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Is Emo Metal? Gendered Boundaries and New Horizons in the Metal Community**Abstract**

This article examines debates in *Kerrang!* Magazine around emo's position in the metal community. I ask, why is emo vilified and rejected in British metal magazines, what can debates around emo reveal about the gendered nature of metal, and what potential for new envisionings of metal do they encapsulate? As the only British weekly magazine to focus on metal and hard rock, *Kerrang!* fulfils a pedagogical role in the metal community, establishing a canon of musical works, a history and ideology of the genre. Fans are vividly represented in its letters pages, their words and images used to disseminate *Kerrang!*'s ideology of metal. 2006's reported increase in female readership has been attributed to the coverage of 'emo' bands such as My Chemical Romance who have a majority of women fans. This coverage has provoked debate and censure in its letters pages, debate that illuminates gender relations and allows new consideration of the gendering of the metal community. Inspired by Barthes' *Mythologies* I perform a semiotic reading of *Kerrang!*'s June letters pages between 2000 and 2008 to understand the gendered myths forged and propagated by the design, images and letters. Using Thornton's concept of the gendered mainstream I delineate the implications of *Kerrang!*'s myths for female fans, arguing that the influx of female emo fans reading *Kerrang!* has caused a revolt amongst fans of more established metal bands, who represent the magazine and emo as feminised, akin to the mainstream. I conclude that whilst debates around emo are rooted in the metal community's conservative ideas about gender, the presence of many vocal young fans open to ideas of fluidity of gender allow us to conceive of a more inclusive metal community in which gender boundaries are less constrained.

1. Introduction

I think emo's a pile of s--.

(Way quoted in Sowerby 2007, swearing edited out in original)

So claims Gerard Way, leader singer of My Chemical Romance, a band famously known as 'emo'. What could motivate Way to seek to deny the band's association with emo and denigrate the genre, when his statement had the potential to alienate many fans, who call themselves 'emos' (Audiojunkies 2008)? In this article, I consider the debates around emo's position in the metal community¹, and argue that so-called emo bands like My Chemical Romance and their large female fanbases pose a significant challenge to the gendered ideology of rock and metal. Whilst this ideology traditionally limits women's participation in the metal community, I posit that emo presents an opportunity to re-write that gendered ideology and to allow greater participation in the community for women fans. This article can be read alongside Andy R. Brown's paper at Heavy Metal and Gender International Congress in 2009. Where I concentrate on women fans, Brown discusses the ways in which women musicians are marginalised in the metal tabloids, and considers female magazine readers' responses to that marginalisation in their letters to the editor.

2. The Gender of Rock

According to Mimi Schippers, 'rock culture [...] has relied upon and reproduced quite mainstream ideas about gender and sexuality' and in these terms it does not live up to its rebellious counter-cultural image (Schippers 2002, p. 23). Indeed the predominance of male voices in rock, retelling stories of predatory sexual exploitation of women (Schippers 2002, pp. 22-3) and tales of wicked women ruining the lives of men (Whiteley 2000, p. 38) asserts masculine heterosexual dominance; women are objectified and silenced whilst masculine dominance is reproduced. In this way rock acts as a 'technology of gender in that "masculinity" is reinforced and multiplied in its many discursive spaces' (Coates 1997, p. 52); for 'acts, gestures, enactments and other signifiers which express gender also reinforce it' and, quoting Judith Butler, 'these signifiers "have no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler 1990, p. 136)'. Thus actions create

¹ I use 'community', as opposed to 'subculture' or 'scene', to denote the broad spectrum of metal fans, musicians and others who work in the metal business, thus signifying both unity amongst members and difference between individual members.

gender, it does not exist in itself, and what male rock stars do in their performance of 'male rock star' is create an 'ultimately fictive "masculinity"' (Coates 1997, p. 52). Furthermore, rock culture defines itself in opposition to pop (Coates 1997, pp. 52-3; Schippers 2002, p. 23), setting up a binary that overlays the masculine/feminine dualism and masks the hierarchy which places rock in the dominant, higher status position and pop in the subordinate, lower status position. To retain the stability of the fiction, then, masculinity must assert hegemony over femininity, and thus must eschew the subordinate gender. As Norma Coates argues,

rock masculinity, at least the stereotype which, I assert, is still very much in play discursively and psychically, is one in which any trace of the "feminine" is expunged, incorporated or appropriated

(Coates 1997, p. 52).

