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Marie Buscatto

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# Women in artistic professions. An emblematic paradigm for gender studies

Marie Buscatto, *Laboratoire Georges Friedmann, Université Paris I Panthéon, Sorbonne*

## Γυναίκες και καλλιτεχνική εργασία. Ένα εμβληματικό παράδειγμα για τις σπουδές φύλου

Marie Buscatto, *Ινστιτούτο G. Friedmann, Πανεπιστήμιο Paris I Panthéon, Σορβόννη*

### ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the 21st century, the boundaries between men and women are still present, yet along new dividing lines. A "horizontal segregation" divides them between masculine and feminine professions. Women are paid less than their male colleagues, even when they are equally qualified. A "vertical segregation" on the other hand makes access to prestigious positions more difficult for women than it is for men. How is it possible to explain such differences? Based on the emblematic paradigm of artistic professions the paper comments on the basic analyses developed in the framework of gender studies over the past twenty years. On the basis of the research conducted by the author on French women in jazz music, the paper will analyze key French and Anglo-Saxon gender theories on the gender-work nexus.

**KEY WORDS:** Art, gender, work, inequalities, methods

### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Στις αρχές του 21ου αιώνα τα όρια μεταξύ των δύο φύλων στον χώρο της εργασίας δεν έχουν ακόμα καταργηθεί. Μετατέθηκαν, ανασυντέθηκαν, με βάση νέες διαχωριστικές γραμμές. Ένας «οριζόντιος διαχωρισμός» κατανέμει τους άνδρες μεταξύ γυναικείων και ανδρικών επαγγελμάτων. Ακόμα και εάν έχουν την ίδια κατάρτιση, οι γυναίκες αμειβονται λιγότερο από τους άνδρες συναδέλφους τους. Ένας «κάθετος διαχωρισμός» καθιστά την πρόσβαση των γυναικών σε διαπρεπείς εργασίες πιο δύσκολη σε σχέση με τους άντρες. Πώς μπορούν να εξηγηθούν αυτές οι διαφορές; Βασισζόμενο στο εμβληματικό παράδειγμα της καλλιτεχνικής εργασίας, το παρόν άρθρο σχολιάζει βασικές αναλύσεις που αναπτύχθηκαν στο πλαίσιο των σπουδών για το φύλο τα τελευταία 20 χρόνια. Με βάση την έρευνα που διεξήγαγε η συγγραφέας για τις Γαλλίδες στον χώρο της τζαζ, αναλύονται και ελέγχονται οι βασικές γαλλικές και αγγλοσαξονικές θεωρίες για τις σχέσεις φύλου και εργασίας.

**ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ:** Τέχνη, φύλο, εργασία, ανισότητες, μέθοδοι

## 1. Introduction

**A**lthough the situation of Western women on the job market has considerably improved since the beginning of the twentieth century, barriers have reappeared between the sexes, albeit constituted along new lines (Maruani, 2005). Horizontal and vertical segregation still exist and discrepancies in pay are still observed even between men and women holding the same qualifications.

How can we explain the persistence of such differences and/or inequalities? In 1960s

France, as in most Anglo-Saxon countries as well, gender studies initially focused on recruitment, employment and promotion in industrial work, an approach that is illustrated by Madeleine Guilbert's innovative work (Guilbert, 1996). In the last twenty years, gender studies focused on work have become a legitimate field of research in France under the influence of key figures such as Margaret Maruani, Danièle Kergoat or Catherine Marry. Two key anthologies published recently in English (Reskin and Padavenic, 2002) and in French (Maruani, 2005) attest to the fact that this field of research is now well established.

In this context, studying women in artistic work appears to offer an emblematic example for understanding the gender differences that remain at work for, at least, two principal reasons. First, all three persistent differences between working men and women can be observed in the field of the arts: i) Horizontal segregation, such as that seen between women singers and male instrumentalists; ii) Vertical segregation, since women remain a minority in this high-prestige activity; iii) Differences in pay between men and women that are common to all artistic fields. Second, there are still very few women in this field, even though it is supposedly open to both sexes, the only criteria for selection being "talent" or "genius". Indeed, how can we explain the difficulties encountered by women in gaining access to and remaining in this field of work if 'nobody' is responsible for their absence, as art is seen as an unrestricted, free and open professional activity?

