

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

---

## Regina Spektor's Small Bill\$

Richardson, John; Pääkkölä, Anna-Elena

*Published in:*  
Popular Musicology and Identity

Published: 10/08/2020

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript

*Document License*  
Publisher rights policy

[Link to publication](#)

*Please cite the original version:*

Richardson, J., & Pääkkölä, A-E. (2020). Regina Spektor's Small Bill\$: The Cute and The Manic-Zany as Body-Political Strategies. In K. Arne Hansen, E. Askerøi, & F. Jarman (Eds.), *Popular Musicology and Identity: Essays in Honour of Stan Hawkins* (pp. 178–195). Routledge. <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe202201147504>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## Chapter 11

### Regina Spektor's *Small Bill\$*: The Cute and the Manic-Zany as Body-Political Strategies

John Richardson and Anna-Elena Pääkkölä

The categories of cuteness and quirkiness most often carry diminutive or dismissive baggage when it comes to descriptions of women performing songwriters, especially when the artist's main expressive *métier* is not confessional but fictional or fantastical. Yet, women who have been categorised in this way have had a growing impact in styles like indie and electronica, which raises concerns about the gendered nature of evaluative criteria. Are dismissive critics – even those who slight performers unknowingly – missing something about the descriptive categories they employ? The Icelandic pop auteur Björk set an important precedent for glamorous identity play which pushes back the boundaries of convention, building on the extravagance of precursors like Siouxsie Sioux and Kate Bush. Recent years have seen a proliferation of artists whose take on feminine glamour is reflectively playful; among them Lady Gaga, Alison Goldfrapp, Sia, Bat for Lashes, Grimes, Régine Chassagne (of Arcade Fire), Feist, and Melanie Martinez. The expressive palette available to women performers has clearly broadened, not only in terms of the visual identity of the performing body, but also musical expression. The current chapter asks critical questions about what this shift in performance style means and what are its cultural repercussions.

We focus on Regina Spektor's music video, *Small Bill\$* (2016, dir. Stephen Mertes). Spektor's live persona is not as flamboyant as some of the musicians listed above, but her music has, since her breakthrough as part of the New York anti-folk movement of the early 2000s, revelled in traits that have often been called quirky, experimental, zany and perhaps surreal. Much of the experimentalism, the sonic and textual quirkiness, takes place in the context of songs that are palatable and draw on traditional elements, from jazz standards to classical piano composition – and, at the edgier end of the scale, hip-hop and post-punk styles. Spektor was born in Moscow in 1980, and migrated along with her family to New York in the early 1990s. A Russian Jewish refugee, she continued to pursue her studies as a classical pianist after her arrival in the United States. Spektor would sell copies of her first two self-published albums (*11:11* from 2001; *Songs* from 2002) as merchandise at gigs, but she achieved a higher level of popularity after touring with The Strokes and then Kings of Leon in 2003–2004, and with the release of her critically acclaimed fourth album, *Begin to Hope* (2005). The song and video we will be discussing here is from her most recent album, *Remember Us to Life* (2016).

Spektor is known for a musical style employing extended vocal techniques (including percussive and beat-boxing techniques, glissandos, and body strikes), influences from classical music, and instances of switching language or dialect mid-song. While Spektor's live performances conform largely to the expectations of the singer-songwriter, her music videos provide a more apt vehicle for exploring the more outlandish aspects of her expressive output. In our discussion of *Small*

*Bill\$*, we argue that the construction of femininity that her often reported ‘quirkiness’ is part and parcel of converges around a cluster of issues to do with the body and the voice as politically charged categories. Beyond quirky, we argue that this song and its corresponding music video raise questions about contemporary culture and gender politics through concepts familiar to us from both vernacular usage and contemporary aesthetics; these include the cute, the zany, the silly, the surreal, and, a favourite category of ours with its origins in film criticism, the manic (especially in reference to the manic pixie dream girl) – a category that while reductive, is also potentially illuminating when thought of not so much as a quality that has been projected onto women, but rather a knowing (and therefore self-empowering) strategy of evasion and ambiguation. Drawing on these concepts, our close reading of the music video enumerates ways of constructing identities that are fluid and endowed with a playful – but by no means apolitical – energy, reflecting on issues including feminist resistance, polyvalent cultural identity, ecocriticism, and anti-capitalism.

The video of *Small Bill\$* tells of a world inhabited by anthropomorphic bears, where the protagonist, played by Spektor herself, escapes from a dreary, capitalist cityscape dressed, initially, as an ice-queen riding through wintry tundra on the back of a polar bear; later, as a traditional Russian maid striding through an avenue of singing Matryoshka dolls. Transformed into a cardboard cut-out mermaid, her character then joins forces with a subversive underwater community. A harness and chains are attached to a blue whale, in order to drag the dystopic city into the sea. At the end of the video, mermaid Spektor is joined underwater by the amphibious polar bear from earlier in the video. The music is built around a 4-bar A minor tonic to major flat second (B flat major) ostinato chord pattern (Am, Am, B b , Am), which continues throughout the song, performed on bass, drums, and low orchestral strings. This basic chord structure, however, belies the complexity of the arrangement, which employs techniques from contemporary classical music whilst also dipping into tropes from hip-hop music, not least due to Spektor’s rapidly delivered vocals. Stylistically the video has a lo-fi, collage-like appearance, combining filmed footage with obviously hand-drawn images.

