

To fully understand empowering character of *I Disagree*, I find it necessary to discuss first wider artistic and biographical context regarding Poppy's project. The artist was born as Moriah Rose Pereira, January 1st, 1995, near Boston. Her pseudonym was invented by a friend and accepted willingly². At the age of 18, she moved to Los Angeles, where she began her career – primary as a YouTube artist. Her first video, uploaded to her channel on 5th of November, 2014, is called *Poppy Eats Cotton Candy* and presents her doing this exact thing³. However, she gained popularity after releasing video *I'm Poppy* a year later, where she repeats title phrase over and over for 10 minutes⁴. The video went viral and currently it gained almost 27 million views⁵.

Thus, the primary theme of her artistic work was the Internet culture – critiqued by her in a subversive way. The artist parodied a tutorial convention (her *How to...* series) and autocritically responded to her own persona, playing on a public's expectations (as an example – interviews with her "friend" – mannequin called Charlotte). Similar topics were addressed in her early music work. Her debut LP, *Poppy.computer*⁶, focused on a relationship between a human being and new media, can be interpreted as ironic diagnosis of technocratic fetishism.

A good example of it is *Computer Boy* – a song that takes a form of posthumanistic romantic poem – a vocalist tells the story of amorous fascination regarding a computer. On the one hand, the device is depicted as an object – a toy ("I'm in love with my favorite toy/Can't go a day without Computer Boy"⁷); on the other hand – it is perceived as a fully valuable form of being, displacing a man ("I don't care and I won't change myself/I don't want anybody else"⁸). The songs like *Software Upgrade* ("I restart you every single day/I turn you off, I turn you on"⁹) and *Interweb* ("I feel the technology beat/Deep inside of me, side of me"¹⁰) are based on a similar strategy. Anthropomorphization of electronic devices illustrates profound relationship of man and machine, in which the machine is the substitute rather than the supplement of social relations. Ironic fetishism provokes critique of thoughtless admiration regarding technological achievements.

Poppy's irony is a dominant tool in her work, as well as the key to understanding it. On the surface, she embraces and establishes stereotypical behaviours of new

² Poppy's interview for TTF Magazine, 23.11.2015 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8XSVIDkhPQ) (access: 26.06.2021).

³ *Poppy Eats Cotton Candy*, dir. Titanic Sinclair, USA 2014.

⁴ *I'm Poppy*, dir. Titanic Sinclair, USA 2015.

⁵ As of a day: 26.06.2021.

⁶ Currently, her discography contains 4 LPs: *Poppy.computer*, *Am I a Girl?*, *I Disagree and Flux*; 4 EPs: *Bubblebath*, *Choke*, *Very Poppy Christmas*, *EAT*; as well as instrumental albums: *ICU (Music to Read To)* and *Music to Scream To*.

⁷ *Poppy, Computer Boy*, Mad Decent 2017.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Poppy, Software Upgrade*, Mad Decent 2017.

¹⁰ *Poppy, Interweb*, Mad Decent 2017.

media users, only to subversively criticize it. This irony is not only critical, but also autothematic; it refers to individual artistic creation, as well as wider phenomenon related to Poppy – questions of virtual popularity and identity created in social media. For example, *Let’s Make a Video* depicts “a day in life of a YouTube star” – a series of actions demanded to record a short video (“Get up, put my makeup on, I know it’s time to go/Sing along to a dumb pop song that they play on the radio”¹¹). Just like series of interviews with Charlotte, where the mannequin, using artificial mechanical voice, questions Poppy about her passions and artistic plans. This artistic act describes Poppy’s ambiguous status as a YouTube celebrity – she creates disturbing atmosphere as her answers do not relate at all to the questions asked by Charlotte. It is the dissonance that makes artificial character of a performance visible – for Poppy is a performer, or rather – a performance of Moriah Rose Pereira – persona performed with full artistic awareness.

I would like to state, that there are two basic elements constructing Poppy’s early performance: android identity (fembot), derived from digital culture, and *kawaii* aesthetics. What makes an audience question her human identity, is her “mechanical” attitude – specifically visible while she talks (using a steady tone of voice, free from affective potential, and articulating words with unnatural precision) or moves (with lack of flexibility and static posture), as well as almost complete lack of mimicry. Not only articulation, but also the content is extremely minimalist – she answers “automatically”, using a narrow scope of vocabulary. Thus, on the one hand, she’s an android, on the other – she revokes a puppet – attractive, but passive one.

