

COMMUNICATOR BETWEEN WORLDS: BJÖRK REACHES BEYOND THE BINARIES

Edwin F. Faulhaber

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green  
State University in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2008

Committee:

Kimberly Coates, Advisor

Robert Sloane

## ABSTRACT

Kimberly Coates, Advisor

Icelandic pop star Björk has spent her career breaking down boundaries, blurring lines, and complicating binaries between perceived opposites. Examining a variety of both primary and secondary sources, this study looks at the ways that Björk challenges the binary constructions of “high” and “low” art, nature and technology, and feminism and traditional femininity, and also proposes that her uniquely postmodern approach to blurring boundaries can be a model for a better society in general. This study contends that Björk serves as a symbol of what might be possible if humans stopped constructing boundaries between everything from musical styles to national borders, and as a model for how people can focus on their commonalities while still respecting the freedom of individual expression. This is particularly important in the United States of America, a place where despite its infinite potential for cultural pluralism and collaboration, there are as many (or more) divisions between people based upon race, class, gender, and religion as anywhere else in the world.

Dedicated to Morgaine

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Dr. Kim Coates and Rob Sloane, for all of their suggestions and encouragement while I wrote this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Don McQuarie and Gloria Enriquez Pizana for their support and assistance, as well as a host of wonderful professors who laid the groundwork for this thesis by inspiring me along the way: Rob, Kim, Drs. Rebecca Mancuso, Maisha Wester, Donald Callen, Sridevi Menon, and Rob Buffington. Thank you to all of my friends and colleagues who have kept me sane (mostly) during the process. I would particularly like to thank Rob for his friendship, advice, and inspiration as my teacher, faculty partner, thesis reader, and friend during my time in Bowling Green.

This thesis would not exist had it not been for the love and support of my wife Evin and my mother Margo, who stuck by me and endured the stress of my odd research methods while watching my son, Miles, and daughter, Morgaine. Thank you so much! You have proven that all is indeed full of love.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Short Biography .....	6
CHAPTER ONE: BETWEEN “HIGH” AND “LOW” .....	23
“Indie Cred” vs. Mainstream “Sell-out”: The Fame Game.....	25
“Fuck Styles, Fuck Categories” .....	37
Building Bridges Between “Fine” and “Folk” .....	44
The “Populist Experimentalist” .....	51
CHAPTER TWO: BETWEEN NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY.....	60
Keep On Marching: How By Moving Forward We Go Back .....	66
Techno, Naturally: Responding to the Tyranny of the Guitar .....	72
Democratizing Sound: Responding to the Tyranny of Techno.....	80
Ego Trippin’: How We Forgot That <i>We</i> Are Nature.....	85
CHAPTER THREE: BETWEEN FEMININITIES .....	95
The “Exotic Elf Woman-Child”: Iceland and Björk’s Femininity .....	98
The “F” Word: Björk & Feminism .....	104
The Other “F” Word: Can a Fashionista Be a Feminist?.....	111
Big Time Sensuality: Defining Her Own Sexy.....	117
“Nana Na Nana”: The “Warrior of Love” .....	124
Unison: “One Plus One Equals Three” .....	133
CONCLUSION.....	143
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED.....	157

## INTRODUCTION

*Is she vegetable or mineral?*

—John S. Hall (*King Missile*)

*Let's unite tonight.*

—Björk (*"Unison"*)

A Björk is a Björk is a Björk. Like Gertrude Stein's famous line about a rose, it's really best to skip the adjectives and adverbs, the metaphors and similes, if you want to talk about Björk. Since the time Stein posited that "a rose is a rose is a rose," the phrase has often been read as a modernist rejection of the flowery descriptions of the Romantic era, and an attempt to free the word from its past connotations and symbols (Stein). However, the phrase also points to the postmodern conception of the ambiguity of meaning in general.

But just what is postmodernism? Though it is a contentious term, postmodernism is most often described as a response to the loss of faith in modernism's "grand narratives" of human progress through science and rationalism (Wheale 9). This is accomplished in art and literature through such methods as eclecticism (mixing of styles), parody, irony, simulacrum, and surrealism (Wheale 42-51). This breakdown sounds very simple, like there is an easy binary between modernist and postmodernist culture. In truth, the two are not as different as they seem. Take Stein's rose for example: though Stein is considered a modernist, her famous phrase also reflects postmodernity. For instance, can a rose be described as anything else other than simply a rose, considering the endless possible meanings of the word to different people in different situations? In other words, can we really count on descriptive language to explain something that is in essence subjective and thus defies categorization in the first place? The modernist

distrust of representation, ie “the rose is red,” is clearly taken to the next level by the postmodernist distrust of the word “rose” itself.

Similarly, attempting to fit Björk’s art and philosophy into any single category is as sticky as it is tricky. When one says “Björk,” one refers not to something singular, but to a host of multiplicities and ambiguities: singer, musician, composer, dancer, fashionista, artist, mother, actress, tastemaker, weirdo, celebrity, mystery, Viking, sex symbol, pixie, girl, woman, warrior, lover, pagan, mystic, technological innovator, feminist, and housewife, just to name a few. Her art has been described as everything from mainstream to underground, pop to avant-garde, electronic to organic, beautiful to abrasive, progressive to retrogressive, political to apathetic, cutesy to sexy, pugilistic to peacemaking, and often simply as strange, bizarre, or ridiculous. Thus, as with Stein’s “rose,” perhaps it *is* just easier to say “Björk.”

With an artist who symbolizes so many seemingly contrasting identities and styles, it is easy to see why music journalist Evelyn McDonnell claims that Björk is the “world’s first post-rock star” (McDonnell 46). The term “post-rock,” coined by music journalist Simon Reynolds to describe pop/rock acts who are influenced more by electronic styles, dance music, jazz, and classical music than older, blues based rock ’n’ roll, seems to also imply a certain postmodernity. One important facet of postmodernism is that it is seen “as blurring or destroying distinctions between established cultural hierarchies . . .” (Wheale 34). It does not seem accidental, then, that McDonnell also calls Björk’s music “sincere post-modern bricolage” (McDonnell 52). In this light, Björk could very well be the ultimate example of a postmodern figure. She has spent her career breaking down boundaries, blurring lines, and complicating binaries. She has soaked up many different influences from many different places, creating her own wild synthesis; in the

process, she has brought together concepts, styles, and identities that most people would see as polar opposites. This is what makes Björk “Björk.”

But why should this matter to someone uninterested in her music, music in general, in postmodernism, or in cultural analysis? I believe that Björk’s philosophy and approach to making music can be a model for a better society, and I believe that her recent work suggests that she might agree with me, as she continues to tackle broader and more humanitarian topics. Björk serves as a symbol of what might be possible if we stopped competing, stopped viewing the world in black and white, and stopped drawing lines in the sand. This is particularly important in the United States of America, a place with infinite potential to create something new from a multitude of different cultures and at the same time a place where people are as divided by race, class, gender, and religion as much or more than anywhere else in the world. The U.S. *needs* Björk.

What follows will be a textual analysis of the specific ways that make Björk’s approach to music (and life) so special: her refusal to conform to socially established boundaries and binaries, and her creation of a space where something new and wonderful can be created in their absence. In Chapter One, I will focus on her ability to transcend the binary of “high” and “low” art, and to blur the lines between “mainstream” and “underground.” In the field of music, one with so much potential for bringing people closer together, these divisive markers instead keep them apart. For instance, the traditional, modernist concept of “quality art” generally holds that “fine art” is preferable to “popular art” because what is popular is inevitably controlled, compromised, and homogenized as an economic product. Musically, scholars who hold this view prefer the virtuosic complexity and “difficult listening” symbolized by modern symphonic music and the avant-garde over more approachable and marketable genres such as rock ’n’ roll



or dance music. More recent work by other scholars has celebrated such popular music subcultures as punk or electronic dance music as populist political forces that represent a break from what proponents see as the snobbery of upper class fine art. Such theorists would agree with the traditional notion that there is an inferior “mainstream” popular culture that threatens the purity of “authentic” music via corporate domination and its insistence upon sales over content, but feel that it is the “underground” subculture, rather than the fine art world, that symbolizes truly “authentic” music. However, current scholarship, more postmodern in its scope, has pointed to the fact that such populist views of “underground” subcultures are just as divisive as the fine art world that they repudiate, and just as limiting as the “mainstream” which they define themselves against. Björk offers us a look at what happens in the rare instance that an artist refuses to see these boundaries between “high” and “low” or “mainstream” and “underground,” where music can be free of such rhetoric and thus highlight what varying musical styles and their listeners have in common rather than what they do not.

Chapter Two will focus on her unique way of meshing ideas of “nature” with “technology,” and how the two have a lot more in common than the binary rhetoric surrounding them would indicate. Whether it be the humanist notion that nature is to be dominated by humans, or the ecocentric idea that all technology is inherently destructive and unnatural, humans and their technologies are too often removed from the natural world to either justify unlimited use of natural resources or, conversely, to create a romantic and unrealistic conception of nature. Björk, in her combining of traditional “organic” instrumentation with electronic musical technology, her blurring of natural and technological imagery, and her pagan sense of the connection between spirituality and science, is a rare example of someone who truly believes that nature and technology are one in the same. As such, she is an antidote to the arrogance,

reductiveness, and shortsightedness of philosophies that place humans and their technology outside of nature.

Chapter Three examines Björk's relationship with feminism and traditional concepts of femininity, and how she has transcended the definitions and limitations of both, thus carving out her own unique "Björkish" femininity. As a woman artist in a patriarchal industry, she has been forced to take some position within the extremely complicated debate surrounding feminism and its many forms and differing approaches. One key debate here is between so-called second wave and third wave feminisms. While second wave feminists have championed the notion that women are much more than the feminine roles they have been assigned within a patriarchal society, some third wave feminists have recently posited that second wave feminists have repudiated feminine roles to the point of championing the masculine. These third wave feminists strongly believe in reclaiming traditional feminine roles as positive rather than imitating masculine roles. Second wave feminists have retaliated that such an approach is inherently apolitical and naïve about the oppression women face as a consequence of these traditional roles. For Björk, it is more important that women come together to struggle against patriarchy, rather than to battle amongst themselves over ideological concerns that inevitably divide them and hinder progress. She has forged a femininity outside the debate altogether, one that is at once masculine and feminine, sexual and asexual, girl and woman. She has been staunchly pro-woman while at the same time avoiding the feminist label, and in the process has questioned the binaries created by identity politics in the first place, which aligns her most closely with postfeminist ideals which challenge the notions of fixed sex and gender. She shows that radical feminism and "girlie" feminism do not have to be at odds, and that the woman who defines herself outside of this binary will in the end be a true feminist icon—an independent, strong,

woman warrior who champions the traditionally constructed feminine ideals of instinct, intuition, emotion, and love.

In conclusion, I will examine her new album, *Volta*, as a microcosmic symbol of how she blurs boundaries in all of the arenas previously discussed, and how Björk's philosophy and approach to music and life, when taken to a broader level, have the potential to save the world. While much of Björk's blurring of boundaries has been within the realm of art, on *Volta* and in recent interviews, she has addressed humanitarian and political topics with the same postmodern sensibility with which she approaches the other realms of her life. The postmodern ideal of destroying intellectual and cultural boundaries is thus brought to the next level—that of destroying national, political, economic, spiritual, and gender boundaries. In the end, Björk's example to us all is that by being open beyond boundaries, we too can be as complex as we are simple (as the word "Björk" implies) and rise above all of the categorization and binary thinking that continually keep us from realizing that, underneath, "a human is a human is a human."

### **Short Biography**

But for those uninitiated in this multifaceted word which represents one *very* multifaceted artist, some background is required first. It is important to know something about the life and career of Björk before unpacking what makes her so unique, what makes her "Björk" in all the word's multiplicities. Björk, for one, has a surname: she was born Björk Guðmundsdóttir on November 12, 1965 to mother Hildur Hauksdóttir and father Guðmundur Gunnarsson (her surname literally means "Guðmund's daughter"). Despite many remarks in the media to the contrary, Björk is not an elf, nor is she an "Eskimo." Her parents were of European descent, and her Inuit features come from an "occasionally recurring Inuit gene" from past encounters between Icelanders and Greenlanders (McDonnell 25). Contrary to rumors, she is not from outer

space: she grew up and still lives part time in Reykjavik, Iceland, a remote and interesting place on many levels, and (as we will see later) a key element in what makes Björk “Björk.”

Reykjavik is home to nearly half of Iceland’s 301,931 people, who together spend six months of the year in near constant daylight and the other six in near constant darkness. Iceland is a young country in more than one regard. As far as Western civilization goes, it was not “discovered” until Norwegians and Celts settled there in the late ninth and tenth centuries C.E., and did not become an independent nation until 1944, when Danish occupation was brought to an end. Geographically and geologically, the land is still in its infancy, being around fourteen million years old (Pytlík 2). This, along with its northern latitude, accounts for its barren landscapes of grinding glaciers, rolling green hills, cracking tundra, and bubbling lava and mud.

Björk not only grew up in a unique geographical area, but also in a unique home. Her parents split while she was still an infant, her mother a whimsical hippie and her father a by-the-book electrician. As it turns out, mom/dad would be the first binary that Björk would complicate in her life: while she lived mostly in a commune of adults with her mother and her stepfather, she spent a lot of time with her father and also with her grandparents, thus absorbing and integrating a variety of disparate lifestyles and tastes at a young age.

Chief among these disparate tastes was music. The commune was full of rock ‘n’ roll at all hours, both on the stereo and live (her stepfather was a rock guitarist), while her father and grandparents were more into jazz and musicals. Being exposed to so much music at such a young age, Björk became a natural musician and singer. She could sing the entire *Sound of Music* soundtrack by age three, and at an early age began formal training in music school (Gittins 67). She thus rounded out her domestic musical world of rock and jazz with the classical music she learned at school from the age of six until she was fourteen.

Despite the fact that she was not as interested in singing (her instruments of choice were piano and flute), it was apparent early that she was a gifted vocalist. Indeed, it was her voice that led to her first recordings at the tender age of eleven. Following a school recording of Björk's rendition of Tina Charles' "I Love to Love," her music instructor was so enthused with it that she sent a copy to Iceland's Radio One. The station loved it too, and with her stepfather's connections in the music business, Björk had her very first record deal with the Icelandic label Falkkin. In late 1977, she went into the studio with a group of working musicians and cut her first full album. Simply titled *Björk*, its cover was designed by her mother Hilda, and its content was mostly cover songs of Icelandic folk tunes, American disco numbers, and pop tunes, with a couple of originals. The album quickly went platinum in Iceland, selling over seven thousand copies and making Björk a child celebrity on the island.

Though this was certainly a solid start for a career in music, Björk, showing exceptional maturity for such a young girl, refused to do a follow-up album. She not only disliked the attention of being a child star, but she also found it degrading that Falkkin wanted her to sing kids' music, while she had always seen herself as a serious musician on par with adults. (For instance, the one Björk-written original on her 1977 debut, "Jóhannes Kjarval," was a flute piece dedicated to an Icelandic painter whom she admired [Pytlik 8].) She eventually grew bored with music school (playing "old music" all the time), and upon graduation at the age of fourteen, she left home and took a different musical route as the drummer for an all-girl punk group called Spit and Snot (Björk qtd. in *Inside Björk*). Showing the musical diversity of her background, she proceeded over the next two years to perform in a couple of very different bands: Exodus, a jazzy experimental group; and Jam 80, a quirky disco cover band. In 1981, Jam 80 began

writing their own punky pop songs, and changed their name to Tappi Tikarrass (in English, “cork the bitch’s ass”).

Though by most accounts a pretty lousy band, Tappi Tikarrass would become an important group for Björk in her life and music. As a member of Tappi, Björk became the poster child of the local documentary of the budding punk scene in Reykjavik, *Rokk I Reykjavik*. Her image appeared on all promotional posters for the film, the soundtrack cover, and the video cover as well. The increased exposure would prove to bring new musical opportunities as she quickly outgrew her bandmates musically. Tappi also put Björk in contact with other artists, such as the “Medusa clique,” a group of teenaged writers and philosophers which included Björk’s eventual lifetime songwriting partner, Sjón Sigurðsson, and her first love, Þór (Thor) Eldon.

In 1983, a “superband” of local Reykjavik musical talent formed out of the ashes of the declining punk scene. Called Kukl (“Sorcerer”), the band included Björk and Einar Örn on vocals, Siggi Baldursson on drums, Gudlaugur Ottarson on guitar, Birgir Mogenson on bass, and Einar Melax on keyboards. The experimental, serious, dark sound of Kukl attracted media attention, and Örn secured the band a deal with England’s Crass label, which supported the band on a couple of European tours and two albums.

In 1986, Kukl disbanded, though its members still performed and hung out together. Örn and Björk beau Eldon created a new organization, Smekkleysa (the Bad Taste collective) with a new, ironic mantra to promote all things of “questionable taste” (i.e. the “underground”) while fighting all tenets of “good taste” (i.e. the “mainstream”), and which still exists today as a non-profit record label (contemporary Icelandic groups Múm and Sigur Rós, for instance, released early work with Bad Taste). Björk and Ottarson recorded some music under the name the Elgar

Sisters, two tracks of which would later end up as Björk b-sides, and Kukl played a couple of “reunion shows” to finish off its three years together. The most famous of these shows was a televised performance in which Björk, now very pregnant with her and Eldon’s new baby, wore only a bra and a skirt and caused a scandal throughout Iceland’s conservative community. Their son Sindri was born in June 1986, and soon afterward, a new Bad Taste “house band” would form that would vault both young parents (and now husband and wife) into the international limelight.

The Sugarcubes were originally a joke, conceived as a way for Bad Taste to mock common pop music. The band included Kukl’s Örn and Björk on vocals, but the two were now singing more lyrics, and with more catchy hooks. The band also had Kukl’s drummer, Siggí Baldursson, Björk’s husband Eldon on guitar, as well as Bragi Olafsson on bass. Keyboards were originally played by Kukl’s Einar Melax. Despite the group’s comic and satirical stance towards pop music, as it turned out, the band began to write some very good pop songs, and became more of a “serious” group, with Örn beginning to shop some demos for a record deal in England.

Despite a divorce between Björk and Eldon, the Sugarcubes remained together and continued to write music in 1987, the year of the band’s big break. On August 22, their single “Birthday” was released to rave reviews in England, and the group signed a record deal with One Little Indian, an independent label based in London. Soon, the band would be signed to major label Elektra in the United States as well, and in 1988, its debut album *Life’s Too Good* would become an international hit, selling well over a million copies to date (Lester 25).

The success of the Sugarcubes proved fleeting as the 1980’s turned into the 1990’s. One of the biggest issues was tension in the band regarding the vocals. Despite seeing themselves as

a democratic group, Björk was the media darling and was treated as the band's leader by the press. Her Inuit looks, fiercely unique voice, stunning beauty, and youthful attitude quickly led the British media to exoticise her as some sort of “elf-pixie-eskimo-woman-child” pop wonder. Conversely, Örn's bizarre vocals were roundly criticized by the media, which combined with Björk's popularity, did not sit well with Örn or other members of the group. Then, the band's second album, 1989's *Here Today, Tomorrow Next Week!*, was widely panned and didn't sell well, with most of the media and many fans calling for Örn to be kicked out of the group to make way for Björk as the frontwoman. By 1990, it was clear that the band needed a break.

The break brought to light another key tension between Björk and the rest of the group: her musical diversity and refusal to see genre boundaries. During 1990, while Björk worked at a Reykjavik record store, she became more and more interested in the new electronic dance music coming out of England at the time, known interchangeably as techno, acid house, or rave music. That same year, she also joined Iceland's premier jazz trio, Trío Guðmundar Ingólfssonar, to perform and record a collection of Icelandic standards which was released under the title *Gling-Glo*. The album quickly went platinum in Iceland. Meanwhile, she began to work on new material which reflected her jazz work, classical upbringing, and especially, her increasing interest in electronic dance music. When all of the Sugarcubes except Baldursson expressed their distaste for electronic music, it became clear to Björk that she needed to look elsewhere for collaboration.

That “elsewhere” would be England itself. Due to the fact that she couldn't find any local techno or house producers, Björk went out on a limb and in 1990 placed a call to one of her favorite electronic groups in the UK, 808 State. Comprised of Graham Massey and Martin Price, the Manchester duo was one of the flagship groups in the electronic dance scene. Talking to



Massey on the phone, Björk did not introduce herself, but asked simply if they would be interested in collaborating with “an Icelandic singer” (Massey 11). Massey invited her to come to an 808 State show in England, and when he and Price realized who she was, they gladly accepted her demo and then offered her the chance to sing on a couple of tracks (“Ooops” and “Q-mart”) on their new album, *Ex:El*. Massey was so impressed with her singing that he began a long distance correspondence with Björk that would eventually lead to musical collaboration between the two on Björk solo material.

The year 1991 found the Sugarcubes back together to record a new album despite the rising tensions within the group. Björk was clearly outgrowing the band, and she and the producer for the session, American Paul Fox, began to discuss her ideas for a solo record. The Sugarcubes’ third album, 1992’s *Stick Around for Joy*, was actually met with a good reception from both fans and critics, but the writing for Björk was on the wall. Her increasing interest in electronic dance music, the popularity of a film that she starred in (1987’s *The Juniper Tree*), and her collaborations with 808 State symbolized the growing creative distance in the group and spread jealousy of Björk as her star continued to rise beyond the band. The final straw came when she performed live with 808 State in front of 10,000 fans at G-Mex Stadium in Manchester in 1991. Even though she was relatively unknown among the hardcore rave scene which comprised most of the crowd, most of her Sugarcube bandmates completely disapproved of the music as inauthentic, and saw her collaboration as an affront to the band. Björk was itching to quit, but agreed to stay on with the Sugarcubes for a three week opening slot for U2’s Zooropa tour in 1992. It was her last act of goodwill towards her bandmates, and after three grueling weeks of tension, she became a solo artist.

In 1993, Björk moved to London with her son Sindri in tow. They lived in a flat with house DJ Dom T, who Björk had met in LA while recording vocals with Paul Fox for *Stick Around for Joy*. The two had become increasingly romantically involved despite geographical separation, and so Björk's move to London was also a uniting of their relationship. London proved a fruitful environment for Björk's solo record to come to life. She not only wrote early versions of "Army of Me" and "The Modern Things" with Massey, but she also found herself in contact with connections she had made with Paul Fox. Fox was able to connect Björk with two key jazz musicians: former Frank Sinatra harpist Corky Hale and World Saxophone Quartet leader Oliver Lake, both of whom would appear on her forthcoming solo recording.

Still, the album was mostly in its idea phase until she met electronic dance producer Nellee Hooper. Introduced to her through Dom T, Hooper would become the producer for Björk's vision. The pair worked so well together that she would later describe this period as "a musical love affair between me and Nellee" (Björk qtd. in Gittins 39). Fox and Massey graciously stepped aside as Björk and Hooper crafted what would become in Europe one of the biggest albums of the early 1990's: *Debut*.

Release in late 1993 on One Little Indian (in the UK) and Elektra (in the U.S.), *Debut* had an immediate impact in Britain, Iceland, and mainland Europe. The record was a testament to Björk's and Hooper's wide musical palettes, mixing techno dance beats with jazz horn and classical string arrangements, Indian tabla, tympani drums, and generally bending or breaking every genre rule in the book. With singles charting as high as #17 in the UK, the album worked as a pop record and a dance club record, while also involving a disparate crew of musicians from outside both genres. While the record had less impact in the U.S., groundbreaking music videos by the likes of Michel Gondry helped quickly make her an MTV institution. By the end of 1994,

Björk had won Brit Awards for Best Newcomer and Best International Female, and had made a second film appearance, a cameo in Robert Altman's *Ready to Wear*. She had also become a household name internationally, with *Debut* peaking at #3 in the UK charts, and #61 in the *Billboard* charts in the U.S., as well as a fashion icon, her trademark floppy thrift store clothing and Princess Leia curls becoming the rage in both Europe and the U.S. (*Billboard.com*; "Björk Discography"; *UK Top 40* . . .).

After a world tour supporting *Debut*, Björk and Sindri settled in London permanently at her own residence. The touring having taken its toll on their relationship, Dom T and she had split in late 1994. Working with Nellee Hooper as a "safety net," Björk set to work on her sophomore effort, teaming up with electronic producers Massey, Howie B, Marius DeVries, and Tricky to complete 1995's *Post*. The album proved to be even more popular than *Debut*, while simultaneously blurring even more genre barriers and breaking newer experimental ground. She also began to take more and more of the producer role herself. In addition to her cast of electronic music co-producers, Björk worked on cuts for the album and its singles with classical artists such as Eumir Deodato, The Brodsky Quartet, and Evelyn Glennie. Jazz made an appearance as well, in the form of a cover of an old 1948 Betty Hutton show tune vehicle, entitled "It's Oh So Quiet." With its Broadway musical flare and accompanying video by Spike Jonze, it surprisingly became Björk's biggest hit to date, and opened up greater success and popularity for her in the U.S. than ever before.

By 1996, Björk had become a massive superstar, and unfortunately, she began to experience the dark sides of celebrity, as that year became one of the most stressful of her life. In February, exhausted from jet lag, constant public appearances, and touring, she attacked a TV news reporter in Bangkok Airport who had apparently refused to stop filming and asking her

questions. Though the reporter did not press charges, and Björk publicly apologized for the incident, video of the violent attack spread quickly among the tabloids, making Björk well-known for an unfortunate reason. Meanwhile, her love life had grown increasingly interesting to the media, as she had had a succession of celebrity boyfriends who tended to be viewed as “bad-boys” in the press. The year 1996 thus saw the paparazzi become an increasingly large part of her life, and resulted in a highly publicized account of a fist fight between ex-boyfriend Tricky and new boyfriend Goldie in a New York night club. The fight, waged right in front of Björk herself, became an additional embarrassment and stress, adding to an already decreasing private sphere. Unfortunately, things only grew worse by the end of the year.

In September 1996, right around the time that Goldie was breaking off the couple’s wedding engagement and relationship, a horrifying act of fan obsession and mental instability played out with Björk at its center. Miami twenty one year old Ricardo Lopez, obsessed with Björk (whom he had never met) and angry at her for dating Goldie, videotaped his slow descent into insanity over the course of 1996. Alone in his apartment, Lopez became increasingly delusional, and eventually began to devise a way to kill Björk by crafting an acid bomb that he placed inside a hollowed-out book. Video taping himself all the while, he slowly made the plan a reality, and on September 12, 1996, he mailed the deadly package to Björk’s home address in London. He then shot himself on tape. Luckily for Björk, the package was diverted to One Little Indian records with her mountains of other fanmail, where it sat for a few days unopened. Meanwhile, Miami police had discovered Lopez’s body and the video tape, and quickly notified the stunned record company of its contents.

After the Lopez incident and the heartbreaking dissolution of her relationship with Goldie, Björk had had enough with stardom and London. Strangely, she found her way out via

composing a stress-relieving flamenco song about the Lopez episode. When Björk told *Post* tour drummer Trevor Morais of the song and how she hoped to record it with a flamenco guitarist, it turned out that Morais happened to own a studio in Malaga, a coastal town in the south of Spain. Morais also knew a flamenco guitarist, Raimundo Amador, with whom she could record. She ended up not only recording that song, entitled “So Broken,” but decided to remain in Malaga to record her next album.

Described by Björk as a way of “going back to Iceland and what I’m all about,” *Homogenic* became her darkest and most interesting album yet (qtd. in Gittins 88). Released in fall 1997, it featured sweeping Deodato string arrangements performed by the Icelandic Octet, played over grinding electronic beats by Björk and producer Mark Bell (of electronica groundbreakers LFO) which were fashioned after the sounds of Iceland’s bubbling magma, whistling wind, and cracking earth. Though it was clearly her least radio-friendly album to date, it was huge in Europe, going to #4 in the UK. Meanwhile, building on the American success of her 1996 *Post* remix album, *Telegram*, *Homogenic* charted at #28 in the U.S., her best ever in the States.

In 1998 Björk returned home to Iceland, leaving London for good. At this point in her career, she had decided to remove herself from the pressures of the big city and of superstardom. In some ways, the increasingly avant-garde nature of her music over the course of her five year career made this transition easier, for if she lost some old fans with *Homogenic*, she had actually gained quite a few new ones as well, and had a sizeable cult following to support her economically. Björk was now equally revered in multiple musical circles, both in the media and among fans, including pop, electronic dance, and now the avant-garde and art music scenes. And though she denied any connection with the feminist movement, her lyrical championing of

the “feminine” and her vanguard role as a major female producer in electronic music positioned her, in some eyes, as a feminist icon. By the end of the 1990’s, then, Björk had clearly carved out a space in multiple spheres, and had gained enough respect to allow her to back off from the limelight and yet still be successful.

The limelight, however, ended up finding her again. In 1999, she was approached by Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier about doing the soundtrack for his new musical, as well as the possibility of playing the leading role in the film. Björk initially accepted the soundtrack offer but denied the acting role; eventually, von Trier convinced her to take that as well. Thus began a dramatic collaboration and battle between the two, resulting in *Dancer in the Dark* and its soundtrack, *Selmasongs*, in the year 2000. Despite the conflict between von Trier and Björk, and between Zentropa Films and Björk (resulting in her leaving the set and threatening to quit the project), the film was a critical success, and Björk herself was at the center of the praise. Not only did the film win the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival, but Björk took away the award for Best Actress at the festival as well. Additionally, she was nominated for two Golden Globes, one for Best Soundtrack and one for Best Actress, and was also nominated for an Oscar at the Academy Awards for Best Song. *Dancer in the Dark* had made Björk even more widely known than ever before, placing her in direct contact with the world of Hollywood and its fans, a world of many who had never heard of her or her music. Despite her absolute distaste for the whole experience (she vowed never to act again), and despite her uneasy partnership with the more traditional and staid Hollywood scene (she did not win a Golden Globe or an Oscar, and was roundly panned for her bizarre swan dress at the Awards Ceremony), it is not too far off to say that most Americans, regardless of their taste in music, can identify Björk as the “crazy girl in the swan dress” at the 2000 Academy Awards. Somehow, just as her music was becoming more

pronounced in its experimentalism, and as she had retreated from the public eye, Björk had become even more popular.

Her fifth studio album as a solo artist, 2001's *Vespertine* was a transition point from darkness to light for Björk. During the summer of 2000, while recording songs for the new record in New York City with harpist Zeena Parkins, she met performance artist Matthew Barney. The two quickly fell in love, and *Vespertine* is an ode to that love as well as a counterforce to the darkness of *Dancer* and von Trier. Recorded almost entirely on her laptop, *Vespertine* was celestial in its sound, a result of Björk's intention to make an album that would sound good through small and portable speakers, a "domestic" album that one could play at home. To achieve the effect, she included very specific sounds and timbres. For her rhythms, she used what she called "microbeats:" scratches, clicks, and beeps which took the place of drums and were most similar to the beats of the electronic genre known as glitch (Björk qtd. in *Inside Björk*). She then employed only strings, celesta, harp, choir, and music box as accompaniment. The result was a heavenly sounding record that was simultaneously easy to listen to and immensely challenging, thus winning over fans and critics alike from multiple musical circles.

Following a short 2001/2002 *Vespertine* tour, in which she limited her venues to theaters, churches, and opera houses, Björk took up permanent residence with Barney in New York, and the two gave birth to a baby girl, Ísadóra, on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2002. Björk's son Sindri decided to live in Reykjavik with his father, Þor Eldon, and Björk began a new life with a new family. Her time bonding with her infant, along with her increasing disgust at the George W. Bush administration's response to the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. (often referred to simply as "9/11"), led her to the idea to make an entirely vocal album as a symbol of a return

to humans' beginnings, a time before the complexities of modern life and religion. The result, in 2004, was *Medúlla*, one of her most critically praised albums of her career, and also her most experimental. Other than a bit of piano, the entire album is crafted from human voices, which, after being treated with heavy digital effects and creative production, are often hardly recognizable as such. *Medúlla* also cemented Björk as one of the most diverse musical forces in the industry—she worked with vocalists from worlds as seemingly disparate as rap and chorale music, and came up with a seamless product that redefined what the voice can do, all the while challenging notions of nature (voice) versus technology (electronics).

In 2006, Björk broke her personal rule never to act in a film again, though this particular film was special, as it was her partner Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint 9*. The experimental film showed only in art cinemas and has purposely never been released on DVD. As with *Dancer*, she both acted in the film as well as scored its music. The film was a typically bizarre Barney creation, taking place aboard an actual Japanese whaling ship, and featuring (literally) tons of Barney's favorite medium—petroleum jelly. For the soundtrack, Björk went in new directions, including working with brass instruments and Japanese Noh singers, further broadening her already diverse musical palette, and gaining further praise in the experimental art world.

In spring 2007, Björk released her most recent studio album, *Volta*. The album acted as a perfect microcosm, a metaphor of what has made Björk so unique throughout her career as a solo artist. There is the disregarding of genre boundaries, with collaborations spanning continents and musical styles. There is a strong pagan, Icelandic feel to the record and an almost tribal flavor mixed seamlessly with the most cutting edge of electronic music technology. There is the championing of the feminine despite the lack of any direct feminist agenda in its lyrics. And,



picking up where *Medúlla* left off (and taking it even further), there is a political intent to *Volta*, a call for a new society that nevertheless looks back to ancient times and to the body itself, specifically the female body. The conclusion of this thesis will go into greater detail about *Volta*, as well as take a broader look at how Björk's blurring of boundaries throughout her musical career, and specifically in her most recent work, provide an excellent model for bringing people together by challenging the perceived binaries that keep them apart.

With an overview of Björk's career now in mind, I hope that those who may have only known her before as the "crazy lady with the swan dress at the Oscars" will have a better context for understanding this thesis and its analysis of her postmodern sensibilities as they apply not only to her music, but to nature, technology, femininity, and most importantly, to humanity. I would also like to mention something about my own context, my methodology, in approaching this topic.