### **The Cute and the Zany as Critical Kitsch**

Despite garnering the respect of artists and critics at the alternative and indie fringes of pop culture, Regina Spektor has been largely overlooked in previous music research. Her eccentric and humorous tendencies have earned her such labels as ‘kooky’, ‘quirkstress’, and ‘adorkable’, while Spektor herself has responded to such comments by drawing attention to gender stereotyping within the music industry:

I used to think calling me ‘quirky’ was a clever way of keeping down anything creative and adventurous. There are things people say that are condescending to difference. But if a guy is the way I am he’s a visionary. He doesn’t let anyone into the studio? He’s so strong! But her? She’s a paranoid

control freak, a micromanager who doesn't trust anybody. Emotional rather than passionate. She... she is crazy! (Spektor, quoted in Wiseman 2016)<sup>1</sup>

Kooky though some of her music might be, offbeat humour is just part of the picture and it is attached to a cultural context. In her first album release for a major label, *Soviet Kitsch* (Sire, 2003), Spektor used the term 'kitsch' ambivalently in relation to her Russian heritage. In the music video for *Small Bill\$*, she revisits Russian kitsch to construct a form of personal narrative (Hawkins and Richardson 2007, 606–607) where the songwriter reflects nostalgically on the land of her birth while critically confronting her heritage as a Russian refugee. As Spektor poignantly observes, 'My Russia is gone' (see Wiseman 2016). Using what Michael Billig (1995) calls 'flagging' national symbols in a banal repetition of nationalistic imagery, Spektor parodies everything from national costumes and icons, winter, and snow, to *Matryoshka* dolls and the ubiquitous image of the Russian bear. Such symbols are found in the bear-inhabited world of the video, this kitsch imagery both contributing to and destabilising its narrative message. Kitsch is commonly thought of as referring to commodified artefacts or performances which aspire to the status of art, but which fail in this aim because they are too cloying, beautiful, or artificial to sustain artistic or functional value (see Greenberg 1989, 3–21). However, kitsch can possess a critical edge when it is understood as representing emptiness or a trickster-like relation to history (see Flinn 2004). Spektor's use of kitschy symbols in *Small Bill\$* serves to undermine her constructed Russian identity, but it also contributes concretely to the music video's narrative, since Spektor ultimately overturns the kitschy dystopian world of polar bears in favour of an underwater domain where she assumes the role of a mermaid. Identity here is voluntary, a form of disguise that can be adopted and discarded at will depending on the requirements of the narrative and the corresponding goals of cultural critique.

Kitsch aesthetics is implicit also in Spektor's performances of femininity, including girlish cuteness, as she rides through a cardboard cut-out forest in the role of ice queen, before changing into traditional dress to join a troupe of giant *Matryoshka* dolls, her heavily mascaraed eyes are wide open, her lips painted in the shape of a small pout, and her cheeks are exaggeratedly rouged (see figure 1). All of this contributes to a heightened sense of camp theatricality which leaves little doubt as to the performer's ironic intent. Feminine cuteness here can be regarded as a feminist strategy of empowerment, where things are never entirely what they seem. The cute, as theorised by Sianne Ngai (2012), is an object to be consumed, which overlaps with kitsch because of its vacuous simplicity. The wide-eyed gaze of folk art like Russian kitsch becomes something the viewer can inhabit, just as Spektor does in this video; but what is ostensibly pliable and receptive actually turns out to be surprisingly resilient and, in the case of the *Matryoshka* dolls, uncannily reproducible – much like the products of capitalist mass production – to the extent of ~~being that it is~~ disarming (ibid., 73–75). ~~All of this~~ ~~The result~~ ~~What follows is~~

Commented [KAH1]: I removed the repetition of "all of this" which also appears a few sentences before (and seemed a bit imprecise in this particular instance).

<sup>1</sup> Compare to Davies 2001, 305.

the empowerment of the elusive subject of the song, whose wide-eyed gaze reflects back onto the viewer, seeming to offer comfort.

>> INSERT FIGURE 11.1 HERE >>

Figure 11.1: Spektor's exaggeratedly cute look and a troupe of *Matryoshka* dolls.

Spektor's playfulness here evades hegemonic masculinist narratives of logic, rationality, and (rock) authenticity. Her playful attitude towards both musical and multimodal performance, moreover, reflects back also onto the economic structures of the music industry. But it is a cuteness that is double coded. As an aesthetic quality applied to female performers, cuteness is often understood as implying girly passivity, sexual availability masquerading as a- or pre-sexuality, simplicity, and powerlessness. It can provoke nurturing responses in (attracted) onlookers, but it might also appeal to these same consumers' more violent predilections, since it is assumed that they can crush the cute object at will (Ngai 2012, 65). But, as commented on above, Spektor's cuteness lulls onlookers (and listeners) into a false sense of security (Pääkkölä 2016, 177–8). Something about her character is redolent of Alice in Wonderland and Dorothy from *Wizard of Oz*: both girls' inquisitive and agentic natures confirm, ultimately, that they are in control of the narrative worlds they inhabit. An additional point of reference, which might be intentional, is to the Russian folk story of Masha and the Bear. Here the story is rewritten to make an amphibious polar bear the accomplice of the girl protagonist rather than her adversary (in the original, Masha outwits the bear to escape him). While countless other bears in the video represent capitalist minions, the polar bear works together with Spektor's characters to subvert cold neoliberal-capitalist society. Performing a constructed girlish femininity – the compound figure of Alice/Dorothy/Masha – while marvelling at her surroundings – she nevertheless moves nevertheless purposefully towards a goal, traversing underground passages in search of an alliance with a kindly and badly drawn King Neptune, with whom she strikes up an alliance. Taking our reading one step further, kitsch stereotypes are simply the currency Spektor's characters use in order to achieve more subtle goals. Such stereotypes might appear disempowered but ironic appropriation renders them more potent. After marvelling at the (neo)surreal spectacle of her story-world (Alice) (see Richardson 2012), the protagonist of *Small Bills* overturns a dystopic world order (Masha), while helping her friends to find their way home (Dorothy).