As a genre of rock, metal culture similarly works as a technology of gender, as is evident through its celebration masculinity (Weinstein 2000, p. 104) and its excription of femininity² (Brown 2009, p. 1; Walser 1993, pp. 114-117). It is perhaps surprising, then, that the female readership of UK weekly hard rock and metal magazine *Kerrang!* has, since 2000, risen to include a large proportion of women (Brown 2009, p. 7) and peaked at over 50% in 2006 (Campaign 2006). *Kerrang!* began in 1981 as a supplement to *Sounds* magazine to exploit the popularity of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal. It became very important to the metal community, fulfilling a pedagogical role, establishing a canon of musical works, and a history and ideology of the genre (Brown 2007, p. 652). By 2004 the magazine's readership was larger than that of the other major British rock weekly *NME*. It has been called the 'Bible' of heavy metal (Brown 2009, p. 7; Taylor 2010), but this position has not been unassailable, however, as I shall discuss presently.

To understand the ideology of metal as represented by *Kerrang!*, I turn to Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (2009) and, using his semiotic readings of popular cultural icons I perform a semiotic reading of *Kerrang!*'s June letters pages between 2000 and 2008 to read the gendered myths forged and propagated by the design, images and letter texts, and so building up a picture of the ideology. I consider the specific time frame 2000-2008 which

² With the exception of glam metal, which adopts the position of femininity, thus denying it to women (Coates 1997, p. 56; Sollee 2010).

covers the renewal of metal's popularity at the turn of the century (Darby 2001) and the increasing coverage of emo bands, in particular My Chemical Romance from 2004. The letters pages are significant in that they claim to represent readers' views and, whilst we have no reason to believe they are not the opinions of fans, they are also a mediated representation with letters selected and edited for publication. Thus the letters reflect real opinions, but are also published to fit the representation of the community that the magazine wants to portray. The letters pages therefore play a vital role in forging and reinforcing the ideology of the hard rock and heavy metal community as represented by *Kerrang!*. Because the letters *appear* as the real words of readers, they give the impression of presenting the natural and original opinions of fans. However, the choice of letters reflects a 'editorial agendas' (Brown 2009, p. 8) and are published to fit with certain myths and the overarching ideology of the magazine. Semiotically reading the signs of the letters pages (including the use of particular colours, fonts, types of images, the general layout, the design 'tricks', the choice, subject matter and framing of photographs, and the themes and styles of the letters themselves), allows for the extrapolation of the myths that are forged therein, and myths are fundamental to the presentation of ideology as they enable particular ideas to take on the appearance of being natural:

We here reach the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature. We now understand why, *in the eyes of the myth-consumer*, the intention, the adhomination of the concept can remain manifest without however appearing to have an interest in the matter: what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason.

(Barthes 2009, p. 154, emphasis in original)

Myth *distorts* the meanings of the original texts and is pernicious in its apparent *naturalness*. The myth is given as if it is a common sense and objective truth, rather than a constructed and societally made and believed idea. The myth masquerades as truth, 'not because its intentions are hidden [...] but because they are naturalized' (Barthes 2009, p. 156). Thus reading the myths around the debates over emo's place in metal enables us to grasp how *Kerrang!*'s ideology is represented as grassroots philosophy, and in particular how its ideology is gendered.

To give a very brief overview of my examination of the signs of the letters pages between