As I mentioned before, Poppy’s visual creation refers to the peculiar aesthetic, especially popular in Japanese culture – *kawaii* style. The word “kawaii” itself means: “childish”, “cute”, “innocent”, “honest”, “weak”, “inexperienced” (Burdzik 2015: 157). However, it recalls a wider cultural context and can be seen in fashion, animation movies, TV series, toy making, visual arts, and music. *Kawaii* category covers a wide range of practices and thus remains hard to be defined precisely (Burdzik 2015: 157). Above all, it depicts glorification of infantility and fascination regarding sweet and innocent girlishness¹², as well as its particular visual attributes – pastel colours (Burdzik 2015: 160.), small and round gadgets (Madge 1998: 158), short skirts, and ponytails. Direct references to this aesthetics appear quite frequently in Poppy’s art. For example, in the video clip for *Moshi Moshi* vocalists perform in various colourful and extravagant outfits (that revoke decora style), drinking tea from a plastic cup¹³; she is surrounded by such props as colourful phones with rotary dials. Moreover, her early musical works contain inspirations derived from one of the most popular Japanese *kawaii* pop singers – Kyara Pamyu Pamyu.

Poppy’s persona is definitely the expression of critical attitude that is far from private identity of performer and her own personality. As Philip Auslander states, “there is no reason to suppose that musicians perform the same identity when

¹¹ Poppy, *Let’s Make a Video*, Mad Decent 2017.

¹² <https://theconversation.com/what-is-kawaii-and-why-did-the-world-fall-for-the-cult-of-cute-67187> (access: 26.06.2021).

¹³ Poppy, *Moshi Moshi*, dir. Titanic Sinclair, USA 2017.

playing music as in their other life routines” (Auslander 2006: 104). For Auslander, musical performance is primarily oriented in relations to widely defined social interactions, not individual identity of the artist (Auslander 2006: 102). Persona stems directly from this performance, for it is “The version of self that a musician performs qua musician” (Auslander 2006: 104.). Auslander points out that persona not necessarily has to be the form of artist’s autoexpression, moreover, it is often far from it. In case of Poppy, it becomes almost autonomic – there is no doubt that Poppy is not Moriah Rose Pereira; not only does she exist on a completely different basis (a distinct way of acting) but also in a different environment – Poppy in its earliest form was most of all the Internet personality, created not by the performer itself, but mostly outside of her control (I shall discuss this matter in the next part of my article). This strictly controlled persona that appears also during the interviews (evasive answers, “mechanical” way of speaking), continually maintains mystification¹⁴.

In the context of her persona, the crucial factor is her short, but intensive relationship with Corey Michael Mixter, hidden under the pseudonym Titanic Sinclair. Poppy met Sinclair shortly after she moved to Los Angeles. The director saw the potential of a young YouTube girl and started to work as her manager; this cooperation gradually evolved into a romantic relation. Sinclair not only directed films and video clips of Poppy, he was also responsible, from the basis, for creating her persona as a *kawaii* android. Eventually, the impact Sinclair had on Rose expanded – during interviews he was the one to answer questions directed to her. Many observers shared the opinion that Poppy is not an independent artist, but only a puppet created and moved by Sinclair himself¹⁵. There were more and more gossips about emotional exploitation he inflicted on her.

A massive discussion was raised after the lawsuit that was brought against the couple in April 2019 by Mars Argo – YouTube star and vocalist, former Sinclair’s girlfriend and co-worker¹⁶. According to Argo, Sinclair used her own Internet persona to create Poppy; moreover, he abused her physically and emotionally¹⁷. It resulted in a settlement between Sinclair and Argo¹⁸ and the lawsuit against Poppy was dismissed¹⁹. However, in December the same year, through her social media, Poppy

¹⁴ It can be confirmed by short films recorded with her, as a part of a popular series *Kids React to...* Poppy, as she watches how children react (not always peacefully) to her films, she stays motionless and unaffected; when she hears her own voice in the record, she starts to repeat the very same words with this very same mechanical, dispassionate tone; the way she acts raises serious confusion among children – they start to doubt that Poppy is a real human being; cf. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0by5W6Yo2sKAFn5omrOYS2UuiT3r4E-v> (access: 26.06.2021).

¹⁵ *The Dark Truth of Poppy*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4ImFhE0C6M> (access: 26.06.2021.)

¹⁶ <https://www.tmg.com/2018/04/17/youtube-legal-feud-titanic-sinclair-mars-argo-thatpoppy/> (access: 26.06.2021).

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ <https://www.nme.com/news/music/poppy-and-manager-titanic-sinclair-settle-lawsuit-with-mars-argo-2428225> (access: 26.06.2021).

¹⁹ <https://www.dailydot.com/upstream/lawsuit-poppy-titanic-sinclair-dismissed/> (access: 26.06.2021).

informed that she parted ways with Sinclair (she also revealed that he abused her too). This was the moment when she started a new and independent chapter in her career – and the first result of it was the album *I Disagree*²⁰. But before I shall attempt to analyze this album and its connection to metal-related feminist performance, I believe it is necessary to highlight the wider context of the female presence in metal music.