An additional factor contributing to Spektor's style is her zany (Ngai 2012) comportment, which has her shifting restlessly between roles and uniforms, much like the adaptable workforce ideal under neoliberal capitalism, where multitasking becomes a necessity and breathless instability – because of competition in a saturated marketplace – is the new norm. But Spektor navigates this fraught terrain with ironic ease and a determined expression, striding through subterranean tunnels beneath a dystopic cityscape of brutalist high-rise buildings and the imposing pillared

architecture of a building evocatively called ‘memory bank’.<sup>2</sup> The various characters Spektor inhabits here enact a rite of passage that moves through isolation (ice queen) and liminality (Alice/Dorothy/Masha) toward reassimilation (the mermaid; see Rogers 2013, 628). Cuteness, then, is the middle or liminal stage in a rite of passage, where a person ‘hovers (between) different social and existential spaces’ (ibid., 528). In our view, this rite is performed through Spektor’s travels beyond masculine rationality, which governs discourses of rock authenticity, and towards a new ‘kooky’ feminine aesthetics which gives voice to dissent and destabilises the pious seriousness of masculine musical discourse.

It is no secret that women in popular music can easily get into (gender) trouble when they contravene the rules of masculinist rock discourse. Indie has offered more leeway in this regard, but even indie performers often enact a pouty seriousness and coldness, which critics and niche audiences tend to favour. The argument goes that women are by default inauthentic, trivial, shallow, images to be consumed.<sup>3</sup> Correspondingly, their music is seen as inherently stereotyped and small-scale, overly personal, uncomplicated, emotional, derivative, and simplistic – all of these expectations standing in the way of women being properly acknowledged for the more authoritative roles they might seek in their music (see Driscoll 2008, 20; Warwick 2004, 192; Warwick and Adrian 2016). Voice production and vocality are similarly connected with questions of gender and authenticity in popular music (Hawkins 2016, 2; Neumark 2010, 95–97). The stereotypes of authentic voice production that are available to men might well signify inauthenticity when it comes to female voices and vice versa (Warwick and Adrian 2016, 2–4). This is pertinent when it comes to Spektor’s zany vocal aesthetics, as Spektor uses exaggeratedly feminine tactics such as the head range of her soprano voice, which is prominent in the choruses of this song. Spektor uses her voice as a performative of cultural expectations regarding girls’ voices (see Jarman 2011, 18–19); but, more importantly, she subverts expectations concerning what these voices can or should do. What makes her vocalisations zany is how she uses comedic devices, spontaneity, and (irrational) humour: ‘Highlighting the affect, libido, and physicality of an unusually beset agent’ (Ngai 2012, 7). Vocally, the zaniness seeps out, therefore, through multiple channels; most significantly, in her unexpected and conspicuously embodied movements from one channel and corresponding vocal strategy to the next.

The melody in the choruses comprises a simple wordless ‘la-la-la’ chant beginning on  $e^2e^2$  and descending onto  $e^1e^1$ , after which the singer makes two octave jumps from  $f^1f^1$  to  $f^2f^2$  and back before repeating the gesture on  $e^1e^1$  and  $e^2e^2$ . Since the octave jump is more familiar to singers from technical vocal warm-up exercises than song melodies, it is revealing how far Spektor pushes the bounds of conventionality in her melodic lines (read: diverging from

<sup>2</sup> This section is reminiscent of the museum in Michel Gondry’s music video for Björk’s *Army of Me* (1995), which similarly represents the establishment and is destroyed in the final moments of the video. In general, the visual style of *Small Bills* owes much to Gondry. See Richardson 2012, 106–107.

<sup>3</sup> The argument concerning the presumed fakeness and theatrical superficiality of women goes back to Nietzsche and beyond, but it is still alarmingly prevalent. See Ngai 2012, 226–227.

normative masculine rules). In these displays of transgressive feminine vocality, she probably owes something to precursors like Joni Mitchell and Annie Lennox, and the fluidity of this passage is somewhat reminiscent of Edie Brickell's singing style. A contrasting example of how the octave jump has been employed by a vintage 'cock rocker' is Steven Tyler's octave-plus-second glissando in Aerosmith's 'Dream On' (1973), a gesture that showcases the singer's formidable vocal prowess. Unlike Tyler, however, Spektor does not show off in the sense of grandstanding, virtuosity not being the main point. Tyler's belting voice combined with his deliberately rising slide are designed to evoke awe. Spektor's doubled voice in the chorus is deliberately softened using the head voice to connote ease, spontaneity, and perhaps fickleness, all of which implies a relaxed feminine agency. This is accentuated by the undisciplined nature of the jump as she aims slightly above the octave before gliding softly down onto the target note. This free-fall vocalese arrangement seems to have a mocking or teasing tone, which challenges:

1. The idea of music making as a 'serious' and therefore authentically masculine activity
2. The physicality of virtuosic singing through the use of head voice and relative laxness of her phrasing
3. The masculine order (or *logos*) of the chorus as the distillation of the song's 'meaning', a sing-along section everyone can relate to, through the eradication of lyrics in this section and the repeated 'la-la-la' melodic line (and emphasising the child-like imagery prevalent in the music and video; see also Appel 2014)
4. Conventions of proper (Western?) melodic construction, as the melody drops twice from a high fifth to a lower fifth and then irrationally jumps an octave higher and back again onto the flat sixth and then fifth
5. The stereotype which equates girlishness with simple melodic lines (see Cohen 2001, 232; McClary 2002, 154)
6. Normative ideas about girlish zaniness in popular music aesthetics, or the idea of female pop as dominated by commercial concerns, and female performers as uncritically conventional (see McClary 2002, 154; Davies 2001, 305)

Spektor's zany vocalisations are matched in the visuals. The first chorus shows the singer in a blonde wig astride a polar bear, her cheeky grin undermining any passivity that might be perceived in her attire's cute aesthetics. While riding the polar bear, Spektor gyrates her body in time with the music, imparting a sense of embodied fluency to the singing. While it could be argued that Spektor reinforces the idea of singing as something that is more 'natural' or 'easier' for women, based on the assumption that 'anyone can do it [without] practice and work' (Davies 2001, 306), it is noticeable that Spektor's embodied actions flaunt the effortlessness of her singing labour, in contrast to performers whose actions suggest effort or strain.<sup>4</sup> The free-fall

---

<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that when she performs this passage live, Spektor steps away from the piano, not only because it is natural for her to wish to dance to this music, but perhaps more importantly because it does require concentration and physical effort on the singer's part to pull off the illusion of auditory ease.

logic of the melody becomes a body-political feminist message: yes, Spektor's construction of quirky girliness is skilful and virtuosic; but to top it all, it can be made to appear easy and natural.