I have approached this thesis through the lens of textual analysis, studying Björk's music, visual imagery, her life, and her philosophy through her records, DVD's, books about her, and interviews conducted with her. I realize the limitations of such an approach: I have never actually talked with Björk, for instance, and therefore am drawing certain conclusions that she herself may disagree with or explain in a very different light than I have. Others might accuse me of taking academic theory and trying to cram Björk's career into its parameters. Aware of these potential pitfalls, and eager to avoid them, I was specific in my research method. My initial hypotheses about how Björk blurs boundaries came not from academic theory, but from my own longtime interest in her music. When it came time to begin research, I looked at Björk first and foremost, taking time to gather information about her outside of any academic theory. Though I never spoke with Björk herself, I had originally planned on trying. As it turns out, my

choice to begin research with Björk-centered texts proved to change my plans—after a few months, I realized how much she values her privacy and how often she is forced to compromise it, and therefore how much of a pest I’d have to be to get in contact with her at all. With ample quotes at my disposal from the texts, and the odds against any easy, non-intrusive contacting of Björk by me, a strict textual analysis made the most sense for this thesis.

Only when I felt that I had as sound of an idea as possible of *her* philosophy, and found that my hypotheses seemed to be supported by her own words, images, and music, did I consult any text not having to do with Björk specifically, and begin to create an academic framework for this argument. As a result, I believe that this textual analysis is truly about Björk, rather than about academic theory and how she fits within it. My intention has been, after all, to show that Björk is unique, and therefore cannot be captured within any single theoretical framework or strict ideological position. This is important to me, as academia itself is rife with binary thinking, artificial boundaries, contentious theories, etc., and I sincerely hope that this thesis will challenge those in the academy to rise above their differences, above the politics of identity, and above the defensive critical stances that sadly get in the way of real discourse and learning.

One last note on my approach: one drawback to a textual analysis of binary thinking is that I am forced to use the very binary terminology that I am questioning or refuting (mainstream, underground, nature, technology, etc.). While this may seem contradictory at times (how can nature and technology be the same thing if we can speak of them as different?), it is necessary for the purpose of communication. For example, I believe that it is not contradictory for one to describe a cave as “natural” and a sampler as “technological” as a means of communicating within a linguistic framework from which to tear down these distinctions. I am more interested, in the end, not in further specification of terms, but like Björk, in seeing beyond

specifications and distinctions that I believe, while useful, are also dangerous when they construct boundaries between people and concepts that have more in common than binary thinking would lead us to believe.

## CHAPTER ONE: BETWEEN “HIGH” AND “LOW”

Division, whether between individuals or groups, has been a part of every chapter of human history. Anxieties about people or ideologies that we do not understand, whether they be based on culture, race, class, sex, etc., have continually amplified (or even created) our differences, and thus have obscured the things we have in common. While in recent years these anxieties have been increasingly critiqued, specifically by civil rights leaders, feminists, and queer rights activists, they still exist in discourse in subtle ways. The world of art, and the industry that surrounds it, is a perfect example of a place where these anxieties, while certainly being questioned, are still very much a part of the discourse, and where boundaries and hierarchies between styles, approaches, genres, and categories are often accepted as absolute, even as they are contested.

Granted, these categories and genres often serve a useful purpose—they enable us to communicate about the art world, its aesthetics, and our own personal aesthetics surrounding works of art. But these distinctions become dangerous when what is aesthetically pleasing to us becomes a way of defining our aesthetics as inherently better than others’. This is a classic problem with some modernist thought—if we trust in the grand narrative that we as humans will become more perfect over time thanks to science and rational thought, it is also possible to view our own cultures as further along in that narrative than others, and to denigrate other modes of inquiry outside of Western science and philosophy. In the art world, this happens all too frequently, creating a binary between “good” art and “bad” art that artists and their followers use to define themselves against what they see as a threat to their own aesthetics.

The concepts of “high” and “low” art and the “mainstream” and “underground” spring from this well. These concepts are closely tied to the industry surrounding the art world. High

art is often defined as what theorist Pierre Bourdieu would call “art for art’s sake,” a “pure art” that is not driven by market forces, and which pursues the right “to define for itself the principles of its legitimacy,” while shunning fame and recognition (61). Low art, as the opposite, would then be associated with popular forms which are subservient “to the demands of the press” and which pursue “privileges and honours [sic]” from their peers and audiences (60). In the late twentieth century, i.e. the postmodern era, this binary has been complicated by the emergence of a second, overlapping binary between “mainstream” and “underground.” This newer dichotomy, which mirrors the “high/low” split, emerged strictly within the world of low art, or popular music. As with the defenders of high art, the underground art world praises the artist who works outside of market forces and does not desire fame. But where the high art world defines their aesthetics as strictly individualist and autonomous, the underground takes a populist approach to art (defined by Bourdieu as “social art”) (72). Its practitioners “condemn the ‘egotistical’ art of the supporters of ‘art for art’s sake’ and demand that [art] fulfill a social or political function” (Bourdieu 73). The underground also defines itself in the realm of popular art against its perceived other—the mainstream, which roughly fits the definition of low art in the high/low dichotomy. Mainstream artists are said to wholly embrace the world of commodified art, and are subservient to the demands of major corporate and media interests, what theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would call the “culture industry” (120, 121).

Björk affords us a unique opportunity to see what happens when these hierarchies, so very common in music, are ignored and complicated. By crossing lines of “authenticity,” by redefining pop music, by ignoring genre barriers, and by refusing categorization, she has successfully blurred the old distinctions between high and low art, and the new ones between

mainstream and underground. In the process, she has blurred distinctions between perceived cultural, racial, class-based, and sexual hierarchies as well.

**“Indie Cred” vs. Mainstream “Sell-out”: The Fame Game**

*Authenticity is to music what happy endings are to Hollywood cinema—the reassuring reward for suspending disbelief.*

—Sarah Thornton (26)

In the realm of popular music, much depends upon the perceived binary between the mainstream and the underground. These terms are most commonly used to distinguish the “authentic” from the “inauthentic,” and in popular music there has developed a basic legend surrounding this binary. The story goes that a style of music is developed in the underground, i.e. outside of commercial influence or intention, and that the artists who developed this style in this environment are authentic and “cool,” and part of a unique subculture in society. This authenticity can all change, however, when this new subcultural style becomes known to others outside of the subculture itself, i.e. by the mainstream, the masses. At this point, the story goes, the music becomes secondary to production and fame and therefore, the artist who becomes popular becomes inauthentic and “uncool,” a charlatan of what the subculture truly stands for.

While acknowledging that money and fame do often corrupt music and musicians, this binary construction of the cool underground and the uncool mainstream functions more often simply as a means of setting up boundaries between one group and the others that they define themselves against. As cultural theorist Sarah Thornton puts it, "Dichotomies like mainstream/subculture and commercial/alternative" are the "means by which many youth cultures imagine their social world, measure their cultural worth and claim their subcultural capital" (Thornton 96). This concept of *subcultural capital* is an extension of French scholar

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *cultural capital*, defined as "knowledge that is accumulated through upbringing and education which confers social status" (Thornton 10). For Bourdieu, this cultural capital seems to refer more to the knowledge required to be a part of the avant-garde or fine art world, while Thornton's notion of subcultural capital points to the similar function of gaining status, albeit in the world of the underground subculture. The underground thus, in a sense, positions itself as the high art of what the fine art world would label as the world of low art (popular art). Thornton notes that a key aspect of subcultural capital, which separates it from the cultural capital of the fine art world, is that it is inextricably linked with media representation as much as it is learned through upbringing and education (ibid. 13).

Subcultural capital is also linked with gender. Typically, the characteristics associated with the underground youth subculture are masculine stereotypes: action, rebellion, confrontation, rawness—the "hardcore." Meanwhile, those associated with the mainstream are commonly feminine: passivity, domesticity, conformity, decoration—the "softcore" (Hollows 163). An excellent example of this gendered terminology is the following excerpt from music journalist Chris Sharp, where he draws lines between what is authentic and inauthentic jungle (an electronic dance music genre):

While the major-label artists were busy using their samplers to simulate real musicians in an attempt to recreate the squelchy virtuosity of Lonnie Liston-Smith or Herbie Hancock, the underground producers busied themselves with the essence of the music—making the bass more physical and the drums more percussive, questing perpetually after the intensity and the galvanic buzz that only jungle at its finest was able to deliver. (Sharp 145, 146)

Sharp's use of words such as "physical," "buzz," and "percussive" to describe hardcore jungle makes what he considers mainstream jungle sound wimpy, fluffy, and insecure by comparison. This association with the underground and masculine stereotypes is particularly interesting when one considers the women who help make up these subcultures. Where do they fit in, and how?

Björk, in her youth, was a member of just such a subculture. In her case, she simply adopted the same masculine hardcore stance as her male peers. According to journalists Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, this is more common than not in the world of rock music subcultures, where women often find that the only model for rebellion is an in-your-face traditionally masculine identity (232-235). Björk, as a member of the Medusa clique, the Bad Taste collective, Tappi Tikarrass, and then Kukl, was deeply involved in an anarcho-punk subculture in Reykjavik that defiantly postured itself against the mainstream. Björk remembers that Kukl "was so hardcore that if someone came to us and asked for an autograph, we'd just tell them to fuck off and get a life" (qtd. in Pytlik 23).

While autographs and other trappings of celebrity are indeed shunned by underground bands, the ultimate symbol of a band "selling out" to the mainstream is to sign a major record deal. The fear for these bands (fairly well-founded, as has been shown time and again in rock history) is that getting involved with large corporations will force them to compromise their music. As a result, part of the underground philosophy is a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos that involves independent record labels as opposed to the large, corporate major labels. For Kukl, this meant signing with British punk label Crass. Similarly, Björk's next group, the Sugarcubes, though they were courted by major labels Warner and Polygram, instead chose to sign with British "indie" label One Little Indian.



This DIY ethos has its limitations, however. Due to lack of funds, the distribution and promotion at “indie” labels are often lacking the scope necessary to get a band “out there” to potential fans. This often forces independents to ally themselves with majors for distribution and promotion of their bands, thus compromising the DIY ethos of the underground (Negus 58). The Sugarcubes’ deal with One Little Indian was just such a situation—One Little Indian’s distribution company, London Records, was an affiliate of Polygram, a major label. The band then chose to “dance with the devil” of the majors even further in order to get distribution and promotion in the United States, where One Little Indian did not have solid contacts. While recording *Life’s Too Good*, the Sugarcubes were introduced to Elektra Records A&R person Howard Thompson. Sugarcubes biographer Árni Matthíasson makes what almost sounds like an apology concerning the band’s decision to sign with Elektra in America, showing the uncomfortable nature of a possible compromise of the underground independent ethos: “They felt that they could work with him, and they needed something in the U.S. At that time there weren’t many decent independent labels [in the U.S.] that you could actually trust to do things,” (qtd. in Pytlik 41). How underground were Björk and the Sugarcubes at that point? These compromises to the DIY ethos certainly aided in the band “blowing up” so quickly in 1987, but this popularity was still restricted to a college radio or “alternative” market. Had they “sold out” by signing with a major U.S. label despite still being limited to the alternative sector? Was the band against “blowing up,” and if so, why did they search for a record deal at all? It would seem that there are quite a few more gray areas here than the mainstream vs. underground binary allows for.

The success of *Debut* shows Björk’s complex relationship between being in the mainstream and the underground simultaneously. Working within the relatively new and

experimental genre of UK electronica and with up-and-coming producers such as Nellee Hooper, Björk's first album initially seemed to be squarely within the underground category. Then it "blew up," going to number three on the UK pop charts. How would the subculture respond? According to subcultural theorist Dick Hebdige, "The creation and diffusion of new styles is inextricably bound up with the process of production, publicity and packaging which must inevitably lead to the diffusion of the subculture's subversive power" (Hebdige 95). Despite its being on an independent label, *Debut*'s massive popularity in the UK and mainland Europe would seem to lead to such a "diffusion of subversive power" within her former anarcho-punk scene, as well as the UK techno/house subculture in which she had recently established herself. However, the question with Björk's music was whether or not it could legitimately be claimed by any subculture at all. Her wide musical palette and indifference to genre barriers, her history as an anarcho-punk, her popularity with the Sugarcubes, her association with key movers and shakers in the UK dance club scene, and her collaborations with classical and jazz musicians enabled her to straddle multiple musical cultures and therefore avoid the tag of "selling out." Musically, her work was so diverse that no subculture could claim it. As UK music journalist Paul Lester notes, "*Debut* . . . appealed to the trendy cognoscenti of London's nightlife as much as it did to . . . the millions of other people who bought it around the world" (Lester 49).

The fact that *Debut* sold millions of copies is important in analyzing the mainstream/underground binary that Björk has circumvented. Typically, another death knell for an underground band is high sales and/or high chart spots, as it implies popularity outside the underground community and thus threatens that community's subcultural capital (Thornton 100, 122, 123). While it is clear that Björk was outside of any one subculture, she also was deeply connected to the electronic underground. Going back to Hebdige's statement, one would assume

that her popularity should erode the music's subversive value, and by implication its quality, as Björk would be considered a watered down version of what was happening in the underground. In the fourteen years between *Debut* and *Volta*, Björk has sold fifteen million albums and earned twelve Grammy nominations (Björk, *Spinner*). Table 1 shows her substantial success on the charts in the UK and in the U.S.:

Table 1.

Björk Album Chart Peaks.

Album	UK chart peak	U.S. chart peak
<i>Debut</i>	#3	#61
<i>Post</i>	#2	#32
<i>Telegram</i>	#59	#66
<i>Homogenic</i>	#4	#28
<i>Selmasongs</i>	#34	#41
<i>Vespertine</i>	#8	#19
<i>Medúlla</i>	#9	#14
<i>Drawing Restraint 9</i>	#141	N/A
<i>Volta</i>	#7	#9

Sources: *Billboard.com*. 8 May 2008. <<http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/eseach/searchResult.jsp?exp=yandNtt=BjorkandNtk=Keywordandan=bbcomandnor=10andNtx=mode+matchallpartialandN=36+4294122492>>; "Björk Discography." *Wikipedia*. 2 May 2008. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bjork\\_discography](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bjork_discography)>; *UK Top 40 Hit Database*. 2008. EveryHit.com. <<http://www.everyhit.com/searchsec.php>>.

Has Björk's economic and mainstream success affected either her musical quality or its ability to subvert established societal boundaries, as Hebdige would assume? Not at all—in fact, her albums have become more political and more experimental over time, her status in underground communities has not diminished, and she has continued to receive rave reviews from critics of both independent and corporate media. This severely complicates the myth that subversive power and quality decrease with media exposure.

In fact, Thornton notes that media exposure is always present and important, even on the underground level. “Contrary to youth subcultural ideologies,” she writes, “‘subcultures’ do not germinate from a seed and grow by force of their own energy into mysterious ‘movements’ only to be belatedly digested by the media. Rather, media and other culture industries are there right from the start” (Thornton 117). This includes niche media, who define the “movement,” disseminate what is “hip,” and document negative attention from popular media. It also includes the popular media itself, whose possible positive coverage would be the undoing of the “movement’s” subcultural capital. Thus, both niche and popular media feed into the creation of the subculture from the start.

As for the subversive potential of underground music, Thornton goes on to point out that “we shouldn’t assume the presence of political subversion just because a youth culture got a negative response from some part of the media. For, rather than operating with any imperative to repress or oppress, media are motivated by corporate agendas like generating sensational copy to keep up high sales . . .” (Thornton 167). She thus calls into question the very idea that the subculture or underground is inherently subversive to begin with.

Björk, despite her connection with Reykjavik’s anarcho-punk underground community, refused to be bound by its aesthetic or political rules. As music journalist Alex Ross notes, she

“was skeptical of punk’s purist ideology: she immediately rebelled against the rebellion” (Ross). From *Debut* to *Volta*, she has broken from the masculine hardcore ethos as much as she has kept its fiercely independent spirit. An interview with the *New York Times* in 2007 demonstrates this quite well. Björk describes how having a seven minute song, “The Dull Flame of Desire,” on *Volta* was indeed against her punk upbringing but responds to her underground critics that that’s just “too bad”: “I just decided to sort of have an emotional chronology . . . because there’s a lot of improvisation and the phrases are going all over the place, and I wanted it to go to this place and that place and land there, and it just happened to take seven or something minutes” (qtd. in Pareles, “At Home Again . . .”). For Björk, the music has always been more important than pleasing any underground community’s ethos. But why does Björk even feel it necessary to respond to such questions?

The myth of a negative mainstream has been a powerful symbol in musical communities for a long, long time. It has been perpetuated not only by underground musicians and their fans, but also by academics: “Rather than making a clear comparison, weighing the social and economic factors, and confronting the ethical and political problems involved in celebrating the culture of one social group over another, [subcultural theorists] invoke the chimera of a negative mainstream” (Thornton 93). Is it really fair to make such qualitative judgments about music based on record sales, fame, and chart positions?

Obviously, it is not, but subcultural capital is a powerful part of status and identity, and even Björk, despite her breaking of many of the underground’s rules, still has felt enormous pressure to avoid being labeled a sell-out, especially early in her career. In 1994, about her sudden mainstream status and its strain on her indie and anarchist sensibilities, she admitted, “I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t give a shit, but it’s not at the top of my list of priorities” (Björk qtd.

in Lester 52). And yet, she also cringed when she heard that rock legends Eric Clapton and Elton John were fans of hers, and was quoted as saying, “I would commit suicide if I thought I was stuck in this [music industry] as an establishment figure” (Björk qtd. in Lester 58). Clearly, the pressure not to “sell out” to the mainstream is strong even for a boundary pusher like Björk, and results in some very negative comments. As Thornton points out, this is inherent in the underground philosophy because “the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn’t” (Thornton 105). Note Björk’s response to questions regarding having underground junglist Goldie open for her in 1995: “People ask me why I’m on the road with Goldie and I don’t understand the question. Am I supposed to be with the fucking Cranberries, or playing stadiums with REM? They don’t interest me” (qtd. in Gittins 86). Asked in 2008 if Grammy nominations mean anything to her, she responded, “I don’t know. I’m not going to pretend I don’t care about awards, but I don’t think I will ever win a Grammy. I’ve been nominated before, but I think they find me . . . I think it’s a really conservative, middle-of-the-road thing. I think they’re probably a little scared of me” (Björk, *Pitchfork*, 1 Feb. 2008).

To be fair, this very well might be a true assessment by Björk. While the mainstream certainly is a reductive myth, popular taste on the level of Hollywood or the corporate music industry is certainly going to be more “middle-of-the-road.” Such major players must attempt to appeal to the widest possible audience, and Björk has always complicated such a thing with her quirkiness and originality. For instance, despite CNN’s Paul Tatara’s 2000 claim that Björk’s performance in *Dancer in the Dark* “so fully deserves an Academy Award that they should mail it to her right now and skip the nominations,” Björk was not even nominated for Best Actress

and did not win for Best Song, the only category for which she was nominated (qtd. in Gittins 113).

Clearly, there is still something very uneasy in the relationship between Björk and the popular media, but with Björk, it is not so much because she identifies herself with an underground style, it is simply because she demands full artistic freedom over her music and thus does not make music that fits in with either the mainstream or underground stereotypes. Consider the fact that in 1994, Madonna asked Björk to co-produce and write the songs for her upcoming record. Björk agreed to write one song, but the single, “Bedtime Story,” was Madonna’s first to not place in the *Top 40* in many years (Pytlik 83). Despite Madonna’s name and voice, musically and lyrically the song did not work for her mainstream audience. It certainly is no surprise to note that Björk, despite all of her success, will never be as popular as someone like Madonna, but this seems more a result of her musical experimentalism than it is her politics or any quest for subversion.

Besides her music, what makes Björk different from famous celebrities and hardcore banner-wavers is that she does not act the part of either, despite being successful and respected in both worlds. For Hebdige, subcultures express “a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to a subordinate position and second-class lives” (132). Björk did not see such a distinction between someone “in power” like Madonna, and someone from the Bad Taste collective in Reykjavik. Her touring bands, for instance, have often been comprised of small-time underground musicians. Despite Björk’s considerable fame and wealth, all have said that she treats them as complete equals. Leila Arab, who played keyboards during the *Debut* tour, remembers that Björk “would travel with us, she’d be in the same hotels with us, you fuck up [and] it wouldn’t be a big deal. It *is* a big deal because it was her first solo tour. She could have

been really up her own ass about it all, but she was just incredibly gracious with a load of people she didn't know very well at all" (qtd. in Pytlik 76). In 2001, underground experimental electronic duo Matmos was invited by Björk to join her on the *Vespertine* tour. Matmos' Drew Daniel, at the time, said that "when she asked us to be in her band for this tour . . . I said, 'Oh, I don't think we're really professional enough to do this.' . . . I think Björk's always willing to walk up to the cliff, and that's really unique for someone in her position" (qtd. in Pytlik 164). Young filmmaker Ragnheidur Gestadóttir, in reflecting on her first film, a documentary of the making of Björk's *Medúlla* album, was equally complimentary of her:

Doing my first projects with someone so generous and courageous as she is has without a doubt inspired me to allow myself to be myself and do what I want. . . . It's also probably quite unusual to get as much freedom as I did. Nobody ever gave me any instruction or a frame to work within. She's very good at that, at giving people she works with their own space to be what they are. (qtd. in "Medúlla")

In none of these instances did Björk exhibit the class tension that Hebdige sees as inherent when underground meets mainstream. Thornton believes that he and other subcultural theorists have been too reductive in their analysis:

Each reference to the 'mainstream' in [Hebdige's book] *Subculture* points in a different direction, but if one added them up, the resultant group would be some version of the 'bourgeoisie' whose function within Hebdige's history is, of course, to be shocked. While this frame work compliments his repeated characterization of subcultural youth as 'predominately working class,' it hardly



does justice to the bulk of young people who are left out of the picture. (Thornton 93)

Björk is clearly not part of either side of the binary that Hebdige and others construct and which Thornton criticizes. She has made lots of money, has achieved widespread fame and recognition, but has maintained an independent edge to her music and has refused to let class get in the way of her relations with her fans and fellow musicians. In the end, Björk is simply not concerned with a binary that gets in the way of making original music. She *is* aware of how money and fame can help her music. For instance, “in an interview, Björk once said that the best thing about stardom is that if you want a sitar player brought over from India, you can. In order to get the sounds you want, you have to sell the album” (Gunnarsson). And yet, “with Björk, you honestly believe this is the only reason she has any interest in fame” (ibid.). Björk agrees, reflecting in 2007 that:

If you had a paper in front of you, and like, you could pick things, before birth, that you would like to try, before you fall down and die; and [celebrity] was one of the bubbles: A-list celebrity, try that out for a couple of months . . . you’d probably go: yes. . . . To be honest, I didn’t really like it. . . . It feels like a service job . . . it feels like you are somebody else’s servant. (Björk qtd. in Vernon)

Perhaps this distaste for fame is what has kept Björk’s music so fresh and uniquely “Björk” despite her success and celebrity status. Certainly, she completely dismantles Hebdige’s assumption that “as soon as the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available they become ‘frozen’” (96). Björk’s music has been anything but. As beatboxer (and Björk collaborator) Shlomo mentions, this puts her in a unique category: “Many artists at Björk’s level of fame often suffer from musical dictatorship

from their major label boss, and as a result the end product you hear is not their music at all. But not with Björk! She is very much in charge of the music you hear, and I am so envious of her position . . .” (qtd. in “Medúlla”).

The bottom line, the thing that Björk refuses to compromise, has nothing to do with being part of the mainstream or the underground; it is the ability to make the music that she loves. She refuses to get caught up in the debate of authenticity and qualitative judgment that is based in this reductive binary. As she said to journalist Liz Evans in 1994, “At the end of the day the only thing that can be right or wrong [about music] is the attitude. People can be on the biggest record label in the world and do ninety seven videos and you can still sense what they actually are like . . .” (Björk qtd. in Evans 83, 84).

### **“Fuck Styles, Fuck Categories”**

*I see boundaries between musical styles as being very arbitrary: it all goes onto CD and it all comes out of the speakers.*

—Moby (qtd. in Rubin 124)

Why the endless splitting and categorization of music that shares, at its core, the same sonic material? For one, as we have seen, subcultural capital bonds subcultures together against the perceived mainstream. Genre categorization is a key method for these subcultures to police the boundary between themselves and everyone on the outside. Saying that you are a part of the hardcore jungle scene, for instance, means that you understand that there is a genre called hardcore jungle and, more importantly, you know the rules about what *is* and is *not* hardcore jungle. A second reason for genre is that the music industry uses it as a marketing tool to locate its audience. As sociologist and musician Keith Negus has noted, genre is the very basis for nearly all marketing decisions at major record labels (Negus 6). As long as subcultures cluster

around musical genres, the companies will continue to have a nice and easy way to organize and promote their stable of talent. A third reason for the prevalence of genre is that the artists themselves often create music with a genre in mind already. The fact that they are producing their works for different functions (i.e. for dancing, for political purposes, for meditation, for background ambience, etc.) lends itself to the categorization of these varying functional works as inherently different. Finally, there is the simple fact that genre labels create a common language so that fans and critics can know that they are communicating about the same thing. These are all valid reasons for categorization, but when does this become counterproductive?

When Björk was once asked what would be her ideal band, she replied that they “would be an open-minded group that won’t let anything get in the way of creating something new. They could use saxophones, teaspoons, drum machines, or anything to communicate a whole concept, whether it be a house track, experimental music, pop, or just a nursery rhyme” (qtd. in Pytlik 7). As classical string arranger and Björk collaborator Eumir Deodato notes, her music reflects this open-mindedness: “If you look closely at her material and when you’ve seen how she works, you know she relates to all sorts of areas in music” (46). Deodato is not alone in his conclusion. Thomas Knak, alias electronic glitch artist Opiate, remembers that the first time he met Björk prior to collaborating with her on *Vespertine*, “We talked about everything from the early [electronic] composers from the ‘20’s up till now. It was a pretty wide range” (qtd. in Pytlik 156). Drew Daniel of Matmos was also impressed by her musical knowledge: “We were hanging out with her in L.A., in her hotel room and she started to DJ for us on her little stereo, playing us Cylob, Tomita, Opiate, Ensemble, Arovane, and Mortiis one after the other, very excitedly. However glamorous she might be, she’s also a big music geek, for sure” (qtd. in Pytlik 157). Her original electronic music collaborator, Graham Massey, said that one big thing

that he and Björk had in common was their curiosity about different musical styles: “We’re both like archaeologists in music. We get interested in certain areas and follow that path to its sources” (12). (Björk’s and Massey’s mix tape trading was later immortalized by Björk in the song “Headphones,” dedicated to him.)

The fact that so many of her peers have taken note of her open-minded curiosity about music of all genres brings up an important point: Björk is not the norm. The truth is that the proliferation of genre categorization, though it has its uses, has actually been quite divisive. To people like music scholar Susan McClary, many genres that are seen as having nothing in common actually come from the same family tree. In American popular music, for instance, African and European musics begat the blues, which begat jazz, which begat jump, which begat r&b, which begat rock ’n’ roll, etc. McClary goes even further to point out that most twentieth century music, regardless of genre, shares the same basic attributes of repetition and rhythm and that “the structures of repetition that characterize so much of our music testify to the complex, unpredictable history of our century. . . . It owes its emergence to countless moments of creativity, accidents of reception, strange correspondences between distant sensibilities, contributions from long-ignored minorities, and much more” (McClary 296).

In other words, music has actually brought people together, while genre categories, and the inherent way that the music business and subcultures utilize them, have separated people and obscured the commonalities inherent in much of the music they listen to. McClary notes that this phenomenon even operates in a physical sense: “At my local record store, you must descend two full flights of stairs from the bins containing CD’s by Terry Riley to find those featuring Ice Cube. This spatial separation prevents any accidental contamination of one clientele with the unintelligible noises of another. . . . Yet the genres often sound astonishingly similar” (291).

For Björk, Massey, Knak, et al, this genrefication gets in the way not only of people coming together, but also the possibility of new and original music being made. They would surely agree with music theorist Ola Stockfelt that “the same listeners have the competence to use the same type of music, even the same piece of music, in a variety of different ways in different situations” (Stockfelt 89). Why then allow genre rules to limit how one is to compose a piece of music? Massey remembers that in his earliest collaboration with Björk for 808 State’s *Ex:El* album, “The thing that came across was that she was quite brave in experimenting in that situation. We were pretty much a techno band, and vocals weren’t a thing that we had in techno at that point. There was no blueprint for that . . . there wasn’t too much [vocals in dance music] around other than the sort of American r&b style” (qtd. in Pytlik 53). Björk particularly impressed Massey with her jazz scatting, not only because it showed that she was into a lot more than simply pop or techno, but because it was the perfect choice for the music. Where most pop singers would have tried to force pop lyrics and structure, Björk’s wide musical palette allowed her to work within the more open structure that Massey was looking for (Pytlik 53). Similarly, it was producer Nellee Hooper’s willingness to transcend genre that originally drew Björk to him, and thus led to their collaboration on *Debut* and *Post*: “[Nellee] turned out to be this really exciting, open-minded guy who was on exactly the same trip as I was. Fuck styles, fuck categories—take risks, try anything” (Björk qtd. in Pytlik 67).

Not all people are so comfortable with this open-minded approach to genre. Simon Reynolds warns that “the dissolution of the boundaries between genres tends to erode precisely what makes them distinct and distinctive,” and it “disables the very functionalist elements that make specific styles *work* for specific audiences” (372). However, Reynold’s criticism of illbient artist DJ Spooky is telling about what really matters to him when genre boundaries are

challenged: subcultural capital. Spooky, who is known for his penchant for crossing stylistic boundaries, is taken to task by Reynolds for his "cultural nomadism, a reluctance to be shackled by roots, a commitment to not being committed" (371). Reynolds goes on to complain that "the style-hopping freestyle menu attracts a rather uncommitted consumer: the chin-scratching connoisseur who's more likely to stand at the back head-nodding than dance" (373). For Reynolds, then, it seems that a commitment to a subculture, its music, and its genre rules and functionality are more important than branching out and making new and unique music that disregards those boundaries. Subcultural capital outweighs the music itself.

When purists draw these sorts of lines between what constitutes proper music, proper style, and proper modes of listening, the end result is a lost chance to truly bring people together. Ironically, it also contradicts the fact that most subcultures see themselves as outcasts. As Bourdieu points out, "The act of giving cultural value to particular texts or objects requires the exercise of *aesthetic judgement*" from those "seeking expression for their *status* and fulfillment through cultural competence" (qtd. in Wheale 35, emphasis added). The result of this status seeking and aesthetic judgment is that subcultures, whether or not they have been made outcasts or not, actually end up being exclusive themselves by policing genre boundaries and rules. Journalist Evelyn McDonnell adds that music writers like herself are complicit in this divisiveness: "We think this [genrefication] will help people understand the mysterious appeal of music. We're often right. But sometimes we forget that people want to appreciate, not destroy, the mystery. Sometimes we replace description with conscription, variations with labels, people with stereotypes" (7, 8). Björk, as an Icelander with Inuit features, agrees. "I have seen my records in the 'world' section because I'm from Iceland," she remarks. "'World music,'

what is that? Everything except the US and Britain? The majority of the planet but kinda second class?” (Björk, *Stylus*).

For Björk, such genre branding is like a colonialism of sorts. Philosopher and cultural theorist Lambert Zuidervaart agrees, noting that “if artists do not need to insist on the uniqueness of their own cultural identity, then opportunities can surface to align artistic efforts with a more positive vision of freedom” (36). Freedom to compose the music she wants is all-important to Björk: “I want new things every day. . . . One month I’m playing jazz with a lot of people, six months later I’m working alone with computers and synthesizers, and then I’m a vocalist in a band . . .” (qtd. in Evans 89). *New Yorker* journalist Alex Ross witnessed firsthand how important this freedom from genre is to Björk’s creative process. In the studio with her and engineer Mark “Spike” Stent during a 2004 mixing session for *Medúlla*, he watched her attempt to get Stent to understand what sound she was looking for: she played him a clip of pop idol Justin Timberlake directly followed by a clip of German avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. “It’s very simple,” she prodded him. “A little Justin, a little Karlheinz. But not world music. And not pop, and not avant-garde, and not classical, and not church music. Don’t you see?” (Björk qtd. in Ross). Often, Björk will not bring genre language into the debate at all, instead opting for emotive language that allows her collaborators the same freedom from genre constraints that she insists for herself. On *Post*’s “I Miss You,” for instance, Björk told producer Howie B that she wanted “an energetic song, a physical song. . . . I knew he would be completely free, and I wouldn’t be nailing him down by saying that” (Björk and Sigurðsson 31).

It is this freedom to express themselves fully that has drawn many of Björk’s collaborators to her, and it is Björk’s insistence on working outside of genre categories that has enabled her to work with musicians and artists across the widest of spectrums. Says hip-hop

producer RZA, a 1997 collaborator, “A lot of people, they scared to be around us sometimes, but Björk just runs around going, ‘Ark, ark, ark!’ It’s like we from the same mother fuckin’ cusp” (qtd. in McDonnell 34). Indeed, Björk has seemingly worked so easily and productively with so many different types of musicians from so many different parts of the world, and has produced such cohesive music doing so, that she is a walking billboard for McClary’s insistence that musical genres have more in common than people think.