Women in Metal Music – (Lack of) Presence and Performative Strategies of Emancipation

In his classic book on metal – *Running With the Devil. Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Robert Walser points out that “Heavy metal is, as much as anything else, an arena of gender, where spectacular gladiators compete to register and affect ideas of masculinity, sexuality, and gender relations” (Walser 2014: 111). The crucial element of this quote is a question of masculinity – heavy metal, as well as its predecessor – rock music, is an area of male domination. Heavy metal discourse is a patriarchal discourse (Walser 2014: 109) – metal (counter)culture from the very beginning has been created primarily by men and for men. According to Walser, the main target were young white middle-class boys – a group deprived of physical, economic and symbolic power (Walser 2014: 109). Heavy metal meant to be an area of initiation, a chance to gain and confirm male sexual identity (Walser 2014: 109). That kind of role was played, for example, by such Twisted Sister videos as *I Wanna Rock* and *We’re Not Gonna Take It*. Both of them depict a young white boy as a main character and highlight his fascination with rock music (rock is here depicted as a „forbidden fruit”, condemned by the older generation). For this boys rock is a chance to free themselves from rigid social and moral norms. The video-clips I mentioned use slapstick conventions to question authority of boomer generation that is represented by a despotic father²¹ (*We’re Not Gonna Take It*) or a strict teacher²² (*I Wanna Rock*). By doing so, ~~this~~ these performances created a room for identification for American teenagers that stepped in an adult life in the 80s.

As I discussed before, the sources of metal paradigm are strongly connected to performances of teenage masculinity that expressed turbulences of middle-class teenage age. However, metal music experienced significant shifts and masculine roots do not mean the absence of women in current metal music – but they certainly complicate their presence. Maisie Kaiser states that metal, while being strongly engaged in redefining class barriers, simultaneously marginalized gender and sexual emancipation (Kaiser 2016: 101). In the light of Walser’s research, this statement

²⁰ According to Poppy, her 4th album will mark the beginning of the next chapter, as she is “in a different place now”, and is going to have “completely different sonic vibe”. *I Disagree* era symbolically ends with her livestream *The Last Disagreement*, that premiered on 24th of April, 2021; cf. <https://www.spin.com/2020/12/poppy-exit-interview-new-lp-2020/> (access: 26.06.2021), as well as <https://www.nme.com/reviews/live/poppy-live-in-la-playful-poised-punk-dispatch-from-a-post-genre-world-2927288?amp> (access: 26.06.2021).

²¹ Twisted Sister, *We’re Not Gonna Take It*, dir. Marty Callner, USA 1984.

²² Twisted Sister, *I Wanna Rock*, dir. Marty Callner, USA 1984.

should be modified – as I mentioned before, metal culture was engaged in case of gender, but only in favour of young males deprived of power²³. As a result, there is no doubt metal culture marginalized (and it is still marginalizing) a female position. Women are (and can be) present and active in metal, but metal paradigm gives far less possibilities for them to express various kinds of feminity (than it gives for a variety of male expressions). They are easily accepted as vocalists – but only in particular subgenres. Especially – in more “commercial” ones, such as heavy metal (Lita Ford, The Pretty Reckless), alternative metal (Evanescence, In This Moment) or symphonic metal (Nightwish, Epica). In extreme metal subgenres, such as death²⁴ or black metal, their presence is extremely rare and often controversial (as it was in case of Myrkur, the project discussed by Kaiser)²⁵. Women are usually judged by their sex, not artistic personality or skills (Berkers, Schaap 2014: 105). Moreover, they are obliged to operate in the narrow spectre of very rigid norms and they have to match up to the masculine codes²⁶.

Kaiser highlights the fact that “a large proportion of women performers seem to fall into one category of gendered expression. Many women are vocalists, and many also seem to conform to an established metal frontwoman style and form of expression” (Kaiser 2016: 29). This style is based especially on sexualisation – judging women not by their talent, but appearance. A leader of glam metal group Femme Fatale – Lorraine Lewis, is a perfect example of such stance. In band’s music videos (*Waiting For a Big One* or *Falling In And Out of Love*) poorly dressed Lewis functions more as a sexual object than an artist – her presence is focused around a sexually attractive body. Singer seduces a viewer by taking various sexually connoted poses – she crawls on the stage²⁷ and slaps her own buttocks²⁸. Current Nightwish vocalist – Floor Jansen – performs in slim, hyperfeminine outfits made in metal style (leathers,

²³ Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie sum up rock culture in a very similar way: “rock offers a framework within which male sexuality can find a range of acceptable, heterosexual expressions.” (cf. Frith, McRobbie 1990: 320).

²⁴ Female vocalists are quite important and respected in melodic death metal – less extreme and more commercial branch of it. The good examples are: Angela Gossow, Alissa White-Gluz, (both connected to Arch Enemy), and Lena Scissorhands (melo death/metalcore/nu metal band Infected Rain). Groups like all-female Brazilian Nervosa and Crypta (a band of the one of Nervosa’s founders), as well as feminist oriented, Welch Venom Prison (with Larissa Stupar as a leader), even though tend to break masculine domination within the subgenre, still remain a minority.

²⁵ Myrkur – a project of Danish black metal artist Amalie Brunn, set up in 2015. A year after its foundation the artist, through her Facebook profile, announced that she will no longer accept direct messages from her fans due to a huge verbal violence and death threats she received (as she suspects, from American males); according to Kaiser, the only reason to “blame” Brunn for (whose work maintains high quality) is that she dares to be a „woman in black metal” (cf. Kaiser 2016: 92).