Concerning cute aesthetics in the song's chorus, Stan Hawkins' (2009, 170–173) concept of 'vocal masking' is helpful: vocal masking is a certain way of articulating words and corresponding attitudes that communicates cultural position. We argue that Spektor's vocal masking is a performance of exaggerated cuteness, a form of vocal hyper-femininity; especially the laxly round pronunciation of 'L' in 'la-la-la' is evocative of childlike and girlish enunciation, but it further suggests the mocking self-absorption of siren-song. The singer's humour, irony, frivolity, and cuteness in this context become critical vocal strategies, not least because in the denouement of the music video, we hear this sane music as the walls of the dystopic city collapse Jericho-like into the singing mermaid's watery abode.

The combination of the cute and the zany in *Small Bills* helps us to arrive at a more specific trope that has influenced perceptions of the 'quirky' female protagonist in contemporary audiovisual culture: 'the manic pixie dream girl' (MPDG). Coined by film critic Nathan Rabin (2007), the MPDG is usually a young, eccentric girl, awkward in her body but endearingly so; life-loving and irrational. The MPDG is most often filtered through the male imagination as another take on 'the eternal feminine'; a ditzzy klutz who is 'lightly pathological, largely mythic' (Solomon 2017), rarely straightforwardly sexual, while always being in equal measure enticing and exciting. While we are cognizant of the problematic nature of existing definitions of the MPDG (see Rabin 2015), in our view it is a trope that does not automatically preclude critical, deconstructive, subversive, creative, non-conformist, and, above all, powerfully *agentive* traits in the women to which it is applied, or rather, who wish to adopt it as a performance strategy. Indeed, we see the trope in its original formulation as a mixture of Ngai's cuteness (the dream girl), as already theorised by Jessica A. Holmes (2019), but also zaniness (the manic pixie). Both are qualities pop performers are currently renegotiating as feminine performance strategies, without conforming either to stereotypes femininity or to prevalent masculine norms. To be sure, the concept of 'mania' is mildly pathologising, hinting at a contrasting depressive side that proves to be the character's undoing; while 'pixie' is somewhat diminutive. But this need not be the case. The MPDG possesses catalytic agency and her irrationality opens up vistas that not only transform the lives of admiring co-stars but, in fact, destabilise the entire cinematic apparatus, taking it in a magical realist or surrealist direction.

### **Virtual Body Politics: Neosurreal Mermaids and Empowered Girls**

The combination of cute and zany discussed above does not automatically equate with autonomous reflexive agency. It is only when the MPDG's actions rub off on the diegetic environment she inhabits, as they do in neosurrealist cinema and music videos in a form of charismatic cross-pollination, that one can speak of the trope as *empowering* or *critical*. In



transforming the world she inhabits and thereby ‘stealing the show’ the MPDG occasions a reflexive turn that reinforces her agency – especially where the performing character and perceived auteur converge, as is true of much of Björk’s audiovisual output and undoubtedly also here. All of this takes the music video in the direction of neosurrealism (Richardson 2012, 22, 28, 35), which brings a critical edge to these otherwise stereotyping traits of feminine cuteness and zaniness. Neosurrealism implies altered or parallel perceptions of reality that augment the everyday, creating a dream-like (or nightmare-ish) state which reflects back onto the social realities of gender performances and can therefore be understood as imminent critique. Spektor’s music video offers audioviewers a dream-like interior world of the performer’s own invention, where the singing voice infuses and reconstitutes reality as part of an emerging ‘body politic’, which we understand as a deliberate strategy of feminine empowerment.

Spektor’s music video articulates the audiovisual neosurreal in animations which create a reflective fairy-tale-like space where the figure of a mermaid is grafted onto Spektor’s body in a radical staging of feminist – and feminine – activism. Feminist body politics make the human body a site of complex power relations through the recognition that oppression is ultimately inscribed onto bodies.<sup>5</sup> While some critics argue that body politics concerns only the ‘fleshly’ aspect of feminism (Harcourt 2013, 16), it can refer also to fictive representations, which are sometimes called ‘fictional body double[s]’ (Walker King 2000, vii–ix). When understood as sites for reinvention, fictional bodies become powerful symbols for feminist activism. In Spektor’s music video, the performer constructs a fictional double of herself in fantastical settings where she exhibits different states of control. She shifts fluently between characters, morphing into figures familiar from girls’ fantasies, which are rebranded in the music video as feminist forces; especially, the mermaid, as her upper body remains in a state of eerie<sup>6</sup> three-dimensional realism while her body’s nether regions are transformed into a two-dimensional mermaid’s tail (see figure 2). This final transformation shows Spektor’s physical body joining forces with its hand-drawn fantasy double, in the figure of the mermaid, in order to wreak havoc on the above-ground community of corporate bears and high-rise dystopia.

<<< Figure 11.2 here >>>

Figure 11.2: Spektor as mermaid, surrounded by aquatic activist friends.

Nina Lykke (1996, 5) discusses three fictional feminine/feminist symbols (monsters, goddesses, cyborgs) as ‘signifiers of chaos, heterogeneity and unstable identities’. The goddess is seen as a feminist icon symbolising a type of sanctified femininity that is celebrated in spiritual ecofeminism (Rountree 2004, 5), but which is sometimes criticised also for embodying technophobic nostalgia (see Haraway 1991). Monsters, in contrast, ‘have for thousands of years

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, the heated discussions on abortion rights, reproductive rights, or in more subtle forms, discussions of ‘acceptable’, normative bodies. See Harcourt 2013, 14–16.