I will first describe the persistent differences between the work experience of men and women in Western countries, before giving a general overview of the range of explanations developed in studies on women working in artistic domains. I will then examine this range of explanations in the light of an empirical study conducted in the world of French Jazz. In conclusion, I will use those results to suggest some possible future lines of research for gender studies.

## 2. Remaining differences and/or inequalities between men and women

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the position of women on the job market in the West has improved considerably in at least three ways. First, they have become 'visible' workers (Schweitzer, 2002)<sup>1</sup>. Thus, for instance, in France, the number of working women has increased from 6.6 million in 1962 to 12.1 million in 2002, while at the same time, the number of working men has been quite stable (a rise from 13.2 millions in 1962 to 14.1 million in 2002). At least 80% of women aged 25-49 are now at work. Indeed, although women have always worked, as farmers', shopkeepers' or craftsmen's wives, they are now legally recognized as salaried or independent workers. Secondly, discriminatory laws and rules have progressively disappeared and in France there have been several laws that have actively promoted the principle of gender equality. Thus, the 1946 French constitution supports equality and non-discrimination, and, starting in 1965, women who wanted to work could do so without their husband's consent. A 1972 law proclaims that equal work should be recompensed with equal pay, and in 1983, a law extended this principle of professional equity to training, work, pay, recruitment, promotion etc. Finally, women have recently succeeded in integrating prestigious and high ranking social positions, even though only a small minority have managed to do so (Marry, 2004; Cassel, 2001). Nevertheless, women have progressively gained access to high-level professions, becoming engineers, lawyers or surgeons, and similarly elevated social positions (prime minister, university professors or top managers).

The discrepancies between the sexes have not, however, disappeared; rather they have been displaced and recomposed along new lines (Maruani, 2005). A 'horizontal segregation' naturally seems to divide women and men between 'feminine' jobs (secretaries, homemakers or nurses) and 'masculine' jobs (industrial workers, policemen or mechanics). Furthermore, when they hold the same qualification and/or professional position as women, men are still better paid. In France, for instance, differences in pay between men and women are 27% and down to 13% when all work and qualification differences are eliminated (part-time work, slower careers or higher unemployment) A 'vertical segregation' limits women's access to high level and prestigious professions, a phenomenon also called the 'glass ceiling' effect.

### 3. Women in artistic work: five principle explanations

**E**ven if still relatively neglected, research on women in artistic fields has boomed in recent years in various domains: Painting (Bozello, 2000; Lang and Lang K., 2001; Pasquier, 1983; Trasforini, 2006); rock music (Tripiet, 1998; Ortiz, 2004), «popular» music (Whiteley, 1997), dance (Faure, 2004; Sorignet, 2004), jazz singers (Buscatto, 2003), literature (Naudier, 2000; Saint Martin de, 1990), classical music (Escal and Rousseau-Dujardin, 1999; Goldin and Rouse, 2000; Graber, 2004; Ravet, 2003) or film writing (Bielby and Bielby, 1996).

In the case of 'traditional' gender studies focusing on work, one (or more) of the following five explanations is generally used to explain gender inequalities. (i) Discriminatory practices, rules or norms that prevent women from acceding to specific positions. (ii) Early gendered socialization leads young women to avoid artistic activity and to 'choose' appropriately gendered work. (iii) Women have difficulties acceding to and/or remaining in predominantly masculine jobs because of masculine conventions, rules and networks. (iv) Devalorizing gendered stereotypes and representations make it difficult for women to be considered as legitimate, employable workers. (v) Difficulties in articulating private and professional lives may lead women to abandon demanding careers. In what follows, I will offer specific examples of how these five explanations have been developed in studies on women in artistic work.