2000 and 2008, key features are as follows: the designs use a *sans serif* font for headers as well as for the body text of letters; black and red are used together as a strong colour scheme (until 2008 when yellow replaced the red) for borders, backgrounds to text boxes, keylines and artworks; techniques such as drop shadows and notepaper effects create an air of scrapbook realism; photographs utilise naturalistic poses and tend to portray men as musicians and women as fans, the men smiling less frequently than the women; letters texts portray emotional responses to the music, to the musicians and to wider topics, particularly those relating to themes of equality, 'selling out' and authenticity. *Kerrang!*'s representation of the gender of fans has changed between 2000 and 2008: in the first few years of the twenty first century few images of fans were printed at all, but in the middle and later years many fan images were printed, and the faces of these fans were predominantly female. A number of myths can be read from a semiotic analysis of these key features, as I will elaborate below. The three myths that I discuss here are that (one) the metal community is and its music 'real' and engendered in a spontaneous and natural fashion by community members (the myth of authenticity); (two) its members have equal status regardless of their role (the myth of equality and inclusivity), and (three) its fans are women worshipping masculine warrior musicians (the myth of the worshipping woman fan and the warrior musician). I turn now to the signs, the individual elements of the key features, and map out their signification and contribution to myth making.

The use of the faux realistic drop shadows and other design tricks such as the notepaper effects and scrapbook realism; the naturalistic poses and the passionate language of the letter writers and the statements about judging bands and people by the music and their personalities respectively, all point towards a community for whom being honest, being 'true to one's self' and not indulging in the false reality of star culture are extremely important values. Intertwined with these values and ideas of authenticity are strong associations of equality: the naturalistic photos and poses of musicians and the DIY stylings of the designs and letter texts relating to fan/musician meetings lead me to argue that the value of *equality* amongst community members plays so strongly with ideas about authenticity that a notion that any community member – more particularly any fan – could become a musician and that musicians are still fans and remain close to their roots. Ideas about equality also affect the way in which community members interact with one another: respect is paramount and lapses prove shocking. I call these two intertwined myths the myth of authenticity and the myth of equality and inclusivity.

There are many images of women looking delighted at meetings with male musicians, alongside defensive and celebratory letter texts that use excited language at the prospect of seeing musicians in the flesh at gigs or expressing (sometimes sexual) pleasure at viewing images of musicians. The frequency of images of fans being images of women, the majority of letters being from women, and the rare images of women musicians (see also Brown 2009, p. 9) combine to give an overwhelming representation of women that is based on enjoyment of listening to the music, viewing the musicians in concert, video and poster form, and meeting musicians. There are some images of male fans, but images of men on the letters pages tend to be images of musicians in unsmiling and aggressive poses. They frequently wear black clothes that reveal their muscular upper bodies, and their skin is pierced and tattooed. These photographs work with the prevalent red and black design schemes (connoting blood, sex, death and danger (Dabner 2004, p. 35) and the aggressive tones of letters using the flying and sounding technique (Benwell 2001; Hill 2010), to produce a myth of a community that celebrates combative strength and positions this strength as residing in the body of the male musician. Thus there is a symbolic difference between the roles of men and women in the metal community: women are fans, worshipping and defending their favoured musicians, whilst men are musicians, strong, fearsome and basking in the adulation of female fans.

A contradiction emerges: the myth of the worshipping woman fan represents women as fans and *not* musicians, but the myth of equality and inclusivity posits that all members of the rock and metal community are equal and that the aspirations of any community member are potent and can be acted upon. Unravelling the myths exposes this contradiction, but as Barthes asserts, the power of the myth is in its ability to appear as 'natural', as 'common sense': it is the fact of its being taken for granted and therefore unquestionable, that is cause for concern. Myth is insidious in its relation to the representation of female metal fans: the ideology asserts that all members of the community are equal whilst simultaneously drawing a line between the feminine and masculine genders, determining what role each gender should play in the community and ascribing only the status of fan to women. The myths that can be read in *Kerrang!*'s letters pages therefore present a gendered ideology of the metal community that reinforces masculine dominance. I now examine the debates around emo to understand how this gendered ideology has impacted upon the representation of the subgenre.

