

Authenticity after Cock Rock: Emo and the Problem of Femininity



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Abstract

- Authenticity is a fetishized value in music fan cultures, yet its definitions are unstable and contradictory. As Norma Coates established, the discursive construction of authenticity is silently equated with masculinity in music, and it's posited opposites (commercialism, fakeness, unoriginality) with the feminine. This further maps onto a binary between 'rock' and 'pop', with rock occupying the positive masculine side of the divide, and pop the denigrated feminine. But in the early 2000s, the relative mainstreaming of emotional hardcore ('emo') posed a challenge to this divide, critiquing from the inside many of the tropes of masculinist 'cock rock'. This paper presents part of the research that informed my forthcoming book, *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture* (Nov 30 2020) to examine how the tropes of authenticity are negotiated in emo culture, in ways that both critique and consolidate Nicholas and Agius' 'persistence of masculinism' in rock music cultures.

Coates' metonymic binary (see also Frith and McRobbie)

| Authenticity | Artifice |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| (Cock-)Rock | Pop |
| Masculine | Feminine |
| Valued | Devalued |
| 'Not about the money' | Commercial |
| Instrumentation (mind) | Singing and dancing (body) |
| Alternative | Mainstream |

Emotional hardcore (emo)

- 'No-one knows what it means' (Greenwald 2012)
- But some popular opinions:
- Dates to 1980s post-punk scenes
- Repudiates cock-rock masculinism
- Interpersonal not international politics
- Male emotion/sentiment/nostalgia
- Hard/soft instrumentation
- More technically complex than punk – beyond I/V/IV power chords (De Boise 2014)
- Often screamed chorus/breakdown alternating with softer verse melody
- Often utilizes a softer resolving melody over a harder rhythm and bassline

Fan-defined 'Emo Holy Trinity'

FALL
OUT
BOY

MYCHEMICAL
ROMANCE

Paris!
at the
MUSGO

Gender-progressive evaluations

- Synergistic masculinity (incorporates subordinated – i.e. feminised elements) (Mack 2014)
- Alternatives for queer boys (Peters 2010)

Yet authenticity as a value and gatekeeping the genre are fundamental to emo subculture (www.reddit.com/r/emo), in ways that often replicate Coates' binary quite closely.

Beta-male misogyny and the male subject

- POV is male
- Girls as object of remonstrance/idolization/hatred (virgin/whore dichotomy): 'Muses at best. Cum-rags or invisible at worst' (Hopper 2003)
- The male perspective is authentic, deep, true subjectivity – 'I'm just a notch in your bedpost/but you're just a line in a song'; 'I could write it better than you ever felt it' - connections to the misogyny of Romanticism (de Boise 2014)

Replicated in fandom to a surprising degree

- Fear of contagion by feminised pop
- Boys as more valued fans
- Instrumentation/technicality as highest value
- Suspicion of mainstreaming/commercialism
- Denigration of feminized fan behaviours

Fear of contagion by feminised pop

From the MCR Livejournal fan community comments,

“i die a little inside whenever i hear they’re in yet another teeny bop magazine”
(untilyoubelieve 2005)

So I went to Barnes and Noble today to look for Rocksound, and while we were there my friend Joanna decides she wants to find out who her pop star!boyfriend should be (who places teenie magazines next to Spin and Kerrang and such? I mean, come on!) So she turns to the first page and screams and I look up at her and she’s shoving the magazine in my face and saying ‘Gerard’s in here! What the fuck?’” (marionettes 2005)

This item highlights a thread that runs through the discourse of authenticity, that is, the fear of contagion. Placing the “teenie magazines next to Spin and Kerrang” infringes on the masculine, sophisticated, critical tradition of the rock periodical (Fathallah 2020, 70).

Boys as more valued fans

- Girls/women rejected from fan communities based on their tastes/appearances – boys accepted as authentic fans based on their say-so ‘You sound like you got your list of emo bands from MTV2’ (Overell, 2010; c.f. Thornton 1995 on the feminised mainstream)
- From the Panic! at the Disco LiveJournal community:
 - “most of the members here are female, arent they?! WHHHHY??” (xpistolax 2004)
 - “hahahaha i know. LAMEEEEE” (i_melt_with_u 2004)
 - “Thats true huh?? We need more penis in this community!!!! ::shakes fist::” (adiscobloodbath 2004)

Girls are the majority but boys’ contributions are more valued.