<sup>6</sup> Eerie is defined here as a ‘failure of presence’. See Fisher 2016, 61.

undermined the normal and the stable by their deviant appearances' (Lykke 1996, 5). Mermaids can be seen as occupying a position between goddesses and monsters, based on their mythological role of combining seduction with the carnivorous hunting of humans. Spektor draws on both of these aspects in her conspicuously de-naturalised embodied actions (see also Goldin-Perschbacher 2014, 49).

Mermaids are highly gendered. In popular culture today, the marketing of mermaids mostly targets children and teenage girls as offering an alternative narrative to that of 'princess' stories (or a parallel one, if one considers Disney's Ariel). Modern-day mermaids and their ancient mythical counterparts have at least one thing in common: the mermaid's siren song, which is traditionally used to lure men (usually sailors) into entrapment, followed shortly by their emasculation and/or consumption. The mermaid/siren therefore traditionally represents danger directed towards the male order (Hayward 2017, 13). Disney's Ariel diverges from her ancient precursors mainly because of the level of danger she poses to humans combined with her lack of sexuality: mermaids are traditionally depicted as sexually monstrous and predatory, while in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) Ariel's sexuality is infantilised. Returning to the trope of the manic pixie dream girl, in Spektor's performance the cuteness of the Disney-fied mermaid coalesces with the commonly encountered infantile femininity of the MPDG (Holmes 2019; Solomon 2017). Regardless of how watered down Ariel is perceived as being, her singing voice nevertheless retains the power to manipulate men (although the outcome is marriage rather than slaughtered sailors). No wonder, then, that Ariel's voice is stripped from her before she can enter the two-legged world of patriarchy. Laura Sells writes:

Autonomy and independence, as many feminists have recognized, is never easy; the cost for participating in the white male system can be quite dear. About to enter the real world, Ariel faces the pain of conforming to impossible ideals as she physically mutilates her own body by exchanging her fins for the mobility of human legs. Even more disheartening, she purchases this physical transformation with her voice. Like so many women who enter 'the workforce', or any other 'male sphere', Ariel wrestles with the double-binding cultural expectations of choosing between either voice or access, but never both. (1995, 179)

In *Small Bills*, the narrative of (Disney's) *The Little Mermaid* is inverted. Spektor travels through a kitschy Russian forest in order to be initiated into the aquatic order, greeted by King Neptune, who turns her into a mermaid. The wordless chorus becomes more echoic and improvised from this point on; Spektor begins to morph her voice into a more liberated form, using her "underwater" siren song to rally the support of other mermaids with a view to overturning above-ground society. Hyperfemininity is present also in the naïve colour scheme and general cut-up appearance of the underwater world. This suggested infantilisation is undermined, however, through Spektor's excessively sighing, improvised vocals in the last iterations of the chorus; a manic performance that is by no means asexual. Here Spektor's mermaid hearkens back to the ancient sirens' evocations of sexual prowess and menace. Jessica A. Holmes (2019) calls this sexual-yet-innocent voice the 'baby doll voice', ~~and~~ example of which being is the

quintessential baby doll voice used by Marilyn Monroe in her rendition of ‘Happy Birthday Mr. President’. In ~~her~~ Holmes’s view, this is fundamentally a ‘masculinist portrayal of female sexual desire’ (ibid.). While Monroe’s voice may inspire ‘cultural contempt for and mistrust in female authority’ (ibid.), Spektor augments her breathy delivery through microtonal invocations of indie aesthetics in her extended vocal techniques, which hint also at exoticism. Namely, there is something of the J-pop or Bollywood pop princess in Spektor’s meandering lines, and her Disney-fied mermaid-cum-MPDG cuteness finds a counterpart in the imagery of Japanese *kawaii* (Ngai 2012, 79), where shy and energetic girlishness is usually assigned to high (read: infantile) soprano voices. The level of lure is elevated here, which is intimated in the breathiness of Spektor’s improvisatory lines.

Spektor’s ~~transformation-adoption of the~~ MPDG ~~into an~~ girlishness ~~becomes in characters that are both knowing and agentic signals~~, ~~the performer’s powerful~~ feminist ~~intent~~ statement.

Girlishness has traditionally been spurned in feminist thinking: it is ~~most often~~ usually womanhood, not girlhood, that traditional feminism ~~encourages~~ valorise. This stems from prevalent cultural ~~constructs-encodings~~ of girlishness as ~~a~~ juvenile, kind, acquiescent, and timid ~~state of being, which qualities which~~ second wave feminism in particular saw as ~~diametrically~~ opposed to the desired image of the empowered woman (Warwick and Adrian 2016, 5). As a counter-reaction to the ascetic values of serious feminism, the ‘girlish’ culture of young women (youth being principally a state of mind here) has turned to fun-giving, feminine pursuits like knitting or the playful use of makeup (see Baumgartner and Richards 2000, 80; Owen et al. 2007, 114). Spektor’s music video symbolically embraces childish play: the ice queen images of the opening sections, where she is visibly and aurally a mature woman, quickly give way to adolescent wonder and discovery (Masha/Alice/Dorothy). Finally, the singer enters the fantastical world of the child-girl as mermaid, turning her impossible escape into a symbolic reversal of her (banal) physical age, thereby allowing her to overturn society above the ocean, whilst also relinquishing the ‘adult’ world of responsibility, everyday reality, violence, and, above all, money; ~~which~~ ~~The latter~~ ~~root of all the aforementioned evils, money~~ is revealed as nothing more than an empty symbol; hence, *Small Bill*\$. We interpret this ~~narrative construction as conveying is~~ a body-politic message in support of strident but playful girlishness rather than stern feminist activism.