3. The conundrum of emo

The current incarnation of emo's origins are contested. Put very simply the subgenre has grown from the emotional hardcore variant of hardcore punk. Sarah F. Williams describes emotional hardcore bands, such as Dashboard Confessional and Thursday as 'attempt[ing ...] to reconcile the long-established codes of masculinity – musical representations of aggression, pomp, stoicism, misogyny, and determination – with more multifaceted human expressions of heartache, weakness, longing and loss' (Williams 2007, p. 146). She argues that emo bands, as they seek to break out of the traditions of rock's masculine gender, are articulating a crisis of masculinity in which 'rigid social definitions of gender roles [are unable] to adapt to the changing cultural landscape' (Williams 2007, p. 146). The difficulty is that whilst emotional hardcore uses masculine musical signifiers - 'distorted guitars, and loud dynamics with an aggressive oftentimes rage-filled sentiment' (Williams 2007, p. 149) – it seeks to embrace those 'more multifaceted' human emotions, and those emotions are coded as feminine. Later incarnations of emo, whilst still claiming the heritage of hardcore, employ feminine musical signifiers – 'acoustic guitars, stringed instruments, intimate vocal styles' (Williams 2007, p. 152) – and in doing so are able to present a 'portrait' of the changing cultural representation of masculinity (Williams 2007, p. 152). As a result emo fits awkwardly with the ideology of the male warrior-musician, but comfortably with ideas of authenticity: its position in *Kerrang!* is therefore one which has some consistency with the magazine's coverage of punk and hardcore bands, but is on some levels at odds with its ideology.

The aforementioned rise in female *Kerrang!* readers is concurrent with the rise in the magazine's coverage of so-called emo bands (My Chemical Romance, Fall Out Boy, 30 Seconds To Mars, amongst others). The magazine's coverage of these types of bands has generated much debate in the metal community, and led to the magazine being referred to as the '*the new Smash Hits*'³ and to lose its status as a metal magazine in some quarters⁴.

³ A number of forum comments reveal this attitude, a small sample are:

http://www.kerrang.com/blog/2009/12/kerrang_magazine_02122009.html

<http://forums.downloadfestival.co.uk/tm.aspx?high=&m=4667442&mpage=7#4672790>

<http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?t=337919>.

Smash Hits (1978 – 2006) was a British pop music weekly aimed at teenagers.

⁴ This complaint has been made to me verbally by a number of metal fans, and is also evident in

Nevertheless, *Kerrang!* has retained its readership amongst fans of heavier bands whilst attracting many newer readers, fans of the emo bands that have received coverage. Furthermore, bands and their fans do not always accept their popular categorisation as emo, a move that Williams argues is 'because of the gender implications' (Williams 2007, p. 156). This brings me to My Chemical Romance who denounced emo, and who are yet the most famous representation of the genre in the UK.

Since 2005 My Chemical Romance have featured often on the cover and in the pages of *Kerrang!*, and they have become the face of *Kerrang!*'s perceived 'teenification' and its move away from heavy metal. As such emo has become the focal point of much anger at the changes to the magazine and, by extension, the metal scene in the UK. The band was formed by comic book artist Gerard Way in New Jersey in 2001, when the events of September 11th in America caused him to rethink his career options (Heisel 2005, p. 130). Their album *Three Tears for Sweet Revenge*, released in June 2004, of which the video for its lead single 'I'm Not Okay (I Promise)' received frequent plays on British rock music television channels *Kerrang!* And *Scuzz*, allowed the band to reach a much wider audience. The video's acknowledgement of school bullying and depression amongst teenagers, along with the high drama of the album's songs 'connect with a very adolescent intensity of feeling' (Boden 2006, p. 52). The band have a particular, but not exclusive appeal to teenagers, and many of their fans are school age girls and young women. Video footage of fans taken by Audiojunkies at Marble Arch in June 2008 showed only two or three male fans amongst the reported 200 female fans (Audiojunkies 2008). Although Williams does not discuss My Chemical Romance, the emo ideals of expressing 'more multifaceted' human emotions that she describes are clearly evident in the songs and image of My Chemical Romance. Furthermore, Way has made specifically feminist statements. When I saw them at Leeds Festival 2006 Way gave advice to the girls and women in the audience: if a member of the roadcrew said they could get backstage for the price of a blow job, they were being exploited and were to refuse. This statement breaks down the male privilege that comes with working in the rock industry in which even the lowliest, ugliest male roadie can gain access to the sexual favours of young women by exploiting their positions as gatekeepers to the musicians (Schippers 2002, p. n193).

Kerrang!'s online forums: see Alvaro's comment at http://www.kerrang.com/blog/2010/12/kerrang_magazine_151210.html, and Dr Hero van Wildebeest's comment at http://www.kerrang.com/blog/2010/03/kerrang_magazine_170310.html.

