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Engendering Assemblages at Music Playschools for Babies

The studies of children tend to focus on the experiences and culture of toddlers and school aged children. The experiences and culture of babies are often excluded from the scope of the studies of children. The importance of this topic, however, is obvious: already from babyhood children are socialized into different cultures and their conventions.

The academic research's emphasis on older children is clearly connected with methodological issues. Our methodological tools, especially after the linguistic turn, are closely related to language. A researcher doing fieldwork with babies, for example, has to face the fact, that it is not possible to interview babies – they do not talk yet. This seems to be a banal example of the problems of fieldwork methodologies, but at the same time this fact has far-reaching epistemological effects. Since babies are not able to tell us of their experiences from music, the research on babies has to be done by adults and children's 'voices' are made to be heard by adults. These issues are significant in relation to the power relationship between children and adults.

In addition to the above remarks, children's agency is remarkably determined, enhanced and traced out by adults. Because of this, studying also adults besides children could be an emancipatory act from the point of view of children's agency.

This paper focuses on music of babies. My talk is connected with a larger research project, which I started in 2003 – I am writing a monograph on children's (from 0 to 6 years old) music in Finland. Methodologically, my study is based on fieldwork, and my aim is to get a versatile picture of children's everyday musical lives. Within this context, 'children's music' refers to children's musical experiences in its entirety, including the consumption of musical commodities intended for children, that is, cd's, cd roms, music videos, films, television and radio programmes.

In this paper, I analyse babies' gendered agency and subjectivity in the context of music playschool for babies. I am interested in how babies' agency and subjectivity are gendered at the music playschool lessons. In addition to this, my aim is to rethink and - conceptualise, what 'music' means in the context of music playschool for babies.

Since the 1980's, there has been a boom in the popularity of music playschools in Finland. More and more parents put their children in music playschools at younger and younger ages, even three months old at the earliest. The term 'music playschool' refers to general music education for children under seven years of age. Instruction is offered to small groups (usually 5-12 children) who are approximately the same age. Children under three years attend classes with a parent or another adult companion. The duration of weekly classes usually ranges from 30 to 90 minutes. (Hietaniemi 2005.) During the last couple of years even music playschool groups for pregnant mothers have appeared in several Finnish towns and cities.

The educational discourse in studying children's music is very hegemonic. Music is thought to be something, which is very beneficial to babies' and children's development. Within the educational discourse, children are treated as not-yet-subjects. The emphasis is on what they will be and not at the present moment. In order to avoid the educational discourse, my focus is on children's agency from the perspective of so called corporeal or material feminism. Corporeal or material feminism refers here to the writings of philosophers Rosi Braidotti, Moira Gatens, Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn.

Corporeal feminism focuses on issues of the body. According to Elisabeth Grosz (1995, 3), it is the specific configuration of bodies, what differentiates humans from each other, from other species, and other materialities. It is also the specific configuration of children's bodies, what differentiates children especially from adults, but also from other children. The philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 74) are, instead of focusing on the general question of

embodiment, interested in the capacities and potentials of the body to do things, to engage in practices. They are interested in what bodies can do. In Deleuze's and Guattari's work, subject and object are no longer understood as discrete entities or binary opposites (Grosz 1994, 167). At music playschool lessons, the bodies of the adults and the babies form assemblages together with other discourses and materialities -- mothers, fathers, children, their companions, teachers, educational discourses etc.

Among music scholars, there is a strong tendency to treat music as a text. Within the material feminist thinking, it is possible to refresh our understanding of what music is. Rather than thinking about music in terms of being, material feminist theorization allows us to conceptualize music in terms of becoming.

Music playschool lessons can be seen as assemblages. An assemblage is any number of "things" or pieces of "things" gathered into a single context. An assemblage lacks organization, and because of this, it can draw into its body any number of disparate elements. Also music can be treated as an assemblage, but its status as assemblage does not prevent it from containing assemblages within itself or entering into new assemblages with for example babies, parents, teachers etc. (See Heckman 2002.)