²⁶ „If women want to feel respected and equal in the extreme metal scene, they have to subscribe to the masculinist codes of the genre” (cf. Riches 2011: 328).

²⁷ Femme Fatale, *Waiting for the Big One*, dir. Marty Callner, USA 1988.

²⁸ Femme Fatale, *Falling in and Out of Love*, dir. Marty Callner, USA 1989.

chains, metal ornaments). On the one hand, it highlights devotion to subcultural fashion codes; on the other – focuses the fan's attention on a gender "inadequacy".

Metal paradigm proposes an extension to set of values that has been already constructed on the field of rock music. Just as in rock, male domination in heavy metal is not restricted only to artistry; women are solely discriminated against in music business too. As Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie claim, "in terms of control and production, rock is a male form. The music business is male-run; popular musicians, writers, creators, technicians, engineers, and producers are mostly men" (Frith, McRobbie 1990: 319). They show the example of ABBA, as a project that represents stratification of roles, which is typical for popular music: men create (lyrics, music, image), women appear (just as men want them to do) and use their bodies and voices as instruments (Frith, McRobbie 1990: 322). In the metal music sphere, (already mentioned) Nightwish might be an analogical example. It is a project that goes on, despite changes of vocalists that theoretically should lead the band (Tarja Turunen was followed by Anette Olzon, and Olzon was replaced by Floor Jansen). The real, creative leader, is a man – keyboardist Tuomas Holopainen – the founder, who is responsible for composing, writing and album's concepts.

Nevertheless, female presence in metal culture is not only meant to replicate masculine codes. Many artists question the oppressive paradigm. Some are located in ambivalent position, between fulfilling and undermining norms. In this context, the crucial question is – what kind of empowering strategies can be used in a genre that is so strongly entangled in patriarchal codes? Simon Frith in his *Performing Rites* refers to Susan McClary's thesis, and he agrees with her that "to perform for an audience as a woman means something different than to perform for an audience as a man"; the female performance requires stronger self-awareness as a woman has to deal with a male gaze and patriarchal rules – so it is necessary to redefine a space of a performance, as well as a narrative that is presented (Frith 1996: 212). As an example, McClary focuses on performances of Dolly Parton. The country **singer plays with the male perception of femininity, imitates the signs of vulnerability**. Consequently, she shows how problematic the meanings of these gestures are (Frith 1996: 212).

As Frith states, "the musician's body is also the instrument" (Frith 1996: 219) – it represents not only particular musical performance, but gender performance too. The artists, who are aware of the kind of relations created by their bodily presence on stage, can subversively use their image to redefine space of female performance and narrative about femininity. According to Frith, "In performance art, though, we don't know if this is an act, and an element of our fear is therefore real" (Frith 1996: 217–218); so, the impossibility of performer's behaviour can cause a confusion, according to what he/she performs *on* himself/herself or the audience. The Internet image of Poppy uses ambiguity of performance, by challenging barriers between "performed" and "natural". For usually, as Frith points out, "we see the movement in and out of character; we watch this aspect of the performance as a *performance*" (Frith 1996: 211). Poppy does not *move in* or *move out* of her character – she is a character herself. Her "being-as-a-performance" redefines frames of performing practice.

I Disagree as an Example of Empowerment in Poppy's Persona

Poppy brought up questions of identity and sexuality on her second album, *Am I A Girl?*, released in 2018. The title track is a critique of traditional gender norms ("I want to be a girl/In all the normal ways/Pose for a photograph/Put on my pretty face/Thank God I'm not a boy/I'd always have to pay/Pretend that I was strong/And never got afraid"²⁹). The vocalist rejects rigid divisions, as she highlights volatility and stands up for androgynous identity ("Sometimes I'm feminine/Sometimes I'm masculine"³⁰ or recurring rhetoric question: "Am I a girl?/Am I a boy?/What does that even mean?/I'm somewhere in between"³¹). In *Time Is Up* she uses, again, electronic nomenclature when she exploits her genesis as artificially made android ("In the factory/In the sterile place where they made me/I woke up alone/Dizzy from the programming"³²). The two last songs on the album – *Play Destroy* and *X* are a foretaste of her later experiments – a radical shift from mellow electro pop to aggressive sound (just as her EP *Choke*, released in the following year). But it is not until *I Disagree* as she fully embraces empowering part of her work (according to personal and gender factors); so I shall pay my academic attention to this album especially.

I Disagree was released on 10th of January, 2020, by Sumerian Records. As I mentioned before, it is her very first album recorded after her break up with Sinclair. It is important though, as the artist herself considers it a turning point in her career. In the interviews she stated that even though it is her third album, she treats it like the first, because for the first time she could fully express her musical fascinations (such as Rammstein, Slayer or Marilyn Manson)³³.