However, Way famously denounced emo in 2007, saying,

I think emo is F–ing garbage, it’s balls–. I think there’s bands that unfortunately we get lumped in with that are considered emo and by default that starts to make us emo. All I can say is anyone actually listening to the records, put the records next to each other and listen to them and there’s actually no similarities. I think emo’s a pile of s–.

(Way quoted in Sowerby 2007, swearing edited out in original)

He later laid claim to the heritage of opera and pomp rock band Queen (JP 2007), a band whose spectacular and excessive sounding music has little in common with the stripped down rawness of hardcore punk. My Chemical Romance's place in the metal community remains a rocky one. Their headline slot on Download 2007's opening night saw them subject to a hailstorm of bottle thrown from the audience, and letters to the three UK metal magazines (the two monthlies *Metal Hammer* and *Terrorizer*, and *Kerrang!*) reveal that there is a significant amount of vitriol directed towards My Chemical Romance by fans of older metal bands, and how the magazines collaborate in their readers' opinions:

Since we were young, my mate has told me he hates metal, the gods (Iron Maiden) suck and that he loves My Chemical Romance. Would it be going too far if I torch his car, and burn 'Maiden rules' in his lawn?

(William, email 2008, p. 6)

Burning a friend's car is an extreme reaction to a difference in musical taste, but William's letter also creates a ludicrous image of the My Chemical Romance fan waking up, opening his curtains and seeing the visible evidence of his friend's passion for Iron Maiden, and this same friend's comment on his own fandom. The hyperbole of the letter is balanced by the understatement of *Metal Hammer's* letters editor's response: 'slightly'. The response cloaks in humour the editor's hidden response of 'yes, of course it would be going too far', but it does not hide the meaning of 'slightly' which suggests that some level of behaviour would be appropriate for William to undertake when faced with his friend's lack of love for Iron Maiden and passion for My Chemical Romance. The magazine's reply is not a 'love and let love' response, but one that condones William's dismissal of, and anger at, his friend's musical preferences.

Katie Jones expresses her distaste for My Chemical Romance fandom in her letter to

Terrorizer, using disparagingly the metaphor of anal sex to describe the way in which she believes some magazines are overly-celebratory of the band and do not give a balanced view of the music:

I would like to congratulate you [...] for being the only magazine not to completely assfuck My Chemical Romance.

(Katie Jones 2007, p. 8)

Katie positions other magazines and My Chemical Romance, as male and gay.

Terrorizer's response refers to *Tootsie*, a film about a male actor who dresses as a woman in order to gain work, implying the maleness of fans and yet suggestive of effeminacy and the loss of masculinity. It also highlights the generational difference between the staff of the magazine and My Chemical Romance fans:

It's highly unlikely that you will ever see any mention of My Chemical Romance (or 'MCR' if you're down with the kids) in the pages of this magazine, as the people who write it are a little bit too old to be smearing cheap eyeliner over themselves like some kind of demented panda that's watched 'Tootsie' one time too many, or to ask for blocks of time with a therapist for Xmas and birthdays as they saw it on 'The OC'.

(Gritt 2007, p. 8)

Terrorizer uses that age difference to mock young fans as poor, as unskilled make-up artists, as vulnerably bestial, as over-exposed to culture such that they are unable to make un-influenced decisions, and as believing themselves to require mental health services.

Terrorizer's editor characterises My Chemical Romance fans as the harmless but highly visible dupes of popular culture, a position reminiscent of Adorno's characterisation of fans of mass culture (Adorno 2002), and both Katie Jones and *Terrorizer* letters editor Emma Gritt use homosexuality and transvestism to criticise My Chemical Romance and their fans, which, with an underlying tang of homophobia, positions both the band and their fans as effeminate.

If *Metal Hammer* and *Terrorizer* are both critical of My Chemical Romance fandom, with *Kerrang!* the case is less clear cut: until late 2009 letters rarely received an editorial response on the page, and letters that are critical of emo often rub shoulders with letters that are supportive of the genre. However the following two letters from 2007 sit alongside

each other and a picture of Slayer, with no emo-positive letters appearing in the issue:

This whole dark scene of rock is so overrated. Not only is the word 'black'; overused way too much in rock, but there's so much rock nowadays that's all about self-harm, suicide, or death, so it wouldn't hurt to have a few cheery articles would it?