#### ***'Invisible' discrimination***

An invisible form of discrimination, which is often difficult to prove, may explain the limited number of women in any given artistic activity. Two economists, Goldin and Rouse, have shown how such discrimination takes place in the recruitment of classical musicians for American orchestras (Goldin and Rouse, 2000). After having reconstructed recruitment figures, they compared the recruitment results from the main American orchestras before and after the systematic use of a folding screen in the recruitment of musicians. They concluded that the thirty percent increase in the number of women musicians recruited to these orchestras was due precisely to this new selection process, which, in principle, prevented discrimination on the grounds of appearance. Indeed, once the folding screen was systematically used during the recruiting process, the jury members did not know whom they were recruiting since she or he was hidden from them.

#### ***Difficulties in combining private and professional lives***

When studying the 'glass-ceiling' phenomena – i.e. the difficulty of gaining access to high-level social and/or hierarchical positions – it is often argued that women tend to escape such positions

themselves, because they cannot articulate a demanding professional life which requires more and more availability with their social roles as wives and mothers. This phenomenon is accentuated as they cannot rely, as men do, on a 'wife' to handle their domestic and professional affairs. A similar explanation can be found in studies on work in artistic activities, where this problem is used to explain women's choice to become teachers instead of artists, a path that they take more often than men. For instance, Dominique Pasquier, in her early work on painters, showed that women painters tended to flee painting as a professional activity due to the impossibility of combining a 'normal' private life with a demanding professional one (Pasquier, 1983). Hyacinthe Ravet considered the absence of a 'devoted husband' who could play the role of a 'wife' as a crucial factor for explaining the social impossibility for many women of becoming a professional classical musician in France (Ravet, 2003).

### ***A very 'masculine' world***

Because the artistic world functions along masculine norms, networks, rules, it tends to be unfriendly to women and leads to their 'natural' absence. Laureen Ortiz in her study of young rock musicians showed, for instance, that while boys often form all-male rock groups with their friends when they are young and quite 'naturally' have fun in doing so, girls tend to start playing rock music in school and have difficulties playing in a 'real' group. If they do eventually join a group, they also find it difficult to remain in it as a legitimate musician, except when one of the other musicians is a boyfriend (Ortiz, 2004). Lang and Lang, in their work on British and American 19th-century etchers also showed that women tended to be excluded from peer groups, except when they were married to an etcher. Thus they were not as well represented in peer groups and not as well defended by vendors either when still living or after their death (Lang and Lang, 2001).

### ***Negative gendered stereotypes and representations***

Gendered representations or stereotypes tend to exclude women from artistic activities since they are not viewed as legitimate colleagues by their potential employers – as well as by other colleagues, producers, and their public (audience). These stereotypes may also limit women to less legitimate or marginal activities such as singing, dilettante practices or soft/sentimental literature. Thus, for instance, while the piano was played at quite a high level by young bourgeois French girls in the nineteenth century, it was nevertheless viewed as a 'dilettante' activity, with professional piano playing being considered as inappropriate for such young women (Lenoir, 1999). Philomene Graber shows how, in the sixties, the first female Swiss orchestra leader, Hedy Salquin, could never quite be fully employed as such, being viewed as a mother and wife whose natural role was to stay home and not to work in such a demanding professional world (Graber, 2004).

### ***Early gendered socialization***

Early gendered socialization may also explain why women may either be absent from a specific world or specialize in 'feminine' activities. They may choose to play the piano or the violin and not to blow the trumpet or the saxophone (Escal and Rousseau-Dujardin, 1999). They may also develop 'feminine' qualities such as listening to others or expressing feelings which do not prepare them well to be comfortable and competent in a highly assertive, competitive and individualistic field (Buscatto, 2003).

## 4. French Jazz singing as an example

Most of the time, one of these explanations is developed in order to account for a specific gendered phenomenon. I will now use my own research in the French jazz world – a very segregated artistic world – to show how these explanations work in practice.

The ethnographic survey was conducted in the French jazz world from 1998 to 2002 and was complemented by 20 interviews with jazz musicians, both singers and instrumentalists. It has revealed a gendered world, segregated along two main lines. While jazz is a male world,<sup>2</sup> a large majority of women are singers. Moreover, all female singers, whatever their level of recognition, are situated at the lowest rungs of the musical, economic and social ladder (Becker, 1963: 128). We could then identify three social processes producing and legitimizing this gendered hierarchy.