Björk’s live groups provide an excellent example of how she brings musicians together. For the 1993-1994 *Debut* tour, her lineup featured Indian Talvin Singh on tablas and percussion, Brit Guy Sigsworth on keys and programming, Iranian Leila Arab on keys, Brit Dan Lipman on sax, flute, and other instruments, Caribbean born Ike Leo on bass, and Turkish drummer Tansay Omar. For a 1994 *MTV Unplugged* performance, she augmented that group with avant-jazz saxophonist Oliver Lake, harpist Corky Hale, experimental percussionist Evelyn Glennie, and the South Bank Gamelan Orchestra. “When I saw how she put that show together . . . she surrounded those same tunes in very different ways and it was then I really realized how talented and creative she is as an artist,” recalls saxophone legend Lake (qtd. in Pytlik 85). For her lengthy touring of *Post*, she stripped the band down and moved it in more of a purely electronic direction, utilizing electronica programmers Ed Handley and Andy Turner of Plaid and moving Arab from keys to on-stage mixing. She then augmented her techno elements with the surprising addition of Japanese accordionist Yasuhiro “Coba” Kobayashi, Sigsworth on organ, and live drummer Trevor Morais. Later tours combined classical string players and brass bands with electronic knob-twiddlers and laptop users.

By transcending genre boundaries, Björk has done what scholars like McClary have longed for—she has proven that music has the potential to bring people from a wide cultural and



geographical spectrum together. As Ross marvels, “What’s most precious in her work is the glimpse that it affords, in flashing moments, of a future world in which the ideologies, teleologies, style wars, and subdivisions that have so defined music in the past hundred years slip away. . . . So far, though, this utopia has only one inhabitant” (Ross). For Björk, it is perhaps as simple as the need to remain free rather than any conscious effort towards such a utopia:

I hate it when people try to categorize my music. . . . It irritates me when people try to separate dance music from pop music. Like, dance music *has* to be brainless and simple while “serious” pop music has to be difficult and lyrically orientated. I’ve always felt, even before I made my own music, that *everything* should be possible, all combinations. . . . You know what my ultimate goal is? That people categorize my music as “Björk Music.” (qtd. in Lester 49)

### **Building Bridges Between “Fine” and “Folk”**

*There is little difference between Beethoven's attempts to épater le bourgeois with sforzando effects and that of the modern teen-ager with his motorcycle.*

—R. Murray Schafer (35)

*A Björk song can stand next to a Schubert song. For me there’s no difference, absolutely none.*

—Paul Cassidy (53)

What is culture? The word is often used but rarely defined—it largely depends upon who you ask. For instance, in his 1882 work *Culture and Anarchy*, British poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold defined culture as “the best which has been thought or said in the world” (Arnold). A highly subjective definition, it nevertheless points to the very real fact that for many, culture is not simply what we all do, it is “the best.” But what is “the best?” In the early

twentieth century, British literary critic F.R. Leavis felt that he at least knew what was *not* the best: the culture of “mass civilization.” Leavis made the argument that there were two types of culture—“minority culture,” or “high culture;” and “mass civilization,” or “low culture” (Leavis). Clearly, this had a strong class, race, and gender bias, in that those purveyors and experts of high culture were the educated, wealthy, white male minority. Arnold’s “best” and Leavis’ “minority” were essentially hegemonic, with a small group of elite keeping the best safe against an onslaught of degraded masses with their inferior low culture.

Another view of culture, held by German “Frankfurt School” scholars Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, was similar in that there was definitely a high culture being threatened by a low culture, but for Horkheimer and Adorno the focus seemed to be more on saving the masses from a capitalist “culture industry” that was out to brainwash them. For Horkheimer and Adorno, in the culture industry (i.e. popular culture), “amusement itself becomes an ideal, taking the place of the higher things of which it completely deprives the masses” (143). In the 1950’s, British cultural scholar Richard Hoggart spoke of an “authentic” working class culture, one that did have value, but which was constantly being threatened by “shiny packets” of popular culture (Hoggart).

Hoggart’s colleague Raymond Williams then went further, identifying that culture was not simply “the best” of a society, but *all* which that society produces, and that culture could also mean simply a way of life, not just art or literature, but everyday activities of survival. This more ethnographical approach to culture created an interest in studying culture from the “bottom up” rather than the “top down.” It is interesting to note that despite the fact that this approach validated the study of popular culture, the popular was still considered on the “bottom,” while

there was also some sort of “top” that could still be loosely defined as “art for art’s sake” rather than commodified art.

This distinction, whether one calls it high versus low, fine art versus popular art, or top versus bottom, is without a doubt still in the public mind, despite the broadened definition of culture by Williams and the surge of interest in the study of popular culture. When one says “fine art” in Western society, it usually refers to a traditionally Western European form such as classical symphonic music, opera, Renaissance paintings, Greek sculpture, etc. There is an implied virtuosity at play here, an elevated form that must be studied and mastered. “Folk” or “pop” art more often refers to the art of the “people,” and usually it is to be consumed, bought, or sold for amusement and escapist purposes. Virtuosity is not as important—what matters is the functionalism of the art and that “anybody” can do it.

In the world of music, this distinction between fine art and popular art is strikingly clear, though it has tended to change over time. Classical symphonic music, opera, and chamber music have long been the bastions of the “fine.” Jazz, once considered by the likes of Adorno and Horkheimer as trashy brain candy, has recently made the transition to fine art. Rock music, rhythm and blues, and all of the derivative styles of these forms have not. One need only look at the course of study offered in any university music school to realize that classical music and jazz are taken more “seriously,” while other musical forms are left for ethnomusicology, media studies, or popular culture studies.

While there has been an attempt to wed fine art and popular music, it has not really been accepted as valid by either side of the debate. Art rock groups such as Emerson, Lake, and Palmer or Yes, and jazz fusion groups such as Weather Report or The Mahavishnu Orchestra, have often been considered too haughty by rock fans and too amateur by fine art connoisseurs.

Both sides often see these fusion acts as inauthentic, as sully the essences of both fine art and popular art. Music critics on both sides of the binary have, by and large, not been kind to those who wish to ignore the fine/pop distinction.

In the case of popular music, many scholars, critics, artists, and fans have embraced the notion of this binary and have celebrated what they see as popular music's populist and working class roots and lack of pretension. Hebdige offers a succinct version of this view when he states that "'garage bands' could dispense with musical pretensions and substitute . . . 'passion' for 'technique,' the language of the common man for the arcane posturings of the existing elite, the now familiar armory of frontal attacks for the bourgeois notion of entertainment or the classical concept of 'high art'" (110). For Hebdige and others who celebrate this punk and garage band ethos, art rock is a stain best forgotten, and fine art such as classical music is best left to the conservatories.

As with the previous discussion of genre barriers within popular music, Björk once again refuses to acknowledge this binary opposition between fine and pop art. Going back to the idea of Björk as a postmodern figure who can bring seemingly disparate worlds together, cultural scholar Nigel Wheale notes that "one of the ways that postmodern art removes cultural barriers is by introducing themes and images from mass/popular/consumer culture into the prestige forms of high culture, such as literature and the fine arts" (Wheale 34). Björk has taken this idea a step further by also bringing what is considered fine art into popular music, and she has done so in a seamless fashion that has eluded the criticism of such attempts in the past.

One key aspect of Björk's ability to successfully wed fine art and popular music is that she does not have any pretensions about her classical music background. For her, music is best engaged in on an emotional level, and while many critics have alleged that there is a lack of

emotion in classical music, Björk disagrees. She posits that this is perhaps because she started music school at a very young age, and that classical training “is great to get inside you when you are that young. . . . You’re reacting to it completely intuitively on an emotional level” (qtd. in *Inside Björk*). Björk herself is definitely critical of the rigidity of classical training and its insistence on memorizing a canon of works, but unlike other critics from the pop world, she also sees that the same things have been happening in popular music: “It’s weird the way they teach music in schools like Julliard. . . . I know someone who graduated at age twenty as a classical composer, playing music the way they did a hundred years ago or more. . . . But now that rock is turning fifty, it’s become in a way classical in itself” (Björk qtd. in Gunnarsson).

It is this ability to see music outside of these high and low distinctions that has made it natural for Björk to integrate fine art and pop music. She notes that she began to do this at an early age due to the influence of being in multiple environments with differing musical sensibilities. She often found herself trying to open the minds of each:

My parents listened to a lot of Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, thinking that was the real deal and the rest was crap. And at the classical music school, they thought [classical] was great and the rest was crap. And going to my grandparents, and them thinking [jazz] was great and the rest was crap. And me coming in like a prankster . . . playing Hendrix for my grandparents or Ella Fitzgerald for the classical people. (Björk qtd. in McDonnell 46)

For Björk, it has always seemed natural to bring these worlds together in her music. “I think you sort of look back on all the things that influenced you and you actually realize that if you like it or not, there have been things that have influenced you and you can’t ignore them” (qtd. in *Inside Björk*).

Right from the beginning of her solo career, others noticed Björk's penchant for blurring the lines between fine art and pop. When she first met Massey and Price of 808 State, Björk surprised them by handing them a demo of early instrumental versions of "Aeroplane" and "The Anchor Song" that were done by Icelandic music students on trumpet, trombone, and two saxophones (Massey 11; Björk and Sigurðsson 28). Sugarcubes producer Paul Fox recalls that Björk stuck out to him right away, noting that "there's not that many people around who like the Art Ensemble of Chicago. She was such a big fan of that music and she just thought they were so brilliant" (qtd. in Pytlik 60). Saxophonist Lake recalls that "she was a very different stylist and that was very interesting to me. That she had even thought of having the World Saxophone Quartet on her CD and had the following that she has for a pop singer—that automatically made her different from everybody else" (qtd. in Pytlik 66).

Many of Björk's other collaborators from the fine art world have been as surprised as Lake was, and as impressed. The Brodsky Quartet's Paul Cassidy raved, "It was exhilarating working with her. She's got a fantastic vocal technique. She . . . put in nuances that we classical musicians think are reserved for us" (53). Classical composer Nico Muhly recalls, "When I first heard *Vespertine*, it completely changed the way I see solo voices or instruments interacting with an ensemble—I was obsessed with the fluidity of the voice versus the intricate textures in the background" (Muhly). Music journalist Ross, who has written extensively on classical music, was amazed by Björk's voice, saying "Like the greatest opera singers, Björk combines precision of pitch with intensity of emotion, and any diva will tell you how hard it is to master one without sacrificing the other" (Ross). Harpist Zeena Parkins felt that Björk's equal footing in both fine art music and popular forms was a great asset for her because "often people who have skills are not so connected to that intuitive process" (qtd. in McDonnell 34).

Björk has not only brought pop to the classically trained, she has brought classical music and jazz into the pop world, something that many art rock and jazz fusions bands have not been able to pull off with as much success. For the *Homogenic* tour, she brought together the Icelandic String Octet and programmer Mark Bell; for the *Vespertine* tour, her band consisted of a full orchestra (conducted by Simon Lee), avant-garde harpist Zeena Parkins, electronica duo Matmos, and an amateur choir of Inuit women from Greenland, whom she collected by placing an ad in grocery stores while on vacation there. With *Selmasongs*, she wrote an album of jazzy showtune musicals that included Bell's electronic beats and Radiohead singer Thom Yorke's voice. "It's Oh So Quiet" is one of very few 1940's jazz standards to ever have a video with heavy rotation on MTV.

Of course, most musicians are not as comfortable stepping back and forth between the conservatory and the pop stage, which means that Björk has to be able to communicate with all of them in a musical language that they can understand. Fortunately, thanks to her appreciation of both worlds, this is something that she finds easy to do. As she explained to avant-garde pianist Meredith Monk in a 2004 interview, "With the musicians I work with, I've just given them whatever they're comfortable with. If it's a classically trained person, I'll write out the notes. If it's . . . electronic beat makers, they are obviously people who are not classically trained, so I've always been comfortable with working in whatever language they want to work in" (Monk and Björk).

There are times, though, when the meshing of fine art and pop makes for a funny pair, acting as a reminder of how unique Björk's approach is in a field so often separated by the unfortunate wall between high and low art. During the making of *Vespertine* and its supporting tour, for instance, Björk laughs that "I'd be standing in front of an orchestra asking if they could

play more rudely, or make section seven sound more like blueberries, please” (qtd. in Sandall 1). Matmos’ Martin Schmidt, meanwhile, was not initially so sure about the whole experiment: “This orchestra has about sixty lifelong trained classical musicians in it, and man, I barely know how to play guitar—barely. It’s kind of a thing where I’m going to wake up in my underwear with sixty thousand people staring at me, pointing and laughing” (qtd. in Pytlik 165). One can only imagine what it must have been like for the Inuit women who answered that ad in the grocery store...

### **The “Populist Experimentalist”**

*I’m definitely not your natural cheerleader. I’m more the eccentric in the back.  
And I feel comfortable there.*

—Björk (qtd. in McDonnell 93)

*Björk doesn’t stay in the back. She puts her eccentric self front and center.*

—Evelyn McDonnell (93)

What is perhaps the most amazing thing about Björk’s career is that despite her complete disregard for boundaries between mainstream and underground, between genres, and between concepts of high and low art, she has been remarkably successful. As we have seen, these binaries have a tremendous effect on every level of the musical process: from the artist, to the industry, to the media, to the audience, these concepts are often taken as absolute truths. As a result, one would expect a hard route for those who wish to point out the falsity of these axioms. For while violinist Paul Cassidy might be excited that Björk has taken “pop music into a whole new dimension,” not everyone is as open-minded about artists experimenting with established forms (Cassidy 53).



A very good example of an alternate response to Cassidy's is the reaction towards the genre of drill 'n' bass, an offshoot of jungle in which the beats often sound like abrasive machine-like clicks and whirls, and the breaks are so intricate that they are not really danceable (nor are they made for that purpose). Simon Reynolds, ever the "funktionalist" [sic] when it comes to beats, claims that drill 'n' bass artists "have ignored the feeling [jungle] induces and the subcultural struggles that the sound and scene embody. . . . Their music feels "pale and purposeless" (374). Reynolds is not alone in this criticism, as many in the jungle community have also expressed similar feelings towards this new musical experiment.

Philosopher Lambert Zuidervaart, however, feels that those who experiment with previously existing forms should be lauded rather than criticized: "If the arts are not chained to a logic of historical progress, and if artists do not have to defend the purity of their own traditions, then the process of creating and enjoying the arts becomes open to many voices with many pasts and many possible futures" (34). For Zuidervaart and others, critics like Reynolds seem stuck in a reactionary and defensive stance that only serves to limit musical possibilities.

In this climate of defensiveness, it seems that author and music critic Mark Pytlik is correct when he points to Björk "as one of music's few populist experimentalists" (131). Somehow, Björk has managed to experiment continually and yet remain on a major label, to constantly challenge but retain her fan base, and to sell albums despite each going in a new direction. To her, it doesn't really seem like a risk to experiment as much as it is something she sees as necessary to continue to produce quality art. She has been experimental in her approach to music since her childhood—she used to make beats based on the sounds of a popcorn machine or her grandfather's snoring, and she says that it was experimental music that inspired her most as a listener: "I think about all the albums I found in secondhand stores that weren't even big

when they came out, but totally saved my life. Those artists jumped off the edge” (Ross; Ali and Björk 64).

Unlike the works of other experimenters (Mos Def’s Black Jack Johnson project or Neil Young’s *Trans* come to mind) which have been roundly criticized or panned by the media, abandoned by fans, or stifled (or attempted to be) by record labels, Björk’s music has met with an overwhelmingly positive response from her peers. “Björk’s gift to fans has been her ability to remain entirely—bravely—herself, and to extend that gesture to collaborators,” notes journalist Neil Drumming (3). Apparently, her fans and collaborators have appreciated the gift. Certainly, it has brought her respect from a variety of different people. Graham Massey is impressed by her bravery: “She’s one for taking risks. You know, she could’ve just continued to do the MTV pop thing. I’m sure that would’ve been the easiest route, but she’ll never take the easiest route. And she’ll always want to pull in strange people from the periphery of music into the thing that she’s doing and make something bolder out of it” (qtd. in *Inside Björk*). Percussionist Evelyn Glennie loves to work with Björk because “she’s willing to try absolutely anything and see what comes out of the experiment” (Glennie 56). At times, she even challenges avant-garde collaborators to attempt to compose more traditionally. Matmos’ Drew Daniel recalls the challenge of working on material for *Vespertine* for he and partner Martin Schmidt: “We’d never dealt with a vocal or with something that had that verse-chorus structure, so it was really strange for us” (qtd. in Gittins 117).

Still, though she has been complimented, praised, and respected for her artistic independence, it has not always come easily within the cautious, cost-conscious world of the music industry. Björk uses one example to show how her record labels do not always share the same goals and motivations as she:

When you go blindfolded into the unknown and you've been on a mission that the world needs new music and you've experimented with all sorts of people and have this excellent adventure, doing that for ten years and sitting down with the record company people and they say, "Oh, forget about everything you've ever done. The only thing that's worth anything is 'It's Oh So Quiet.'" You just go, "What?!" (qtd. in Pytlik 184)

Film and video director Michel Gondry, a longtime Björk collaborator, was all too familiar with such reactions from members of the industry when he first met Björk. Gondry had had experience for a few years making videos for major label pop artists such as Lenny Kravitz, but was always frustrated because by the time that the artist and record company had gotten through with editing his videos, "there wasn't much *me* left in them" (Gondry 19). He says that Björk was the first pop star he had worked with who understood and liked what he did "on his own terms," though he was not as convinced as she was that the public and record company would accept such a video: "It was the first time I had a decent budget to do a really original video. When I proposed the storyboard to her and she really liked it, I thought, 'Oh my God, she spent all this money on a disaster.' I thought that nobody would like the video—it would be too bizarre . . ." (Gondry qtd. in Pytlik 71). As it turned out, his video for "Human Behavior" became immensely popular, and he ended up grateful to Björk because then, "The same people who'd wanted me to water down my ideas came back, but now they were asking me to do things in my own style" (Gondry 19). Gondry went on to direct many more videos for Björk, as well.

While it is clear that Björk has had success as a "populist experimentalist," and has helped others (such as Gondry) gain more autonomy in the music industry, the question still remains: why has she been so successful where others, such as many "prog" rock or jazz fusion

groups, have been relegated to a tiny niche market? Sociologist Keith Negus notes that one reason is that often, a major label will retain some artists who push the creative envelope as a means to attract and sign big names who wish to work for a label with a “‘creative’ environment” (64). Björk, then, could be used by Elektra as an example of how open the label is to experimentation (whether or not every artist, once signed, would find that this is the case seems doubtful in the face of Negus’ evidence to the contrary). Another possible reason could simply be that Björk is immensely talented, and as such, can utilize her genius to carve out spaces within the industry that others with less talent could not. This, like the theory of her as a “carrot” to dangle for future signings, seems reductive, however. Negus notes that while talent is an undeniably important factor for a successful artist, it is more realistic to look at “the conditions within which great individuals will be able to realize their talent,” which takes into account a broader relationship between talent, record label, and certainly a bit of luck (Negus 18). Outside of luck and talent, one possibility is that Björk doesn’t really see a difference between pop music and experimental music, and since for her they are the same thing, her experiments work more naturally. As Ross says, “She has an ability to stand apart from the crowd while not holding herself aloof from it. . . . Her catholicity of taste is real and automatic” (Ross).

Examining her album *Medúlla* should help to explain how this “real and automatic” blurring of pop and experimental musics operates for Björk. *Medúlla*, as was mentioned in the introduction, was a political response from Björk to the Bush administration’s reactionary policies following 9/11. One thing that Björk felt particularly connected to at the time was her own body, and the power of her body to supply life for her new baby girl, born to her and Matthew Barney in late 2002. The combination of her reconnection with the power of the

female body, and physicality in general, and her anger at Americans who were using religion as rhetoric for war, inspired her to focus on a return to the physical body in order to escape the negative effects of politics and religion in the modern world. After some initial songwriting, she began to envision a way for her new album to reflect that return to the magic and simplicity of the human body, deciding to compose the entire work with human voices alone.

Björk envisioned the album as an organic and folk project that got to the core of humanity—the body, symbolized in this case by the voice. Voices were used to produce not only the melody and harmony, but all of the rhythms and textures. She enlisted a variety of vocal specialists to bring her vision to life: experimental rocker Mike Patton, hip-hop beatboxer Rahzel, Japanese human-band Dokaka, Inuit throat singer Tagaq, an Icelandic choir, and a London choir, to name but a few. The reaction from the media was that this was going to be her most experimental album yet, and a huge departure from anything she had done previously. “Everybody was going, ‘Oh, she’s making a vocal album, it’ll be a horrible Yoko Ono experience,’” Björk recalls. “But I wanted to show that a vocal album doesn’t have to be for the chosen few” (qtd. in Sandall 1). Björk was confused by the media’s notion that the album was some sort of methodical, avant-garde magnum opus, like an Arnold Schoenberg serial work: “It wasn’t like I had a set of rules and had to follow them. That is not liberating. I was just playing with the buttons on the mixing desk and thinking, ‘Oh, this sounds better,’ and I found I’d taken out all the instruments” (Björk qtd. in Sandall 1).

When *Medúlla* was released, it was praised by both longtime fans and critics, as well as by musicologists and academics who were fascinated by the virtuosity and originality that went into creating the record. With just a bit of piano (on one track) being the only instrument besides the human voice, *Medúlla* nevertheless sounded as if it had been done using a multitude of

instruments and electronic beats. As the media had already hinted at prior to the album's release, *Medúlla* was definitely considered to be an experimental departure for Björk, one that put her in a class unto herself in the world of music. And while she gained many new fans from the experimental music world due to the album, there were definitely some of her pop-oriented listeners who felt that they could not connect with *Medúlla*.

What is most interesting about this reaction is that to Björk, *Medúlla* was more of a pop or folk record than an experiment. "I make music for everyone, not for VIP or educated people," she explained (qtd. in McDonnell 20). To those who claimed that she had left pop and dance music behind, she begged to differ: "I've always been obsessed with pure pop music. There are some real 'up' songs on *Medúlla*, but they won't be played in clubs. They're more for dancing around your house, like a domestic rave" (Björk, *Instinct*). It was clear that for the composer herself, the line between what was pop and what was experimental was much more liquid than for most people. "I really don't know what is pop and what is not," she mused. "The meaning of the word comes from folk, or people, and therefore I felt at moments that *Medúlla* being only done with the human voice, which we all have, [was something] that everybody could join in. I feel materialism has really distorted that word [pop], and it has changed its meaning into 'sellable,' not 'music of the people' . . ." (Björk, *Drownedinsound.com*).

Björk seems to feel in general that she makes accessible music, and that there needs to be a balance struck between the popular and the experimental. As for those who criticize pop music as too fluffy and simple, she says that "the problem is that too many people dismiss pop as crap because nobody has had the courage to make pop that's relevant to the modern world. Pop music has become so stagnant. This is really a paradox because it should change and evolve every day" (Björk qtd. in Pytlik 69). For Björk, pop does not translate simply into *being* popular,

it means that your music is enjoyed by a large variety of people: “Overall, I don’t believe in the artist that does what he or she does only for power and people, and to be famous and all that stuff. I also think, though, that it is just as bad to totally isolate yourself from the world and people—then the love starts to go out of it” (Björk, *Drownedinsound.com*). Conceding that certain albums and songs of hers are perhaps more accessible than others, she also sees that as a natural part of the creative process. “I am aware that there are periods when I am an extrovert and there are periods when I am an introvert,” she admits. “When I am at my most introverted it probably goes in hand with developing a deeper contact with my idiosyncrasies; when I am very extroverted I am curious about other people, so I reach out way more” (Björk, *Drownedinsound.com*).

Whether she is in an introverted or extroverted mood, Björk’s music has been successful with critics and fans from *Debut* to the present day. Whether it is talent, luck, personality, or her natural ability to get beyond binaries and experiment in a “real and automatic” way, there is something about Björk that has enabled her to achieve equal amounts of success and freedom that is not common in the music industry (Ross). Björk realizes that being branded as strange, quirky, and experimental, and at the same time still being a major label pop star that sells records is a gift that few have received.

I’ve been quite lucky. . . . I’m not trying to please anyone, and yet people are still interested in me. I don’t expect people to get me. . . . I guess I’m quite used to not being understood rather than being understood. . . . In order to get someone you have to read books about them [sic], listen to their albums, spend time with them—it’s a lot of time and effort, and I don’t expect that. I know there are people that have done that with my music and I really appreciate that. But the

overall public haven't done that so, of course, they're not going to get me. (Björk, *Spinner*)

In conclusion, Björk's transcendence of shackling concepts such as genre, mainstream, underground, high and low art, pop, fine art, and experimental music has enabled her to create her own sphere in music, a world where music can bring people together rather than divide them into perceived opposites. If one reason had to be given for her success in this regard, it would probably be that she has done it without trying to. "I don't set out to push boundaries," she points out. "That would be a bit silly. But I have a pretty low boredom tolerance, so I try to keep things exciting for myself" (Björk, *Stereo Warning*). As we will continue to see in the coming chapters, Björk sets out to do only one thing, and that is to be free to express herself as she would like. And who wouldn't want that? As fan Sean Penn posits, Björk "seems very full of love and magic and the things that are increasingly rare in the culture, and I think that's why [although] it was somebody who seemed on the surface so much an alien, that she's had the kind of broad appeal that she's had . . ." (qtd. in *Inside Björk*). Whether it be love, magic, or simply a need for artistic freedom, Björk's blurring of musical boundaries should be a lesson to us all that we have more in common than we often think we do.



## CHAPTER TWO: BETWEEN NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY

About ten years ago, my brother and I were having a discussion about the influence of humans on the environment. An environmental biologist, my brother was relating how his project in Kenya had been going, a project that dealt with how the local people's farming and grazing practices impacted the wildlife in the area around them. He explained how he and other biologists were trying to instill a balance between the needs of the farmers and those of the wildlife. I posited, in my typically combative manner, that he and the other biologists should instead be trying to keep these people from encroaching upon nature at all. Weren't environmentalists supposed to be pro-environment, I wondered? Wasn't there some way to keep humans from destroying nature? Why don't we have more respect for the natural world around us? My reaction would be criticized by economics professor Thomas DeGregori, who claims that too many environmentalists assert that "those 'who depend upon their surroundings for their living are not in a position to take care of their environment'" (Brockington and Homewood qtd. in DeGregori 37). I was putting humans outside of nature. My brother responded similarly to DeGregori, noting that humans don't just act upon nature, they *are* nature. Farming is not unnatural, it is the way that humans have developed to survive. All creatures, my brother noted, have an impact upon their environment - it is not like humans are "guilty" alone.

If humans and their actions are indeed part of nature, I wondered, does that mean that technology is actually *natural*? Such a thought seemed absurd to me before the discussion with my brother, but thinking about it in the context of his argument made me reconsider. While with sharks it is sense of smell and sharp teeth; with owls, keen eyesight and the ability to fly; or with bears, size, strength, and knife-like claws; as humans, our brains and opposable thumbs are the tools by which we survive. By that logic, the use of technology to manipulate the world around

us is as understandable as a chameleon hiding on a tree. Technology is a part of nature, humans are animals, and the boundary between the old binaries of “Nature” and “Human” and “Human” and “Technology” would thus be forever shattered.

The idea that nature, technology, and organic life are deeply interconnected is one that brings to mind feminist Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto,” wherein she points out the benefits of embracing the concept of the cyborg for women as well as men. As Haraway defines it, “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important and political construction, a world-changing fiction” (Haraway 475). Because the cyborg calls into question the difference between humans and machines, Haraway posits that it provides the very postmodern opportunity for humans to rise above identity politics (specifically gender). Importantly, this connection between machine and human does not preclude the connection between human and animal. In fact, Haraway says that the cyborg *depends* upon the fact that humans and other living species are equals: “The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling” (Haraway 477). Technology (the machine) thus equals nature (organic life).

And yet, there is no question that humans constantly distinguish between what is nature and what is technology. One need only consider the difference between the “fantasy” and “science fiction” genres to begin to see the lines that have been drawn between the natural and the technological. “Science fiction,” generically speaking, looks toward a fictional future, filled with robots, silvery metal spacecrafts, and ray-guns—all things that humans have supposedly created over time using science and technology. “Fantasy” stories, on the other hand, seem to

look back in time, often in a medieval European setting augmented with mythical magic and monsters. In this genre, though the storyline is in many ways similar to that of science fiction (a classic battle of good versus evil, but with a fantastical bent which comes from the imaginative mind of the author), the fantastical elements are not created by humans, but are naturally occurring (such as monsters) or spring from a deep, spiritual center (like magic). Science is typically not mentioned as any significant force in fantasy stories.

In music, the distinction between one sound as natural (“acoustic”), and the other as technological (“techno”), plays out in a similar fashion. Acoustic music is generally considered to be music created without the use of any electronics, but electronic music composer and theorist Thom Holmes notes that in the twentieth century, this idea became blurred by electronic amplification. Holmes defines this “electroacoustic” music as that which “uses electronics to modify sounds from the natural world,” such as an electric guitar, or a voice through a microphone (8). Meanwhile, Holmes distinguishes a “purely electronic” music where “the generation of sound waves” is done by “electrical means,” where the sound goes through either analog synthesis (a “continuous electrical current that is *analogous* to its corresponding sound waves”) or digital synthesis (where a computer chip “represents sound waves as binary information” which must then be “converted to analog signals before they can be heard”) (6, 7). As with the fiction genres discussed previously, there is a future/past binary that seems to go along with concepts of nature and technology in musical sound. Holmes’ “purely electronic music” (whether techno dance music, avant-garde electronic music, or arpeggiated keyboard-based pop) is often described in common discourse as the most “unnatural” because its sound is only possible through recent, cutting edge scientific technologies, whereas electroacoustic music

is simply a modification of a previously existing “naturally occurring” acoustic sound. Acoustic symbolizes the past, electronic the future.

For Björk, this distinction between "natural" music and "unnatural" music is too limiting. She rejects the idea held by many musical "purists" that traditional instrumentation, such as a stringed instrument, is somehow more authentic or "musical" than purely electronic music, such as a drum machine or synthesizer. Meanwhile, however, she avoids the opposite extreme, where electronic music "progressives" claim that the use of traditional instrumentation is outdated and that electronic composers should avoid using them in their works. Björk would much rather view music as simply *sound*, and therefore as incapable of being contained within some nature/technology hierarchy. In her own work, she freely mixes traditional ("natural") instrumentation and harmony with electronic ("unnatural," "technological") instrumentation and sounds. For Björk, nature and technology in music symbolize neither the past nor the future. Like Haraway or my brother, she sees human technology as inherently natural, and therefore views all musical possibilities within the present.

There is an ethical component, however, that is important in viewing technology and nature as essentially the same. Technology may be perfectly natural, but this does not, of course, mean that humans should have the freedom to simply use and abuse the world around them without care. This is not only an issue of ethics, it is also one of human survival. “Living within a crowded and delicately balanced economic, social, and ecologic system, we have become vitally dependent on one another and on our shared planetary habitat,” says future studies scholar Ervin Laszlo. “If we overstress our environment, we can only head for another planet; on Earth there will be no place left for us to go” (Laszlo 2, 3). Crafting bombs which could destroy all organic life on earth, for example, certainly does not make sense in terms of the survival of the

species. A balance between our abilities to create new tools and their negative impact upon the earth's life forms and resources must be considered. Historically, balance is something that humans have not paid much attention to, as sustainable and earth-friendly practices have been few and far between until recent years, especially in industrialized countries. Global warming, animal extinctions, and the threat of nuclear holocaust are just a few of the results of this lack of foresight about the balance needed between our own environmental needs and the needs of other species of life.

The old binary of nature versus technology is certainly not helping in this regard. If humans do not consider themselves, nor their technological creations, as part of nature, then by extension there is no reason to achieve a balance with the world around them. Two ideologies, though they are at opposite positions on the ideological spectrum from one another, make this same mistake - they remove humans and their technology from nature and thus contribute to the unhealthy nature/technology binary. In the first position, which developed from what is known as the philosophy of *humanism*, nature becomes the opposition, the force to be controlled and eventually mastered in the name of human survival. Technology becomes the tool of the "master controllers" of nature, a tool whose possible dangers are overlooked by egotistical humans who are convinced that what they create is always beneficial, and more easily controlled than nature itself. The old Enlightenment project rests upon this idea, as does the Christian notion that God created the world for humans to use. A quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson succinctly explains the humanist position favored during the Enlightenment: "This great savage country should be furrowed by the plough, and combed by the harrow; these rough Alleganies [sic] should know their master . . ." (qtd. in Merchant 38). Meanwhile, in the Christian Bible, it is written that "God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over

the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’” (*Holy Bible*, Gen. 1.26). In both cases, a hierarchy exists with humans at the top, and the rest of the planet at the bottom.

The second ideological position complicit with the nature/technology binary is marked by a fear of technology and a romanticism of nature (Nature). Rooted very loosely in pagan and Eastern philosophies, this “defense of Nature” position is symbolized by many in the New Age and hippie communities, as well as radical ecologists such as EarthFirst! and Greenpeace. These groups, at least rhetorically, shun new technology as a threat to “Mother Earth.” As radical ecologist Tim O’Riordan outlines, this sets up a sharp binary (and value judgement) between nature and technology: “[Ecocentrism] . . . provides a natural morality—a set of rules . . . based upon the limits and obligations imposed by natural ecosystems” while technocentrism “is identified by rationality . . . by managerial efficiency . . . and by a sense of optimism and faith in the ability of man [sic] to understand and control physical, biological, and social processes” (qtd. in Curran 108). The more radical of these groups call for an end to human technological progress (going “back to the land”) rather than the sustainable development outlined by most environmentalists, which they accuse of being in line with the humanist argument which they oppose. As environmental activist Daniel Kealey alleges, “The commercialization of conservation is couched in such terms as ‘balanced use of resources,’ ‘wise use,’ ‘scientific management,’ ‘genetic improvement,’ and ‘cost-benefit analysis,’ forming some of the central principles of the management ideology which basically understands the whole of nature as ‘resources for humans’” (27, 28). Despite their ideological positioning against the humanist position, the radical ecological movement and “back to nature” movement end up on similar footing when it comes to placing humans and technology in a strict binary outside of nature. In

one case, a hierarchy is created with humans on top, and in the other, “Nature” is placed on top in their place.