Moreover, the manic pixie trope is manifested in the juxtaposition of the groove and ~~the~~ girlish ~~images of~~ mermaids – made newly cool, not naïve, due to their appropriation in the context of indie cut-up aesthetics (see Richardson 2012, 100–104). The groove of the song comprises mostly classical instruments rather than studio-produced beats; as a result, the edginess of a hip hop-inflected groove becomes acoustically blurred. ~~However,~~ something of rap aesthetics remains, ~~however,~~ in the verses, which are half sung, half recited, while echo and reverb are ~~used on~~ applied to selected words to accentuate final rhymes and bring to the fore a lineage of spoken word performance that extends back to dub reggae toasting (first verse: ‘he had spent it

Commented [MOU2]: Yes, something got lost in the revisions. We’ve made some improvements and think it now works better.

all on chips and Coca-COL-LA'). Spektor is a 'wordy' songwriter who ~~likes to combine~~ words she chooses in unexpected ways, manipulating their *sounds* ~~using~~ with extended vocal techniques. ~~Here~~ In this song she creates a flow of words similar to hip hop, but without slipping into full-out rapping. Rap and hip hop still have a reputation as being masculine genres (see Hawkins 2016, 24; Rose 2009, chapter 5).<sup>7</sup> Spektor flirts with (masculine) hip hop edginess and rhythmic verbosity, but she smooths over some of the rough edges of traditional rap performance with a skillset of melodious invention and cultural omnivorousness (classical, indie, and rap) that can easily be understood as femininely encoded. She paraphrases the genre enough for her borrowings to be recognised, but refuses to 'keep it real', a tenet of hip-hop authenticity. Instead, she makes hip-hop aesthetics relatable to her target audience by camping it up with images gleaned from girlhood, but these images are decommodified through performances steeped in neosurrealist irony and *joie de vivre*.

### Lyrics and Audiovisual Context: Articulating Anti-Neoliberalism and Feminist Utopia

A potent political message is conveyed in the music, lyrics and visual imagery of *Small Bill\$* that pertains to a dystopic neoliberal capitalist order that is perceived as being out of control. The lyrics of 'Small Bill\$' describe a devil-may-care, almost nihilistic attitudes towards finance in neoliberal society, as well as a lack of imagination that seems to govern the overground world: 'His destiny was just too big to spend / so he broke it into smaller bills and change / By the time he bought all the things he needed / he had spent it all on loosies and weed and' ... With consumption becoming an end in itself, and bringing about a numbing of the senses rather than sensory stimulation ('he had spent it all and didn't even feel it' ~~/he had spent it all and didn't even feel it~~), the first verse mirrors the dystopic atmosphere of the cityscape portrayed in the music video.

(Spektor, 'Small Bill\$', verse 1)

Above all, Spektor's music video ~~is~~ offers a dialectical examination of two worlds: the world of the bears, dreary and monochromatic, in contrast to the colourful underwater world of mermaids. It is tempting to read the division between the two communities as gendered, but it is more fruitful perhaps to focus ~~instead~~ on their contrasting social systems: a dystopic neoliberal world in opposition to a utopian world. This ~~act of~~ division can be understood as a familiar queer-feminist/queer strategy of reimagining the status quo. At the beginning of the song, Spektor describes a 'he' who has so much money he 'can't even feel' the benefits of spending it. The protagonist's efforts at self-medicating with drugs and junk food ~~do not lead to satisfaction, but to a meaningless and lead him towards ennui: a lifestyle of distracted and anaesthetised form of existence~~ indifference. The real raspberries offered to Spektor's characters by the Matryoshka dolls have been replaced by the symbolic replace currency of paper bills, inspiring avarice and

<sup>7</sup>An emerging presence of feminist and queer hip hop is undoubtedly on the rise, challenging the masculine nature of hip hop; see, for example, Hansen and Hawkins 2018; Pääkkölä forthcoming.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

conflict among the greedy bears, whether gathered from Matryoshka dolls by the song's protagonist or printed onto the 'small bills' referred in the song's title. The music video supplies additional information about these bears' world as being hypermediated through television and smartphones. The bears are isolated, their only connection with each other happening through conflict: bank robberies and muggings. Spektor seems to direct her criticism towards neoliberal societies' overemphasis on individualism, which leads to experiences of as represented by distracted self-absorption and, ultimately, antisocial criminality -activity- (see Smith 2012). Spektor, however, describes a conjures up the image of a 'bear in winter' that is about to threaten the protagonist's world existing order. This figure could admittedly represent all of the bears in the video and the social unrest that is prevalent in the dystopian city. A more compelling reading, however, would understand this line as representing the polar bear who of the bear perhaps might represents as the female character's main accomplice. This bear's -grumpy awakening to the despair of a world governed by finance corporate muscle and its corresponding array of unfulfilling escapist distractions, brings the possibility of revolt – a familiar Russian sentiment with ambiguous historical baggage. The music video supplies additional information about the bears' world as being hypermediated through television and smartphones. The bears are isolated, their only connection with each other happening through conflict: bank robberies and muggings. Spektor seems to direct her criticism towards neoliberal societies' emphasis on individualism, which leads to experiences of distracted self-absorption and, ultimately, antisocial criminal activity (see Smith 2012).

Commented [KAH3]: Referred to? This might be a "Norwegianism", so please disregard if the existing wording is correct

Hawkins (2016, 24) writes of asserts makes a convincing case for dystopias' ability to as - 'easily stop (ping) us in our tracks' (2016, 24). Spektor, however, propels the story narrative forwards by offering her vision of underwater society as an alternative social construct; a specifically feminist form of utopia/utopia: a that is a 'good place which is no place' (Sargisson 1996, 1). This alternative world consists of girlish imagination run amok and cultural omnivorousness that that defies stereotypes of the high and the low. Feminist utopian texts are a specific subcategory of the feminist imagination which, for Lucy Sargisson (ibid., 17), are 'concerned to some extent with power relations, all with sexual power, some also with the exploitative relations between patriarchy and nature' (ibid., 17). While the confrontation of otherness and estrangement are additional themes that are often explored (ibid., 179), Sargisson emphasises a specific unruly attitude as an essential facet/tenet of feminist utopian writings:

The form of utopianism which I identify as feminine is a transgressive, infinite and active genre. It is transgressive in the senses (...) of binarity, of the Self/Other relation, of the mind/body divide, of social and scholastic conventions. It is infinite in the sense of its multiple, open ended nature and approach to constructing alternative ways of living and being. It is active, first in the sense that its function is to challenge and transform perceptions of the present and of what is conceivable and possible, and secondly with regard to the nature of the texts under discussion. (ibid., 198)

As a take on self/Other relations, Spektor weaves together a narrative that proceeds from radical otherness to radical inclusivity. ~~The bear that was~~ An awakened sleeping is presumably the polar bear ~~that~~ assists the kitschy-cute folktale heroine and mermaid protagonist to achieve her subversive goals. And the results are revolutionary, cataclysmic to the dominant (patriarchal) order. There's an element of 'what if?' to this storyline: What if the bohemian world of artists ('poets coughing up blood') were to have its way? What if the Russian bear (Spektor's heritage) were awoken from its slumber? The consequences could be dangerous, but to who as there are bears on both sides?