The explicit proof of these metal inspirations is the first track – *Concrete*. The song opens with a siren wailing and a sharp whisper of the vocalist. After this part we can hear aggressive guitar riff, supplied by unusual rhythmic section. This riff suddenly turns into faster, but more melodic part, as Poppy sings about a sweet snack and an eternal dream: "That tasty treat/Sugar in my teeth/Demons in my dreams/Watch me while I sleep/For eternity"³⁴. The galloping sequence recalls thrash metal style; combined with keyboard usage it sounds somehow like power metal songs of Babymetal (I shall discuss *kawaii* metal inspirations later on). It shifts into unexpectedly slow and heavy, almost metalcore bridge. This part is accompanied by whispered verses from the beginning: "Bury me six feet deep/Cover me in concrete/Turn me into a street"³⁵. And this part is followed by pop sequence, based on choir and simple keyboard arrangement, than can evoke early glam rock years of Queen. The vocalist with her sweet voice expresses cannibalistic desires: "I tried to eat ice

²⁹ Poppy, *Am I a Girl?*, Mad Decent 2018.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Poppy, *Time Is Up* (feat. Diplo), Mad Decent 2018.

³³ Poppy's interview for Loudwire, 11.12.2019 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHQHfBifW5s>) (access: 26.06.2021).

³⁴ Poppy, *Concrete*, Sumerian Records 2020.

³⁵ Ibidem.

cream/I tried to drink tea/But I need that taste/Of young blood in my teeth"³⁶. At the end, once again the songs turns into pop climate, this time based on rhythmic part of acoustic guitar, supplied by the crowd chanting the vocalist's name³⁷.

The strong statement is bonded with extreme musical component. This extreme is based not only on the usage of metal sound, but also on rejection of standard song structure for a series of sequences, changing in an unpredictable way. What is crucial here is the way, in which genres intertwine – both particular metal styles, and separate genres that are rarely connected. The song is a radical example of a genre collage: it combines pop, glam rock, metal, and electronic. Not only *Concrete*, but the whole *I Disagree* album explores various genre combinations. So it is not only a naive fantasy, but well-prepared strategy; for Poppy rejecting genre barriers becomes a form of an artistic emancipation. In her interview for Loudwire she claims: "I don't believe genres exist anymore"³⁸. She expands on this thought while talking to Kerrang: "I've never said my music is metal, but I do listen to that music. To clarify: post-genre. Or prog rock or pop. We're turning a new page."³⁹.

The term *post-genre* appears many times in her comments on *I Disagree*. As Kaiser notices, "Genre is almost impossible to define" (Kaiser 2016: 43). Keith Kahn-Harris agrees with Kaiser, as he states that "Genres are not and cannot be static" (Kahn-Harris 2007: 12). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, despite of all the trouble caused by attempts to define, both fans and critics do not cease with their efforts to set clear boundaries between styles. Genre remains an important element of metal paradigm – for it is related to the crucial category of authenticity. The norms of what combinations are acceptable (within metal discourse, as well as merging metal with other genres) are still extremely strict. So, when Poppy breaks genre boundaries, she does not only set up musical revolt, but also – ideological one. The artist combines metal (that used to be willingly positioned by fans as a counter-cultural outsider – regardless of it by far more complicated status) with pop – that represents mainstream discourse with these very values that metal culture rejects (cf. Hill, Lucas, Riches 2015: 1). As a result, she exposes the fact that metal culture and music too is entangled with capitalistic mechanisms; moreover, she bends stiff norms, as she explores their constructive (or rather performative) and oppressive character. For as I mentioned before, gender marginalisation can occur even between particular metal subgenres.

This time Poppy not only adapts *kawaii* aesthetics, she also become inspired by *kawaii* music, as eclecticism of *Concrete* refers to *kawaii* metal. It is a very popular musical phenomenon that originated in Japan in the middle of 2010s and is characterized by combination of such genres as pop, industrial, electronic, speed and power metal. *Kawaii* metal bands (with Babymetal on top of them) consist of young girls that are both vocalist and kind of "mascotts". That is because marketing strategies

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHQHfBifW5s> (access: 26.06.2021).

³⁹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20200111101719/https://www.kerrang.com/the-news/poppy-ive-never-said-my-music-is-metal/> (access: 26.06.2021).

are similar to those in k-pop (based on a central designing and producing bands by a music industry). Because of that, *kawaii* metal remains very problematic in case of genre relations. Poppy, however, in a thoughtful and self-aware way, uses her own female presence in metal to give it an empowering character.

The artist, using a figure of “sweet *kawaii* girl”, collides it with drastically different aesthetics. As a result, she introduces the effect of grotesque, which (just as exaggerated irony in her previous songs) emphasizes performative character of her persona and, again, its critical character. This time, the critique is involved in the field of gender even stronger. The vocalist both visually and lyrically refers to a popular popcultural, and sexist in its nature, figure of vamp woman⁴⁰ (“Bury me six feet deep/Cover me in concrete/Turn me into a street”⁴¹ or “I need that taste/Of young blood in my teeth”⁴²). However, she does not identify with the representations she embodies; instead of it, she distances herself from it by a hyperbolisation and grotesque which create a strong sense of irony.