For Björk, these ecological nature/technology hierarchies are as limiting as the musical ones. She is very much opposed to the humanist and Christian philosophy that humans are the masters of nature and technology, and that nature is simply a set of resources for humans to exploit using their technological inventions. However, unlike some environmental activists who feel the same way, she is by no means a Luddite. While the radical ecologists and “back to the land” hippies fear technology as a destructive force, Björk has embraced technology. For her, as for Haraway and my brother, “Nature” encompasses not just the plant and animal life of the wilderness, but also humans and their technology. Having grown up with a traditional pagan Scandinavian philosophy, where all of nature (including technology) is inherently spiritual, Björk finds it easy to see that a hierarchy with humans ruling over nature is inherently false, and also that a fear of new technology is unrealistic and unnecessary if it is used responsibly. Through her visual and musical combination of nature and technology, her resistance to arguments of authenticity between rock music and techno, and her strong background in both rational science as well as mythology, she seeks to get beyond the binaries, to democratize the relationship between humans, nature, and technology. In the process, she comes to the same conclusion that Haraway and my brother do: nature and technology are not as separate as we often think they are.

### **Keep On Marching: How By Moving Forward, We Go Back**

*When time? To return...Do it now! / Shake us out of the heavy deep sleep / Shake us now...Do it now!*

—Björk (“Submarine”)

Björk has great reverence for the past and for the primitive, but also freely embraces new technology and has no interest in going “back to the land.” This is reminiscent of Haraway, who, “though sympathetic to ecofeminism’s interest in the ‘natural’ body and the Goddess...urges women not to fear the technological future, but to face it with resolve and imagination” (Zimmerman 355). For Björk as well, being in touch with nature is not about standing pat. As DeGregori notes, this view is not common among many romantic environmentalists:

The widely recognized need for agricultural practices that are sustainable has led to the appropriation of the word ‘sustainability’ as an identifying buzzword for a variety of back-to-nature schemes. . . . To some enthusiasts, sustainability has become a synonym for stasis. It also means that we will no longer have to acquire new knowledge and values and otherwise respond to a changing world.

(DeGregori 117)

While she has definitely embraced the symbolism of returning to a simpler origin, specifically on *Medúlla* and *Volta*, Björk is not interested in an actual return to the past. She firmly believes that by continuing forward and avoiding reactionary conservatism, humanity is very much in line with nature, for nature is not a fixed concept, but a dynamic one. Haraway’s concept of nature is much the same, according to scholar Michael Zimmerman: “Stressing the interactive, generative aspect of nature, Haraway defines it as ‘figure, construction, artifact, *movement*, *displacement*’” (Haraway qtd. in Zimmerman 364, emphasis added). In moving forward and embracing new possibilities, Björk envisions transcending time altogether by creating a new “origin” in the present, one that can hopefully embrace nature *and* technology as equals. Similarly,

Haraway maintains that the real opportunity for women (and for men as well) lies *not* in recovering an unrecoverable origin, but rather in taking the risk of



imaginatively exploring multiple identities that transgress the boundaries between the human, the natural, and the mechanical, thereby opening up unexpected alternatives to the deadly path forged by technological society. (Zimmerman 356)

For, despite DeGregori's optimistic assertion that "on balance . . . technologies have been far more effectively used to promote freedom than to suppress it," he also admits that "not many technologies exist for which one cannot conceive of ways to use technology to harm others" (DeGregori 155). Björk, like Haraway, does not embrace a technological future blindly and without ethical consideration. But, she sees no point in attempting to live in the past either. It is a synthesis of old and new that Björk truly seeks, both in her own music and in her life philosophy.

As a musician and producer, Björk is often portrayed as one of the ultimate progressives in popular music. Whether it be her electronic beats, her unique and always challenging voice, or her use of the latest in cutting edge instrumental technology, she has definitely positioned herself in opposition to the "roots," folk, or classical musician who believes that the best of music has already happened and that it is the artist's job to reproduce that work to the best of his or her ability. "Playing Beethoven all day is cowardly . . .," she says. "I think the balance should be to play old music one day a year" (Björk qtd. in Lester 8). Despite her classical training, then, Björk is quite critical of the classical approach to learning music. Like many popular musicians, such as jazz luminary Miles Davis or punk icon Mike Watt, she believes more in a dynamic and natural "feel" for music rather than a concentration on training to gain technical proficiency, or "chops." Björk's idea of music education is quite different from that which she received as a child: "I'd take kids out into nature, and teach them that they can be

right, and not just the teacher. I would let them lead the way. To some degree, at least” (qtd. in Gunnarsson).

It was this belief in experimentation and reliance upon one’s own creativity that probably made her so amenable to the electronic sounds coming out of London in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. Comparing the scene there to be-bop jazz in the 1940’s, Björk happily remembers, “There’s nothing like being a fly on the wall when a new music is in the making” (qtd. in McDonnell 48). In embracing this move towards making music without guitars, acoustic drums, or other traditional instruments, and instead using sequencers, samplers, and electronic keyboards, she allied herself with a movement that was largely feared and derided in rock ’n’ roll circles, especially in the United States. Discussing the initial resistance to her music in America, she concludes, “The American rock ’n’ roll industry is more conservative than the electricians’ union in Iceland. . . . Once you’ve learned to be an electrician you have to go to courses just to keep in touch [with new technology]. And everybody in the world is doing that except the U.S. rock ’n’ roll industry. They’re just . . . listening to guitar solos” (qtd. in McDonnell 47).

Speaking with *Wired* magazine about why she embraces new technology, she notes its considerable advantages sonically: “Orchestras used to need fifty people in order to fill a whole room with sound. Then the rock band could do it. Now, you just need one person. It’s cheaper. It’s easier. You’ve got more control” (Björk, *Wired*).

For Björk, such use of technology in her compositions does not mean an abandonment of nature. She does not shun traditional instrumentation nor hold new technology as inherently better than the old. Her belief in progress does not, to her, preclude a belief in tradition or human emotion. As Evelyn McDonnell notes, one can hear this in her music: “The production [of *Homogenic*] showed Björk’s steeping in the cutting edge of electronic dance-music culture, her

embrace of techno futurism. . . . But the emotion was ancient, deeply human—the voice of what hippie types call ‘an old soul’” (7). Björk, then, does not see new technology as a cold and harsh substitute for organic, hands-on musical expression. On the contrary, she believes that human technological progress is simply a new way to stimulate the creative process, and to thus carry on a tradition of musical innovation that has marked great composition from the beginning of time, and which celebrates tradition rather than challenging it. On the string arrangements by her collaborator Eumir Deodato, Björk marvels that “on the same song you get all the rawness and ethnicity, all the nature and all the sexuality together with all the sophistication and development that Western civilization has achieved. It’s the best of both. . . . There, one plus one is three” (Björk and Sigurðsson 29).

For Björk, technology has in many ways helped to restore and update some perfectly good traditional ideas. The making of her 2001 album *Vespertine* is an example. Björk produced the music specifically for the purpose of listening on portable tiny speakers, such as a laptop. Sounds were chosen for their specific timbre and resonance at those frequencies—hence the crackling and popping “microbeats,” along with strings, celesta, music box, and harp. “It’s kind of how a hundred years ago you had people having string quartets and playing harpsichords entertain each other in the evening,” Björk explains. “I think we’ve gone full cycle [sic] and now we can do that again, but with laptops. . . . That’s what this album is attempting to deal with: to make a paradise in kitchens . . .” (qtd. in McDonnell 88, 89). Similarly, she noted that despite the electronic technology that allowed for the making of her all-vocal record *Medúlla*, she saw the album as a return to a simpler time when she sang with Kukl, when she did not even sing lyrics but instead let her voice simply express itself as the most natural of instruments: “You know, it’s some kind of a strange continuity. And I now feel like I have some kind of a time

tunnel, or a time loop, straight into when I was seventeen, eighteen years old” (Björk qtd. in *The Inner or Deep Part . . .*).

In other words, by marching forward and embracing new technology, Björk had actually returned to the simple core of the human voice. *Medúlla* engineer Valgeir Sigurðsson, describing the creation of the song “Where is the Line?,” demonstrates how this worked on the album:

The song fell into place after Mark Bell had programmed some electronic beats that suited the song but were perhaps out of character with regard to the album as a whole. So we started the great quest for a way to deliver the energy it had but only with the voice. It so happened that we were working in New York at the time and heard of [hip-hop beatboxer] Rahzel . . . and then we transferred those sounds into the same form as the electronic beats. So we had to go in many circles before finding how to make the song as powerful or even more powerful than the original idea. (qtd. in *The Inner or Deep Part . . .*)

For Björk, moving forward simultaneously brings us back. Whether it be by creating a new chamber music for laptops, or creating something more powerful than electronic beats by using a human voice, Björk sees no contradiction in seeing time as essentially circular: “I feel it is important to move on and stop clinging to old stuff. By moving forward and letting go, so much other stuff is going to come back to us . . .” (Björk, *Stylus*). Daniel Adric, designer of the bounding bear in the video for “Human Behavior,” may describe Björk’s philosophy best. On the stage set that he helped her put together for the *Debut* tour, one whose mix of nature and technology would become a model for Björk’s career, he posits that: “Old meets New, high tech

materials sit alongside wood, science fiction meets romanticism, purity mixes with excess—at that moment of unity, we reach into the future . . .” (Adric 61).

### **Techno, Naturally: Responding to the Tyranny of the Guitar**

*I understand that each country has got a heart, and that guitar is maybe the heart of America. But what annoys me is when they look at anything else as being weird—especially when it’s been going on for fifty years.*

—Björk (qtd. in McDonnell 46, 47)

Unfortunately, not everyone is as optimistic about moving forward as Björk and Adric. Music scholar Simon Frith notes that whenever new technology comes out in the world of music, it is seen as a threat by the establishment, and considered “false and falsifying” and “opposed to nature and community” (qtd. in Thornton 29). This thinking closely resembles that of the radical ecologists and “back to the land” hippies, who fear new technology while viciously defending a romanticized view of nature. For anarcho-environmentalist Giorel Curran and others, for instance, the primary concern is “modernism’s elevation of an instrumental and technocratic rationality as the supreme achievement of human culture” (Curran 104). In rock ’n’ roll circles, this same fear of “technocratic rationality” was very much the case with the rise of electronic popular music. Beginning with the “disco sucks” movement of the late 1970’s, and continuing with its characterization of techno as “gay” in the early 1990’s, the rock establishment saw little potential in the use of the sequencers and beat machines, and derided them and their users as a weak and inauthentic version of popular music. The 1989 *Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, for instance, states that with techno and its progenitor, disco, “producers, who already had too much power, used drum machines, synthesizers and other gimmicks at the expense of musical values . . .” (qtd. in Thornton 2).

Many ethnomusicologists have had the same negative reaction to the use of electronic technology as have many rockers. As ethnomusicologists René T.A. Lysloff and Leslie C. Gay, Jr. have observed, “When ‘natives’ use electronic devices or enjoy mediated performances, technology is now considered intrusive and often rendered invisible by the [ethnomusicologist]” (Lysloff and Gay 5). Examples given by Lysloff and Gay include when a film crew insists on an oil lantern in a Javanese shadow theater documentary rather than the electrical light now commonly used; or when ethnomusicologists demand the use of ambient “room” microphones for recording gamelan music, even though the Javanese gamelan players usually record with direct microphones to feature the singers and provide clearer distinction between vocal and gamelan.

Similarly, ethnomusicologist Tong Soon Lee argues that theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer are too strong in their assertion that technology is “part of a larger culture industry that induces social alienation and passive reception, empties meaning from life, and is controlled by a dominating and oppressive power” (Lee 119). He cites the example of Muslims in Singapore using loudspeakers, radios, and televisions as a way of broadcasting the *adhan*, the Islamic call to prayer. The *adhan* was once given without amplification from the top of towers, but Lee shows that these electronic methods of broadcasting demonstrate “how a community actively employs media technology to maintain collectivity in a pluralistic society” (Lee 119, 120). DeGregori agrees with Lee that attempting to “protect” indigenous, traditional, and primitive societies from “oppressive” technology is being overly pessimistic. He feels that such sheltering, in the long run, will only hurt a culture, and notes that as long as technology is not forced upon them, most cultures would probably welcome it. DeGregori asserts that it is only fair to “give technologically less-developed people the freedom to change (or not to change) at

their own pace and advance technologically on their own terms, which they will inevitably do if the choice is theirs to make. . . . Very few, if any, will exercise the option not to change” (107).

Björk, like Lee or DeGregori, is not shackled to notions of an authentic, safe “natural” nor to an inauthentic, dangerous “electronic.” This could partly be from her unique musical upbringing, for by age six, she had been exposed to Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, and other avant-garde electronic composers by her music teacher Stefan Edelstein (Pytlik 7). It is no surprise, then, that unlike her bandmates in the Sugarcubes, Björk was excited by the new techno and house music coming out in the 1980’s. Due to the fact that the Sugarcubes were constructed on a strictly democratic basis, with no one person allowed to make any “exorbitant suggestions,” Björk waited some time to express her feelings for electronic dance music (Pytlik 45). When she did, as was mentioned in the introduction, the response was overwhelmingly negative. When she and drummer Siggi Baldursson (the one member who shared her interest) put together *It’s-It*, a 1992 remix album of Sugarcubes material by such electronic luminaries as Todd Terry, Marius De Vries, and Graham Massey, their fellow band members referred to it as *It’s Shit* (Pytlik 62).

As a band coming from an anarcho-punk scene based around the electric guitar, most of the Sugarcubes fell in line with the commonly held notion that such electronic music was inauthentic. According to “green” political theorist Michael Saward, this authoritarian and reactionary stance towards new technology is common when open discussion is discarded in favor of narrow-mindedness. “Saward (1993) questions any vision of green democracy that rests on a set of principles, arguing that it is too easy to slide into authoritarianism when paired with apocalyptic talk of the environmental crisis” (MacGregor 106). Instead, Saward argues for a green movement that favors politics and discussion over principles and humanistic ideas about the “common good,” as such ideas give unlimited power to whoever defines what is “good.”

The fact that such principles change over time is obvious. For instance, when the electric guitar first came on the scene in popular music, *it* was considered unnatural and inauthentic. Now, as it's been fully integrated, it has become (to quote Sarah Thornton) "*the* seal of rock credibility" (29). What was once, in Bob Dylan's early years, seen as a threat to authenticity has now become its staple, having been replaced by a more dangerous enemy: "computer music." This new use of electronic technology by "non-musicians" has been labeled as cold, heartless, and lacking in emotion as compared with guitar-based rock and folk music, and some critics claim that it is not music at all.

Björk, for one, has proven that such criticism is simply reactionary dogma. "If I hear one more person saying that there is no soul in computer music I will puke," she counters. "The reason there is no soul in it is because no one put it there. It's like looking at a guitar and asking it to write a song" (Björk and Sigurðsson 29). Given the heart of the artist, then, the tools should not matter. "Pluto," a crushingly intense barrage of electronic noise and metal fury on *Homogenic*, is an emphatic example of this. Composed as a live jam between Björk and programmer Mark Bell, the song shows that Bell can wield a laptop with as much feeling as any guitarist, and that Björk can sing with as much emotion over sounds made from a computer as she could over a typical rock lineup. "Pluto" is just one example—considering that nearly all of Björk's songs save a few ("Síðasta Ég," "Stígðu Mig," "Human Behavior," "So Broken") have *no* guitar at all and very little acoustic drums, and that her songs are brimming with human emotion, the argument that computer music is cold seems silly: a tool is a tool.

Importantly, though, Björk does not abandon traditional instrumentation as outmoded. Her philosophy that nature and technology are not at odds allows her the freedom to use acoustic, electro-acoustic, and purely electronic instruments interchangeably without concern.



“The way I look at the balance of all the organic instruments and the computers is the same way I like to balance reality and fantasy . . . ,” she explains. “Computers stand for fantasy—like you can have a violin with ninety seven strings and green hairs” (Björk and Sigurðsson 29). Former manager Netty Walker notes that Björk was by no means locked in to doing her songs electronically, recalling about the 1994 *MTV Unplugged* performance how Björk “always got incredibly bored playing the same songs over and over again . . . *Unplugged* was like a real opportunity to say, ‘Okay, let’s strip everything away—how can I portray these songs completely acoustically?’” (qtd. in Pytlik 84). In the studio, Björk has also insisted on not over-using the technology at hand: “The engineers I work with tease me because I have an ongoing mantra: no reverb and no compression [on her vocals]. . . . It takes away all sensitivity and nature out of the voice” (Björk and Taylor, *Remix*). Classical percussionist Evelyn Glennie was excited to find that Björk “can be acoustic if she wants: she doesn’t need effects . . . I am entirely an acoustic player. . . . So her voice suited me perfectly” (56). Thus, Glennie/Björk compositions “My Spine” and “Oxygen” provide a change from the electronic sonic vistas of “Pluto” or “Headphones.” This easy mixing of traditional and electronic in her music has often surprised and confused critics, listeners, and even collaborators such as Graham Massey. Recalling the early demo tapes that Björk gave to 808 State, he laughs that “she’d make tapes that had absolutely nothing to do with electronic music while still talking quite a lot about electronic music, which was kind of confusing. ‘I want it to be like this’—so why are you asking *me*?” (qtd. in Pytlik 65).

The answer to this question was that Björk felt that there was no real difference between nature (traditional instrumentation) and technology (electronic instrumentation). She brings up a point that is too often forgotten in modern discourse: “Electricity is not just a phenomenon of the

twentieth century. It's been around before us, it's like thunder and lightning. There is electricity inside us. . . . You walk on a nylon carpet and it pops when you touch the wall. . . . It's part of our lives" (Björk qtd. in Pytlik 89). With that in mind, the harnessing of electricity is no different than humans' harnessing of other natural phenomena, such as wood. "Sometimes, I think nature and techno are the same word, it just depends on if it's [said in the] past or future," Björk theorizes. "One thousand years ago you'd look at a log cabin in the forest, and that would be techno. And now it's nature" (qtd. in McDonnell 23). Music critic Simon Reynolds agrees with Björk, noting that, just as a log cabin has morphed into "Nature," so can musical sampling and sequencing technology which "can be seen as a new kind of realism that reflects the fact that the late-twentieth century mediascape has become our new Nature" (Reynolds 45).

Björk has played with this blurring of nature and technology both lyrically and compositionally. One collaboration with Massey, entitled "The Modern Things," posits that "all the modern things / like cars and such / have always existed / they've just been waiting / in a mountain / for the right moment / listening to the irritating noises / of dinosaurs and people / dabbling outside" and that "it's their turn now" (Björk, "The Modern Things"). Another song from *Post*, "Headphones," co-composed by trip-hop producer Tricky, is another example of this intertwining of nature and technology. In her lyrics, Björk describes falling asleep to a mix tape from Massey, invoking imagery of the technology of the tape seamlessly integrated with the physicality of her own body: "genius to fall asleep to your tape last night / sounds go through the muscles / these abstract wordless movements / they start off cells that haven't been touched / before" (Björk, "Headphones"). "Headphones" is also a nice example of how Björk interweaves nature and technology during the compositional process. The song, along with another ("Enjoy"), was composed by Björk and then-boyfriend Tricky on portable recording equipment

while touring the wilderness of Iceland during late December, 1994: “We drove around in a four wheel drive and saw the glaciers and swam in the hot springs. It was brilliant . . . twenty four hour darkness and snow,” Björk remembers (qtd. in Gittins 70). Interestingly, much of the rest of the *Post* album was recorded outdoors in the opposite climate. Björk, going for a sonic mix of nature and technology, enlisted Nellee Hooper, Howie B., and Marius DeVries to record vocals on the beach in the Bahamas. Hooper even had her record the original vocals for the song “Cover Me” in a cave filled with dripping water and bats. (Though Björk eventually re-recorded a lot of these songs in London, she included this original version of “Cover Me” on 2002’s retrospective compilation, *Family Tree*). Similarly, some ten years later, Björk did some early composing for *Medúlla* on the island of La Gomera, walking the beach with a portable device suggested to her by electronic wizard Richard D. James (a.k.a. Aphex Twin) that allowed her to lay down vocal tracks while outdoors (McNair). On 1997’s *Homogenic*, she went so far as to base the album’s beats (co-composed by Mark Bell) off of the naturally occurring sounds of Iceland’s landscape, such as bubbling lava and crackling ice. In all of these instances, Björk challenges the oppositional stereotypes of the troubadour strumming a guitar outdoors and the techno musician hunched over machinery in a windowless studio.

Björk has also questioned the boundary between nature and technology by employing a unique and postmodern blend of imagery, where stereotypical and traditional notions of natural and technological are challenged and transcended by being mixed seamlessly together. The *Homogenic* album artwork, done by the ME Company, is a fantastic futurescape of silver and maroon cyborg flowers and vines that simultaneously evoke scenery from *Alice in Wonderland* as much as they do a Philip K. Dick novel. For the supporting tour, while Björk dressed as a winged bird, the backdrop was not a typical blue sky, but an icy blue and green cyberscape.

*Post*'s tour stage set was a "sinister yet playful" techno/nature backdrop of silver metallic trees, branches, with icy blues and greens (Gittins 86). Michel Gondry's video for 1995's "Hyperballad" was a vivid blurring of nature and techno: mountains with city lights like buildings; Björk lying in twigs and leaves, but with a TV image and hologram of herself over her face; a video game image of Björk, and flashing electronic static and strobe-like images superimposed over a peaceful, natural, "virgin forest."

For Björk, even something as natural as sex cannot be removed from technology. The video for *Homogenic*'s "All Is Full of Love," by Chris Cunningham, is a cybersexual *tour de force*, with two robot Björks being created by automated androids as perfect love machines, who then engage in a highly erotic scene of touching and kissing. The video, with the lyrics of the song in mind, seems to suggest that robots (machines) can be as symbolic of erotic love as flesh to flesh human interaction (if not even more so, at times). For Björk, love can sometimes come from unexpected places—"it's all around you," even from robots (Björk, "All Is Full of Love"). This should be no surprise, says Haraway, who points out that "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (Haraway 478). For Björk and Haraway, then, "the merging of the organic with the mechanical, the natural with the artificial," is a means "to code the world in a way that undermines the integrity and innocence of the 'organic whole'" (Zimmerman 359). In the process of constructing a video where robots are equally as erotic as humans, Cunningham and Björk thus fashion a world that philosopher Jean Baudrillard would fear is "hyperreal": "The real does not efface itself in favor of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favor of the more real than real: the hyperreal. The truer than true: this is simulation . . . sexuality does not fade into sublimation, repression, and morality, but fades much more surely into the more sexual than sex . . . ." (qtd. in Wiley 138). For Björk, however, such hyperreality

is not to be feared, but celebrated. Nature slips easily into technology, and vice versa, and in the process, a new medium is discovered.

**Democratizing Sound: Responding to the Tyranny of Techno**

*Electronic music is, in a way, the folk music of the twenty first century. Instead of, say, the '20's, where you had everyone who knew a blues riff playing a guitar, you now have everyone who knows certain beats and things like that putting them together and then circulating them—this scene is about mixing and mix tapes. Technology is making the creative process democratic.*

—DJ Spooky (qtd. in Holmes 271)

As electronic composer/author Thom Holmes points out, "One of the key differences between electronic music and music composed for traditional instruments is that *its sonic vistas are limitless and undefined*" (Holmes 9, emphasis in original). This in turn allows for a new freedom for both artist and listener, where such technology as sampling and sequencing enables compositions that borrow from a myriad of musical styles and even everyday "noise." These are unique possibilities, opportunities to blur not only the distinctions between "high" and "low" art and genre categories, but even the difference between music and noise. As music theorists Mary Russo and Daniel Warner explain it, "It is possible to electronically produce pure pitch (sine wave) or pure noise (white noise). But aside from these two esoteric exceptions, the entire sound world is one in which periodic and non-periodic vibrations intermingle in an endless variety of ways" (Russo and Warner 49). Put another way, by electronic composer John Cage, "Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating" (qtd. in Holmes 131). Similarly, composer Henry Cowell has noted that

"there is a noise element in the very tone itself of all our musical instruments," and that noise has always been a part of music (Cowell 23).

Björk, as a key composer of electronic music, is in full agreement with Cage and Cowell. "If I were to say who influenced me most," she says, "I would say people like Stockhausen, Kraftwerk, Brian Eno, and Mark Bell," who used noise and music interchangeably. "We walk around with all these telephones and car alarms, and we hear all these noises. We can keep saying, 'No, it's soulless, it's cold,' but it's part of our lives" (qtd. in Pytlik 126). As a composer, she says, "I want to use the noises that everybody is using everyday—the remote control, the mobile phone, the Internet, the fax machine. It's not weird or avant-garde to do that. Digital stuff is all around us anyway, so why not make a song out of it?" (qtd. in Gittins 116, 117). In the film *Vessel*, Björk, in various vignettes shot by Stephane Sednaoui, proves her point, singing an improvised vocal to a car alarm on the streets of London.

Considering electronic music's premise that all music is basically just noise at its core, this provides an excellent opportunity to democratize sound and thus music as well: if all music shares the same core material, then seemingly disparate genres are actually just different forms of the same thing. No one type of music should thus be inherently more authentic or more sophisticated than any other. This democratizing rhetoric has been a part of the electronic music revolution since its inception, but unfortunately, many electronic music composers, critics, and fans have created a divide between the purely electronic and the electroacoustic, placing distinctions on them that posit one as inherently "better" or more "correct" than the other. Stockhausen, for instance, often stated that "electronic music sounds best only as electronic music, which is to say that it includes as far as possible only sounds and sound relationships that are unique and free of associations" (374). By "associations," Stockhausen is implying sounds

that we would recognize -such as a piano, a waterfall, etc. Stockhausen's position has been championed in modern electronic styles by critics who believe that such styles are only "progressive" if they lack any recognizable traditional instrumentation. Simon Reynolds, for instance, criticizes some trip-hop for its ties to acid jazz, which to him signals "a Luddite retreat to live musicianship and the resurrection of the idea of clubland as a metropolitan elite (as opposed to rave's suburban populism)" (325). Reynolds lodges a similar complaint at many jungle artists: "Why did so many artcore junglists avidly embrace the most conventional and middlebrow signifiers of 'musicality' (sax solos, overmelismatic singing)? Because underneath the bravado and the futurist rhetoric lurked a secret inferiority complex" (342).

But what of the rhetoric of electronic music as liberating and democratizing?

Environmentalist David Ehrenfeld's comment that "the lifestyle that makes cancer research and potential therapy remotely possible is also causing cancer" works as a convenient metaphor for the short-sighted hypocrisy of many in the electronic music revolution (qtd. in Kealey 31). For though there is indeed much potential for liberation and democratization within electronic music, Stockhausen, Reynolds, and a host of other "technocrats," through their narrow-minded rhetoric, reveal that the reality is in direct opposition to these ideals. As cultural theorist Sarah Thornton notes, "It is a classic paradox that an institution [the electronic dance scene] so adept at segregation, at the nightly accommodation of different crowds, should be repeatedly steeped in an ideology of social mixing. . . . The 'revolution' in leisure was seen as both democratic and *avant garde* . . . meant to be both exclusive and egalitarian, classless but superior to the mass-market institution" (56, 55). As an example, British popular music journalist Ian Gittins, in a review of Björk's remix album *Telegram*, notes with a certain disdain how classical artists the Brodsky Quartet "eagerly replace the electronic beeps and computer noises" and "have tip-toed

relatively genteelly through ‘Hyperballad,’” while he praises “techno renegades . . . Outcast” for “driv[ing] a coach and horses through ‘Enjoy’” (81). The first problem here is that Gittins somehow assumes that the Brodsky Quartet did not like the original electronic sounds and therefore were “eager” to replace them with strings, and the second problem is that he assumes that a reworking with strings is “genteel,” implying that a reworking with electronic sounds is somehow more aggressive or “renegade.” This seems to fit with Reynold’s distaste for “conventional” instrumentation in electronic music—though it may be subtle, Gittins certainly seems to be expressing the bias that a remix is better done by “renegade” electronic artists like Outcast than by “genteel” classical musicians like the Brodsky Quartet. This does not imply democratization, but rather a new value judgement with “renegade” electronic technology being inherently incompatible with traditional instrumentation. The tyranny of the guitar has become the tyranny of techno.

Ironically, many of the innovators of electronic music did not envision this hierarchy. Edgard Varèse, one such innovator, felt that “our new liberating medium—the electronic—is not meant to replace the old musical instruments, which composers, including myself, will continue to use” (19). Cultural historian Jacques Barzun does not even make the distinction between electronic machine and acoustic instrument: “Orpheus’s lyre was a machine, a symphony orchestra is a regular factory for making artificial sounds, and a piano is the most appalling contrivance of levers and wires this side of the steam engine. Similarly, the new electronic devices are but a means for producing new materials to play with” (Barzun 369).

Similarly, Björk refuses to be boxed in by the idea that traditional instruments must be completely replaced by new technology. “I’m not obsessed with technology, not at all,” she explains. “I love working with freedom, but I also love to work with limitations. Something like



a violin has only so many notes; it's only made of wood. The person who can create soul with that has won out on restriction" (Björk, *Wired*). One of her musical idols, electronic ambient composer Brian Eno, agrees, noting that "everyone is constrained in one way or another, and you work within your constraints. It doesn't mean that suddenly the world is open, and we're going to do much *better* music, because we're not constrained in certain ways. We're going to do *different* music because we're not constrained in certain ways—we operate under a different set of constraints" (Eno 130).

The challenge for Björk then, has been to work with new constraints that involve not a hierarchy between the traditional and the newest technology, but a perfect synthesis of the two, implying that in fact the traditional and the new should be interchangeable (techno=nature). In much of her music, in fact, it is difficult to tell what is electronically programmed and what is organic. As Björk says of her latest album, "The most natural sounding stuff on *Volta* is actually programmed and then you get brass trying to be techno . . ." (Björk, *Brooklyn Vegan*). This philosophy has been represented in music throughout her catalog. On 1995's "I Miss You," Howie B.'s electronic syncopations are seamlessly mixed with Björk's Hammond organ and Talvin Singh's tabla. Similarly, on "Scary," a 1997 b-side to "Bachelorette," a harpsichord is so carefully mixed with electronic arpeggiated sounds that the two are nearly indistinguishable. "Jóga's" beats, by Mark Bell and Howie B., are infused with strings played by the Icelandic Octet and arranged by Eumir Deodato. "All Neon Like" features electronic, inhuman sounds, one of which (as it turns out) is not electronic at all, but a simple glass harmonica. "Hunter" combines Yasuhiro Kobayashi's accordion with sweeping strings and Mark Bell's march-like electronic beat. Perhaps the most striking example of Björk's inclusion of traditional instrumentation within an electronically programmed framework is *Selmasongs*, her soundtrack

to the 2000 film *Dancer in the Dark*. An album that mixes the sound of Hollywood musical showtunes with Mark Bell's and Björk's techno beats, *Selmasongs* is a work so unique as to be the first of its kind. With this mix of clanking machinery, hand claps, brass, strings, tap dancing, and even footsteps with electronic beats and programming, Björk has proven that electronics can truly democratize sound, and that those composers, critics, and fans who choose to limit themselves to the electronic alone have missed a unique opportunity.

### **Ego Trippin': How We Forgot That We Are Nature**

*The first principle of conservation is the use of the natural resources now existing on this continent for the benefit of the people who live here now.*

—Gifford Pinchot (*qtd. in Kealey 27*)

*The cyborg is...no longer structured by the polarity of public and private. . . .*

*Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other.*

—Donna Haraway (476)

Björk seeks not only to democratize sound and music making, but to democratize the relationship between humans, nature, and technology in general. She has noticed that humans have created a dangerous binary between themselves and nature. Seeing nature as something to be controlled and mastered by their technology, or something simply to be defended against the perceived evils of technology, the human race has forgotten that technology is actually just a natural means for humans to survive in the world, not a tool to destroy it. Björk instead wishes to see a move toward a greater understanding that humans and their technology *are* nature, and that responsible use of technology comes along with this interconnectivity.

Björk, though she embraces technology as natural, is highly critical of the humanist notion that such technology should be used to dominate the world around us. In recent years, she has been particularly outspoken against modern organized religion, which she sees as a force which is moving people away from being in union with nature, and towards a conception of anthropocentrism, where the rest of the earth is viewed simply as a resource for human survival. Christianity has specifically been implicated by Björk for its espousal of such anthropocentrism, and many scholars agree that Björk is not off-base in her criticism. Religious scholar David Kinsley notes that though the humanist project of taming nature “was opposed by established Christianity in the beginning,” the Church “eventually adapted to the modern world view and came to support and applaud the modern project of taming nature” (Kinsley 140). Theologian Francis A. Schaeffer notes that today, while not all Christians share the view that nature is outside of humans and should be dominated, certainly there are many that still do (40). Medieval historian Lynn White, in his treatise “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” agrees with Björk that “especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. . . . Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions . . . not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (qtd. in Kinsley 105). Björk is particularly concerned about how easily such justification for the exploitation of an inferior nature can blur into a similar justification for the exploitation of other humans who are also viewed as inferior. As we have seen previously, her 2004 all-vocal record *Medúlla* was her way to counter “stupid American racism and patriotism. I was saying, ‘What about the human soul? What happened before we got involved in problematic things like civilization and religion and nationhood?’” (Björk qtd. in Hoggard). Here, Björk notes how the

religious rhetoric of Bush's "war on terror" demonstrates how if one believes that God created a natural hierarchy with humans on top, it is easy to also make the claim that a similar hierarchy exists among humans themselves (in this case, with Americans on top).