### *Female singers are negatively hierarchized*

Making a living playing jazz music implies working in about ten bands in the course of one year, either *leading* one's own band, playing as a *sideman* in a friend's group or playing as a sideman in one-off concerts (to replace a missing musician or to play in an occasional event). Most observed musicians then tried to become 'intermittents du spectacle', a specifically French employment status: thus, musicians must declare more than 507 hours of official, artistic, paid work a year (or that they have been officially engaged at least 43 times) to be entitled to unemployment benefits when they are out of work (Buscatto, 2004). In order to find such jobs, musicians need to belong to informal networks (Becker, 1963) that are mainly constructed around musical styles (traditional, modern and improvised jazz). When acting as a band leader, one is supposed to prepare the repertoire, to find gigs, to organize recording sessions etc. As a sideman, one plays the band leader's music, imposed on the musicians.

Nevertheless, female jazz singers, as opposed to instrumentalists, never attain this status of sideman. There is indeed no such word as 'sidewoman'. In other words, they are never considered to belong to one of the informal social networks that organize employment in jazz music. Therefore, unlike famous foreign singers, such as Stacey Kent, Diana Krall or Cassandra Wilson, even the best-known French jazz singers can never make a living from jazz music. They teach, lead choirs, do studio voices or have 'day' jobs outside this musical field.

However, except for the stars, most instrumentalists play in a band with a singer, since this type of band is most easily hired at clubs, cafes, hotels, commercial events, or marginal festivals. Thus, it is the singers who provide the opportunities for instrumentalists to reach the workload needed to be a professional jazz musician. Moreover, the concerts with singers are often valued since they offer good money – they tend to be better paid and are more often officially declared – and they do not require too much work. But when they become well known, musicians tend to stop working with female singers, or only do so on an occasional basis.

How can we explain this devalorizing image of female singers that prevents them from being fully integrated into this market of the jazz-music world? Three complementary social processes may account for such gendered segregation.

### *Gendered conceptions of music*

First, it appears that male instrumentalists and female singers do not have the same conception of what characterizes music. This creates constant tensions and misunderstandings between women and men when working together.

Singers are mostly interested in interpreting songs, themes, melodies that are meant to be sung. They focus on telling stories to the audience: *"I consider myself to be a performer, not a composer"*. Sounds and music, rhythmic and melodic ideas are important but only as long as they enable the singer to perform in the most creative, emotional and personal way possible. This idea is even shared by the most contemporary singers who consider their voices as instruments. Vocal improvisation – *scatting* – remains secondary to this performing work.

The instrumentalist's main objective is to invent new songs, to create original music, to improvise in personal musical ways. Playing the melody is thus considered as secondary, whereas rhythmic, melodic or tonal originality comes first.

When playing together, these two differing conceptions of music make life difficult for everyone. On the one hand, singers complain about instrumentalists who do not respect the singing rhythms, or are too talkative, or simply do not share their ideas. On the other hand, instrumentalists get tired of singers who are not creative, autonomous, original etc. Singers then become associated with the discredited world of commercial jazz music – too easy to write, not at all original – which places them on the lowest rungs of the ladder of this musical world.

### ***Masculine, social, musical and linguistic conventions***

But this first social process is not sufficient to account for the situations of all female singers. It indeed appeared that recognized women who did share men's conceptions of music – the creative, young and modern female singers – did not have a better chance of a professional jazz career than other female singers. Indeed, masculine conventions that define working relations between male instrumentalists and female singers also make it difficult for the latter to be hired and to remain on the jazz 'job market'.

First, men highly value competitive and assertive interactions, which, they believe, make music more creative and lively. Improvising on new standards, developing ideas on the spot, limiting the number of rehearsals are valued as ways of enabling such creative encounters. But female singers do not share this feeling, rejecting such conditions, which they regarded as tiring, frustrating and even 'blocking'. They prefer working regularly with the same musicians, having time to present their ideas, and 'displaying' their intimacy in protected settings.