Instrumentation/technicality as highest value

People always tell me how EMO MyChemRomance is . . . It's really annoying and then they always ask if I'm EMO just because I listen to them . . . Then I get grief from EMO kids who think MCR sucks and aren't "Real Emo" . . . There is no winning for MCR where I live . . . But my best friend likes them, and I sport MCR shirts at least 3 out of 7 days of the week . . . I've gotten one awesome comment from this Hardcore Metal guy at Guitar Center . . . He told me how different the Lead Guitarist is, and how he does something no one else would have ever thought of (forlornangel 2005)

Suspicion of mainstreaming/commercialism

“I feel like a woman . . . you guys are such sellouts (anon., 2008 on the FOB Myspace page).

MCR HITS TRL

Yeah—you read that right. The powers-that-be at MTV have seen the light and have asked MCR to play live on TRL on January 17th. We’re all just as surprised as you are, but it’ll be pretty amazing to see the TRL crowd experience the MCR assault.

To make sure that there aren’t the usual TRL Barbie and Ken dolls in the audience, they’re looking for 15 of the biggest MCR fanatics to be in the studio live with the band. So, send in a note explaining why you want to be in the audience that day . . .

Jeff at MCRHQ (2004, reposted in the LiveJournal community by [_tune_you_out](#))

'aww, yeah. i'll admit, at first when they were on trl i was a bit bummed cos everyone else was convincing me, but later, i realized just how great they are for doing that/ they deserve it more than anyone! . . . MCR didn't go mainstream . . . mainstream went MCR. ;)' (gerards_kitten 2005)

Denigration of feminized fan behaviours

- 'I had a spastic 14 year old girl next to me at the Pittsburgh show with a pride flag and she was whipping it everywhere . . . during every song . . . and nailing me in the head and eyes with the metal grommets on it' (damnitschecky 2018, on Reddit).
- 'I personally don't care what people are wearing at the show, as long as they act the right way and are into the music. one 'fuck me gee' and you're down, but if it's just the clothing that's different, who cares? then again, the rest of the people at the show could have a different opinion of you. just play it safe and wear a black tshirt anyway. Heh' (brndnw22 2005, in the MCR LiveJournal community).

Pushback

- ‘I say, be a fan however you want to be a fan. You’re entitled to your opinion, but there’s just so many of these pointless rants by people who want to distance themselves from stupid little fangirls. I don’t give a fuck which you are as long as you appreciate MCR and they bring you happiness. The important thing is that we know who we really are and what the band means to us, right? So who give s a fuck what anyone else thinks?’ (mysti112 2005).



“What the hell happened to rock & roll?”

It’s 2018. DEAL WITH IT!
(TJ Williams 2018, on YouTube)

Nonetheless, men and boys remain the human subjects and narrators of emo

- Important illustration of the ‘persistence of masculinism’ (Nicholas and Agius 2018– flexible strategy by which patriarchy is upheld – can easily accommodate the man of feeling as masculinity changes over time and place – masculinism is whatever justifies the superiority of men and boys in a particular context)
- Upheld by women as well as men (because masculinism is a discourse) “She kills a lot of things” [...] “even her husband” (pixel and tete henkes 2015, on YouTube)
- Magazine stories of redemption for queer/non-masculine boys (e.g. Dean 2017 in *Alternative Press*)

Allie: Yah I think it could be because you're what you're hearing, most emo bands are all guys and they're talking about girls so . . .

James: [interrupting Allie] I think women have a better way of looking at things from both sides, rather than men who just kinda have that egotistical, "it's your fault bitch."

Allie: Well in some cases it could be like in Taking Back Sunday how the girl is sleeping with both members of the band, [short pause] that's just shitty. [short pause] They write a song about her because she's a bitch (in Alsaksen 2005, 106)

Conclusions

- We cannot precisely say that femininity is silenced
- BUT the persistence of masculinity easily accommodates the 'man of feeling', 'beta male misogyny'
- despite the denigration of cock-rock and strong presence of girls in emo fandom, the authenticity of the masculine in emo culture maps onto Coates' binary in often quite traditional ways
- The flexibility of the masculine maintains its hegemonic strength: justifications might change, but gendered hierarchies endure

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