

Rosi Braidotti – Original Transcript (ENG)

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Welcome to, Met Terugwerkende Kracht ('With Retroactive Force'), a podcast and audio tour from Utrecht University in honour of International Women's Day. We are podcasters Corinne Heyrman, Marieke van de Ven, and Jozien Wijkhuijs, and we are taking you on a tour of Utrecht. Along the way, we will make stops at places with an underexposed history and listen to people with a story to tell. We learn about the history of intersectional feminism in the city and at the university. At this stop, we speak to philosopher and gender researcher Rosi Braidotti. We are at Tivoli Vredenburg, on Vredenburgkade 11, where we discuss music, feminism, Adele, and Pussy Riot.

Because I am a fun, you know, sex-positive, body-positive feminist, this idea that feminists are castrating bitches who don't like sex – I don't know who says that, but it's so completely not.

I became the founding professor of Women's Studies in Utrecht in '87–88, just think how far back, straight out of my PhD at the Sorbonne, straight out of the women's movement. And one of the very first lectures that I did to introduce the concept of, what the hell is feminism to a university like Utrecht, was a Rock n' Roll lecture, where I started from Janis Joplin 'oh god, won't you give me a Mercedes Benz, my friend', to Lori Anderson. Because in '88, 'Superman' comes out (the beginning of the Posthuman), all the way through then the in-between, the Rock 'n Roll revolution. Saying that feminism is modernisation; it is women going out into the world kicking some serious ass – did you see Adele last night?

(Interviewer laughs: oh, I love Adele)

'Oh it's good to be a woman, oh it's good to be a female artist', while she's also in favour of gender neutral awards. For me, they go together, I mean, but I have many other things to say about Utrecht and music, but I don't want to take over. As you can see, I am. Switch Rosi off.

(All laugh)

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The Netherlands was home to a strong women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s, says Rosi. The Dutch government responded to this by creating eighteen chairs for professors in women's studies and LGBT studies. Utrecht was given a central role in this.

The reason why Utrecht got the chairs is that there were women campaigning here – nothing happens, you know, in a void. And so the professorship came because women wanted it.

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Rosi exchanged Paris for Utrecht, and she was immediately given a major role in the study programme.

I started halftime and then I decided to take it – at the age of 33 I took it fulltime. That gave us the opportunity to really create a programme from scratch. There were really brilliant women already here, and I was very happy to be able to hire Gloria Wekker in 1993, very important to have a black woman, and I was very, very lucky to be able to apply my philosophical ideas in practice. We were probably the first in Europe to give out PhDs in women's studies. I mean, we created generations of very bright women who actually made it into the institutions. So, it's a very beautiful story out of, you know, an initial irrigation of the field, 5, 6 programmes remained that are really top-notch. And I feel both very privileged and extremely, extremely honoured to

have been able to play my role in that. It has certainly shaped me and I have shaped it. By also keeping that lightness of tone, a bit of rhythm, you know. Don't make it too heavy – life is difficult enough.

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Women's resistance has always found its way through music. It starts already with an unexpected, old friend, Johann Sebastian Bach.

Who, in this country, is like God – you cannot touch Johann Sebastian Bach. But Bach was a complete commercial writer, he wrote music for a living. So, he was commissioned by a *burger* of his town to write the famous Coffee Cantata. And the Coffee Cantata is Bach's most feminist statement, because women were not allowed to drink coffee, a colonial beverage considered a drug. So Bach writes, on a commission from a citizen, not from the church, the Coffee Cantata, where women are like: *coffee, coffee, ich luste coffee* – give me my cup of coffee, I want to be liberated. Bicycles are the same story: women aren't allowed to ride to bicycles, so you're look at a – you can make a microhistory of this, and you will find that access to the joys of life, whether it's music, coffee, tobacco, are highly controlled for women. We were really deprived of pleasures and joys. It was part of the whole episode.

VO

Women did not get a foothold in the more pleasurable aspects of life until late in the 20th century – and that gave feminism a kick-start.

Everything changes with the modernization of music. I mean, The Beatles... I mean (laughs) all hell breaks loose. I am still of the generation, the baby boomers, very infamous but very lovely, who grew up with the choice between The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. (*interviewer: yeah, yeah*) No female bands, no women bands in sight. This is why Janis Joplin is for me the first of the Club of 27. It's a breaking point, she can't hold in, but it's in your face ... it really is a starting point. But it assumes a popular culture revolution, the coming of television, the coming of the record industry, the coming of a generation who is not going to take a Bach. It was going to say 'no' (laughs). And I think that that's where modern feminism comes in – with that kind of 'argh!' That rage of ... and there, indeed, then it all starts. Although we have to wait until Cyndi Lauper to have the first real major female media star. 'Girls Only Want to Have Fun' is really the anthem of a whole generation. It's a bit slow in the beginning and it's connected to racism, it's connected to the blues and the ... you need an intersectional history! Once it gets structured as an industry, the presence of female talent was undeniable. And then I think you have to look at the punk moment, because the punk bands are also ... who has a contract like, so in the air, and yet, through punk, with the Sex Pistols, you get Vivienne Westwood and we get branding. It starts then that something comes into place. And, paradoxical as it is, punk actually becomes a major cultural moment and makes quite a lot of money. Then from that moment on there is a restructuring. Nina Hagen, who is my Pussy Riot girls', my beloved Pussy Riot's iconic role model, coming out of East Berlin, extraordinary figure – but then again, you know, commercial success (laughs). Then we get to today, you know, where the major figure is – you can't get past Adele. She is extraordinary, and we have come a very long way there.