With *Medúlla*, Björk wanted to tear down such a hierarchy. *Medúlla*, which means “marrow,” was chosen as the album title for its reference to physicality and earthiness, that which is common among all beings on earth (Sandall 2). It refers specifically to the “inner or deep part of an animal or plant structure,” and symbolizes Björk’s call for a symbolic return to the physical, that which sustains us and is our essential nature (“Medúlla”). Not a rejection of technology in favor of some literal return to a natural origin, *Medúlla* was instead a statement that, in the words of ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant, “some chemicals and forms of energy are life-sustaining; others are life-defeating. Those that lead to sickness on the planet or in the home cannot be tolerated” (Merchant 146). The songs on *Medúlla* are not anti-civilization, Björk says, but “are about ancestry and trying to go back to the core of civilization before religion and terrorism and George Bush. Living in New York post 9/11, I was repulsed by the fascism and patriotism that swept through America and the way I survived it was by encouraging my friends to switch off their TVs and stereos and just sing together” (Björk, *Uncut*).

For Björk, her skepticism surrounding Christianity’s view of nature is something that she has grown up with as a pagan Icelandic. “Compared to America, or even Europe, God isn’t a big part of our lives here [in Iceland],” she explains. “I don’t know anyone here who goes to church when he’s had a rough divorce or is going through depression or something. We go out into nature instead. Nature is our chapel” (Björk qtd. in Gunnarsson). For an Icelandic like Björk, it is ironic that Christians “build cathedrals in urban situations with tall ceilings to imitate nature” to “get a feeling for the sky” when “it is much easier to just take a trip into the Tundra” (Björk,

*Harp*). Clearly, it is not as easy to visit the Tundra for non-Icelanders, but her point is still well taken—the idea that a cathedral is inherently more spiritual than the wilderness is a concept refuted completely by pagans, who view all of nature as sacred.

If nature is a chapel, for Björk, the human body can be viewed as a building block in that greater structure. Far from seeing humans as some sort of deity-chosen masters of earth, she instead views our species in the context of a machine-like nature. *Medúlla* is not the only Björk album to channel the physical and mix it with the machine: comparing *Homogenic* to a living body, Björk saw it as a stripped down, nuts and bolts record where “voice celebrates the oxygen . . . ; the strings, the nerves . . . ; and the beat is the pulse” (Björk qtd. in McDonnell 63). This notion that organic and machine are more similar than not echoes Haraway, who has posited, “The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment” (490). Björk would probably agree with Haraway that “it is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. . . . There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic” (Haraway 489, 490). Björk and Haraway, then, complicate the reductive notion that humans have somehow been separated from nature by technology, posited by such scholars as Kinsley, who laments that “nature has become something one sees through a window. . . . Most of us live most of our lives in technological cocoons in which very little contact with or even observation of nature takes place” (139). Philosopher Sri Aurobindo agrees with Kinsley that “the multiplication of scientific processes has its disadvantages, as that tends, for instance, to develop a victorious artificiality which overwhelms our natural human life under a load of machinery . . .” (qtd. in Kealey 77). For Björk, however, such thinking errs when it places humans outside of technology and technology outside of nature. Björk, like Haraway,

believes that humans, as machines, are not above the sloppy mechanics of nature, as we would often like to believe. Rather, by blurring the lines between human, machine, and nature, she, like many “deep ecologists,” argues for a “world view that is supported by modern science but is rooted . . . in a subtle awareness of the oneness of all life . . .” (Spretnak and Capra qtd. in Curran 111).

The imagery from three of Björk’s videos reflects this concept that humans and nature are inextricably connected in a mechanical symbiosis. Björk, in all cases, is seen as deeply connected to her natural surroundings. In the video for 2004’s “Where is the Line?,” directed by sculptor Gabriela Fríðriksdóttir, we are presented with the extremely disturbing scene of Björk as some sort of artichoke mother-creature in a pasture, giving birth to a pale green humanoid. Once out of the “womb,” this slimy horror becomes covered with grass as it rolls and thrashes around, spewing a jelly like substance out of its mouth. Eventually, she accepts it back, causing a huge group of grass-mound creatures to surround and envelope her into the earth. In Spike Jonze’s video for “It’s in Our Hands” (a 2001 single not included on *Vespertine*), a pregnant Björk is seen walking with insects, frogs, and other such creepy-crawlies of the night, all magnified and shot in green and black film so as to make her equal in size and color with this swamp life. Similarly, though perhaps in a less dark manner, Alexander McQueen’s 1998 video for “Alarm Call” depicts Björk literally embracing the life of the swamp from a wooden raft, seemingly unafraid of the alligators and piranhas and the huge snake which slithers up her body between her legs. In all three videos, the message seems to be that many Christians, humanists and radical ecologists, who believe we are somehow outside the often dark and grotesque realities of nature, are simply victims of an illusion. Björk embraces such realities and posits that humans

are no better or worse than nature, but, like a bug or blade of grass, just another cog in its mechanics.

Though Björk has been particularly critical of the anthropocentrism of Christianity, she is by no means a blind follower of science, which, as we have seen, shares the responsibility for such anthropocentrism as much as does organized religion. Scientific inquiry seems to revolve around the idea that nature and technology are things which we as humans study, rather than arenas which we are a part of, and therefore places humans at the top of a hierarchy as much as Christianity. The simple fact alone that humans are the only species able to practice scientific inquiry, and that we generally trust that inquiry's discoveries, is enough to show that science at least reflects some of the same bias as religion. Though there are clear differences between faith and inquiry, it is still possible to view science as another sort of religion in itself, if we accept the fact that we must *believe* in the scientific process that humans themselves have created. As environmental political scholar Lester Milbrath explains, "Society plays a crucial role in knowledge development, in development of beliefs about how the world works, and in value clarification (or obfuscation). . . . Beliefs are crucial for shaping values and values are crucial for shaping beliefs" (65). Thus, if we choose to assume that values and belief are not a part of science, and that science is instead a fundamentally objective system, "we hand over part of the control of our future to those who shape science," for "*science that pretends to be value-free will serve the values of those who rule 'the establishment'*" (Milbrath 65, emphasis in original). Indeed, though science is based upon the observation of facts, those "facts" change over time, revealing that what was thought to be "fact" by one generation is fallacy to the next. There is clearly a human element here that defines what a fact is in the first place, as there is a human element in the transmission of religious texts and tenets, and yet in both instances, practitioners

will often view such facts or ideas as objective rather than relative. Both science and many organized religions, by placing absolute knowledge in the hands of humans alone, often place them outside concepts of nature and technology as manipulators, researchers, or creators, rather than as participants.

In pagan traditions, however, it is common to see humans, nature, and technology as inextricably connected, both scientifically *and* spiritually, rather than as levels of a hierarchy which places science or religion on top. Growing up in Iceland, which has a strong pagan tradition via Norse mythology, it makes sense that Björk would be able to blur these three concepts and undermine the boundaries that modern science and religion have set up between them.

In fact, the importance of the unique culture of Iceland to Björk's philosophy cannot be overstated. The Norwegian sagas, copied down by Icelander Snorri Sturluson during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, are still highly regarded by Icelanders and strongly affect their views on nature and technology. The myths are full of the pagan allusion to the immanence of the divine in nature, with each element of nature represented by a god or goddess. These deities often represent the power of nature and its potential for destruction: crashing ocean waves, thunder storms, wolves attempting to swallow the sun, and giants and eagles battering the earth with wind, all images which feature quite prominently in Iceland's barren terrain (Davidson, Lindow). What makes Iceland unique, in terms of modern conceptions of nature and technology, and specifically religion and science, is that though the myths of the sagas still play a strong part in its culture, "Iceland rates among the world's most technologically progressive nations; the inhabitants rank highly in Internet usage per capita and adapt to new technology with lightning quick reflexes" (Pytlik 2). Björk notes that this is actually common not just to Iceland,



but to many other countries which have become “Western civilized in fifty years. They took an aggressive shortcut. . . . They talk about having one foot in nature, in the mud, in mythology, and the other foot in mobile phones. I used to think that sort of thing was special [to] Iceland” (qtd. in McDonnell 23). This can be surprising to those in “First World” nations where myth and nature are often seen as in direct opposition to science and technology (think of the “back-to-the-land” hippie and New Age movements, for instance; or the stereotype of the pale computer geek who never sees the sun). Björk posits that this communion between nature and technology works in Iceland because it

has always been mad for information. We wrote the sagas—what, a thousand years ago?—documenting Scandinavian history. We were quick to take to the idea of home computers because they were all about making access to information easier. Some of the best Internet companies in the world are in Iceland, even though we have only 260,000 people. . . . We’re still connected to nature—my family still hunts for half our food, but using a mobile phone and a laptop to coordinate with other hunters. (Björk, *Wired*)

This easy wedding between nature and technology, between mythology and science, has permeated Björk’s music from the beginning. She notes that in Kukl, she and her bandmates were very conscious about “not forgetting about nature . . . not forgetting about the mythology that we have that is very strong in our culture” (qtd. in *Inside Björk*). It became even more marked starting with *Homogenic*, which Björk described as “going home, going back to Iceland and what I’m all about” (qtd. in Gittins 88). Icelandic Octet violinist Sigurbjorn Bernhardsson says that for the strings on *Homogenic*, “Björk wanted the rough sound of the wind, storms, the landscape, not a smooth European sound. I picked up her use of fifths straight away. Fifths are

very traditional in Icelandic folk music. . . . As soon as you hear that, you know right away this is Icelandic music” (qtd. in Gittins 88). Music scholar David Toop adds that this focus on Icelandic pagan imagery is not confined to traditional Western notions of nature, for it includes technology as well: “I do hear something in Björk’s music that seems to relate very strongly to the shamanistic idea that the world is full of spirits, and whether it’s the mobile phone or the laptop computer, those spirits are as strong whether they’re in new technology or whether they’re in the paddle of a canoe or a rock in a landscape” (qtd. in *Inside Björk*).

This unique blend of technology and pagan mythology within Icelandic culture can perhaps best be shown via a recent live performance in Detroit, Michigan, in which Björk performed a song from *Medúlla*, “Desired Constellation,” along with programmer Damian Taylor. The only instrumentation was a brand new digital sampler and sequencer (known as the Reactable) and Björk’s voice. While the stripped-down, low key song had an intimate feel suggestive of a traditional duet between voice and an acoustic instrument, in this case it was the futuristic Reactable providing accompaniment, a symbol of cutting-edge technology at its newest and flashiest. In fact, Björk’s *Volta* tour was the first to feature the Reactable since its development in the late 2000’s at a Barcelona university (*Reactable*). Taylor manipulated the instrument by placing small objects in varying spots on a luminous blue screen the size of a tympani drum, causing shifts in pitch and timbre that were reflected by laser-like beams shooting from the objects to the center of the screen. While Taylor wowed the crowd with this bizarre new invention, Björk sang pagan lyrics that brought to mind some sort of astral deity mimicking Taylor on the grand scale of the universe: “With a palm full of stars / I throw them like dice...repeatedly / On the table...repeatedly / ...until the desired constellation appears” (“Desired Constellation”).

This performance works as a metaphor for Björk's blurring of the boundaries between human, nature, and technology in general. Considering the fact that these lyrics explain "how" Björk's "going to make it right"—how she will cope with the dismal state of the world after Bush's reactionary post 9/11 politics—this performance is not only an example of Björk's mixing of cutting-edge technology and pagan mythological imagery; it is also a response to humans who arrogantly consider themselves above nature and who utilize technology not for survival but to control nature, including other humans ("Desired Constellation"). To those who make this mistake, Björk suggests a symbolic return to the roots of existence—to our physicality, our connection to each other, and our connection with the world around us, including the technology we create. She would agree with Curran when she warns that "an alienation imposed by hierarchical and anthropocentric thinking blinds humanity to the fact that they are a part of nature and that only by protecting nature can they protect themselves" (Curran 113). For Björk though, it is important to remember that technology is also nature, and therefore should not be feared as long as it is used wisely. Björk promotes neither a real return to a primitive, "natural" past, nor an arrogant belief in a human-dominated, "technological" future. Instead, she posits that humans, nature, and technology are in fact one and the same, and that, though we have a right to use technology, we also have a responsibility to take care of each other and the planet upon which we live.

### CHAPTER THREE: BETWEEN FEMININITIES

The term “feminist” is a word rife with multiple meanings for different people, conjuring up everything from the extremes of a heroic female freedom fighter to a bitter, man-hating “femi-Nazi.” For others, it just defines someone who believes that women should be treated as equal to men. Who is a feminist and who is not can be very confusing. There are those who see themselves as feminists, but are not seen as such by other feminists; there are those who act like feminists according to most definitions but do not perceive themselves as such (and may even be offended to be called a feminist); there are those who believe a feminist is a woman who is strong like a man and shows traditionally masculine traits; there are those who believe that a feminist is a woman who champions traditionally feminine traits; and there is every nuance in between all of these possibilities.

To understand the complexities surrounding feminism, one must first define what traditional masculine and feminine gender roles are. Gender is most often viewed as a social role rather than as a biological sex; gender roles are thus the learned roles that we equate with our biological sex. In our society, it has been historically “normal” for men to exhibit “masculine” traits (toughness, aggression, emotional distance, rationality, etc.) and for women to exhibit “feminine” traits (which are essentially just the opposite—emotionality, romanticism, passivity, fragility, nurturance, etc.). Along with these traits come visual cues: men should wear suits, women should wear dresses; boys should wear blue, girls should wear pink; women should wear make-up, men should not, etc. These gender polarities are even exhibited in the activities that men and women do: men are traditionally associated with commerce and business, women with the home and family; men are supposed to be interested in mechanics and technology, women

with literature and gardening; men are supposedly ravenous for sex while women should be selective about their partners, and on and on.

With these roles have also come hierarchies, and in most cases men have been on top of these hierarchies. Women have had to fight for such rights, freely given to men, as the right to vote, the right to work outside the home, the right to equal pay, the right to an abortion, the right to be considered an individual (rather than a husband's or father's property), and the right to be taken seriously for the same types of jobs as men, among others. Traditionally, masculine gender roles have been perceived as positive and praiseworthy, while feminine roles have been derided as their opposites, not fit for society outside of a very narrow scope of home, family, and sexual objectivity.

As outlined by feminist scholars such as Estelle B. Freedman and Ann Brooks, feminism, as a resistance to this inequality, has evolved through three generally agreed upon stages in history. It is the difference between these stages, and the overlap between them, in part, that has set up some of the confusion regarding exactly what a feminist is or is not today. *First wave feminists* are often described as the early fighters for women's political equality with men, approximately beginning with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, where Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other women demanded the end of legal and political "injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman" (qtd. in Freedman 17). *Second wave feminists* are generally described as those feminists in the late 1960's and in the 1970's who demanded liberation not so much politically, but from traditional feminine roles, specifically their roles as mothers and homemakers. Second wave feminists insisted that they could be just as successful as men in traditionally male-dominated occupations if given the chance. What defines *third wave feminists*, in the 1990's and the present, is less agreed upon, and in some cases, third wave

feminism is said not to exist at all. Some feminists described as third wave believe that the second wave went too far in denouncing traditional feminine roles and thus ended up simply imitating patriarchy. These feminists believe that women should celebrate traditional feminine roles as equally important to masculine ones, and thus reclaim them as symbols of power and pride. Another group, also often labeled as third wave feminists, wishes to question identity politics in the first place, calling themselves “postfeminists” (Brooks 1-10). These feminists utilize poststructuralist and postmodernist theory to critique the ideas of sex and gender in our society. Additionally, there have been important movements among women of color, lesbians, and young women that have brought to light the implicitly white, heterosexual, and middle-aged bias of the second wave.

While absolutely necessary in terms of making sure that the feminist movement is as inclusive as possible, the disagreements between varying feminisms have on some levels created schisms in what would otherwise be a unified front. The more intense and reactionary forms of such debate, while clarifying the terms of feminism, have also helped to create strict labels by which many women (and men) feel either pigeonholed, confused, or alienated. What results is a missed opportunity, as we have seen in previous chapters, for people to come together due to boundaries that are perhaps more artificial than they would seem.

Björk, as a female musician in a male-dominated industry and media, has often found herself forced into navigating these controversial boundaries. Not surprisingly, she has treated them as she has treated others: as nonexistent. Björk’s relationship with femininity is as complex as the debate about what femininity is in the first place. She is at once masculine and feminine, sexual and asexual, girl and woman; she has been staunchly pro-woman while at the same time avoiding the feminist label; and she is a mother of two as well as international superstar and

fashion icon. The bottom line is that Björk has carved her own version of femininity, jumping freely between perceived polarities, and in a sense, I will argue, has thus become the ultimate feminist: someone who refuses categorization and brings into question identity politics in the first place, thus defining for herself what it means to be feminine and to be a woman. By doing so, she has once again played the part of the post-modernist, blurring perceived social boundaries and questioning hierarchies.

### **The “Exotic Elf Woman-Child”: Iceland and Björk’s Femininity**

*I have had to deal with the elfin naïve nonsense stamp all my life and I have never seen an elf and I don’t think I’m naïve. (If I was from Boston making the same music, I wouldn’t be called naïve.)*

—Björk (Stylus)

If gender roles are indeed learned behaviors, then to look at Björk’s conception of femininity and relation to those roles that are ascribed to it, we must begin with Iceland. As with her relationships to the high/low art divide and the nature/technology binary, Iceland factors strongly here as well. There are three main ways Iceland has played a role in Björk’s femininity: one, in the influence of her unique family life, two, in the influence of the broader Icelandic culture, and three, in how she has been perceived outside of Iceland as an internationally known female artist.

When the Sugarcubes struck gold with their 1987 single “Birthday,” it was Björk that captivated the British, and then international, media’s attention. Her untamed, wildly emotional delivery during the song’s chorus seemed a mismatch to her small stature, girlish looks, and playful behavior onstage and on video. Though Björk was twenty one years old at the time, she looked all of sixteen, and the song’s lyrics, vaguely about the erotic fantasies of a little girl for an

older man, only enhanced this image of youth and naivety that would become a trademark of Björk's image (whether she likes it or not) up to the present day. The fact that she was from Iceland, a place remote and unknown to people in England and the U.S., along with her striking Inuit features, made her stand out even more to the international press. This combination of her passionate, bizarre singing voice, girlish looks, playful behavior, Icelandic background, and Inuit features, along with her obvious sexual appeal as a beautiful young woman, made Björk an exotic figure in the eyes of the music media. Quickly, she began to be referred to in the press as "naïve," "elfin," "woman-child," "Eskimo," "pixie," "sprite," and other such exoticizing and patronizing descriptions. (Never mind that at this point she was a mother of a one year old and was recently divorced!)

Most sources agree that Björk was initially complicit in her status as the childlike, "exotic, punky, and extraterrestrial" Icelandic pop singer (Pytlik 75). While Björk herself has never admitted to this complicity, comments during the early years of her solo career such as, "I like the weirdo tag I've got. It's quite flattering because it makes me seem far more interesting than I am," may have played into this view (qtd. in Lester 66). Regardless of whatever her real intentions have been, her image as the "elfin-pixie woman-child" has certainly aggravated some feminists who believe that it indulges certain men, who, in the words of feminist music critic Evelyn McDonnell, "prefer their grown women to be unintimidating and even helpless" or "who just can't get over their Lolita fantasies" (32). Feminist scholar Sheila Jeffreys would agree, as she deplores the "representation of women as children for men's excitement" as "kiddie porn" (100). McDonnell, for instance, despite being a huge Björk fan, admits in her book on Björk, *Army of She*, that "there are moments where Björk's so cutesy and coy . . . they make me want to pull a Bangkok airport on her [referring to Björk's physical attack of a journalist in 1996]" (36).



Yet, there are definitely reasons to believe that Björk was not as complicit in her “elfin pixie woman-child” image as some might think. First, she has openly criticized being labeled as such from the very beginning, as she did in a 1994 interview with journalist Liz Evans where she dismissed “all this ‘Elfin woman, Pixie woman’ stuff” as a way that the media in the UK and U.S. tried to exoticize her and Iceland (Björk qtd. in Evans 87,88). Second, if one looks at her family upbringing in Iceland, there is reason to believe that her childlike aspects are actually quite authentic rather than just some sort of act.

Björk, as I mentioned in the introduction, spent her childhood growing up in three separate spheres of influence—her father’s, her grandparents’, and her mother’s. Her main home, however, was in the hippie commune with her mother, where she had anything but a traditional upbringing. Hildur was an eccentric artist who did not subscribe to traditional feminine roles, including roles of motherhood. Björk, who has praised her mother for instilling her with her values of freedom and trusting her intuition, also remembers that Hildur would “listen to her heart and forget her duties, which got a bit mad sometimes, because she’d forget to bring me up” (qtd. in Evans 81). As a result, Björk says, “I became my own mum, very, very early on, and I developed a relationship to myself where I was the mum *and* the child” (qtd. in McDonnell 33).

The upside to this was, in the words of McDonnell, that “her parents never beat the child out of her; it’s her unquenched wonder, untamed imagination and unbridled enthusiasm that power her genius” (33). From an early age, then, Björk was not forced into the box of traditional gender roles for girls, nor asked to “act like an adult.” As she herself explains, “I was quite conscious that I wanted permission to be able to be sad and funny, and human and crazy and silly, and childish and wise, because I think everybody is like that” (Björk qtd. in Pareles, “At

Home Again . . .”). In their book *The Sex Revolts*, Simon Reynolds and Joy Press posit that Peter Pan’s “refusal to grow up is as much an evasion of adult sexuality and gender divisions as it is clinging to childish wonder and playfulness” (241). Following this line of thinking, it is certainly possible that Björk’s girlish behavior and image could partly be a way of refusing to be boxed in by gender norms. A statement she gave in 1994 seems to validate this:

Women are just not allowed to be characters. . . . If a woman hasn’t got a certain figure or doesn’t make an effort to remain on a level which is considered feminine, she isn’t in the game. If you had a woman who was the equivalent of Woody Allen, charming, brilliant, and with her own personality, she’d be nowhere. That pisses me off more than being dismissed as an Eskimo or whatever, because if I had to pick between the hunk and Woody Allen, I’d say I was more in the Woody Allen category! (Björk qtd. in Evans 90)

McDonnell notes that the fact that Björk was encouraged from an early age to act outside of gender norms is a privilege not common for many girls: “Bohemian households such as Hildur’s are often breeding grounds for extraordinary talents. Björk is the most successful of a whole generation of little girls who were thankfully never told that they should be seen and not heard” (19). It is probable, then, that the childish demeanor of Björk has actually been a product of her demand to be herself (encouraged by Hildur) rather than some conscious act of guile.

It is not the influence of Hildur alone, but also that of Icelandic culture in general that gave Björk the confidence to live outside of feminine gender expectations. Iceland has been one of the most progressive, pro-women countries in the world: it has a feminist political party and was the first country ever to elect a female president (McDonnell 37). This leader, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir (president from 1980-1996), has publicly compared Björk to the strong women of

the national sagas, such as Brynhild and Aud the Deep-Minded (Ross). Having role models of women in positions of power in both politics and in mythology certainly must have helped shape her view of what it meant to be a woman, and therefore gave her confidence in her own potential that girls in other cultures may not have had.

Even if she might be portrayed as childlike by the media, in truth, Björk is very much the strong woman that Finnbogadóttir suggests she is. McDonnell found this out when she first met Björk in the late 1990's: "Although I'm one year older than Björk, I felt intimidated, like I was conversing with someone far more worldly and experienced than myself. . . . This was not the 'elfin woman-child' I expected to meet" (60). As it turns out, Björk has just as much of her father Guðmund in her as she does of her mother: she is a hard worker, a family woman, and very much a responsible adult who knows how to fight for her existence (Evans 81; Björk and Sigurðsson 29). Her main loyalty, rather than to superstardom, has always been to values of work and family. In fact, quite early on, her music career came very close to being put on hold (perhaps permanently): "When the Sugarcubes insanity took off, I had a one year old boy. I decided that if he didn't like riding on busses, I would abandon music and head for the fish factory. He liked riding on busses" (Björk qtd. in Gunnarsson).

On the subject of family, Icelandic culture was also a major factor in forming Björk's values as a strong and confident woman. Unlike in countries such as England or the U.S., Björk didn't have to worry about being stigmatized when she was teen and pregnant in 1985-86. Iceland's progressive outlook on teen pregnancy meant that she and partner Þor Eldon (fellow Sugarcube and father of her son Sindri) could get married and get immediate economic assistance from the government (Pytlík 26). Importantly, this economic stability also enabled Björk to remain active in music while still being a mother, and there was little social pressure on

her to drop her career and become a housewife. It is obvious that in a different situation, where Björk would have been made to feel ashamed and stigmatized, and been without aid, she may have developed into a much different person than the one she is today.

Icelandic culture has also allowed Björk to disregard the notion that pop musicians are at their peak early in their careers. This conception is especially common for women, who are often judged by the media upon their youthful beauty as much as their artistic talent. While in the UK and America, where a woman is considered “over the hill” at seemingly younger and younger ages, in Iceland, maturity is not something to be feared by female pop artists. “When people tell me [*Vespertine*’s] mature, I go ‘WHOO-HOO!’” Björk said in 2001. “It’s my favorite word. Everybody else goes, ‘Whoops, reminds me of cheese’” (qtd. in Pytlik 160). In a dual interview with avant-garde pianist Meredith Monk in 2004, she explained how her homeland has helped her rise above the media’s expectations:

One thing [Icelanders] have always had is literature. . . . This idea that people are at their peak at twenty five, you would never expect that from a writer.

Everybody’s going, ‘Yeah, that’s OK for a twenty five year old,’ and everybody’s just waiting for his big novel when he’s maybe sixty, when he will mature into that. So, I’d be in Iceland . . . and feel the expectations that maybe I would do my good stuff around sixty or seventy, and then I go to Europe and do interviews and I get this sort of other projection . . . and for me, my first album was just a rehearsal. (Monk and Björk)

Iceland has definitely had a profound impact on Björk’s femininity and relation to gender expectations. Her stereotype as the “exotic elf woman-child” seems to stem more from her upbringing and homeland culture than it does from a conscious image projection. In the end, her

ability to be simultaneously childlike and mature should be seen more as something to be admired rather than derided, for it is symbolic of Björk's ability to disregard common gender expectations for women. Her continued conversation with Monk demonstrates this:

I come quite natural as a granny or as a kid. It doesn't matter what age I am. I've always been able to relate more easier [sic] to those parts in myself. I always knew that between twenty and forty would be kind of confusing, you know, and I remember as a kid looking at my gran and thinking, 'I can't wait for this part to start' and looking at my mum and just thinking, 'Ick! Don't like it!' . . . Twenty to forty is like, 'Who am I? Who do I love?', this kind of looking . . . and I always knew as a kid, intuitively, that that would be the tough part and that forty would be when I'd kind of roll up my sleeves and do the real work . . . so this kind of like twenty seven year old kind of 'hot woman/sex object'—it so didn't happen! (Laughs). And so it never was really that interesting to me. (Monk and Björk)

### **The “F” Word: Björk and Feminism**

*Björk is a perfectly wonderful feminist icon. Even if she doesn't want to be.*

—*Evelyn McDonnell (36)*

Despite the fact that Björk has been a strong, independent, and groundbreaking female artist and celebrity, her relationship with the feminist movement has been anything but smooth. A main reason for this has been that Björk has steadfastly refused to identify with the movement throughout her career. This might seem confusing for someone who McDonnell calls a “perfectly wonderful feminist icon,” but upon closer inspection, it makes sense (36). Due to her privileged upbringing in pro-woman Iceland, she has been able to assume that she should be able

to exist outside of any gender expectations. Like fellow early-1990's pop artists Tori Amos and PJ Harvey, she resents that the focus is on her femininity rather than her art. This is in contrast to other strong, independent female musicians like Sarah McLachlan or Ani DiFranco, who have been vocal in their support of the feminist movement both lyrically and in interviews, and have been active in the movement themselves. Björk's refusal to do the same has brought her much criticism from many feminists, but despite her resistance to the feminist label, her actions and values have proven that she should, without a doubt, be considered a feminist icon.

Part of the resistance to the idea of Björk as a feminist icon is understandable, as she has been openly critical of feminists and their methods in the past, especially early in her career. Describing her 1979 female punk band, Spit and Snot, she once said that they "were very tired of the negative feminists who were always feeling sorry for themselves. . . . We were like, 'Hey, we can do it!' It was about girls having fun . . ." (Björk qtd. in Lester 10). McDonnell notes that Björk has also "dismissed the protest politics of early-nineties punk feminists . . . saying 'If the Riot Grrrls had been born in the '30's or '50's, then they could moan and whine'" (37). Still an influential movement today, the Riot Grrrls (comprised of all-girl punk rock bands) "discuss their feelings of alienation from a boy-dominated hardcore punk scene in which they're marginalized; they decry the ideals of perfect femininity; they write moving confessional accounts of their experiences of harassment and sexual abuse" (Reynolds and Press 323). They also reclaim words like slut and whore as badges of pride, and often dress like prepubescent girls, which music critics Reynolds and Press speculate might be out of nostalgia for a time before they were sex objects (325, 326). To Björk, however, these women were complainers who were hurting themselves by not taking advantage of what she perceived as the opportunities won by older feminists.

But some feminists were quick to point out the problems with Björk's argument. Feminist blogger "Mymble" feels that such messages imply, falsely, that all women have been liberated: "For Bjork to cheerfully assert that 'women' have been 'let out of their cage' smacks of the most luxurious disregard for the experiences of anyone ranked below the middle-class white female of the developed world in the world hierarchy of women. Stick to the beats and strings, Bjork, and leave the Feminism talk until you've thought about it more deeply" (Mymble). McDonnell says that to dismiss feminists as complainers "is classic postfeminist balderdash, a belief that an improvement in choices and conditions for some means that equality has been achieved for all...and the sure sign of a privileged upbringing" (37). It is hard to argue with McDonnell on this point. Björk's upbringing in Iceland did seem to insulate her from the realities of patriarchy that other women continued to face in less progressive countries. Such lyrics as 1995's "Army of Me" certainly could be read in this light: "And if you complain / Once more / You'll meet an / Army of Me" (Björk, "Army of Me"). So while Björk was indeed very pro-woman, autonomous and independent, she certainly was blinded by the idea that this was as easy for everyone else as it was for her (she has since changed her view, as we will see later).

Much of her early distaste for such political feminist rock as the Riot Grrrl movement can be understood from her belief that she and other women should be simply viewed as artists, not as "female artists." Björk was openly critical of McLachlan's Lilith Fair, for instance, calling it "a step backwards" because it created "more isolation" by allowing only female artists to perform at it (qtd. in Piku). While her belief that artists should be viewed outside of gender is a noble idea, the reality is that the male-dominated music industry and media make this nearly impossible. In the field of pop, and especially rock, it is especially difficult for women to leave

their feminine selves out of their art. The reason for this is the long tradition of the traditionally masculine, often anti-woman, culture of rock music, coupled with the parallel tradition of the highly sexualized, unintimidating female pop singer managed and packaged by and for men. For rebellious women who buck the pop singer stereotype, Reynolds and Press note that pop and rock offer few avenues for them to do this outside of imitating men. The question for Reynolds and Press “is whether it’s possible to rival male rock’s extremity of expression, while severing the music from the anti-woman impetus that so often underwrites its force” (235). They have distinguished three other approaches outside of this “tomboy” imitation of masculine norms: “female strength,” such as in the case of the Riot Grrrl bands, offers a “different but equivalent strength”; postmodern “masquerade” involves acting out different stereotypical female personas in an attempt to criticize or reclaim them (Madonna is an example); and lastly, “all fluxed up” artists challenge the very idea of identity itself (they include Björk in this final category) (Reynolds and Press 233-235). Some of the tension between Björk and the Riot Grrrls could be due to their different approaches to their feminine musical identities.

While she has been critical of Björk’s stance on the feminist movement, McDonnell does admit that “Björk has certainly done more than her part to expand the repertoire of characters available to women” (39). This jibes with Reynolds’ and Press’ contention that “fluxed up” artists like Björk are closer to scholar Julia Kristeva’s idea of the *subject-in-progress*, where “identity is seen as an open space rather than structure, full of . . . divided impulses and contradictory desires” (qtd. in Reynolds and Press 354). Whereas McDonnell still felt that “something was missing” with Björk’s approach to feminism, and therefore was initially skeptical about her as a feminist icon, Kristeva’s scholarly work seems to suggest that Björk may actually be a new kind of feminist (McDonnell 39). Kristeva posits in “Women’s Time” that



there have been three phases in the feminist movement, roughly equating with the “waves” of feminism discussed earlier: the first phase was rooted in political and economic equality; the second in cultural and sexual equality; and the third and most recent is more interested in refusing the masculine/feminine binary altogether and thus questioning and denying identity itself (Kristeva, “Women’s Time” 193-195).

But the question for some feminists might be whether or not an artist like Björk, who wishes to deny identity politics altogether, would undermine the cause of feminism for women who take a more overtly political approach. One such feminist, Roseann Mandzuik, worries that “if feminism relinquishes the authority of identity in favor of an elided distinction between politics and pleasures, we have gained nothing but an invitation to participate in the endless dance of non-commitment” (qtd. in Brooks 155). Feminist scholar Judith Butler thinks that this is not an issue, positing that “the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics, rather it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated. This kind of critique brings into question the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated” (qtd. in Brooks 192). Could it be, then, that the coy, glitter faced Björk could be just as political as the in-your-face Riot Grrrl with “WHORE” scrawled on her arm?

Reynolds and Press suggest, as does Butler, that there might actually be “something missing” (to quote McDonnell) with the Riot Grrrls’ approach rather than with Björk’s. As Reynolds and Press point out, Riot Grrrls “may criticize tomboy rockers, but musically they *sound* like tomboys” (327). In other words, their heavy investment in identity politics may obscure the fact that, in the end, their performance, music, and lyrics are actually quite masculine, despite their dresses. “If there’s a problem with the new surge of female activity in

rock,” suggest Reynolds and Press, “it’s that innovations have remained mostly at the level of content . . . rather than formal advances. Where are the great female sonic wizards?” (387).