As a consequence, she reveals her self-awareness as a performer – she seems to fulfill the expectations imposed on her as a female vocalist, but eventually she deconstructs those expectations, and exposes the usage of women as tokens. In metal music context, a token theory was evoked by Kaiser, who states: “women, as tokens, are judged based on their looks more often than their musical skills”; and: “Token women in metal are certainly visible, but not for the reasons that they want” (Kaiser 2016: 89). According to Kaiser, “In dressing, acting, and performing “feminine,” women use their femininity as a tool, drawing attention to their gender in order to attract listeners” (Kaiser 2016: 90). Poppy becomes a token intentionally – the appealing vocalist that tends to attract a male gaze (in *Concrete* music video she incessantly looks in the camera). *Ipsa facto*, through the autothematic distance, she challenges the question of female presence in metal, and the way women are perceived (and objectified) in this genre. As she knowingly creates her image, she places it in the centre of audience attention; the image that is attractive indeed, but in a completely “not metal” way. The artist does not represent seducing femininity, as Lorraine Lewis does, nor desexualized “male” femininity in Angela Gossow-like style; it is rather girlish innocence she embodies. In the clip for *Concrete* she wears the same long blond hair, her poses tend to be naive, just as in her previous music videos⁴³; she sings with the same fragile manner. However, this time, the lyrics, even though soaked in *kawaii* aesthetic (“Chewy chewy/Yummy yummy yummy”⁴⁴), also contains a strong and direct message, and hyperbolisation of “femininity” in her imagery undermines the way it could be objectified, as well as particular standards that allow for this objectification.

⁴⁰ Poppy comments on the song in the following way: “It’s about wanting to be buried underground, killing off an older version of yourself.”; cf. <https://www.altpress.com/features/poppy-i-disagree-track-by-track-interview/> (access: 26.06.2021).

⁴¹ Poppy, *Concrete*, Sumerian Records 2020.

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ Poppy, *Concrete*, USA 2019.

⁴⁴ Poppy, *Concrete*, Sumerian Records 2020.

The title track may be less radical in terms of sound, but it definitely is as strong as *Concrete* in terms of a feminist message. The video clip shows the vocalist inside the corporate room; there are bored and elegant people (almost exclusively men) sitting around the table; the showcases with music CDs hanging on the walls suggest that it can be a record company⁴⁵. Consequently, gender critique is explicitly aimed at oppressive, male-dominated music industry that tends to restrain creative freedom of women. Both lyrics of the song and stance of the vocalist are expressions of objection to female dependence and silencing, according to artistic, as well as private sphere (“I disagree, everything you believe is a tragedy/I disagree with the way you keep preaching insanity” and later: “I disagree with the way you continue to pressure me/I disagree with the way you are failing to pleasure me”⁴⁶). Poppy’s stance is not only an act of disagreement, but also a sign of strength, that eventually let her anaesthetize and burn company employees gathered in the room⁴⁷ (“Down, let it all burn down/Burn it to the ground/We’ll be safe and sound/When it all burns down”⁴⁸). It is a disagreement written down in feminist codes, but it remains open for wider interpretations too – for example, in a context of the fight between individuality and system, and resistance against suffocating rules of music industry.

The female involvement in series of subjections is portrayed in *Sit/Stay*. Poppy commented on it in the following way:

“Sit Stay” I wrote when I was feeling very boxed in, and it’s me communicating that I’m not going to listen to the people that I’ve been listening to for years telling me that I can’t do something that I’ve always wanted to do. The more melodic part is, in a way, a warning to people that are just beginning in music because this thing that you love could also be the thing that’s killing you.⁴⁹

Music video depicts this state of being “boxed in” a body as a oppressive construct that shapes one’s identity. Poppy, wearing a body-like suit, tosses around helplessly, imprisoned in a room without door handles, watched by a vigilant eye of a camera⁵⁰. Recurring choruses remind of a command imposed on an animal (“Sit, stay, lie down”⁵¹); consequently, they evoke objectification and dependence.

Bloodmoney explores another form of emancipatory strategy. The song refers to religious hypocrisy and using faith as a tool of manipulation and power (“Keep telling yourself that you’ve been playing nice/And go beg for forgiveness from Jesus the Christ”⁵²). Music video portrays the artist wearing a white silicon outfit and fighting with men in black who attack her⁵³, all in the aggressive rhythm of dub-

⁴⁵ Poppy, *I Disagree*, USA 2019.

⁴⁶ Poppy, *I Disagree*, Sumerian Records 2020.

⁴⁷ Poppy, *I Disagree*, USA 2019.

⁴⁸ Poppy, *I Disagree*, Sumerian Records 2020.

⁴⁹ <https://www.altpress.com/features/poppy-i-disagree-track-by-track-interview/> (access: 26.06.2021).

⁵⁰ Poppy, *Sit/Stay*, Dir. Poppy, USA 2020.