(Interviewer: and you see that in Adele, how far we've come?)

Yes, absolutely. With the courage to say: you know, I've had a meltdown, I can't do this, I'm not ready. Of course when you have, you know, 60 million followers you can afford that. The courage of a certain vulnerability, that Essex girl, working class girl, the courage to actually appear

wounded, that's amazing. As opposed to Madonna who's like a warrior (laughs), and Madonna should retire now, I think.

VO

Rosi mentions her 'beloved' Pussy Riot. Pussy Riot is a punk band that rebels against Putin's policies and his allies in Russia. On 21 February 2012, they interrupted a church service in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow as a protest action. They wore colourful baklavas and made punk music. Rosi and other famous feminists, such as Judith Butler, followed Pussy Riot's actions and their subsequent imprisonment with great attention and concern. They wanted to support them, but, at the same time, it was difficult to reach them. As soon as the members of Pussy Riot were released, Rosi organised an event in Oslo where she once again gave a lecture on feminism and music, and where the members of Pussy Riot were also present.

I gave a modern version of what I had done, and then I played of course Janis Joplin, Nina Hagen, and I think one of the punk bands. Then Nadya says: *they are my idols, thank you so much, that's my entire history...* it was like a 'welcome back to the world' event. And then, from there, they went immediately to New York and played for Madonna. I mean, it was the moment where they became mega stars. I said to Judy afterwards: we may not see them again because they'd become so very, very famous. So, they opened for Madonna, they did other things... and then a few years later, I brought them back here to Utrecht. That was the Pussy Riot event at Tivoli. But Nadya by then was already in LA and just a little bit too glamorous, so she didn't come, but Maria came with the ... I think Masha came with her group, and it was a good event. They were talking about how they continued the struggle, and Maria made it quite clear then that she, her sort of party, her team, would stay in Russia and not leave the country because they did not want to leave the country because they did not want to leave the country to Putin. Whereas Nadya left, and she's just been declared enemy of the state by Putin, so I think he's taken away her citizenship. I think she would be delighted to be an enemy of the state, it fits in perfectly, but it puts her in a difficult position.

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So here we are at Tivoli Vredenburg, where Pussy Riot once performed with Rosi, and where many other artists have come and gone. It matters that Pussy Riot is a punk band, says Rosi.

Punk absolutely, as a gist of rebellion. Punk because you don't need to be a very good musician to do it. Let's face it: it's not the greatest punk band, we've had better voices, acts, you know, with ... very much using the body, very in colour, relationship between the mask, to the balaclava... and because it was also what carried a revolutionary spirit, if you're looking at the 90s and the social thing. The intervention in the cathedral, which got them to jail, was criminalised as an act of blasphemy. I think it is very important to see that what plays a role here is the relationship of church and state. It was a blasphemy charge – *oh good lord, liberate, deliver me from Putin. Or: Virgin Mary, deliver me from Putin.* Of course, it wasn't so much a... of course, Putin we know controls the church, so the church and state thing is where Pussy Riot really highlighted a crucial problem. An incredibly clever action saying: look what's happening here. But it cost them. So, punk for all of those reasons did ... the sheer bravado that blasphemy, of that energy... but the genealogy is the genealogy of the rebellious girls, of the bad girls who don't comply

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At every stage of her career, music has continued to play a major role in Rosi's work. Now, for instance, she is working on feminism in relation to ageing, and she is doing that –

With music! The NEVE/NICA institute wasn't recorded, but what I did – you see how music comes? – I did three singers: Joni Mitchell, Barbara, and Marianne Faithfull, and I took their hit songs. For

Joni Mitchell it was 'I Looked at Life Upside Down' (VO: 'Both Sides Now', yeah), for Faithfull, 'As Tears Go By', and for Barbara 'L'Aigle Noir', and I did it when they were 16, 18, 20, and when they were 60. The same song – because all of them really caught them... people were in tears. The voices are so rich and dense and broken, and Marianne Faithfull was extraordinary, and it just made the point crystal clear. I had a very young audience, because it was about music. People were so moved, and I thought: OK. So I'm going to do a lot more on the aging process and music, music as way of actually bringing it into focus. I think it is unexplored and understudied.

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The next stop on the audio tour is the academy building at Domplein 29. Where Marieke van de Ven talks to Ernestine Comvalius and Pearl Pengel about their aunt Nadia: the first black woman to graduate as a doctor from Utrecht.