(Elliott, Surrey via email 2007, p. 4)

Below Elliott's letter and underneath the (*Kerrang!* written) headline, 'Stop crying your hearts out' Little Harry Hardcore writes,

One message to all My Chemical Romance fans: STOP IT AND GET SOME SLAYER.

(Little Harry Hardcore, via MySpace 2007, p. 4, capitals in original)

Kerrang!'s letter headline may physically divide the letters from Elliott and Little Harry Hardcore, but it also serves to link them. To read through the letters in order, Elliott's words ring in the mind when reading Harry's letter with its capitalised 'STOP' echoing the 'stop' of the headline, so suggesting that *Kerrang!* stop focusing on the 'dark scene of rock'. The miserable music referred to by Elliott becomes, by association, the music of My Chemical Romance, and the thing that Little Harry Hardcore wants My Chemical Romance fans to stop is being miserable and listening to music 'that's all about self-harm, suicide or death'. The headline's linking role establishes the magazine as supportive of the view of My Chemical Romance as excessively involved in misery to an extent that it affects other readers of *Kerrang!* by dint of the dearth of articles about other bands. Like the editorial replies in *Terrorizer* and *Metal Hammer*, the musical taste of My Chemical Romance fans is called into question by *Kerrang!* rather than being respected as a legitimate preference.

Meanwhile, emo-positive letters in *Kerrang!* present My Chemical Romance as a band who have been misunderstood, and its fans to be quite different from the pseudo-angst-ridden, cross-dressing (male) teens characterised by *Terrorizer*. Becca in Norwich gives a personal perspective of her My Chemical Romance fandom:

Thank you so much *Kerrang!*. You've opened up my eyes to good music, which has changed my life. It has helped me through so much, like bullying and depression.

I became more confident in myself, and the fuckers who made my life a misery saw that, and the bullying gradually became less and less serious. [...] And you know what? One of those bands who helped me through this are MCR. They had been through so much as a band, and they pulled through it all. Their lyrics have such hope, they hold one important message, to keep going, whatever it takes. So people who brand their music as 'depressing' and the band as possible leaders of a 'suicide cult' can shove it up their... well... you get the point!

(Becca in Norwich, via MySpace 2007, p. 4)

Other letters present similar attitudes, and the wide reporting of emo fan Hannah Bond's suicide in 2008, reportage that blamed My Chemical Romance, was discussed by a number of letter writers on *Kerrang!*'s letters pages. Notably the letters that support My Chemical Romance are predominantly from women. This fits in with the myth of the worshipping woman fan, and, when read alongside Katie Jones' letter and *Terrorizer's* response, embeds the representation of emo fandom as a feminine passion.

Paul Brannigan, editor of *Kerrang!* between 2000 and 2009 reads the contested place of emo as a result of prejudices around gender and age, and a protectionism by older, more masculine fans of more established metal bands:

Emo fans are the whipping boys of the moment. [...] There's a misogynistic air to it. A lot of the credible metal bands have got an older, very male following and they see teenage girls getting into bands like MCR and think they've not earned the respect to be called a rock fan.

(Brannigan quoted in Boden 2006, p. 53)

'Respect' from male fans of 'credible metal bands' is something teenage girls must *earn*, not something that is accorded automatically as a right. Looking at Little Harry Hardcore's letter, as it is contextualised with Elliott's letter by *Kerrang!*, it is important to note that the band Little Harry Hardcore recommends instead of My Chemical Romance is Slayer – a longstanding band with an established place in the canon of metal rather than a newer band. Brannigan puts the lack of respect down to both the My Chemical Romance fans' age and their sex, but also implies that bands 'like MCR', unlike the ones older male fans like, are not 'credible'. So whilst Brannigan seems to condemn older fans' misogyny he betrays his own disbelief in My Chemical Romance's credibility. Reading letters to other metal magazines and Paul Brannigan's comments I argue that the gendered ideology that

can be found in *Kerrang!*'s letters pages can also be found elsewhere in the metal community: behind Brannigan's ambiguous statement, the publication of the letters and editorial responses, and behind Way's rejection of the 'emo' label, lies and ideology of metal that relies heavily upon gendered value judgements and the gender of fans.