⁵¹ Poppy, *Sit/Stay*, Sumerian Records 2020.

⁵² Poppy, *BLOODMONEY*, Sumerian Records 2020.

⁵³ Poppy, *BLOODMONEY*, USA 2019.

step passages. In the final shots, attached to a neon cross, she rises into the air, in a gesture of ironic autosacralisation⁵⁴. As a result, the empowering character of the album is expressed through the disagreement with every kind of authority – genre regulations, patriarchal norms, domination of music industry or religious structures; though it is not only gender, but also personal empowerment, derived from the search for individual identity.

That kind of statement is presented in *Anything Like Me*. It is a boldly performed, strong declaration of transformation (“Sorry for what I’ve become/Because I’m becoming someone”⁵⁵ and “I’m everything she never was/Now everyone’s out for my blood”⁵⁶) is connected with simultaneously preserved part of her former identity (“I feel her heart beating in me, get her out of me”⁵⁷ – these verses are sung in a gentle way that revokes her early work). “You shouldn’t be anything like me”⁵⁸, notoriously repeated through the chorus, is juxtaposed with a slogan that opened her musical career (according to the title of her debut single – *Everybody Wants to Be Poppy*). This time the dominant part is not a critique of fame and conflicted persona; it is rather a call for a free (not only artistic) expression.

Summary – *I Disagree* – the Performative Shift in Favour of Artistic and Personal Empowerment

I Disagree album remains a result of Poppy’s earlier work, but it also marks a distinct turn in the career of an artist. Poppy, in the eyes of the public, from a manipulated YouTube pop-girl character became an independent creator, fully accountable for her musical image. Her artistic interests moved from the Internet culture’s critique to a wide range of empowering narratives. Nevertheless, Poppy does not fully reject her former persona; rather, she transforms it in her own way, and subversively enables the previous tool of oppression to become a current way of empowerment. As she is fully aware of her complicated position as a “woman performing on a stage”, she undermines this status when she combines *kawaii*-style “hyperfemininity” with aggressive sound and political message. By creating a grotesque effect, she challenges a relationship between femininity and metal music (even though her project is not clearly a metal act; it rather refers to metal paradigm and juxtaposes it with many different styles); the relationship that is entangled in oppressive masculine discourses.

Though, her stance is not limited only to a feminist commentary – her narratives exploit by far a wider context of identity-creating – gender, genre and personal in character. It is expressed both in lyrical and visual concepts, as well as in her own post-genre aesthetics. Post-genre category functions as an act of transgression against rigid genre norms; the combination of two distant paradigms – metal

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Poppy, *Anything Like Me*, Sumerian Records 2020.

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

and pop. After all, her project is not only a call for female presence in metal, but most of all – affirmation of femininity on women's own terms⁵⁹.

Bibliography

- Auslander Philip. 2006. "Musical Personae". *The Drama Review*. Vol. 50, no. 1 (T. 189). 100–119.
- Berkers Pauwke and Schaap Julian. 2014. "Grunting Alone? Online Gender Inequality in Extreme Metal Music". *Journal of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music* no. 4:1. 101–116.
- Burdzik Tomasz. 2015. „Kawaii – estetyka made in Japan”. *Kultura Popularna* no. 2(44). 156–165.
- Frith Simon and McRobbie Angela. 1990. *Rock and Sexuality In: On Record. Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*. Simon Frith and Andrew A. Goodwin (eds.). London and New York. 317–332.
- Frith Simon. 1996. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Cambridge.
- Hill Rosemary L., Caroline Lucas, Gabby Riches. 2015. "Metal and marginalization: Researching at the edges of exteriority". *Metal Music Studies* no. 1(3). 295–301.
- Kahn-Harris Keith. 2007. *Extreme metal. Music and culture on the Edge*. New York.
- Kaiser Maisie. 2016. *Gender, Identity and Power in Metal Music*. Hampshire College.
- Madge Leia. 1998. "Capitalizing on «Cuteness»: The Aesthetics of Social Relations in a New Postwar Japanese Order". *Japanstudien*, no. 9.1. 155–174.
- Riches Gaby. 2011. "Embracing the Chaos: Mosh Pits, Extreme Metal Music and Liminality". *Journal for Cultural Research* no. 15.3.
- Walser Robert. 2014. *Running with the Devil. Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Middletown.

Discography

- Poppy, *Am I a Girl?*, Mad Decent 2018.
- Poppy, *Anything Like Me*, Sumerian Records 2020.
- Poppy, *BLOODMONEY*, Sumerian Records 2020.
- Poppy, *Concrete*, Sumerian Records 2020.
- Poppy, *I Disagree*, Sumerian Records 2020.
- Poppy, *Interweb*, Mad Decent 2017.
- Poppy, *Let's Make a Video*, Mad Decent 2017.
- Poppy, *Sit/Stay*, Sumerian Records 2020.
- Poppy, *Software Upgrade*, Mad Decent 2017.
- Poppy, *Time Is Up* (feat. Diplo), Mad Decent 2018.