Perhaps Reynolds and Press need look no further than Björk. McDonnell suggests that what she herself initially “failed to appreciate was that by eschewing guitars for samplers, Björk was in many ways the most radical girl of all” (49). Because women have traditionally been sparse in technological professions and hobbies, Björk has indeed been a groundbreaker, not only by participating prominently in electronic music, but by being an innovator in the field. McDonnell notes that while Björk has certainly offered a new model for women in electronica, she is still one in a million: “This is as true in music as in rocket-building and computers; there are pitifully few female engineers, sound mixers, DJ’s, and producers” (49, 50).

What are the reasons for this lack of women in the technological sphere? Scholar Anne Balsamo suggests that it has not been easy to find specific causes for this scarcity because “gathering even basic biographical material about the women who participated in traditionally male-dominated technical and professional fields . . . is not an easy task” (151). Technology historian Joan Rothschild points out that, at any rate, there has been, and still is, a “literal identification of the male with technology” (qtd. in Balsamo 152). Balsamo posits that the field is difficult for women to get into for the same reasons that women have struggled in other spheres of society: historical and structural barriers to women’s equality with men. In technological fields, these “range from formal prohibition against women’s education to legal restrictions of women’s property rights” (Balsamo 151). Those women in history who have pushed the technological envelope were often forced to patent their inventions and discoveries under their brothers’ or husbands’ names (Balsamo 151). Additionally, women’s use of technology has often been restricted simply to “use” itself—clerical and task specific—and in

terms of *creating* technology, they are often found in low-paying factory jobs such as making silicon chips for cheap electronics (Balsamo 153).

Somehow, Björk has been able to transcend these gender boundaries in electronic music and become a force in the field. Bucking the stereotype of the pop singer who has an army of producers and lyricists polishing and molding her music, Björk instead has been hands on throughout the entire creative process. “She’s very much taken a producer role. . . . She’s not one of those passive singers who has everything done for her,” says collaborator and electronic musician Graham Massey (12). Indeed, though 2001’s *Vespertine* was her first record as sole producer, Björk has been crafting electronic music since she was a young girl. Despite working in an unbelievably male-dominated arena, with big name producers such as Massey, Nellee Hooper, and Mark Bell, chauvinist bad-boys such as Tricky, and legendary control-freaks such as Timbaland, Björk has always had her hands on the console, her fingers on the buttons, and the last word on any and all of the fantastic electronic sounds that she puts on her records. In the process, she has been a musical innovator in a field where women are usually seen as little more than sexy bodies on the dance floor.

Is Björk a feminist icon then? It would certainly seem so, although her relationship with the movement has certainly been strained. Perhaps it is just a question of approach—it seems that Björk is more of a role model than a protester or political fighter. While critical of the exclusivity of Lilith Fair, for instance, she meanwhile composed lyrics dedicated to the Jewish feminist icon and festival namesake for Plaid’s song “Lilith” in 1997. Her privilege, though it has certainly at times blinded her to the limitations placed on other women, has allowed her to believe in herself from day one, and to break into technological spheres normally devoid of women. Importantly, too, as she has grown older, Björk has realized her error in some of her

criticisms of feminism, and considers 2007's *Volta* to be a feminist album (the Conclusion will discuss this in greater detail). In the end, while she may have a history of criticizing Riot Grrrls, McLachlan, and others unfairly, and while she still has not gone on record as a "feminist," she acts and lives as a feminist icon who attempts to rise above identity politics, and who breaks ground for women in the process.

### **The Other "F" Word: Can a Fashionista Be a Feminist?**

*She claims she's not an actress, but she certainly knows how to create a persona.*

*This is a woman who knows how to use a camera.*

—Zeena Parkins (*qtd. in McDonnell 17*)

One of the hallmarks of traditional femininity has been strong interest in fashion and appearance. It is no surprise, then, that fashion has been a sticking point, a bone of contention, between second wave and certain third wave feminists. For many feminists of the 1970's, traditional women's fashion, i.e. makeup, dresses, high heels, jewelry, etc., was something to escape. They saw it as a function of patriarchy, citing the idea that an interest in fashion meant an interest in pleasing and attracting men, and thus being complicit in becoming a sexual object. For radical feminist Sheila Jeffreys, author of *Beauty and Misogyny*, "fashion is no trivial matter and requires the serious attention of political theorists because it is crucial to creating the difference/deference [between men and women] and underpins women's subordination" (106). For many young feminists since the 1990's, however, fashion is something that should be celebrated, as should women's ability to be sexy. These feminists claim that by avoiding or criticizing traditionally feminine dress and style, women are unwittingly criticizing femininity, and thus aligning themselves with the patriarchal notion that champions masculinity over femininity. As scholars Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards put it, the second wave, due to

their being historically forced into feminine roles, consequently overreacted with the opposite “notion that to be a ‘good girl’ you had to master ‘boy things.’ That girls should do this while rejecting femininity. *Go to work, play sports, be tough, but don’t do it while wearing nail polish, pink uniforms, or crying*” (60, emphasis in original). Baumgardner and Richards advocate the reclaiming of the term “girlie” as a positive symbol. In their terms, “Girlie says we’re not broken, that our desires aren’t simply booby traps set by the patriarchy. Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation—Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels—and says using them isn’t shorthand for ‘we’ve been duped’” (60).

How do these feminists simultaneously rebel against patriarchy and yet champion the fashion that many second wave feminists see as a form of bondage to men? A shift in perspective is certainly needed to understand this paradox. For scholar Meaghan Morris, “this means studying not how people *are* in a passively inherited culture (‘tradition’) but what they *do* with the cultural commodities that they encounter and use in everyday life” (qtd. in Brooks 142). Yes, says Morris, women do inherit the fashion culture from a patriarchal tradition, but they can reclaim it as a symbol of pride and power rather than see it as imposed upon them. French feminist Luce Irigaray says that to do this is “to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it” (qtd. in Reynolds and Press 318).

For many feminists, “girlie” third wave feminism is, at best, a way for these girls to have their cake and eat it too. For Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth*, the “beauty cult” is just a way for a patriarchal society to distract women from their own liberation, and therefore “girlie” feminism works *against* the feminist struggle for equality (Reynolds and Press 333). Jeffreys feels that what she calls “liberal” (as opposed to “radical”) feminists “do not consider the limitations of the ‘pleasure’ and ‘power’ that beauty practices offer, or the ways in which they

contribute to women's condition of subordination" (13). She claims that "the fact that some women say that they take pleasure in [beauty] practices is not inconsistent with their role in the subordination of women" because these women have fallen prey to "the guise of free will and choice" created by advertisers in the fashion industry (Jeffreys 27; Callaghan qtd. in Jeffreys 27). Jeffreys and Wolf, then, see woman who wear traditionally feminine fashion and read women's fashion magazines as, in the words of cultural scholar Stuart Hall, "cultural dopes . . . living in a permanent state of false consciousness" (qtd. in Hollows 13).

If women who are into fashion are indeed "cultural dopes," then this would seriously complicate Björk's ability to be a feminist icon despite her autonomy, confidence, innovation, and success within a patriarchal music industry. For *Debut* not only made Björk a musical star, it also made her a "left-field fashion icon" sought by such big designers as Jean-Paul Gaultier and Jean-Baptiste Mondino (Lester 50). Though she refused to be photographed by Stephen Meisel (the photographer for Madonna's book *Sex*) for Gap ads and an Italian *Vogue* spread, she embraced fashion and image early on, much like Madonna before her (Lester 50; Pytlik 70). Björk claims that she fell into her role as a fashion icon rather than worked at it—her initial "fashion sense," which became so popular with the fashion media in the UK, surrounded her use of second hand clothing, which Björk claimed was simply out of economic necessity so that she could afford more records. Then, with the renewed popularity of environmentalism in the early 1990's, her "fashion sense" became cool (Evans 88, 89). "I don't look at myself as a fashion person at all," Björk said in an interview early in her solo career. "In fact, I really hate the fashion industry and all the bollocks that comes with it, so it's a bit ironic that suddenly, for some strange reason, people think I'm really clever about it" (qtd. in Lester 51).

Yet, for all of her seeming innocence regarding fashion early on, Björk clearly has become a fashionista if she did not start off as one. Most Americans still know her more by the swan dress that she wore to the Oscars than they do her music. From the beginning of her solo career, she “found it hard to deny her love for such cutting-edge, and expensive, designers as Martin Margiela and Ann Demeulemeester” (Lester 51). This was no simple thrift store shopper: the cover of *Debut* was shot by Jean-Baptiste Mondino, a famous fashion designer/photographer; big time designer Alexander McQueen (whom Jeffreys accuses of causing “egregious cruelty” to his female models) did the cover for 1997’s *Homogenic* as well as the video for “Alarm Call”; and famously combative French fashion photographer Stephane Sednaoui not only directed two videos and a concert film for Björk, but was also her lover for nearly a year in 1994 (Jeffreys 98). Björk has worn avant-garde fashions by Junya Watanabe, Martin Margiela, and Hussein Chalayan. She was once named #19 on a list of the “100 Most Influential People in Fashion” by fashion magazine *The Face* (McDonnell 53). There was an entire Björk fashion photo spread in the August 15, 2004 issue of the *New York Times*, wherein she modeled clothing worth thousands of dollars, and available at some of the finest stores in New York.

How do we reconcile the thrift store shopping, record collecting, “one of the guys” Björk with the fashionista setting the latest trends and modeling the hippest dresses from designers who are consistently accused by such feminists as Jeffreys as misogynists? Scholar Marjorie Garber notes that “the woman constructed by culture is . . . , according to [fellow theorist Joan] Riviere, already an impersonation. Womanliness is mimicry, is *masquerade*” (qtd. in Reynolds and Press 290, emphasis in original). For Garber and Riviere, Björk’s smart fashion sense should be viewed as such a masquerade, and there would be no contradiction in her appearing in old, floppy sweaters sometimes, and flashily expensive gowns at others. Björk, as a woman in the

public eye, is simply donning different identities that say nothing explicitly about her politics. Her image as a fashionista does not contradict her image as a feminist icon. Indeed, though many second wave feminists see women's fashion as "a form of 'bondage'"—the girdle and stiletto being frequently used as examples—third wave feminists such as Baumgardner and Richards note that while "many young feminists do not take rejecting consumerism as their major organizing principle," this does not mean that they are not pro-woman and do not resist patriarchy (Hollows 139; Baumgardner and Richards 62). Teresa de Lauretis, a feminist film theorist, notes that donning varying different feminine masques can act like "a new dress which, even when required, does give some pleasure to the wearer" (qtd. in Reynolds and Press 290). For these feminists, a woman does not have to give up pleasure in order to remain political, does not have to give up fashion in order to make a feminist statement.

Björk, for instance, is anything but a "cultural dope." Though she associates with fashion designers and clearly gets enjoyment out of wearing their products, she is fiercely independent about her style. While she has worn some very expensive clothing, she does not do it to gain any sort of class status, and is quite critical of those parts of the industry that associate themselves with this status: "A lot of fashion is about control, all these big companies telling you, 'If you don't spend that much money, you're not fashionable'" (Björk qtd. in Pytlik 153). And while she is flattered by the attention given to her fashion sense, and "can't imagine that someone wouldn't be if Italian *Vogue* offered to do twelve pages on them," Björk says that "after a while you get the feeling that they're misunderstanding something, and they're expecting something you can't give, because it isn't you" (qtd. in Evans 88). "I like the creative angle, where people express themselves," she maintains. "But I don't like it when it's too much of people being told



what to do, and too much like . . . fascism, of magazines telling women to starve themselves, and they obey! . . . It makes women very unhappy” (Björk qtd. in Vernon).

It is this willingness and desire to express herself that draws Björk to fashion, especially outlandish and experimental fashion. Whereas a feminist like Susan Brownmiller might hold that “trousers are practical” because “they cover the lower half of the body without nonsense and permit the freest of natural movements,” Björk considers a T-shirt and jeans to be “a symbol of white American imperialism, like drinking Coca-Cola” (Brownmiller qtd. in Hollows 141; Björk qtd. in Hoggard). Whereas Brownmiller implies that wearing women’s fashions is some sort of “nonsense” that one would only do to seem sexually attractive to men, Björk’s desire to express herself is more ambiguous than that. “I’m not vain, like, ‘I want to look pretty,’” she says. “That’s never bothered me. . . . If I see a photograph of me and I look tired, then I’d be more worried than if I looked ugly” (Björk qtd. in Vernon). Björk complicates the commonly held notion by some feminists that an interest in fashion automatically means nothing more than a desire to please men. As Kate Gleeson and Hannah Frith (of England’s Centre for Appearance Research) point out, “Ambiguity is a crucial means for women to negotiate their way through contradictory identities as women who are attractive without actively seeking admiring glances, who are sexual but not too sexual, and who are clothed without deliberately creating a look” (112). This idea fits Marjan Pejoski’s famous swan dress, which Björk wore to the 2000 Oscars, perfectly: a frilly, feminine, and fitting dress which showed off Björk’s legs, it also featured a swan wrapping its neck around Björk’s shoulders and four stuffed “swan eggs” which she dropped in random places throughout the evening from her feather-coated skirt.

Björk’s fashion message—“have fun, be proud, be sexy, and be yourself”—in the end seems a more positive one than Brownmiller’s or Jeffreys’, which roughly equates to wearing

men's clothes so as not to draw attention. Björk tells young girls to be themselves and refuse limitation, rather than to conform to some established feminist uniform. As she told *Hot Press* magazine in 1994, when asked how she felt about all of the girls imitating her style at the time: "I follow my instincts, and if that supports young girls in any way, great. But I'd rather they saw it more about a lesson in following their own instincts rather than imitating somebody" (Lester 51, 52). In the end, isn't that really one of the ultimate goals of feminism—the right to be the woman that one wants to be, not the woman others think she should be? As Björk observed in 2005,

It's interesting for me to bring up a girl. You go to the toy store and the female characters there—Cinderella, the lady in *Beauty and the Beast*—their major task is to find Prince Charming. And I'm like, wait a minute—it's 2005! We've fought so hard to have a say, and not just live through our partners, and yet you're still seeing two-year-old girls with this message pushed at them that the only important thing is to find this amazing dress so that the guy will want you. (qtd. in Hoggard)

It would appear that a fashionista can indeed be a feminist.

### **Big Time Sensuality: Defining Her Own Sexy**

*She can be very much in your face, and she can be sexual, but she's not going to be cliché sexual.*

*—Joy Press on Björk (qtd. in Inside Björk)*

Sex, obviously, is a part of life, the very act that brings life about. It should come as no surprise, then, that being sexually attractive (sexy) is something that most sane people care about for the better part of their lives, at least to some degree. For women, though, the ante has been

upped in regard to sexiness—in many societies, women are caught in a double bind between two polarities: being the chaste virgin or the Babylonian whore. Women are either asked to look as sexy as possible or to cover up their sexiness as much as they can. Often, they are asked to do both. In Western culture, there has been an ever increasing demand for sexual appeal from celebrity women, so much so that it is more common than not for female celebs to have plastic surgery in order to live up to the nearly impossible standard of “sexy” expected of them. This standard comes in more than one flavor; however, whether it be the blond beach girl, the bootylicious r&b star, the stiletto and garter dominatrix, the exotic geisha, or any other number of stereotypes, there are still clear boundaries about what is sexy and what is not.

Feminists have been quick to point out, rightly, that these standards, these stereotypes, have been created by men. Men have essentially defined what it means to be a sexy woman in society. On a biological level this might make some sense, at least for heterosexuals, in that there are obviously selections to be made based on some form of physical criteria, and in that way women have defined what the sexy man looks like as well. However, feminists are also right to point out that the criteria are much narrower for women, and come with quite a bit of negative baggage, such as when women who fit these criteria are simultaneously lusted after but also derided as “whores” or “bimbos.”

Many feminists have therefore defined themselves against the term “sexy” because of its patriarchal connotations. Wolf says that popular conceptions of “sexy” are really little more than “beauty pornography and beauty sadomasochism, which arose to put the guilt, shame, and pain back into women’s experience of sex,” and that they express a sexiness that “strikes to the root of [a woman’s] sexuality by making her feel sexually unlovely” (132, 148). It has already been noted how such feminists as Brownmiller and Jeffreys have been highly critical of “sexy”

women's fashion that reveals skin or fits tightly to women's bodies. French feminist Monique Wittig claims that

The category of sex is the product of heterosexual society that turns half of the population into sexual beings. Wherever they are, whatever they do (including working in the public sector), [women] are seen (and made) sexually available to men, and they, breasts, buttocks, costume, must be visible. They must wear their yellow star, their constant smile, day and night. (qtd. in Jeffreys 22)

However, some, like Adrienne Rich, have suggested that women need to embrace sexiness, but on their own terms: "Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny" (qtd. in Reynolds and Press 346). Wolf, too, notes that rather than abandon sexiness, it is more important to promote "sexual imagery that affirms the female point of view" and that criticizes "the cultural prohibition against seeing men's bodies as instruments of pleasure," implying that a concept of sexy must work two ways and not just towards women in the male gaze (148).

Björk has definitely embraced her own physicality outside of this male gaze, and considers herself to be a very sexy woman in a truly *sexual* sense rather than in just how she looks. Like Rich suggests, her definition of sexy does not reside within the boundaries of the patriarchal stereotypes of sexy. For Björk, sexy is quite a bit more ambiguous than the term is often thought of. "I find it very difficult to draw a line between what's sex and what isn't," she muses. "It can be very, very, sexy to drive a car, and completely unsexy to flirt with someone at a bar" (Björk qtd. in Evans 84). Her own sexual image is complicated and paradoxical. On one level, she is still looked at as the "elfin pixie woman-child," and therefore seems somewhat

asexual or presexual. However, while Björk has appeared in plenty of body-hiding clothes, there is also a famous poster of her standing in a field with three leaves strategically placed on her otherwise naked body, with her eyes closed and an expression of ecstasy on her face.

McDonnell says that this “direct eroticism is part of what gives her girlie act teeth, makes her beguiling instead of cutesy” (53).

Putting these paradoxes together adds up to a typically postmodern Björk take on sexy, somewhere in between the virgin and the whore, and also completely outside of the binary altogether. Her demand is, as usual, to be able to express her sexual self as she would like, whether that be wearing a bag or wearing nothing above the waist but pearls sewn into her skin. This places her at once inside and outside of a debate between second wave and many third wave feminists, revolving around a contention similar to that over fashion—can one be sexy in a traditional way and still be a feminist? Not according to Jeffreys, who alleges that “the fashion industry sells prostitution and pornography” and that traditionally sexy postfeminist icons like Madonna take “men’s sadomasochist and prostitution fantasies out of brothels and pornography into the malestream [sic] entertainment industry” (75, 77). For feminist writers Baumgardner and Richards, however, such scholars as Jeffreys have become just as oppressive to women as patriarchy. They contend that by the 1990’s, “the barrier to [women’s] individuality and individual expression was no longer ‘the patriarchy’ that hobbled the second wave, but *feminism* (and, too often, older feminists who didn’t understand young women’s midriff-baring tops or thong underwear)” (65). They note that instead of avoiding traditionally sexy attire, in the feminist play *The Vagina Monologues*, “women wear mini-skirts (and look fabulous and happy, sexy and proud) and simultaneously claim it as something they own” (Baumgardner and Richards 64).

For Björk, this debate is too limiting on both sides. It seems that her definition of sexuality has less to do with attracting or not attracting sexual partners as much as it has to do with being in touch with her own body. As we shall see in greater detail in the coming pages, Björk views sexuality and sexy as essentially feminine traits. This puts her in the same camp as French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous, who wrote that “more so than men who are coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation, women are body” (355). Whether or not this is viewed as an essentialist argument does not matter to Cixous or Björk; what is more important is that it enables them to define sexy on terms that are their own rather than men’s or other women’s. It allows them the freedom to be sexual and erotic in ways that are creative rather than conformist, ways that are specific to *their* bodies, and that are therefore less clichéd. “There’s always been an erotic side to [my work],” Björk notes, “but it isn’t the most traditional way of, um, like fishnet stockings and S&M outfits. . . . I’ve always felt that was a bit the easy way out” (qtd. in *Inside Björk*).

Björk’s very original and personal concept of sexy wreaks havoc with traditional ideas of the concept. In some ways, her markers of sexy are familiar to the viewer, but often accompanied by styles or mannerisms that complicate and confuse these traditional markers. One great example is her 1994 performance live on *MTV Unplugged*. Wearing a very tiny lemon-yellow one piece dress (which bares her entire back and nearly all her legs) and with heavy eye makeup and lipstick along with very traditional shoulder-length hair, she fits the traditional stereotype of the sexy young woman to a tee. Her skin seems smooth and perfect, and she looks much younger than her twenty eight years of age. Björk initially comes off as the perfect target for Jeffreys’ or Wittig’s criticism of the “cultural dope,” but as the performance goes on, one begins to notice that this is no typical sexy young woman. Complicating her perfect

makeup are her natural, bushy eyebrows and the very visible stubble in her armpits. Meanwhile, her sexy mini-dress is not accompanied by the typical teasing gyrations and flirting looks that one might expect from a Madonna or Christina Aguilera. Rather, Björk's movements are awkward and modest, and her gaze is far away, deep into the emotions of the songs. Her dancing is more childlike, happy and pogo-like than some sort of grinding sexual simulation. When she addresses the audience in between songs, it is in a very quiet and modest, almost embarrassed tone. It seems clear to the viewer that she is not a victim of patriarchy but instead someone taking quite a bit of pleasure out of dressing up in a stage costume.

The video for "Big Time Sensuality," shot in black and white film on a rolling truck in New York City by Stephane Sednaoui, is another example of the confusing and yet titillating Björkish sexy. Unlike the *Unplugged* performance, her attire is anything but traditionally sexy—a sparkly, extra-long sleeved shirt and full length matching skirt reveal no skin below the neck. Her hair is wrapped tight to her head in multiple buns, rather than flowing freely. Her makeup is playful, with glitter around her eyes, rather than something you'd see in a fashion magazine, and not at all suggestive of an attempt at getting male approval or indicative of a so-called "harmful cultural practice" (Jeffreys 107). Yet, she exudes a sexiness that is undeniable. Her flirtatious close-ups into the camera combined with her constant touching and stroking of her body are accompanied by a host of emotional visages that range from fright to ecstasy. This is a woman who appears as though she literally might explode from emotion and sensuality. Here we find a perfect example of "woman as body," where Björk strokes herself in ways that do not suggest a strip tease and are not focused on her sexual organs, but which communicate a sexual confidence and connection with her own physicality that makes it look as if she could orgasm without sex. As Björk said in her interview with Meredith Monk, she couldn't fully get into the "hottie" thing

demanding of her as a twenty seven year old, but yet, Björk IS sexy—but not in the pin-up, sexual object way that so many female artists are. Rather, her sexiness seems to come from her core and to spill out of her into the world not as a mating ritual or attention grabber, but as a natural eruption of *woman*.

As Björk's longtime lyric-writing partner Sjón Sigurðsson points out, "There is a constant conflict between the inner and outer world [in her music]. The battlefield of this conflict is the body, often the sexual body. This is something you can see in Björk's videos" (qtd. in *Inside Björk*). Like "Big Time Sensuality," the "Venus as a Boy" video by Sophie Muller depicts a rather girlishly asexual Björk who can barely contain the sexual frenzy on the inside. As a housewife, dreaming of cunnilingus and foreplay with a fantastical "boy," she rubs eggs across her face and cracks their contents into a frying pan, the sizzling eggs seeming to imitate her increasing arousal. She strokes her head and face in the ecstatic and tense excitement that one would normally associate with masturbation. In Stephane Sednaoui's video for "Possibly Maybe," Björk's uniquely erotic way with food is once again center stage—she devours a slice of watermelon as if it were a lover, licking the entire length of the rind with abandon, then laps up varying glowing piles of unidentifiable edibles off the floor like a hungry cat. But as undeniably sexy as such imagery is for the viewer, it is so far outside of the trite sex appeal of the "woman dancing as object" that it almost makes the viewer uncomfortable. In no way does her behavior seem directed specifically at a male gaze. Björk seems to be physically acting out emotion from within and seems unaware of the viewer, completely unembarrassed to be so physically expressive in such personal ways, enacting the "battle" between inside and outside that Sigurðsson observes in her work. This battle symbolizes Björk's demand to be able



to act out her sexual “inside” without being labeled as a pornography model or prostitute by such “outside” essentialists as Jeffreys.

The key to understanding this battle is the key to understanding what makes Björk so uniquely sexy: outside of the male gaze and removed from his stereotypes, Björk’s sexiness seems almost spiritual. Holistic, it feels as if her version of sexy has no bounds, and removes the focus from body parts that so characterizes the traditional idea of the term. This once again, whether she likes it or not, connects her with important modern feminist ideals. She is so connected with her body that she transcends it, which as feminist scholar Lynne Segal notes, has been a classic struggle in the movement: “While aware of the consequences of men’s greater social and cultural power in controlling women’s behaviour, feminists were—at least at first—less able to problematize the physiological reductionism of the biomedical sciences they wished to transcend” (Segal 108). This struggle for a sexiness that transcends body parts is, according to Hélène Cixous, a natural one for women like Björk: “Woman does not bring about the same regionalization which serves the couple head/genitals and which is inscribed only within boundaries. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide” (Cixous 358). “I can find men sexy, women sexy, plants sexy, the ocean, fish,” Björk notes of her own Cixousesque cosmic libido. “I’d switch for a sexy panda” (Björk, *Instinct*). Without a doubt, Björk has redefined sexy’s boundaries based upon her own terms, ones encompassing much more than the established norms can offer. As she puts it in lyrics, “It takes courage / To enjoy it / The hardcore and the gentle—/ Big time sensuality” (Björk, “Big Time Sensuality”).

### **“Nana Na Nana”: The “Warrior of Love”**

*I’m fierce, a helpless romantic.*

—Björk (qtd. in Pytlik 131)

*For us the point is not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate,  
but rather to dash through and to “fly.”*

—*Hélène Cixous (356)*

Perhaps one reason that Björk has been able to craft this “cosmic libido” and “big time sensuality” is that she has always connected nature with the feminine, and with sexuality, intuition, and love (Cixous 358; Björk, “Big Time Sensuality”). As McDonnell notes, “Björk has described her art as ‘instinct driven.’ Working from an emotional, not an intellectual place, has always been the starting point for her” (34). This embracing of instinct and emotion over the logical and intellectual, as we have seen, in part comes from the influence of her mother. But the connection with nature as the bearer of these traditionally feminine traits also comes from Icelandic paganism, which sees a yin-yang, or male-female, dynamic in the world. When it comes to nature (or Nature), it is often equated with the female (Reid-Bowen 21-25).

The idea of the “all-powerful Goddess who makes the earth fruitful” came to Scandinavia in the third millennium BCE, when agriculture began to spread as a means of subsistence. During the era of the Roman Empire, the Danish goddess Nerthus was described as *Terra Mater* (Earth Mother) by Tacitus (Davidson 29, 30; Lindow 33). Modern concepts of Mother Nature spring from this pagan tradition, as does modern “Goddess feminism,” which seeks to return to a mythical time before patriarchy, where the feminine was revered and humans were more in touch with nature. Because nature (Nature) has often been equated with instinct and harmony, femininity has thus been viewed as naturally instinctual, loving, and emotional.

This equating of femininity with nature, and with traits such as instinct, love, and emotion, can be, as Paul Reid-Bowen notes, in his book *Goddess As Nature*, “a risk-laden activity . . . to invoke essences when they have so often been deployed by patriarchy to place

determinate and oppressive limits” on women (156). For Björk, however, Reid-Bowen’s warning has gone unacknowledged. She not only associates herself with these “natural” feminine traits, she has become a champion of them in her life and music. In the process, she has become something of a “warrior of love,” a woman who utilizes the traditionally masculine images of strength, aggression, and challenge to convey traditionally feminine traits such as instinct, love, and emotion.

Björk’s “warrior of love” stance is unique in the music industry. “I’m a very over-emotional person. I’m always very, very happy, or very, very sad, or very, very something else,” she freely admits (Björk qtd. in Gittins 48). Typically, in rock music, the dark side of this emotional range is expressed more often than the light; with anger, depression, and sadness seeming to be the catalyst for much of the work done. As feminist scholar Joanne Hollows notes, rock is “associated with masculinity, sexuality, authenticity and rebellion” and “pop with femininity, romance, and the inauthentic and conservative realm of ‘show-biz’” (175). Thus, it is in pop music that one usually finds the happiness and joy on the lighter side of Björk’s “emotional landscape” (Björk, “Jóga”). As we have seen, though, Björk’s music and image have been too ambiguous to fit into the neat box of pop or rock. As a result, she has brought the dark to pop and the light to rock. “The unusual thing about [Björk] is how well she tackles joy,” admires U2 singer Bono. “Joy is the hardest thing of all to convey, whether you’re a painter, filmmaker, or rock singer. It’s easy to paint with black and be angry” (qtd. in Gittins 52). But Björk is by no means just about joy, and even when she is, as McDonnell notes, “she conveys joy in a way that’s not smiley-face simple, but fierce and dangerous and complex . . .” (93).

Björk is actually quite conscious of her ability to be quite volatile, like the rock stereotype, and prefers an aggressive approach to her music despite its often romantic messages.

Speaking of *Medúlla*, for instance, she stressed, “I didn’t want this to be some cute vocal album with no balls, a New Age kind of ‘la, la, la.’ Probably the hardest thing to do was make sure it had something that was quite male and brutal because it’s easy to do pretty stuff” (Ali and Björk 64). Like the character she plays in Michel Gondry’s “Army of Me” video, Björk is definitely willing to “fight the fucking gorilla” or drop a bomb (Björk qtd. in McDonnell 35). This applies to real life as well as to her art—her two physical attacks on photojournalists, in 1996 and then in 2008, have attested to the fact that Björk is not the “naïve pixie” she’s been portrayed as.

But as a champion of the feminine, Björk is by no means what Reynolds and Press call the “tomboy” who simply mimics traditional masculinity (233). Björk is much too dedicated to instinct, love, and intuition for that. Interestingly, Björk’s “warrior of love” can be compared to Chinese-American Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* on multiple levels. Kingston describes her attempt at being a “bad girl” (i.e. a boy), to gain the acceptance of a traditional Chinese community that revered the masculine over the feminine to an alarming degree. Unlike her idol, the legendary “female avenger,” Fa Mu Lan, Kingston’s attempt at being a “boy” is a failure (Smith 1123-1125). In the end, though, while Fa Mu Lan ended up going back to her wifely duties, Kingston finds permanent success through writing her own tale and her mother’s (i.e. *Brave Orchid*). Although Kingston’s tale shows the “horrifying vulnerability” of Chinese women, it also shows their resilience, and power “to turn adversity and victimization to triumph” and “whose very survival in the midst of vulnerability lie in the world of the creative imagination” (Smith 1135). Similarly, Björk’s refusal to simply ape the masculine is, like Kingston’s book, a true triumph of will and feminine values rather than simply a masquerade, like Fa Mu Lan’s, that would inevitably lead to the championing of patriarchal values.

Björk's and Kingston's women warriors have more in common with the supreme confidence of Goddess feminism or *écriture féminine*, a style of "feminine writing" developed and promoted by French feminists such as Irigaray and Cixous, than with masculine war. While virulently and confidently pro-woman, this *écriture féminine*, like Björk's and Kingston's warriors, is fully invested in lauding what are seen as inherently feminine traits, rather than attempting to challenge patriarchy on its own masculine terms. While these inherent traits are dangerously close to essentialism, i.e. "that woman is innately closer to nature, instinct, intuition," *écriture féminine* is a positive way to reclaim the nature women have been attributed since early human civilization (Reynolds and Press 284). Björk's "warrior of love" figure can thus be an icon for postfeminists such as Eve Ensler (author of *The Vagina Monologues*), who has predicted that, "I actually think that there's going to be a much more profound feminist movement . . . very mystical and not fearing the feminine. [It won't be] repressing but really inviting the feminine" (qtd. in Baumgardner and Richards 59).

Björk not only "invites the feminine," she promotes it, through lyrics spanning from *Debut* to *Volta*. While remaining a "warrior," her use of the words "surrender" and "strengthen," for instance, have been reinterpreted from a more feminine perspective. In "Undo," from 2001's *Vespertine*, she counsels: "You're trying too hard / Surrender / Give yourself in / It's warmer now / Lean into it / Unfold / Unfold in a generous way / Surrender" (Björk, "Undo"). Here, "surrender" seems more like a path to victory than defeat, an ode to the Taoist notion of flowing with life and intuition, and thus its warlike meaning is turned on its head. She works similar magic in *Medúlla*'s "Pleasure Is All Mine": "Women like us / Strengthen most / Host-like—when in doubt give / In doubt: give" (Björk, "Pleasure Is All Mine"). For Björk, strength comes not from conquering and taking, but from giving.

Björk's "warrior of love" concept was hatched on 1997's *Homogenic*, which was for her a sort of response to the stress and challenges of 1996, most notably Ricardo Lopez's acid bomb and Goldie's renege of commitment to her. On *Homogenic*, Björk admits, "the songs are really under a lot of pressure. . . . Maybe being a bit heartbroken as well, but still being a bit of a warrior, still believing in love" (qtd. in McDonnell 65,66). Ironically, although no explicit connection has been made to Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Björk appears (digitally enhanced) on the cover of *Homogenic* as some sort of Far Eastern ascetic mystic, a cross between a Qing dynasty Beijing Opera performer and a samurai, not far off from what one would expect from the legendary Fa Mu Lan. Crucially, she explains that this character (unlike Fa Mu Lan), though clearly a warrior, is "not a warrior with weapons that wants to fight back, but somebody who wants to fight with love" (Björk qtd. in *Inside Björk*). This paradoxical statement sounds like those of the *écriture féminine* writer, who Irigaray says crafts "contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with readymade grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand" (Irigaray 366).