The final moments of the music video show Spektor as mermaid settling down for a performative nap with her favourite polar bear at her side, as she rests her head on her hand in a gesture of camped up slumber. We know she isn't really sleeping and isn't really a mermaid, right? This final scene offering a 'happily ever after' scenario that nevertheless fails to satisfy in narrative terms bringing satisfying narrative closure. Once the neoliberal world order has come tumbling down, we are left with more questions than were present at the beginning of the music video. What happens in a utopia once the battle against convention is won? Will the visibly *different* Spektor be accepted in her half-human, half-monstrous state? Is the polar bear welcome in the aquatic realm/domain? He is amphibious, so he might be. In short, is this new feminist utopia a society which that accepts difference? We are ~~not~~ provided with no answers: the music video is concerned only with the present moment. The anxieties and hegemonies of conventionality have been dismantled, and solace has been found in this new state of utopia – a domain of queer futurism where oppressive powers have been dismantled, but viable new alternatives have yet to be found. Hence, utopian thinking is an unfinished and perhaps *unfinishable* project; a state of fancy, of almost juvenile or, rather, manic zany pixie ~~(because requiring magic)~~ counter-logic, as epitomised by the provocative body politics of the MPDG.

Commented [KAH4]: This strikes me as slightly odd

### Concluding thoughts: of sirensong, subversive orality, and awakening the winter bear Conclusion

The concept of the 'manic pixie dream girl' is in our view useful for calling out female stereotypes in mainstream cinema, ~~but~~ Contrary to the term's originator's regrets about its coinage (see Rabin 2015), we find the term useful, too, when it is permitted to 'travel' beyond its original context. Instead of being seen as merely as a projection of a male protagonist's unrequited desires for freedom and adventure, in our theorisation the MPDG has-claims a life of her own. We envision her as an agentic, creative, and yes, also irrational force (in a rebellious and politically aware-astute sense), who transcends the nature-culture divide while ge expanding the palette of expressive strategies available to ~~the~~ female pop performers. She rebels and critiques but without aggression (or even; indeed; *passive* aggression), revelling instead in irreverent humour while distracting audiences with wordplay and sensory smoke and mirrors.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In a way, Spektor can be regarded as working according to the principle of 'think counterintuitively, act accordingly' in the 'gaga feminism' principle. See Halberstam 2012, 27–28; 138–9.

This allows her to smuggle in messages that might otherwise cause offence or ~~result in prompt~~ knee-jerk reactions. These are feminine and (not ~~at all at all~~ paradoxically, in our view) *feminist* strategies that have long been berated by those who espouse ‘straight talk’ as the ~~only sole~~ acceptable means for bringing about change. But in an age when dissent is expressed mainly in the self-affirming echo chamber~~s~~ of cyberspace, new strategies are needed that invite more than repel. Feminine anti-rationalism is an attempt to claim back and revalorise femininity whilst exposing the shortcomings of rationally biased masculinity (Sargisson 1996, 82). Both ~~of these categories are, femininity and masculinity are,~~ of course, culturally constructed and reproduced; and it is certainly not our goal to reinforce ~~gender~~ stereotypes. In fact, it is the knowingness of those performative acts ~~that nees which~~ we have called cute, zany, and manic ~~that which~~ undermines the ~~idea notion~~ of an essentialising feminine irrationality ~~a being – in other words, an uncontainable femininity that is perceived as the straightforward mirror image of antithesis of a corresponding walled-in n-exclusive masculine rationality. Consequently, the argument we are putting forward does not imply that feminine and maseuline. This argument extents to musical expression, music making which~~ should ~~be not be~~ demarcated along ~~similar~~ mutually exclusive lines.

Spektor’s *Small Bills* toys with and deconstructs norms by treating them reflexively. Such interventions complicate existing frames of reference while ~~at the same time calling for their offering up their~~ premises ~~to be subjected to for~~ critical scrutiny. Garrard makes a pertinent point in this regard:

If women have been associated with nature, and each denigrated with reference to each other, it may seem worthwhile to attack the hierarchy by reversing the terms, exalting nature, irrationality, emotion and the human or non-human body as against culture, reason and the mind. (2012, 26)

Our argument here is that pleasure can be taken in the very act of toying with stereotypes as well as in revealing the sophistication and pleasurable appeal of expressive forms which are all too easily dismissed as superficial and devoid of social responsibility. Value is not intrinsic, it is assigned, and the values traditional value judgements rest upon are saturated with assumptions about gender. We instinctively recognise that stereotypes such as the manic pixie dream girl appeal to men and women alike, but we have been enculturated to respond to such feelings with disparagement or shame – mainly because the qualities such figures embody are felt to have little or no value in the current cultural order. Our theorisation is an attempt not only to elucidate why and how *Small Bills* speaks to audiences; we go further and call for a reassessment of the value system that marks certain expressive acts as trivial or commodified and others as serious and warranting critical attention. We do not know for sure why Regina Spektor’s music has so far received so little attention in scholarly writing, but we suspect it has something to do with her often attributed ‘quirkiness’ – or, in our more thoroughgoing discussion, her reflexively

embodied cuteness and manic zaniness. More than any argument we have offered here, perhaps the best response to this would be something along the lines of ‘la-la-la, la-la, la-la, la, la...’