Videography

- Femme Fatale, *Waiting for the Big One*, Dir. Marty Callner, USA 1988.
- Femme Fatale, *Falling in and Out of Love*, Dir. Marty Callner, USA 1989.

⁵⁹ This article is based on a paper *I Disagree: Narratives of Empowerment in Poppy's Project*, that was presented on 24.06.2020, during the conference: Modern Heavy Metal 2020, organised by Aalto University School of Business (Finland).

Poppy, *BLOODMONEY*, USA 2019.

Poppy, *Concrete*, USA 2019.

Poppy, *I Disagree*, USA 2019.

Poppy, *Sit/Stay*, Dir. Poppy, USA 2020.

Twisted Sister, *We're Not Gonna Take It*, Dir. Marty Callner, USA 1984.

Twisted Sister, *I Wanna Rock*, Dir. Marty Callner, USA 1984.

I'm Poppy, Dir. Titanic Sinclair, USA 2015.

Poppy Eats Cotton Candy, Dir. Titanic Sinclair, USA 2014.

Netography

Poppy's interview for TTF Magazine, 23.11.2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8XSVIDkhPQ (access: 26.06.2021).

Poppy's interview for Altpress, 06.01.2020, <https://www.altpress.com/features/poppy-i-disagree-track-by-track-interview/> (access: 26.06.2021).

Poppy's interview for Loudwire, 11.12.2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHQHfBifW5s> (access: 26.06.2021).

Playlist Kids React to Poppy, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0by5W6Yo-2sKAFn5omrOYS2UuiT3r4E-v> (access: 26.06.2020).

The Dark Truth of Poppy, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4ImFhE0C6M_ (access: 26.06.2021).

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200111101719/https://www.kerrang.com/the-news/poppy-ive-never-said-my-music-is-metal/> (access: 26.06.2021).

<https://www.tmg.com/2018/04/17/youtube-legal-feud-titanic-sinclair-mars-argo-thatpoppy/> (access: 26.06.2021).

<https://www.nme.com/news/music/poppy-and-manager-titanic-sinclair-settle-law-suit-with-mars-argo-2428225> (access: 26.06.2021).

<https://www.dailydot.com/upstream/lawsuit-poppy-titanic-sinclair-dismissed/> (access: 26.06.2021).

<https://www.spin.com/2020/12/poppy-exit-interview-new-lp-2020/> (access: 26.06.2021).

<https://www.nme.com/reviews/live/poppy-live-in-la-playful-poised-punk-dispatch-from-a-post-genre-world-2927288?amp> (access: 26.06.2021).

<https://web.archive.org/web/20161105004141/http://www.islandrecords.com/news/that-poppy-releases-everybody-wants-to-be-poppy/> (access: 26.06.2021).

<https://theconversation.com/what-is-kawaii-and-why-did-the-world-fall-for-the-cult-of-cute-67187> (access: 26.06.2021).

Abstract

In this article I shall examine how Poppy uses her extreme grotesque effect to construct visual, audial and lyrical narratives of empowerment – in gender, personal, and musical context. I shall shed a light on the way her self-awareness as a female vocalist deconstructs the image of 'metal woman' – through subversive combination of hyperfeminine image with aggressive music and involved lyrics – to expose excluding paradigms which determine female presence in metal. Finally, I shall show how her post-genre aesthetics undermines hardened determinants of what is, and what is not 'metal'.

I Disagree: Narracje emancypacyjne w twórczości Poppy

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule zbadam, w jaki sposób Poppy używa ekstremalnego efektu groteski by skonstruować wizualną, audialną i liryczną narrację emancypacyjną – w kontekście genderowym, osobistym i muzycznym. Zanalizuję sposób, w jaki samoświadomość Poppy jako wokalistki dekonstruuje wizerunek „metalowej kobiety” – poprzez subwersywne połączenie hiperkobiecego wizerunku z agresywną muzyką i zaangażowanymi tekstami – by obnażyć wykluczające paradygmaty warunkujące kobiecą obecność w metalu. Wykażę, jak jej estetyka „post-genre” podważa skostniałe wyznaczniki tego, co jest, a co nie jest „metalem”.

Keywords: narratives of empowerment, the Internet culture, personae, women in metal, post-genre aesthetics

Słowa kluczowe: narracje emancypacyjne, kultura Internetu, persona, kobiety w metalu, estetyka post-genre

Dawid Kaszuba – is working on his Masters of cultural studies on Polish Faculty Studies, Jagiellonian University in Krakow. He devoted his Bachelor thesis to performances of sex in the work of glam metal bands. Currently he is working on his Master thesis, regarding musical projects that combine pop with metal, as well as a grant connected to racially determined genres of Polish popular music. His academic interests centres around gender, performances, and audiovisual context of rock and metal artists. He presented his papers on conferences around Poland, in Finland, Canada and Czech Republic. He was co-organizer of the second edition of an academic event Nordic Metal Music Seminar in 2021.