For Björk, her background in Icelandic mythology may make it easier for her to see nothing paradoxical or contradictory about being a "warrior of love." Hip-hop producer and collaborator RZA, from the Wu-Tang Clan, has compared Björk to the Norse goddess Freyja, who was a warrior goddess, but also a goddess of love. In the ancient sagas, Snorri Sturluson notes of Freyja that "wherever she rides to battle she has half the dead, and Odin half," but also, that "she enjoys erotic poetry" and that "it is good to call on her for love" (Snorri qtd. in Lindow 126). This comparison is not a stretch by RZA, for Björk (besides, obviously, being an Icelandic familiar with its myths) seems to have alluded to Freyja's legend in the Spike Jonze-directed video for "Triumph of a Heart." In the video, she is depicted in a version of an old Icelandic

myth about a cat who becomes human. Cats, as it turns out, are important symbols in Icelandic folklore. In the sagas, Freyja drove a carriage into battle that was pulled not by horses, but by cats, and according to Icelandic ethnologist Haraldur Jónsson, “The cat is a symbol of nature, desire, and even love” (qtd. in *The Medúlla Videos*).

Like Freyja, Björk is indeed a defender of nature, desire, love and intuition, and she is not shy about heading into battle to do so. In her b-side “Sweet Sweet Intuition,” Björk does not just suggest, she demands, from the listener to “Fuck logic, fuck logic / . . . Believe in believing / Believe in instinct / And sweet intuition, honey” (Björk, “Sweet Sweet Intuition”). It is almost as if Cixous was speaking of Björk when she wrote that “she doesn’t ‘speak,’ she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies. . . . She doesn’t deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking” (Cixous 351). And, it could be added, she demands the same from others.

Perhaps the clearest example of Cixous’ “flying” and “impassioned” woman is Björk’s character Isobel. First appearing on the song named for her (co-written by Björk with Sjórn Sigurðsson for 1995’s *Post*), Isobel became a mythological character worthy of inclusion in any saga, and a true champion of the feminine and of nature. Equally triumphant and tragic, Isobel, says Björk,

is a woman who was born in a forest from a spark. . . . When she grows up she finds that the pebbles on the forest floor are actually baby skyscrapers. So when she is a fully-grown woman she finds herself living in the city. Most people in the city are run by their heads and she is completely instinct-driven, which doesn’t match very well. . . . Isobel means well but ends up doing a lot of harm, so she decides to go back to the forest. (qtd. in Gittins 73)

Isobel's rejection by the city dwellers mirrors Cixous' contention that "No woman stockpiles as many defenses for countering the drives as does a man. You [woman] don't build walls around yourself, you don't forgo pleasure as 'wisely' as he" (352). The *logic* of the city, after all, is traditionally considered to be a masculine trait, and so there is definitely a gendered dimension to Isobel's being driven out of it. Isobel, after fleeing from the city, exacts a certain form of revenge upon its logic-spoiled inhabitants. From her forest home, she periodically sends moths back to the city to land on people who are "too clever and trying to understand too hard," sending the message, "Don't understand, just let it happen, just relax . . ." by singing, "Nana nana nana" (Björk and Sigurðsson 31). The saga continues on 1997's *Homogenic*, in the Björk and Sigurðsson follow-up "Bachelorette": "Isobel decides to return to the city. . . . She decides to confront love with love and confronts the cowards that don't have the guts to fall in love with love" (Björk qtd. in Pytlik 173). Here Isobel has transformed into the "warrior of love" character that defines Björk herself. Björk's personal connection to this track is clear, because despite the fact that most of the songs on *Homogenic* were co-produced with LFO's Mark Bell, Björk was the sole producer of the music for "Bachelorette."

Similarly to her Isobel character, Björk brings a feminist message to both women *and* men that a denial of the feminine will be society's (or an individual's) undoing. Like the 1990's academic field of "gender theory," which deals with how patriarchy as a system hurts men as well as women, Björk's warrior often seems to be addressing men (Warhol and Price Herndl 1025, 1026). Reid-Bowen explains that the pagan Goddess Feminist perspective is also that both men and women have suffered from patriarchy, and specifically patriarchal religion, which has put both out of touch with the power of female energy (embodied in instinct, nature, and love)



(157). With Björk's pagan heritage, it is not surprising then that, like Goddess Feminists, she is such a champion of female energy for *all* genders, not just for women.

What *is* slightly surprising, for those unfamiliar with Björk, is her absolute ferocity at times in delivering this message to love. While Irigaray is suspicious of masculine, warlike imagery, imploring, "Let's never lay down the law to each other, or moralize, or make war," Björk will strap on the proverbial boxing gloves (Irigaray 90). In "Sod Off," ignoring Irigaray's plea, she lays down the law to a possible lover: "I know that I've been tolerant 'til now / But here comes a warning, / There's a very clear line that I'm drawing / And if you cross it / Sod off / If you think I'll let you pull me down to / Your third-class communication / And bulldoze over all my sensitivities / You've read me all wrong" (Björk, "Sod Off"). In "Scary," from the "Bachelorette" single, she accuses a romantic couple of having "No courage for love—too scared to be happy," and then takes this to the next level with her absolute tirade in the *Homogenic* song "5 Years," this time berating an ex-partner (thought to be Tricky or Goldie), "You think you're denying me of something / Well I've got plenty / You're the one who's missing out . . . I dare you / To take me on . . . I'm so bored of cowards / Who say they want / Then they can't handle / You can't handle love!" (Björk, "5 Years").

Despite the fieriness of her message at times, for Björk the objective seems never to put someone down as much as to bring more love, intuition, and emotion into a very logical masculine world. Again, Cixous could well be describing Björk when she says, "As a militant, she is an integral part of all liberations. She must be farsighted, not limited to blow-by-blow interaction. She foresees that her liberation will do more than modify power relations or toss the ball over to the other camp; she will bring about a mutation in human relations, in thought, in all praxis . . ." (352, 353). In the end, and literally at the end of *Homogenic*, Björk is all about love.

In case the “warrior of love,” should be misunderstood, “All Is Full of Love” makes her message clear: “Twist your head around / It’s all around you / All Is Full of Love / All around you” (Björk, “All Is Full of Love”).

**Unison: “One Plus One Equals Three”**

*If you love somebody very much, you just feed off that somehow. . . . I know all these things sound very sickly and very housewifey, but I guess that’s what I function on.*

—Björk (*qtd. in Evans 90*)

*Show Me Forgiveness / For having lost faith in myself / And let my own interior up / To inferior forces.*

—Björk (“Show Me Forgiveness”)

A large part of the feminist struggle during the 1970’s was to be defined outside of any relationship with a man. Whereas traditionally, women were given the equivalent of two choices—either marry, or be an “old maid”—feminists demanded the full spectrum of possibilities that men had, as well as the respect afforded to single bachelors who were not looked down upon for being “alone.” Second wave feminists sought to remove the shackles of the long-held notion of the “strong man” taking care of the “fragile woman.” Feminists such as Betty Friedan argued against the idea that women were biologically determined to be mothers and housewives. Luce Irigaray challenged women to open their eyes to their bondage: “And what about your life? You must pretend to receive it from them [men]. You’re an indifferent, insignificant little receptacle, subject to their demands alone” (84). Friedan, Irigaray, and others were critical in liberating women from their status as possessions of men, helping formulate and coordinate the “sexual revolution” of the 1970’s. Their efforts have not been in vain, as many

women today feel completely “whole” without being mothers, wives, or even partners, and partnerships between women and men are growing more equal. Still, there are many traditional pockets of society where women are still held to the narrow definition of “having a man,” and certainly there are vestiges of this pressure that even the most liberated of women feel from time to time.

As a result, a female artist like Björk, who is a mother of two, and who places great importance upon unions with male partners, may be looked at with some suspicion by some radical feminists who wish to distance themselves from motherhood or dependence upon men. Many second wave feminists, for instance, have been critical of the “false emotions” of love songs, and favored the more “authentic” and “sexual” rock ‘n’ roll, which they see as promoting freedom rather than swooning over a man (Hollows 175). It has also been common for certain feminist groups to shun sexual intercourse as a political statement, elevating the clitoris to a privileged position over the vagina. Feminist theorist Lynne Segal describes how the message of some “feminist sex-advice literature,” from the 1970’s and 1980’s, “was that wise women, in touch with their ‘authentic’ needs, would avoid penetrative sex,” and that even in the 1993 feminist sexual encyclopedia, *The Sexual Imagination*, there is no entry on the vagina (108, 109). It is not surprising, then, that in such feminist circles, Björk seems like a strange choice for a feminist icon. But once again, Björk, refusing such narrowing definitions of sexuality, proves the skeptical to be wrong.

The seeds of Björk’s obsession with union, first of all, go beyond the sexual and romantic into realms of work and creativity. “I get so much out of collaborations. That’s where I get all my nourishment,” she says. These collaborations are “sometimes physical, sometimes musical, sometimes ideological, sometimes spiritual; sometimes a mix of all of the above. Every

collaboration I've taken part in has felt quite different. . . . I enjoy playing a different role each time" (Björk and Sigurðsson 26; Björk, *Harp*). Lyrical collaborator Sjón Sigurðsson says that when working with Björk, "It's like you create a force field, the two of you become one" (Björk and Sigurðsson 33). For Björk, the lines between creative and sexual relationships have often been blurry. "In a lot of ways, writing a song with a guy is far more giving and erotic than having a sexual relationship with him," she says (qtd. in Lester 71).

Her penchant for combining the professional and sexual has earned her plenty of attention from the paparazzi and tabloids, and brought criticism and skepticism from those who questioned whether Björk was as independent and strong of a woman as her media image conveyed. Her romantic relationships with fellow artists and collaborators, including guitarist Þor Eldon, DJ Dom T, photographer Stephane Sednaoui, electronica producers Tricky, Goldie, and Howie B, and now experimental filmmaker Matthew Barney, have been well documented among the tabloid media, especially the more turbulent ones with "bad boys" such as Sednaoui, Tricky, and Goldie. For many critics, it has probably been difficult to reconcile Björk's romantic trysts with collaborators with her image as a groundbreaking producer in her own right. There has definitely been speculation on whether Howie B's inferior version of "All Is Full of Love," for instance, ended up being chosen for *Homogenic* due to his romance with Björk at the time, especially as the Mark "Spike" Stent version was chosen by Björk later (after the two had split) for both the video and her 2002 *Greatest Hits* compilation.

Equally paradoxical to her image as the strong and independent woman are some of her lyrics, which, in the words of biographer Mark Pytlik, have often "portrayed Björk as quietly at odds with her singledom, content with independence but rarely satisfied with being alone" (98). On *Debut*, such songs as "Crying" and "Aeroplane" seem far from the feminist protocol of

liberation. In the former, Björk seems absolutely desperate for companionship: “Only if a ship would sail in / Or just somebody came / And knocked at my door / Or just—or just / SOMETHING / Crying ’cause I need you . . .,” while in “Aeroplane,” she tells her absent lover that “I can not live / Peacefully without you / For even a moment” and resolves to get on a plane and fly to where he is (Björk, “Crying”; “Aeroplane”). On *Post*’s “I Miss You,” she goes a step further, as the lover she is missing is still a fantasy whom she’s never met: “And if you believe in dreams / Or what is more important, / That a dream can come true / I will meet you / I’m so impatient / I can’t stand the wait / When will I get my cuddle? / Who are you?” (Björk, “I Miss You”).

And yet, Björk is not so easily pinned down, once again refusing to be simply written off as some lovelorn damsel in a distant tower waiting for her knight. Perhaps, Björk’s openness and honesty about her desires are more feminist than some of the radical and anti-phallus feminists would like to believe. In 1994, for instance, Björk and fellow pop/rock artist PJ Harvey did a version of the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction” at the Brit Awards in England. This was an interesting choice, especially in light of the fact that both women had publicly refused any identification with the feminist movement. With the song’s overriding lyrical theme of unrequited heterosexual desire, and the Rolling Stones’ reputation as misogynists, along with the women’s traditional makeup and dresses, it could be looked at as proof that both Björk and Harvey were slaves to men, and therefore call into question why anyone would ever assume that either was a feminist in the first place. For feminists like Jeffreys, who is highly critical of cultural norms that “give pleasure to men” and “enable their sexual excitement,” it seems as if such desire for sex with men is equal to servitude, epitomized by beauty practices which she sees as “the forced availability of all women” in a “a period of forced sexual service, a sexual service

that we may compare to the military one” (Jeffreys 23; Wittig qtd. in Jeffreys 23). Nowhere in Jeffreys’ analysis is the possibility of female desire given a chance—all women who seek male attention are pictured simply as cowering, fearful automatons who want only to be desired by men. In this light, sex seekers such as Björk and Harvey *must* look like victims of patriarchy, since Jeffreys nearly denies women’s sexual desire entirely (in the index of her book, under “sexual desire,” it says “*see* male sexual desire”) (Jeffreys 204, emphasis in original). Yet, as author Mark Pytlik notes, the performance could also be read as a “subversion of the notion that feminism is equal to attaining dominance over desire” (Pytlik 79). Segal would agree, positing that openness to heterosexual intercourse does not make one an anti-feminist. In fact, she posits that such openness actually challenges masculinity by reclaiming traditionally feminine roles in addition to applauding new ones: “Any feminist preference for clitoral over vaginal, ‘active’ over ‘passive,’ self-directed over self-shattering sexual engagement not only ignores the unruliness of desire but reflects, more than transcends, the repudiation of ‘femininity’ in our culture” (Segal 108). For Segal, then, there is nothing inherently unfeminist about Björk’s desires for union, nor do they rule out her being independent and strong as well. Segal, like Björk, is challenging the binaries set up by certain feminists, and claiming a middle position without hierarchy and without shame.

For Björk, the idea that her relationships somehow sap her individuality is absurd. On the contrary, she sees them as inherently empowering. About her relationship with Barney, now in its eighth year: “A lot of people think, ‘Oh, he’s into birds, so she’ll make a bird album,’ when it’s the total opposite. When you love someone you feel secure and you get the confidence to present your own universe” (Björk qtd. in Sandall 2). Much of 2001’s *Vespertine* was inspired by her new love affair with Barney (the album is actually dedicated to him), and yet, defying

expectations for such a romantic theme, Björk proves that unison with Barney has been anything but limiting to her as a woman. The album wreaks havoc with Jeffreys' comments that young women performing heterosex have "to split mind and body to stay in control of their sexual encounters" and have sex only as "a performance for men's sexual pleasure rather than meeting any desires of their own" (19). The song "Cocoon" openly depicts Björk's elation when she wakes up after making love with Barney, and finds his penis still inside her. Despite what the authors of *The Sexual Imagination* or Jeffreys might think of this celebration of intercourse, the video for the song by Eiko Ishioka paints a picture not of a woman who doesn't know her own body, but of one who is just as active in creating the "cocoon" as her man is. In Ishioka's video, the cocoon emanates from Björk's own femininity, as she is slowly enveloped by red ribbon spilling from her own breasts. Björk thus challenges the binary conception of the liberated woman's clitoral stimulation versus the oppressed woman's vaginal intercourse.

Perhaps there is actually bravery in allowing oneself to fall in love with another person, despite the threat of losing some perceived individuality. For Björk was certainly skeptical of her feelings for Barney at first, as many of the lyrics on *Vespertine* attest to. In "Hidden Place," for instance, she struggles between "her pinch of hope," longing to "hide in the hair of him," and her protective instinct to "hide" her love "under a blanket" and "lull it to sleep" (Björk, "Hidden Place"). "Unison," the album's closer, shows Björk's eventual conclusion that she has nothing to fear from giving in to her desires, and that in the end, unison will make her even stronger: "Born stubborn, me / Will always be / Before you count 1 2 3 / I will have grown my own private branch / Of this tree / You: gardener / You: discipliner / Domestically / I can obey all of your rules / And still be: be" (Björk, "Unison"). The key here is that in *choosing* to "obey all of

your rules,” rather than doing so out of fear of rejection, Björk proves that she can “be” independent, “be” herself, *and* be head-over-heels in love at the same time.

Björk, in fact, has noted that her relationship with Barney, depicted in *Vespertine*, has helped her become more in touch with her inner self, her inner woman. She posited in 2002 that “I needed this album to explore what we sound like on the inside. It’s that ecstasy, that euphoric state that happens when whispering. It’s very much about being alone in your house, in a very quiet sort of introverted mood” (Björk qtd. in Gittins 118). This allusion to the domestic is important, because the domestic has been labeled as the enemy by second wave feminists like Betty Friedan, who wonders why “so many American women, with the ability and education to discover and create, go back home again, to look for ‘something more’ in housework and rearing children” (62). While the domestic sphere has been criticized by second wave feminists, it has also been equally devalued by feminist rockers, especially Reynolds’ and Press’ “tomboys.” Reynolds and Press note that this “devaluation of the domestic can pose problems” for women artists, as “women’s adventures often take place in *the great indoors*,” as opposed to the masculine tradition of external adventure which rock music so often epitomizes and celebrates (348). Björk, instead of downplaying it like many feminists, revels in this domesticity. It is here that she notes the influence of Barney, and the bravery that it took to accept the challenge that her love for him posed. “I guess he proved to me that you can go to the most decadent, deepest places, far, far, far into the subconscious, without being destructive,” she reflects (Björk qtd. in Pytlik 163).

For Björk, this voyage into her subconscious, into her “dark” side, has been thoroughly empowering. Her self-mutilation in her video for “Pagan Poetry” explores the sides of her own sexuality that are dismissed by Jeffreys as simply “a result of abuse and low social status” (149).



In this video, directed by Nick Knight, she wears a dress that stops just below her breasts, and is attached to her body via strings of pearls actually sewn in to her skin, symbolizing the dark side of pain that is the shadow of pleasure, and how she has emerged powerfully from giving herself over to that side which she fears. Björk and Knight provide a stunning visual dimension of how “Pedalling through / the dark currents / I find an accurate copy / a blueprint / of the pleasure in me / . . . On the surface simplicity / But the darkest pit in me / is pagan poetry” (Björk, “Pagan Poetry”). Despite Jeffreys’ criticisms of piercing and body modifications, it is clear that for Björk such self-mutilation is not a dark side to be feared, but a side that brings her closer not to pain, but to pleasure. Her ecstatic looks at the end of the video as she decides to “hand herself over” to Barney mirror the revelations sought by many self-mutilators who want to subject their bodies to stress in order to “surrender to life and explore new realms of possibility” (Body Modification Ezine qtd. in Kupelian 656). Similarly, in giving herself to her union with Barney, Björk has bravely jumped into the “darkest pits” of her psyche and has come out the other side not only unharmed, but more in touch with herself.

According to many feminist theorists, these “dark pits” are necessary for women to face in order to reclaim their bodies and themselves from patriarchy. For Cixous, the woman’s interior “is still unexplored only because we’ve been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because [patriarchy] want[s] to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack” (354). For Julia Kristeva, facing what has become known as the “dark” side can be described as facing “the abject.” The abject, Kristeva says, “beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 1). Yet, Kristeva notes that desire is not to be denied so easily: “Simultaneously, just the same, that

impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned.

Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (ibid. 1). This being “beside [one]self” has a tremendous upside for women—by transcending their egos, they can get outside of some of the shackling definitions and roles (Cixous’ “white continent”) that society places upon them. The imagery of transcendence through body mutilation makes sense in this context, as participants propose to get outside of themselves and therefore find pleasure in what would normally be considered painful.

Lilith, the legendary first wife of Biblical Adam, is another excellent example of how embracing the abject can be a sign of affirmation through transcendence. According to multiple myths, because she refused to serve Adam as his obedient wife, and refused to reduce her sexuality to a tool for bearing his children, Lilith was banished from Eden, becoming a she-demon in Hell, a symbol of the slut or whore that “pure” women were to avoid. Recent feminists, echoing Cixous and Kristeva, instead see Lilith (also known as the “Dark Moon” by astrologists) as a heroic figure, a goddess who refused to allow her sexual desires and physicality to become labeled as “dark” by men who sought to control her. Björk, like Lilith, has embraced her desires despite her fears, not only in her own confident sexuality but also in her willingness to stand up for unison in the face of criticism which labels her submissive. Björk proves that a woman can celebrate her own sexuality in the model of Lilith, embracing what is considered demonic by patriarchy, and simultaneously embrace the abject of heterosexual unison demonized by some feminists. She thus shows that the symbol of the abject can work positively for women in multiple ways, allowing them to step outside of the expectations of both patriarchy and radical feminism. On “Lilith,” from Plaid’s *Not for Threes*, she calls on the “Dark Moon” to guide her in crafting her *own* femininity outside of such expectations: “I just don’t care anymore / ‘Cause

my court is calling / It's me and truth / It is home / I'm at home with truth alone / Moon will lead me on" (Plaid, "Lilith").

In looking within herself to find her own definition of the feminine, Björk may just be the ultimate feminist icon, a "fluxed up" "subject-in-progress" bringing into question the very value of identity politics. She exists outside of the boundaries set up between traditional feminine roles and feminist dogma, in a world where there is little paradox between being a girl and a woman, sexual and asexual, traditional and progressive, tough and loving, and independent and united. Björk has carved out her own feminine space, where instinct, intuition, love, and emotion rule supreme in the face of hard logic and masculine aloofness. As journalist Alex Ross notes, "She is unafraid of the darker byways of emotion, but she has no time for free-floating, modernist-style alienation. On 'Who is It?,' she sings, in a definitive statement of her emotional philosophy, 'I carry my joy on the left, my pain on the right'" (Ross).

## CONCLUSION

*I truly, hand on my heart, feel like I'm doing music for the everyday person. I could've so easily gone and become a composer and done some avant-garde music in some corner for the chosen "eleven and a half person [audience]," but I've never wanted to do that. I think my role is more to be some sort of a communicator between all sorts of different worlds.*

—Björk (*qtd. in Inside Björk*)

In May 2007, Björk released her latest album, *Volta*. Like her other albums before it, *Volta* has been praised by fans and critics alike, both in the realms of pop and experimental music. A review of *Volta* provides a crash course on the postmodern phenomenon of Björk's entire career, breaking down boundaries, blurring lines, and complicating binaries between supposed opposites: high and low art, nature and technology, and traditional and modern femininities. Additionally, *Volta* shows Björk continuing to grow artistically and philosophically, expanding her postmodern sensibilities to encompass more directly political, economic, religious, and sexual topics than ever before.

For instance, in interviews describing *Volta*, Björk has now fully articulated the call for a new world order that she hinted at with 2004's *Medúlla*. Disturbed by the rising political power of religion in the U.S. and elsewhere, and by the accompanying conservative backlash against the more liberal, feminist, and earth-friendly politics of the 1990's, Björk says that for her latest record she was going for "something that was quite pagan . . . , maybe the only time we were sort of quite feminine—that long leap of ten thousand years back, where they've kind of been in harmony with nature. . . . I also wanted to have some sort of shaman, voodoo thing, to just liberate, to get rid of a lot of tension. . . . It's sort of maybe trying to put out some good vibes for

the little princesses out there. There are actually other things than pink jars and losing a glass slipper” (Björk, *Pitchfork*, 23 Apr. 2007).

Here, Björk is definitely siding more clearly than ever with the Goddess Feminist ideal, espoused most recently by feminist archaeologist and cultural historian Marija Gimbutas, who through her studies believes that there was once an egalitarian time when people were in harmony with nature and that they “revered the female as the immanent power of renewal in nature” (qtd. in Ruether 21). While Gimbutas’ research and conclusions have been roundly criticized as both reductive and essentialist by Christian feminist scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, even Ruether acknowledges that the pagan utopian vision’s core purpose is positive: “One might say that the lost feminist alternative is not so much a literal historical era of the past as it is a symbol of faith in the possibility of a better self and society despite their distortion by systems of domination” (Ruether 307).

For women like Björk, coming back to pagan ideals seems like the best way to save humans from bringing about their own extinction. She thus infused *Volta* with a tribal element that reflects an explicit pagan mantra: “I’d been reading the news a bit too much, and I felt an exhaustion about the sense of self-importance in religious people. I wanted to remind people that there are and always have been other ways. I mean, Christianity may have existed for two thousand years, but nature never left the building. There’s always been this insane arrogance that we’re not part of nature” (Björk, *Interview*). As political and idealistic as she has ever sounded before, Björk has stated that “what this whole album is about is trying to remind people that . . . we are one tribe...the whole planet” (qtd. in Pareles, “At Home Again . . .”). For Björk, it’s “kinda funny thinking of everyone at Times Square, for example, as a tribe—all that evolving, civilizing, and we’re still just one of the animal species” (Björk, *Stylus*).

Björk's open attack on organized religion, especially Christianity, is closely linked to her distaste for boundaries and hierarchies. Björk has noticed that "a lot of religious people first come across as someone interested in goodness, then very quickly [they reveal] how interested they are in power and hierarchy" (Björk, *Harp*). As usual, Björk's response is to make an album that provides proof that these boundaries and hierarchies are not inevitabilities, and that despite our differences, her vision of humanity as one tribe is not just some idealistic cliché. *Volta* shows that what makes Björk "Björk" is very real: her belief in such a vision has once again enabled her to create an album that defies categorization and provides a glimpse into what her utopia might look like.

*Volta* is another fine example of how Björk can disregard genre boundaries and thus create music outside of the high and low binary of art. Her cast of collaborators on *Volta* is as diverse as ever, bringing together megastar hip-hop producer Timbaland, longtime collaborator and electronic musician Mark Bell, Chinese pipa player Min Xiao-Fen, the unique voice of singer Antony Hegarty (leader of pop group Antony and the Johnsons), Malian kora player Toumani Diabate, electronic musician and engineer Damian Taylor, Congolese kalimba troupe Konono No. 1, an Icelandic women's brass ensemble, and experimental free music drummers Chris Corsano and Brian Chippendale. Björk travelled all over the world to record *Volta*, accompanied by Taylor, a Mac G4 PowerBook, a Mac G5, an external hard drive, a Shure SM58 microphone, and the software Pro Tools (Björk and Taylor, *Remix*).

Prior to the album's release, the media were obsessed with the idea that because Björk was working with Timbaland, she was going to make a hip-hop record. As it turns out, the three tracks that he co-produced sound nothing like his work with Justin Timberlake or Missy Elliott. Björk, disregarding genre as usual, explains that "I wasn't really after a hip-hop thing, I am just

into him as a musician” and that “[Timbaland] was a big fan of ‘Venus As A Boy.’ . . . He also sampled ‘Jóga’ for a Missy Elliott track so we have had an eye on each other for a while . . .” (Björk, *Brooklyn Vegan*). As to whether or not she thought Timbaland provided a hip-hop flavor to *Volta*, she responded, “I guess I don’t think in these terms. I remember Missy saying she thought of *Homogenic* as hip-hop, so it is a little abstract to me what is hip-hop and what not. I go more for emotion. I was up for action and pranksta and that’s why I was up for Timbaland” (Björk, *Brooklyn Vegan*).

The media’s misguided insistence upon Timbaland’s presence as a sign of Björk looking to “break through” with a hit proves how unique her blurring of boundaries still is. The following interview provides an example of the exasperated Björk trying to comprehend her own music within binary constructions between mainstream/underground, genre categories, and nature/technology:

**Mike Powell:** Is “Earth Intruders” really an attempt to pull people together? Is it one of the reasons you tried to pull in people as disparate as Timbaland and Konono? Just curious. I mean, I’m wondering if you actually envision it as a song being played, say, on the radio.

**Björk:** I’m really rubbish in knowing what could go on the radio, because I never listen to it. And I never listen to it because...?!?!?!?! (it is less than good). I do wish it would be a wee bit more exciting and adventurous. But to be honest, I wasn’t thinking of radio at all, I was just being a bit indulgent and mixing together my favorite things. And is there such a gap between [hip-hop and kalimba] anyway? Electronic tribal rhythms? (Björk, *Stylus*)

*Volta* also shows that Björk, despite being an established celebrity for nearly two decades, still undermines the contention that class tension is inevitable between mainstream and underground subcultures, and that monetary success breeds a selfish egomaniac that is out of touch with fans and other artists. Björk consistently shows a lack of interest in fame as well as underground clout. When asked about her record company's promotion of *Volta* as her most catchy album since the mid 1990's, she simply laughs, "One Little Indian are so cute. They always feel that 'my latest release is the most commercial to date'" (Björk, *Drownedinsound.com*). Björk's collaboration with Malian kora player Toumani Diabate is another example of her lack of ego. While she could have easily just sent computer files of the songs back and forth between New York and Mali, she insisted upon spending the time and money to travel to West Africa to meet and interact with Diabate, and to play the songs live: "I wanted to sing it with him at the same moment, because it's always different when you do that, she explains" (Björk qtd. in Pareles, "At Home Again . . ."). For his part, as a relatively unknown musician by comparison, Diabate was both honored and impressed by Björk and her easygoing, natural approach to the writing process. After they jammed together for awhile, they came up with two songs; one became "Hope" (one of the Timbaland co-productions on *Volta*), and the other she gave to a surprised Diabate: "She said, 'Take this [song] and use it any way you like.' I couldn't imagine a superstar doing that" (Diabate qtd. in Pareles, "At Home Again . . .").

Similarly, when it came time to make videos, Björk did not hesitate to involve artists and filmmakers from the "underground" for her #7 charting album. The video for "Innocence," in fact, was directed by fans Fred and Annabelle, who won a video contest where hundreds of videos were submitted to Björk and One Little Indian by amateur filmmakers. Björk selected



eleven finalists, which were put on YouTube and bjork.com, and then selected the Fred and Annabelle video as the winner. For the “Wanderlust” video, she enlisted experimental animators Encyclopedia Pictura (San Francisco duo Isaiah Saxon and Sean Hellfritsch) to create a three dimensional fantasy landscape that would match the adventurous spirit of the track. The production took more than nine months to finish, with a budget that exceeded \$100,000 and almost threatened the video’s completion. “In this day and age of YouTube and the Internet, the budgets are maybe not what they used to be,” Björk noted (qtd. in Ryzik). However, when the budget dried up, Saxon and Hellfritsch just kept working on their own: they built an entire three dimensional camera setup themselves, and ended up finishing the video using their own money (Ryzik). Björk discussed this unique mixture between her mainstream U.S. record company, Atlantic, her underground directors, and her role in between:

With certain video directors, I’ll get quite involved with the storyboard and I’ll be there to make sure that it’s uniting with the song. . . . With them, they’re so fertile . . . you just become a curator, making sure they’ve got the money they need, the space they need. And I’m fighting off the record company and all the “business” people and making sure they’ve got work space. (Björk qtd. in Ryzik)

The “Wanderlust” video continued to blur boundaries between high and low art after production was finished, premiering not on MTV, but at the Deitch Projects Gallery in Long Island City, Queens in March 2008. Björk, when asked about whether she thought it was strange that an art gallery would premiere a pop video, responded that

Quite a lot of my videos have actually been shown in museums and art galleries. I’ve never really wanted to fit that well into the pop world, and when I get invites from the film world or the art world, I’m always a bit suspicious. . . . But maybe it

doesn't surprise me. . . . I think what they [her directors] do is beyond your average pop video. (Björk qtd. in Ryzik)

Just the fact that her video got a major write-up in the *New York Times* art section is an interesting glimpse at Björk's equal status in both the popular media as well as the art world.

The "Wanderlust" video may also be Björk's most explicit attack on the nature/technology binary yet. Featuring mountains, rushing rivers, water buffalo, and a Björk that looks like a Tibetan Sherpa ready for travel, the video is like a cross between *Labyrinth* and *The Hobbit*, but yet was shot in stereoscopic 3-D, thus making it feel like a high-end video game as well. Björk notes that she chose the San Francisco duo as directors not only because they were familiar with cutting edge technology, but that "the Encyclopedia people are obsessed with nature, and have a deep philosophy about it. It's not just superficial" (qtd. in Ryzik). As proof of this obsession (and their less-than-mainstream approach), Saxon and Hellfritsch spent a day in the woods, tripping on psilocybin mushrooms, as inspiration for the video's rustic and fantastic imagery.

*Volta* also sonically challenges the nature and technology binary. "The struggle [between nature and machines] is still there [on *Volta*] for sure but it is more seamless and complex," Björk suggests. "Some of the most natural sounding noises on the album are actually done with computers and then you have the trumpets imitating Morse codes" (Björk, *Filter*). This extreme blurring of electronic as nature and nature as electronic, where electronic beats were made to sound like ancient drums and the brass section like techno machinery, began in 2005 with her work scoring partner Matthew Barney's newest experimental film. "I started working with brass on *Drawing Restraint 9*," Björk recalls. "It was quite ambient or abstract, so when that project was done, I was excited about looping the brass into a more poplike manner. . . . I was quite

excited about doing techno brass in the rudest possible manner” (Björk and Taylor, *Remix*). For the beats, meanwhile, she strove to create the pagan, tribal atmosphere that she wanted, but with electronics. This proved to be quite difficult for Björk, Bell, and Taylor: “The only thing I remember [in preparation for the album] is that we spent some time doing show-off, kinda filigree Pro Tools beats à la *Vespertine*, but we threw them all in the bin,” Björk says. “They were just too pretentious for this album. The beats had to be effortless, primitive, lo-fi style” (Björk and Taylor, *Remix*). In the end, the problem was solved by Björk’s decision to stick to the “use of either tribal live drumming or [Roland] 808’s, 909’s, the old-school drum machine noises. Or the mix of all those” (Björk, *Harp*).