Secondly, it seems that musical exchange itself is organized according to masculine rules. Indeed, most musicians use formal musical language most of the time. Leaders bring written parts to organize rehearsals and give very precise indications (rhythmic or harmonic structures for instance), which launch collective improvisations. When deciding how to start, end or rearrange a part, instrumentalists tend to use formal harmonic or rhythmic codes. While this musical language is mastered by most instrumentalists, it is often not as easily mastered by singers, partly because few singers have been trained in these codes and partly because, in the way they learn music, they come to value intuition – listening and feeling – more highly. One singer trained as a pianist explained how she was often at a loss as to how to communicate what she wanted to musicians, at least in terms of the regular formal codes. This discrepancy in expectations makes communication difficult and the result is that female singers come to be viewed as poor musicians and thus inappropriate leaders to work with.

Finally, female singers are highly dependent on their partner, who is most often a jazz instrumentalist. He often recruits instrumentalists, helps to write (or writes) the parts, translates the singer's requests to his colleagues, or explains how difficult it is to sing right etc. When he does not actively belong to the singer's major band, he may also indirectly help her integrate in the informal network she needs to find jobs.

### ***Feminine devalorizing stereotypes: «l'éternel féminin...»***

But this is not the end of the story. There is also a third process at work in the devalorization of women. Singers tend not to be viewed as real musicians since their performances are not considered as real work, as they are not considered the outcome of real work or competence. These performances are instead conceived as the natural expression of their true personality.

On the one hand, their voice is not considered to be an instrument: *“For instrumentalists, a voice is natural, it does not need work. This explains the old cliché that singers are not musicians”*. Thus, not only are they not real musicians, but they are also considered as only able to sing melodic lines and not capable of being a sidewoman (only a leader). All these stereotypes prevent them from taking advantage of many of the musical positions necessary for making a living in this professional world.

On the other hand, while singing implies that one learns to work on one's physical posture on stage, this type of work is generally considered as the expression of one's natural capacities to seduce the public. Singers learn to hold their microphone, to tell stories in a lively way, to walk freely on stage, and to look relaxed while singing. But this scenic work is quite invisible for instrumentalists and even for singers, who think of it as nothing but an expression of their true personality.

## **5. Conclusion: Future directions for gender studies**

**A**s discussed above, gender studies tend to use one or two explanations to analyse one specific gendered phenomenon. Explanations often end up being partial, one-way processes, mostly depending on the researcher's method and perspective. Life interviews or questionnaires related to biographies are the methods best adapted to analysing differences in socializations, the influence of family context (mostly partner and parents) or the difficult articulation between private and public lives. Analysing the works of art themselves offers a powerful way of gaining access to gendered representations and stereotypes in art worlds. The ethnographic method, based on a long-term involvement of the researcher in the art world under study – as well as an ethnographic use of historical documents – can help to identify networks, informal rules and norms, as well as the criteria of judgement that communities use, through interaction.

Mixing methods and explanatory hypotheses might offer a more profound understanding of women's difficulties in gaining access to artistic activities and, more generally, to prestigious and high-level social positions. For instance, if a woman decides not to pursue her work in an art-world and instead to take care of her family, this may also be explained in part by the impossibility for her to find her way in this world, due to its masculine conventions, norms and rules. Young women's 'oversocialization' at the entry into such a masculine domain may be linked to masculine modes of selection, cooptation and judgement of young recruits. Put differently, individual decisions need to be viewed as the outcome of a series of conscious and unconscious choices, success and failures, orientations and changes. These evolve through time, partly influenced by internal social processes, and partly structured by societal phenomena. Gendered relations are continuously constructed, based upon different processes, at different moments and places, and in a variety of social spheres, and one has constantly to articulate all these levels of analysis in an explanation. Only then can gender be truly thought of as a complex and interactive phenomenon as once asserted by Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1976-1977).



## Notes

1. Figures and examples presented in this introduction are drawn from the French context. However similar facts have been observed in most developed occidental countries, even if in different ways and proportions depending on national factors (Padavic and Reskin B., 2002).
2. Based on *Le Guide-annuaire du jazz 2004*, among 2.000 jazz musicians, about 8% are women. But while 65% of singers are women, less than 4% are instrumentalists. Some instruments are more feminised than others, such as the violin (9%), piano (6%) or harpsichord (four women out of four harpists), while others are gendered masculine such as drums (less than 2% women), bass (none in this guide), guitar (less than 1%) or trumpet (less than 2%).

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