While doing fieldwork at music playschools for babies, the lessons appeared to be to a great extent women's spaces. Men were only very seldom present at the lessons. According to music playschool teacher Pauliina Jokinen's experiences, fathers and men are almost absent among the parents of the babies at music playschools lessons and at lessons for toddlers, out of ten parents only one is a father (7:91). Also music playschool teachers are almost without exception women in Finland. I would like to move forward from these ~~kind of~~ general descriptions of music playschool settings by the help of materialist feminist conceptualizations. In this paper, I am addressing the following question: How are the material practices at music playschools gendered and what does this mean in regard to children's agency and subjectivity at the lessons?

Babies as consuming subjects

In Finland, in the beginning of this century, there has been a boom of production of culture for babies. There are videos and DVDs, theatrical performances, film showings and music playschool groups for babies. This phenomenon is significant from the point of view of the definition of public/private definition. Traditionally, babies have been kept in the private realm, in homes, with women, usually their mothers, who are taking care of them. It is not irrelevant, that babies are brought into the public realm at the same time, when the role of the men as fathers and carers of babies is gradually changing. When men are allowed and impelled to spend more time with babies, babies are brought, in addition to the private realm, into the public realm, too.

Michel Foucault shows, in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), the way the jail constructs the prisoner. Disciplinary institutions, such as prisons, schools, universities and music playschools for babies are created in order to assign prisoners, schoolchildren, scholars and babies an identity. Music playschool groups assign babies an identity that results from a process which extracts, isolates and segregates them from the other groups, for example toddlers and schoolchildren. Since babies are assigned an identity, they can be treated as consuming subjects, to whom commodities can be directed.

Rosi Braidotti (2006, 142) has claimed, that advanced capitalism is a system that constructs and proliferates differences for the sake of commercialized profit. Several music playschools are organized by non-profit organisations, which are government-subsidized, such as conservatories and music schools. However, music playschool groups for babies are, because of their popularity, very valuable for these institutions' economic policy. Within these disciplinary practices, babies are constructed as consuming subjects.

The transition of babies into consuming subjects within the market economy indicates not only opportunities for adults for financial benefit. When babies are constructed as a new consumer group, they are enabled to new kinds of movements, encounters, pleasures and affects. Music playschool lessons for babies allow babies and adults to take pleasure in the form of musicking (Small 1998).

Gendered pairings of parents and babies

Parenthood is strongly gendered in the context of music playschool for babies. The adult companions of babies at the music playschool lessons are almost without exception female, the babies' mothers.

At the music playschool lessons for babies adults and babies are formed in pairs, which consist of a parent and a child, usually a mother and a baby. Music playschool teacher Pauliina Jokinen said in an interview, that the interaction between the adult and the child is the most important issue at music playschool lessons. According to her, the teacher's task is only to tip off. (7:90.) The bodies of a baby and an adult are bound up with each other and touching each other for the most of the time. At the music school, where I have done fieldwork, the teacher and mothers open the lesson by a song, which puts a question for each pair of a baby and adult at a time: "What shall we do, what shall we do, Maria and Kalle?" The mother answers the question by suggesting the babies for example to jump, and the song proceeds: "jumping, jumping, Maria and Kalle". The song confirms the relatedness of the bodies of the adults and the babies, and sets down the framework of the lesson.

After the song the teacher asks the mother: "How are things going?", and the mother answers the question. This moment was taken up a few times in the interviews with the mothers. One mother, Kristiina, told me about her father, who accompanied Kristiina's son Oliver at the music playschool lessons.

Kristiina: Well, the men... my father was at the lessons with Oliver very often. About his attitude, well, it was like... When Pauliina [the teacher] asked my father "How are things going?" in the beginning of the lesson, my fathers answers were quite weird, something like, well, "Yesterday I had a couple of glasses of red wine" (12:15.)

Music playschool teacher Pauliina Jokinen described the lessons, where there are men in attendance in the following way:

when men are in attendance, it is like, they hardly know, which clothes [of the children] belong to whom, it is very different, the atmosphere is different (192.)