Despite the pagan message to return to a harmony with nature, then, Björk still believed in moving forward to look back. She insisted that *Volta* explore new technological and sonic vistas that would show that science and technology have a very natural dimension to them. “It’s 2007, it’s not some hippie shit—go back to your roots—it’s all march forward,” Björk clarifies. “I was reading a lot of books the past couple of years . . . like neuroscience, about the two hemispheres [of the brain] and that we actually are an animal species, and how Christianity forced us to ignore nature and the body” (Björk, *Pitchfork*, 23 Apr. 2007). The sound of water between each track, though it implies a departure from civilization, also implies movement, not backward, but forward into the unknown. The easy mixing between the water segments and electronic music is itself a testament to the recording technology of today, as well as a symbol of the techno/nature continuum which Björk continually blurs.

On *Volta*, Björk continues her championing of instinct, love, and emotion, as well as her criticism of a patriarchal Christianity that she believes has separated women from their inner selves. Through the lyrics of multiple songs on the album, she celebrates the return to that

uninhibited, sexually primitive physicality that Christian patriarchy has labeled as “dark.” In “Vertebrae by Vertebrae,” she conjures mystic visions of Lilith (the “Dark Moon”) and the sexual and animalistic nature of women that she symbolizes: “She came here to lose face / Got down on her knees / The beast is back / On four legs / Set her clock to the moon / Raises her spine / Vertebrae by vertebrae” (Björk, “Vertebrae by Vertebrae”). In “I See Who You Are,” a lullaby written for her daughter Ísadóra, Björk gets in touch with the physicality shared between her and her daughter, and its inherent spiritual side: “I see who you are / Behind the skin and muscles / I see who you are / And when you’ll get older later / I will see the same girl the same soul / Lioness fireheart / Passionate lover / And afterwards / Later this century / When you and I have become corpses” (Björk, “I See Who You Are”). Here, Björk sees her own daughter’s “dark” (i.e. animal) side as well as her own, their shared spiritual bond in life and death, and calls out: “Let’s celebrate now all this flesh / On our bones / Let me push you up against me tightly / And enjoy every bit of you” (ibid.). This combination of love with abjection was something that Björk knew that she wanted for her lullaby from the beginning: “Because [‘I See Who You Are’] was about my four year old girl, I thought it was sweet but had to have a child’s kinda dark side in there—an innocent, growling-monster dark side” (Björk and Taylor, *Remix*). On “My Juvenile,” the album’s final track, Björk faces her own growling-monster—her guilt about her perceived failures in raising her son Sindri, now a twenty one year old living with his father in Iceland: “Perhaps I set you too free too fast / Too young” (Björk, “My Juvenile”). By addressing this dark side within herself, Björk is then able to release her guilt and move on: “This is an offer to better the last let go / The intentions were pure / My juvenile” (ibid.). In all three songs, Björk channels the feminine, either in the lunar cycle, as a mother, or as a physical, animal female, thus

reconnecting herself to that inner world, that “pagan poetry,” that she first found with *Vespertine* in 2001.

This idea of reconnection seems to inhabit *Volta* in its entirety, including the title itself. *Volta* (similar to the term voltage) could very well symbolize a recharging of the battery for the human spirit; or perhaps, it could also be seen as a jolt for those that have never been charged in the first place. Though this is speculation, Björk’s comments seem to lend credence to this idea: “The *Volta* album is very much about justice. Justice for women, the female spirit, nature and people in need in general” (Björk, *Filter*). More than ever, Björk seems to be taking her philosophy of blurring boundaries to a political and humanitarian level, and, for the first time, an explicitly feminist one:

I have been noticing how much harder it is for me and my girlfriends to juggle things than it is for men. In the 1990’s, there was a lot of optimism . . . and then suddenly it just crashed. I think this is my first time in all the hundreds of interviews I’ve done, that I’ve actually jumped on the feminist bandwagon. In the past I always wanted to change the subject. But I think it’s time to bring up all these issues. (Björk qtd. in Hoggard)

And yet, though she’s ready to fight, Björk’s “warrior of love” is by no means ready to give up on the traditionally feminine ideals of emotion and nurturance: “*Volta* isn’t really so political as it is emotionally eager for justice. That can be quite a personal feeling with nothing to do with party politics. It’s a very impulsive warm thing” (Björk, *Harp*).

*Volta*’s penultimate track, and certainly its fieriest, is “Declare Independence,” a rallying cry for justice written from this emotionally eager place. Simultaneously about the political (calling for the independence of Greenland and the Faroe Islands from Danish control) and the

personal (a manifesto to disregard binaries and boundaries), it in some ways symbolizes the new Björk, one who has made the personal the political (Björk, *Pitchfork*, 1 Feb. 2008). As it turns out, “Declare Independence” has become Björk’s biggest political statement of her career. Two separate dedications during live performances of the song in early 2008, one to Kosovo and the other to Tibet, have drawn outrage and condemnation from Serbia and China. Her concert at the Exit Festival in Serbia was promptly cancelled, while the Chinese government essentially banned her from ever playing in their country again (Solarski). For the first time, Björk had become a political activist of sorts, though in her official statement via her website, she proved that she is still the “warrior of love” more than a revolutionary:

I have been asked by many for a statement after dedicating my song “Declare Independence” to both Kosovo and Tibet on different occasions. I would like to put importance on that I am not a politician, I am first and last a musician and as such I feel my duty to try to express the whole range of human emotions. . . . This song was written more with the personal in mind, but the fact that it has translated to its broadest meaning, the struggle of a suppressed nation, gives me much pleasure. I would like to wish all individuals and nations good luck in their battle for independence. Justice! (Björk, “Statement”)

This cord of justice starts the album off as well. “Earth Intruders,” her collaboration with Timbaland and Konono No.1, presents the idea of a tsunami of justice that Björk envisions sweeping across the earth, like some sort of Travis Bickle-esque cleansing of the unjust (Björk qtd. in “Volta”). Inspired by the terror and carnage she saw in Southeast Asia doing humanitarian work with UNICEF following the tsunami of 2004, it also seems to be a symbol of her belief in reconnecting to the human spirit and connection to nature, and in a populist

redistribution of power: “We are the earth intruders / Muddy with twigs and branches / . . . With our feet thumping / With our feet marching / Grinding the skeptics into the soil / Shower of goodness / Coming to end the doubt pouring over” (Björk, “Earth Intruders”). This imagery of “marching” and “pouring over” seems, once again, to reflect her belief in keeping moving forward as a means of turning back. Symbolic of *Volta* on the whole, “Earth Intruders” is Björk at her most “Björk,” calling for boundaries to fall on the grandest scale yet.

“Earth Intruders” harkens back to Scandinavian mythology, specifically the nine “Ægir’s daughters” (the ocean’s strongest waves) who crashed upon the shore and tossed boats around with their overwhelming power (Lindow 49). This is not the first time that Björk has channeled the ocean deities, Ægir and Rán, as a metaphor for a call to save humanity from itself. *Volta* is really the culmination of Björk’s recent move towards taking her philosophy to the next level. For the last few years, it seems as if Björk has come to realize that the power of her ability to blur boundaries and destroy binaries can reach beyond just music, the nature/technology binary, femininity, and her own personal sphere, into the realms of humanitarian politics and a quest for peace and justice in the world. (Or, more likely, she’s just doing what comes naturally to her!)

“Oceania,” from 2004’s *Medúlla*, was a song that she and old friend Sjórn Sigurðsson wrote after she was commissioned to compose and perform a theme for the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece. In her statement on August 13, 2004, she explained the song’s concept:

I am incredibly honored to have been asked to write a song and sing at the Olympics. The song is written from the point of view of the ocean that surrounds all the land and watches over the humans to see how they are doing after millions

of years of evolution. It sees no borders, different races or religions, which has always been at the core of these games. (Björk qtd. in “Oceania”)

This goes back to the Scandinavian sagas, in which the varying creation stories all begin with a primordial ocean giving birth to the first human life. It also echoes another pagan tradition, for in Egyptian cosmology, all life is originally born from an androgynous sea called Nun, where “for two and a half billion years on earth all life forms floated in the womb-like environment of the planetary ocean . . .” (Sjöö and Mor qtd. in Reid-Bowen 85). In Lynn Fox’s video for “Oceania,” Björk plays the part of this ocean goddess, this giver of human life. Underwater, with aqua sequins covering her turquoise skin, she is less a pretty mermaid and more of a creepy but fascinating aquatic reptile-goddess equally alluring and fear-inducing. She could very well be Rán, the goddess of the sea from Scandinavian mythology, as she guides orchids, jellyfish, and other lifeforms to their new world above the surface; their new life as plants, animals, and humans on land.

Lyricaly, “Oceania” features the sea goddess looking upon her progeny years later, and offering the gentle reminder of their connection to her: “Little ones—my sons and daughters / Your sweat is salty / I am why” (Björk, “Oceania”). Somewhat displeased by the divisions she sees among her sons and daughters, she offers this piece of wisdom: “You show me continents / I see islands / You count the centuries / I blink my eyes” (Björk, “Oceania”). For the Olympics performance, though she was not covered in sequins and turquoise, Björk nevertheless played the part of “Mother Ocean,” this time with the Olympian athletes symbolizing her progeny, the world. Wearing a gown of thirty thousand square feet of fabric designed by Greek fashion designer Sophia Kokosalaki, she intoned the wisdom of “Oceania” as those thirty thousand



square feet of her skirt slowly spread over the twenty thousand athletes on the floor of Olympic Stadium in Athens, revealing a map of the world stitched into its fabric ("Oceania").

This is fitting imagery to end with, as it is symbolic of what we can learn from Björk's philosophy. Like Mother Ocean looking beyond national borders in "Oceania," her penchant for breaking down boundaries, blurring lines, and complicating binaries within her own career provides us an opportunity to see what the world might look like without the signposts of the human ego and the arbitrary divisions, both literal and figurative, that they create. Whether it be between musical genres, concepts of nature and technology, science and religion, different forms of femininity, or political borders, she has fought binary categorization and its limitations at every turn of her career, in the process providing an example of openness seldom seen in our society, and especially in an America so often divided by binary thinking. In her own unique, postmodern fashion, Björk has made her self so open to so many influences that she has become indefinable outside of one word: "Björk." Her philosophy suggests that by following her lead, by dropping our own artificial boundaries through which we view our world, we too can be so open as to best be described as simply "human."

## WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

- Adric, Daniel. Interview. *Björk: Post*. Ed. Sjón Sigurðsson. New York: St. Martin's Press Griffin, 1995.
- Ali, Lorraine and Björk. "Voices Carry." *Newsweek*. 6 Sep. 2004: 64-65.
- Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: MacMillan and Co., 1882. 22 May 2008 <[http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/nonfiction\\_u/arnoldm\\_ca/ca\\_titlepage.html](http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/nonfiction_u/arnoldm_ca/ca_titlepage.html)>.
- Balsamo, Anne. *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Barzun, Jacques. "Introductory Remarks to a Program of Works Produced at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center." *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.
- Baumgardner, Jennifer and Amy Richards. "Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong." *All About The Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*. Ed. Anita Harris. New York: Routledge, 2004. 59-68.
- Billboard.com*. 8 May 2008. <<http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/eseach/searchResult.jsp?exp=yandNtt=BjorkandNtk=Keywordandan=bbcomandnor=10andNtx=mode+matchallpartialandN=36+4294122492>>.
- Björk. "5 Years." *Homogenic*. Elektra, 1997.
- . "Aeroplane." *Debut*. Elektra, 1993.
- . "All Is Full of Love." *Homogenic*. Elektra, 1997.
- . "Army of Me." *Post*. Elektra, 1995.

- . "Big Time Sensuality." *Debut*. Elektra, 1993.
- . "Crying." *Debut*. Elektra, 1993.
- . *Debut*. Elektra, 1993.
- . *Drawing Restraint 9*. One Little Indian, 2006.
- . Fashion advertisement. *New York Times*. 15 Aug. 2004. *Björk.com*. 12 Mar. 2008  
[http://unit.bjork.com/specials/albums/medulla/magz/img/NyTimes15aug\\_01-06.jpg](http://unit.bjork.com/specials/albums/medulla/magz/img/NyTimes15aug_01-06.jpg).
- . "Headphones." *Post*. Elektra, 1995.
- . "Hidden Place." *Vespertine*. Elektra, 2001.
- . *Homogenic*. Elektra, 1997.
- . Interview. "Antony Interviews Björk." *Interview*. 8 Jan. 2007. 12 Mar. 2008  
<http://www.bjork.fr/Interview-Magazine-2007.html>.
- . Interview. "Army of She: Planting Flags with Bjork." *Filter*. 19 Apr. 2007. 12 Mar. 2008  
<http://www.filter-mag.com/index.php?id=14361andc=2>.
- . Interview. "Björk Discusses 'Independence', Videos, Grammys." *Pitchfork Media*. 1 Feb. 2008. 12 Mar. 2008 <http://www.bjork.fr/Interview-Declare-Independence.html>.
- . Interview. "Björk Finds Her Personal in the Political." *Spinner*. 30 Aug. 2007. 12 Mar. 2008 <http://www.spinner.com/2007/08/30/bjork-finds-her-personal-in-the-political/>.
- . Interview. "Björk Interview by Brandon Stosuy." *Pitchfork Media*. 23 Apr. 2007. 12 Mar. 2008 <http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/feature/42181-interview-bjrk>.
- . Interview. "Björk Interview and Review On *Volta*." *Stereo Warning*. 25 Jul. 2007. 12 Mar. 2008 [http://www.stereowarning.com/2007/07/bjork\\_interview\\_review\\_on\\_volta.html](http://www.stereowarning.com/2007/07/bjork_interview_review_on_volta.html).

- . Interview. *Brooklyn Vegan*. 9 Apr. 2007. 12 Mar. 2008  
 <[http://www.brooklynvegan.com/archives/2007/04/an\\_interview\\_wi\\_18.html](http://www.brooklynvegan.com/archives/2007/04/an_interview_wi_18.html)>.
- . Interview. *Drownedinsound.com*. 12 Mar. 2008  
 <<http://www.drownedinsound.com/articles/1900868>>.
- . Interview. "Half Child, Half Ancient." *Harp*. 11 Jan. 2007. 12 Mar. 2008  
 <<http://www.bjork.fr/Harp-Magazine-novembre-2007.html>>.
- . Interview. "The Return of the Ice(land) Queen." *Instinct*. 1 Sep. 2004. 12 Mar. 2008 <  
<http://instinctmagazine.com/celebrity-interviews/bjork.html>>.
- . Interview. "Sno-Koan." *Wired*. 6 Jun. 1998. 12 Mar 2008  
 <[http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/6.06/bjork\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/6.06/bjork_pr.html)>.
- . Interview. *Stylus*. 26 Apr. 2007. 12 Mar. 2008  
 <<http://www.stylusmagazine.com/articles/interview/bjork.htm>>.
- . Interview. *Uncut*. 2004. 12 Mar 2008  
 <<http://www.uncut.co.uk/music/bjork/interviews/16>>.
- . "Jóga." *Homogenic*. Elektra, 1997.
- . *Medúlla*. Elektra, 2004.
- . "Modern Things, The." *Post*. Elektra, 1995.
- . "Oceania." *Medúlla*. Elektra, 2004.
- . "Pagan Poetry." *Vespertine*. Elektra, 2001.
- . *Post*. Elektra, 1995.
- . "Scary." *Bachelorette Single*. One Little Indian, 1997.
- . *Selmasongs*. Elektra, 2000.
- . "Show Me Forgiveness." *Medúlla*. Elektra, 2004.

- . "Sod Off." *Jóga Single*. One Little Indian, 1997.
- . "Statement." Online posting. 4 Mar. 2008. *Björk.com*. 6 Mar. 2008  
     <<http://bjork.com/news/?id=779;year=2008#news>>.
- . "Submarine." *Medúlla*. Elektra, 2004.
- . "Sweet Sweet Intuition." *It's Oh So Quiet Single*. One Little Indian, 1995.
- . *Telegram*. Elektra, 1996.
- . "Undo." *Vespertine*. Elektra, 2001.
- . "Unison." *Vespertine*. Elektra, 2001.
- . *Vespertine*. Elektra, 2001.
- . *Volta*. Atlantic, 2007
- and Sjón Sigurðsson. Interview. *Björk: Post*. Ed. Sjón Sigurðsson. New York: St. Martin's Press Griffin, 1995.
- and Damian Taylor. Interview. "Gypsy Queen." *Remix*. 1 Jul. 2007. 12 Mar. 2008  
     <[http://remixmag.com/artists/electronic/gypsy\\_queen\\_bjork\\_volta/](http://remixmag.com/artists/electronic/gypsy_queen_bjork_volta/)>.
- "Björk Discography." *Wikipedia*. 2 May 2008.  
     <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bjork\\_discography](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bjork_discography)>.
- Björk: Greatest Hits— Volumen 1993-2003*. Dir. Michel Gondry, Sophie Muller, Danny Cannon, Stephane Sednaoui, Jean-Baptiste Mondino, others. Perf. Björk, others. 1993-2002. DVD. One Little Indian, 2002.
- Björk: Live in Cambridge*. Dir. David Barnard. Perf. Björk, Mark Bell, The Icelandic Octet. 2 Dec. 1998. DVD. One Little Indian, 2001.

*Björk: Live at Royal Opera House.* Dir. David Barnard. Perf. Björk, Matmos, Zeena Parkins, Simon Lee, Greenland Inuit Choir, Il Novecento Orchestra. 16 Dec. 2001. DVD. One Little Indian, 2002.

*Björk: Live at Shepherds Bush Empire.* Dir. David Barnard. Perf. Björk, Guy Sigsworth, Leila Arab, Plaid, Yasuhiro Kobayashi, Trevor Morais. 27 Feb. 1997. DVD. One Little Indian, 2001.

“Björk, The Making of ...‘Declare Independence’ Video.” Dir. Mike Spinella. Perf. Björk, Mark Bell, Michel Gondry, others. Online video. 29 Nov. 2007.  
<<http://www.spinner.com/2007/11/29/bjork-the-making-of-declare-independence-video-exclusive/>>.

*Björk: MTV: Unplugged and Live.* Dir. Unknown. Perf. Björk, Talvin Singh, Guy Sigsworth, Oliver Lake, Mark Bell, others. 1994, 1998. DVD. One Little Indian, 2001.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field.* Cambridge: Polity, 1996.

Brockes, Emma. “The Emma Brockes Interview: Björk.” *The Guardian*. 13 Feb. 2006. 12 Mar. 2008 <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,5397912-110428,00.html>>.

Brooks, Ann. *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms.* New York: Routledge, 1997.

Cassidy, Paul. Interview. *Björk: Post.* Ed. Sjórn Sigurðsson. New York: St. Martin’s Press Griffin, 1995.

Cixous, Hélène. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism.* Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. Rev. ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 347-362.

- Cowell, Henry. "The Joys of Noise." *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.
- Currott, Phyllis. *Book of Shadows: A Modern Woman's Journey Into the Wisdom of Witchcraft and the Magic of the Goddess*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.
- Curran, Giorel. *21<sup>st</sup> Century Dissent: Anarchism, Anti-Globalization and Environmentalism*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.
- "Dark Moon, The." *Aquamoonlight Astrology*. 2003, 2004.  
<<http://www.aquamoonlight.co.uk/lilith-dark-moon.html>>.
- Davidson, H.R. Ellis. *Pagan Scandinavia*. New York and Washington, D.C.: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Trans. B. Frechtman. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1948.
- "Declare Independence." Music video. Dir. Michel Gondry. Perf. Björk, Mark Bell, others. 2008. YouTube, 2008. <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igOWR\\_-BXJU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igOWR_-BXJU)>.
- DeGregori, Thomas R. *The Environment, Our Natural Resources, and Modern Technology*. Ames, IA: Iowa State Press, 2002.
- Deodato, Eumir. Interview. *Björk: Post*. Ed. Sján Sigurðsson. New York: St. Martin's Press Griffin, 1995.
- "Desired Constellation." By Björk. Perf. Björk, Damian Taylor. Fox Theater, Detroit, MI. 11 Sep. 2007.
- Drumming, Neil. "Guided by Voices." *Entertainment Weekly*. 3 Sep. 2004. 12 Mar. 2008  
<[http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,688723\\_3,00.html?print](http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,688723_3,00.html?print)>

“Earth Intruders.” Music video. Dir. Michel Ocelot. Perf. Björk. 2007. YouTube, 2008.

<[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igOWR\\_-BXJU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igOWR_-BXJU)>.

*Egyptian Mythology*. New York: Tudor Publishing, 1965.

Eno, Brian. "The Studio as Compositional Tool." *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*.

Ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.

Evans, Liz. *Women, Sex, and Rock 'n' Roll*. London: Pandora, 1994.

Freedman, Estelle B. *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*.

New York: Ballantine Books, 2002.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1963.

Gittins, Ian. *Björk: There's More To Life Than This: The Stories Behind Every Song*. New

York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002.

Gleeson, Kate and Hanna Frith. "Pretty in Pink: Young Women Presenting Mature Sexual

Identities." *All About The Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*. Ed. Anita Harris. New York: Routledge, 2004. 103-113.

Glennie, Evelyn. Interview. *Björk: Post*. Ed. Sján Sigurðsson. New York: St. Martin's Press

Griffin, 1995.

Gondry, Michel. Interview. *Björk: Post*. Ed. Sján Sigurðsson. New York: St. Martin's Press

Griffin, 1995.

Gudmundsdóttir, Björk and Trío Guðmundar Ingólfssonar. *Gling-Gló*. One Little Indian, 1990.

Gunnarsson, Valur. "Waving a Pirate Flag." *Reykjavik Grapevine*. 2004. Online Posting.

*Bjork.com*. 12 Mar. 2008 <<http://unit.bjork.com/specials/albums/medulla/pirate/index.htm>>.



- Handley, Ed and Andy Turner. Interview. *Björk: Post*. Ed. Sjón Sigurðsson. New York: St. Martin's Press Griffin, 1995.
- Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Ed. Amelia Jones. New York and London: Routledge, 2003. 475-496.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1979.
- Hesmondalgh, David. "Bourdieu, the Media and Cultural Production." *Media, Culture, and Society* 28.2 (2006): 211-231.
- Hoggard, Liz. "'Maybe I'll be feminist in my old age.'" *The Observer*. 13 Mar. 2005. *Guardian*. 12 Mar. 2008 <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,5146736-110428,00.html>>.
- Hoggart, Richard. "The Full Rich Life and the Newer Mass Art: Sex in Shiny Packets." *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Ed. John Storey. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998. 42-47.
- Hollows, Joanne. *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Holmes, Thom. *Electronic and Experimental Music: Pioneers in Technology and Composition*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.
- Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 1944. Trans. John Cummings. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972. 120-167.

*Inner or Deep Part of an Animal or Plant Structure, The.* Dir. Ragnheidur Gestadóttir. Perf.

Björk, Rahzel, Dokaka, Mike Patton, Valgeir Sigurðsson, others. 2004. DVD. One Little Indian, 2004.

“Innocence.” Music video. Dir. Fred and Annabelle. Perf. Björk. 2007. YouTube, 2008.

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72RFO1YtLMg>>.

*Inside Björk.* Dir. ?. Perf. Björk, RZA, Joy Press, David Toop, Sean Penn, others. 2002. DVD.

One Little Indian, 2002.

Irigaray, Luce. “This Sex Which Is Not One.” *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and*

*Criticism.* Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. Rev. ed. New Brunswick, NJ:

Rutgers University Press, 1997. 363-369.

---. “When Our Lips Speak Together.” *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader.* Ed. Janet

Price and Margrit Shildrick. New York: Routledge, 1999. 82-92.

Jeffreys, Sheila. *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West.* London and

New York: Routledge, 2005.

Kealey, Daniel A. *Revisioning Environmental Ethics.* Albany: State University of New York

Press, 1990.

King Missile. “Muffy.” *Fluting on the Hump.* Shimmy Disc, 1987.

Kinsley, David. *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective.*

Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995.

Koltuv, Barbara Black. “*The Book of Lilith: A Summary.*” *Which Lilith? Feminist Writers Re-*

*Create the World’s First Woman.* Ed. Enid Dame, Lilly Rivlin, and Henny Wenkart.

Northvale, NJ and Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998.

- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. L. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- . "Women's Time." *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Kukl. *The Eye*. Crass, 1984.
- Kupelian, David. "Killer Culture." *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Ed. Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007.
- Langsdorf, Antonia. "Introducing Lilith—the Black Moon in Horoscope." *AntoniaLangsdorf.de*. 21 Feb. 2002. 12 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.antonialangsdorf.de/dateien/astrologie-antonialangsdorf-essay.php>>.
- Laszlo, Ervin. *The Choice: Evolution or Extinction?: A Thinking Person's Guide to Global Issues*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994.
- Leavis, F.R. "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture." *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Ed. John Storey. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998. 13-21.
- Lee, Tong Soon. "Technology and the Production of Islamic Space: The Call to Prayer in Singapore." *Music and Technoculture*. Ed. René T.A. Lysloff and Leslie C. Gay, Jr. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003. 109-124.
- Lester, Paul. *Björk: The Illustrated Story*. London: Hamlin, 1996.
- "Lilith Shrine, The." *Lilitu.com*. The Jewish Pagan Webring. 12 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.lilitu.com/lilith/>>.
- Lindow, John. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

- Luke, Timothy W. *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Lysloff, René T.A. and Leslie C. Gay, Jr. *Music and Technoculture*. Ed. René T.A. Lysloff and Leslie C. Gay, Jr. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003.
- MacGregor, Sherilyn. *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care*. Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2006.
- Marsh, Charity and Melissa West. "The Nature/Technology Binary Opposition Dismantled in the Music of Madonna and Björk." *Music and Technoculture*. Ed. René T.A. Lysloff and Leslie C. Gay, Jr. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003. 182-203.
- Massey, Graham. Interview. *Björk: Post*. Ed. Sjórn Sigurðsson. New York: St. Martin's Press Griffin, 1995.
- McClary, Susan. "Rap, Minimalism, and Structures of Time in Late Twentieth-Century Culture." *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.
- McDonnell, Evelyn. *Army of She: Icelandic, Iconoclastic, Irrepressible Björk*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- McNair, James. "Björk: Passions in a Cold Climate." *China Daily*. 16 Aug. 2004. 12 Mar. 2008 <[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/English/doc/2004-08/16/content\\_365842.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/English/doc/2004-08/16/content_365842.htm)>.
- "Medúlla." *Bjork.com*. 2004. 12 Mar. 2008 <<http://unit.bjork.com/specials/albums/medulla/>>.
- Medúlla Videos, The*. Dir. Lynn Fox, Dawn Shadforth, Spike Jonze, Ragnheidur Gestadóttir, Gabriela Fridriksdóttir. Perf. Björk, Spike Jonze, others. 2004, 2005. DVD. One Little Indian, 2005.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Milbrath, Lester W. *Envisioning A Sustainable Society: Learning Our Way Out*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Monk, Meredith and Björk. Interview. *Counterstream Radio*. 2005.

<<http://counterstreamradio.org/specialprograms/monk%5Fbjork/>>.

Muhly, Nico. Interview. "Nico Muhly: Pianist on 'Oceania.'" *Bjork.com*. 2004. 12 Mar. 2008

<<http://unit.bjork.com/specials/albums/medulla/nicomuhly/>>.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. Rev. ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 438-448.

Mymbly. "Björk and feminism and you." Online posting. 16 Sep. 2002. Atforumz.com. 4 July 2008 <<http://www.atforumz.com/archive/index.php/t-152107.html>>.

Negus, Keith. *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Newman, Beth. "The Situation of the Looker-On." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. Rev. ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 449-466.

"Oceania." *Bjorkish.net*. Bjork.com. <<http://specials.bjorkish.net/oceania/>>.

Pareles, Jon. "At Home Again in the Unknown." *New York Times*. 29 Apr. 2007.

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/29/arts/music/29pare.html?\\_r=1&adxnnl=1&oref=slogin&adxnnlx=1210269804-ZFZiUKX/Jx9+OWNR2o7X1g](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/29/arts/music/29pare.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&oref=slogin&adxnnlx=1210269804-ZFZiUKX/Jx9+OWNR2o7X1g)>.

---. "Björk Grabs The World By the Throat." *New York Times*. 29 Aug. 2004. 12 Mar. 2008

<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9503E7D7153BC0A9629C8B63>>.

Piku. "Björk and feminism and you." Online posting. 13 Sep. 2002. Atforumz.com. 4 July 2008 <<http://www.atforumz.com/archive/index.php/t-152107.html>>.

Plaid. "Lilith." Lyrics by Björk. *Not for Threes*. Warp, 1997.

Pytlik, Mark. *Björk: Wow and Flutter*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2003.

*Reactable*. Music Technology Group, Pompeu Fabra University. Barcelona, 2003-2008. 28 Apr. 2008 <<http://reactable.iaa.upf.edu/>>.

Reid-Bowen, Paul. *Goddess As Nature*. Hampshire, Eng. and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007.

Reynolds, Simon. *Generation Ecstasy: into the world of techno and rave culture*. 1998. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Reynolds, Simon and Joy Press. *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Ross, Alex. "Björk's Saga." *The New Yorker*. 30 Aug. 2004. Online posting. *Alex Ross: The Rest is Noise*. 19 Oct. 2004. <[http://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/10/alex\\_ross\\_bjrk.html](http://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/10/alex_ross_bjrk.html)>.

Rubin, Mike. "Days of Future Past." *Modulations: A History of Electronic Music: Throbbing Words on Sound*. Ed. Peter Shapiro. New York: Caipirinha Productions, 2000.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Goddesses and The Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2005.

Russo, Mary and David Warner. "Rough Music, Futurism, and Postpunk Industrial Noise Bands." *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.

Russolo, Luigi. "The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto." *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.

Ryzik, Melanie. "Björk in 3-D: The 'Wanderlust' Video." *New York Times*. 8 May 2008. <[http://video.on.nytimes.com/?fr\\_story=cae6cd1d56ad61cd2686baeba62701d9f7a8d2ae](http://video.on.nytimes.com/?fr_story=cae6cd1d56ad61cd2686baeba62701d9f7a8d2ae)>.

Sandall, Robert. "'This time it's intuition only—no brain, please.'" *Telegraph*. 14 Aug. 2004. 12 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.bjork.fr/Daily-Telegraph-UK-2004.html>>.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existential Theory of Consciousness*. Trans. F. Williams and R. Kirkpatrick. New York: Noonday Press, 1957.

Scerba, Amy. "Changing Literary Representations of Lilith and the Evolution of a Mythical Heroine." MA Thesis. Carnegie Mellon University, 1999.

Schafer, R. Murray. "The Music of the Environment." *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.

Schaeffer, Francis A. *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970.

Segal, Lynne. "Body Matters: Cultural Inscriptions." *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. New York: Routledge, 1999. 105-110.

Sharp, Chris. "Modern States of Mind." *Modulations: A History of Electronic Music: Throbbing Words on Sound*. Ed. Peter Shapiro. New York: Caipirinha Productions, 2000.

Sloane, Robert. Personal interview. Dec. 2007.

- Smith, Sidonie. "Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*: Filiality and Woman's Autobiographical Storytelling." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. Rev. ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 1117-1137.
- Solarski, Matthew. "Björk's Tibet Boost Angers Chinese Authorities." *Pitchfork Media*. 3 Mar. 2008. <<http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/news/49207-bjorks-tibet-boost-angers-chinese-authorities>>.
- Spelman, Elizabeth V. "Woman As Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views." *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. New York: Routledge, 1999. 32-41.
- Stein, Gertrude. "Sacred Emily." *Geography and Plays*. 1922. Reprinted ed. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.
- Stockfelt, Ola. "Adequate Modes of Listening." *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.
- Stockhausen, Karlheinz. "Electronic and Instrumental Music." *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.
- Sugarcubes, The. *Life's Too Good*. Elektra, 1988.
- Thornton, Sarah. *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1996.
- UK Top 40 Hit Database. 2008. EveryHit.com. <<http://www.everyhit.com/searchsec.php>>.



- Varèse, Edgard. "The Liberation of Sound." *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.
- Vass, Beck. "Björk Assaults News Photographer." *The New Zealand Herald*. 14 Jan. 2008. 12 Mar. 2008 <[http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/1/story.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=10486682](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/1/story.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10486682)>.
- Vernon, Polly. "'I didn't like being a celebrity. It's a service job. Like washing toilets.'" *The Observer*. 8 Jul. 2007. Online posting. *The Guardian*. 12 Mar. 2008 <<http://music.guardian.co.uk/pop/story/0,,2118290,00.html>>.
- Vessel*. Dir. Stephane Sednaoui. Perf. Björk, Talvin Singh, Guy Sigsworth, Leila Arab, Dan Lipman, Ike Leo, Tansay Omar. 1994. DVD. One Little Indian, 2003.
- "Volta." *Bjork.com*. 2007. 12 Mar. 2008 <<http://unit.bjork.com/specials/albums/volta/>>.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Galapagos*. 1986. New York: Dell, 1999.
- Warhol, Robyn R. and Diane Price Herndl. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. Rev. ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.
- Wheale, Nigel. *The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader*. Ed. Nigel Wheale. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Wiley, Juniper. "No Body Is 'Doing It': Cybersexuality." *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. New York: Routledge, 1999. 134-139.
- Williams, Raymond. "The Analysis of Culture." *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Ed. John Storey. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998. 48-56.
- Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

“World Factbook: Iceland.” 1 May 2008. *CIA.gov*. 3 Apr. 2008

<<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/ic.html>>.

Zimmerman, Michael E. *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity*.

Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994.

Zuidervaat, Lambert. “Postmodern Arts and A Democratic Culture.” *The Arts, Community,*

*and Cultural Democracy*. Ed. Lambert Zuidervaat and Henry Luttikhuisen. New York:

St. Martin's Press, 2000. 15-39.