## References

- Appel, Nadav. 2014. “‘Ga, ga, ooh-la-la’: The Childlike Use of Language in Pop-Rock Music’. *Popular Music* 33 (1): 91–108.
- Baumgartner, Jennifer, and Amy Richards. 2000. *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage Publications.
- Cohen, Sara. 2001. ‘Popular Music, Gender and Sexuality’. In *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, edited by Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street, 226–242. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, Helen. 2001. ‘All Rock and Roll Is Homosocial: The Representation of Women in the British Rock Music Press’. *Popular Music* 20 (3): 301–319.
- Driscoll, Catherine. 2008. ‘Girls Today: Girls, Girl Culture and Girl Studies’. *Girlhood Studies* 1 (1): 13–38.
- Fisher, Mark. 2016. *The Weird and the Eerie*. New York: Presenter Books.
- Flinn, Caryl. 2004. *The New German Film: Music, History, and The Matter of Style*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Garrard, Greg. 2012. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge.
- Goldin-Perschbacher, Shana. 2014. ‘Icelandic Nationalism, Difference Feminism, and Björk’s Maternal Aesthetic’. *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 18: 48–81.
- Greenberg, Clement. 1989 [1961]. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Halberstam, J. Jack. 2012. *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hansen, Kai Arne, and Stan Hawkins. 2018. ‘Azealia Banks: “Chasing Time”, Erotics, and Body Politics’. *Popular Music* 37 (2): 157–174.
- Haraway, Donna. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Harcourt, Wendy. 2013 [2009]. *Body Politics in Development: Critical Debates in Gender and Development*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hawkins, Stan. 2016. *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Normativity, and Temporality*. New York: Routledge.
- Hawkins, Stan. 2009. *The British Pop Dandy*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Hawkins, Stan, and John Richardson. 2007. ‘Remodeling Britney Spears: Matters of Intoxication and Mediation’. *Popular Music and Society* 30 (5): 605–629.
- Hayward, Philip. 2017. *Making a Splash: Mermaids (and Mer-Men) in 20th and 20st Century Audiovisual Media*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.



- Holmes, Jessica A. 2019. 'The "Manic Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth-Pop World" and Her "Baby Doll Lisp": Grimes and the Disabling Logics of the Feminization and Infantilization of Lisper'. *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31 (1): 131–156.
- Jarman, Freya. 2011. *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Keighley, Keira. 2001. 'Reconsidering Rock'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, edited by Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street, 109–142. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lykke, Nina. 1996. 'Introduction'. In *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace*, edited by Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti, 1–12. London: Zed Books.
- McClary, Susan. 2002 [1991]. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender & Sexuality*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Neumark, Norie. 2010. 'Doing Things with Voices: Performativity and Voice'. In *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*, edited by Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson and Theo van Leeuwen, 95–118. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ngai, Sianne. 2012. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Owen, Susan A.; Sarah S. Stein and Leah R. Vande Berg. 2007. *Bad Girls: Cultural Politics and Media Representations of Transgressive Women*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Pääkkölä, Anna-Elena. 2016. *Sound Kinks: Sadoomasochistic Erotica in Audiovisual Music Performances*. Annales Universitatis Turkuensis B 422. PhD Dissertation. Turku: University of Turku.
- Pääkkölä, Anna-Elena. Forthcoming. 'Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda": Intersectional Feminist Fat Studies, Sexuality, and Empowerment'. In *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis*, edited by Lori Burns and Stan Hawkins. New York: Bloomsbury. <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>
- Rabin, Nathan. 2015. 'I'm Sorry for Coining the Phrase "Manic Pixie Dream Girl"'. *Salon.com*, July 15.  
[https://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im\\_sorry\\_for\\_coining\\_the\\_phrase\\_manic\\_pixie\\_dream\\_girl/](https://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im_sorry_for_coining_the_phrase_manic_pixie_dream_girl/)
- Rabin, Nathan. 2007. 'The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown'. *AVFilm*, July 27.  
<https://film.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595>
- Richardson, John. 2012. *An Eye for Music: Popular Music and The Audiovisual Surreal*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rogers, Holly. 2013. "'Betwixt and Between" Worlds: Spatial and Temporal Liminality in Video Art-Music'. In *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, edited by John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman, and Carol Vernallis, 525–542. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Rose, Tricia. 2009. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop – And Why It Matters*. New York: Civitas Books.
- Rountree, Kathryn. 2004. *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess: Feminist Ritual-Makers in New Zealand*. New York: Routledge.
- Sargisson, Lucy. 1996. *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*. New York: Routledge.
- Sells, Laura. 1995. "'Where Do the Mermaids Stand?'" Voice and Body in *The Little Mermaid*. In *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells, 175–192. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Smith, Candace. 2012. 'Neoliberalism and Individualism: Ego Leads to Interpersonal Violence?'. *Sociology Lens*, December 7. <https://www.sociologylens.net/topics/crime-and-deviance/neoliberalism-individualism-ego-violence/11193>
- Solomon, Claire. 2017. 'Anarcho-Feminist Melodrama and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (1929–2016)'. *Comparative Literature and Culture* 19 (1).
- Walker King, Debra. 2000. 'Introduction: Body Fictions'. In *Body Politics and the Fictional Double*, edited by Debra Walker-King, vii–xiv. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Warwick, Jacqueline. 2005 [2004]. "'He's Got The Power": The Politics of Production in Girl Group Music'. In *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity*, edited by Sheila Whiteley, Andy Bennett and Stan Hawkins, 191–200. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Warwick, Jacqueline, and Allison Adrian. 2016. 'Introduction'. In *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity*, edited by Jacqueline Warwick & Allison Adrian, 1–14. New York: Routledge.
- Wiseman, Eva. 2016. 'Regina Spektor: "The Only Reason I'm Jewish Is Antisemitism"'. *The Guardian*, November 13. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/nov/13/regina-spektor-the-only-reason-im-jewish-is-antisemitism>.