Jokinen felt that men's attitude made the lessons more relaxed; men's attendance at the lessons is, according to her, desirable. In fact she wished for more fathers to attend the music playschool lessons with their babies.

However, the above-mentioned statements have in common the representation of men as self-centred in relation to the babies. The mothers tend to focus their activities at the lessons more on care and nurturing with relation to their babies.

Becomings at music playschool lessons

The concept of becoming within materialist feminist theorizing is especially interesting in the context of children. The concept of becoming might be of help in analysing the absence of men at the lessons for babies at music schools. This concept is adopted into corporeal feminism from Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987, 272):

A kind of order or apparent progression can be established for the segments of becoming in which we find ourselves; becoming-woman, becoming-child; becoming-animal, -vegetable, -mineral; becomings-molecular of all kinds, becomings-particles.

The concept of becoming allows us to think about the gendered power relationship between a child and an adult in fresh and fruitful ways. It transforms the subjectivities of an adult and a child from fixed entities, from being, into open and dynamic materialities. Becomings are “specific movements, specific forms of motion and rest, speed and slowness, points and flows of intensity” (Grosz 1994, 173).

Music playschool lessons for babies are, as I have mentioned earlier, to a great extent women’s spaces. In addition to this, they are babies’ spaces. This implicates, that the becomings in the music playschool setting are at least twofold, that is, becoming-woman and becoming-child. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 305), “[b]ecoming is never imitating”. A becoming does not involve approaching a certain endpoint or model; it is rather a kind or style of movement. Becoming-woman, for example, does not mean resembling a woman; it means functioning the way women function.

At the music playschool lessons for babies, the adults have to comply with co-operating with their babies and keep them amused. The activities and the movements of the adults at the lesson happen mostly in the terms with the child. This assumes becomings in the forms of becoming-child and becoming-woman.

Becomings are always minoritarian in the sense that they are always departures for the majority or the standard. In other words, the paradigm has been shifted from serial or structural resemblances and differences to a question of deviations from the standard. A becoming always deviates from the majority. When considering specifically human becomings, then, we can see why Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 291) say there is no such thing as a becoming-man, “because man is majoritarian par excellence, whereas becomings are minoritarian; all becoming is a becoming-minoritarian”. Since man is the primary standard, all becomings (even when they involve women) take off from the point of man (as standard) and furthermore becoming-woman has a privileged role as the primary becoming. (<http://www.duke.edu/~hardt/mp4.htm>.)

Music playschool lessons for babies open up possibilities for adults, mostly women and mothers, to enjoyable encounters with their babies. Eva said to me in an interview, that sometimes it is very enjoyable to be childish and to play. In addition to this, according to her, it is enjoyable to see the baby to enjoy.

Conclusion

Music allows babies and adults to move – to move together in ways, which are possible specifically at music playschool settings. In addition to this, it gives the adults and babies at music playschools the opportunity to do something together in an enjoyable way. In order to make these enjoyable encounterings and assemblages to happen, becomings – becoming woman and becoming-child -- are required. For the adults, musicking at music playschool lessons for babies involves and calls for a lot of caring and nurturing. In Finland, where women are still much more responsible for childcare in the families than men, these kinds of becomings seem to be more possible for women than for men.

When the bodies of the adults and the babies form assemblages together with other discourses and materialities, it is not possible to treat music as a text. Instead of this, music can be conceived of as doing, processes and becomings. The myth of autonomous music, which entails the distinction between the music “itself” and extra-musical phenomena, is deconstructed by these conceptualizations. The deconstruction of this binary opposition is part of the essence for feminist musicology. It allows musicologists to think of gender as a constituent strand of music “itself”. Within materialist feminist context it is possible to think about the gender in relation to babies in a entirely novel ways. Gender at music playschool for babies does not reside in babies themselves; it is not a property of individuals. Instead of this, a theorization of gender as becoming (see Linstead & Pullen 2006), is proposed.

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