4. The gendering of fans

The positioning of My Chemical Romance fans as feminine corresponds with Schippers' description of the gender order of rock, in which women fans are not 'real fans' (a masculine position that is complicit with the hegemonic masculinity of the musician, the 'real fan' is the record collector, the acquirer of 'insider knowledge', the aspirant musician [Schippers 2002, p. 29] with the potential to take on other roles such as critic, roadie, promoter, etc.), but are 'groupies', interested in the person of the musician rather than the music, and seeking a relationship (perhaps sexual) with the musician. 'Groupie' is positioned as the complement to 'musician', and as the sexual object to the musician's sexual subject; the groupie is always passive and always feminine, whilst the musician is active and masculine. As Schippers argues, the relationships between the rock musician, the real fan, and the groupie form a hierarchy in which 'groupie' falls to the lowest position (Schippers 2002, pp. 26-29). Thus women's participation in the community is limited to a certain role, and that role is subordinated, less visible and less powerful. The musician/fan hierarchy is tied to ancient binaries that align men with the 'positive' associations (such as 'active') and women with the 'negative' associations (such as 'passive') (Gatens 1991, p. 92). Thus the way in which men are represented in *Kerrang!* as the doers, the musicians, the record collectors, and women the watchers, the fans, the sexual objects, presents a problem for women wishing to enjoy greater participation (e.g. as musicians) and respect (e.g. as 'real fans') within the community, but can also be read as an attempt to keep women 'in their place' as fans, rather than breaking out into more powerful and (possibly) fiscally rewarding roles as musicians or other high status roles, thus minimising the latent danger presented by femininity.

It is not only the presence of women fans in the metal fold that is problematic for the ideology of rock: objects of female fandom are likewise ignored or derided. Simon Frith gives the example of the lack of cultural capital afforded to women (and in particular older women). His discussion of the disdain shown to James Blunt by rock critics concludes that the contempt shown the musician is intertwined with the status of the fans; he describes

how James Blunt CDs are displayed in music shops as 'Perfect for Mothers Day' and that this in itself is enough to deter people from buying it (Frith 2007). Blunt lacks respect, Frith argues, because his target audience is older women. Andreas Huyssen offers compelling evidence that conceptions of mass culture have consistently treated mass culture's audience as a feminine 'other', giving the examples of Flaubert's Emma Bovary, the provincial housewife who tried to live her life as she were a heroine in one of the 'inferior' (Huyssen 1986, p. 46) romantic novels she read, and Nietzsche's critique of theatre audiences as 'herd, female, Pharisee, voting cattle, patron, idiot (Nietzsche quoted in Huyssen 1986, p. 51). High art is defined in opposition to mass culture:

the powerful masculine mystique which is explicit in modernists such as Marinetti, Jünger, Benn, Wyndham Lewis, Céline et al. (not to speak of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud), and implicit in many others, has to be somehow related to the persistent gendering of mass culture as feminine and inferior

(Huyssen 1986, p. 55)

Women's culture is thus considered inferior to men's art. The gendering of the audience of mass culture has persisted into mid-twentieth century theorists' work. Leavis and Denys Thompson, following Joseph and Overton, write disparagingly of readers using fiction as compensation for a 'narrowed life' (Joseph and Overton quoted in Leavis and Thompson 1933, p. 99), 'habituating him to weak evasions, to the refusal to face reality at all' (Leavis and Thompson 1933, p. 100), and these readers are 'especially women' (Joseph and Overton quoted in Leavis and Thompson 1933, p. 99). Adorno in *Prisms* describes pop fans quite specifically 'as girls' (Adorno quoted in Frith 1983, p. 44). Motti Regev argues that in the 1960s rock critics worked hard to gain high art status for rock music, whilst characterising pop music as mass culture (Regev 1994), a project that has been extremely successful and that has brought with it the attendant associations of masculine for rock and feminine for pop. Thus the rock/pop binary is intrinsically gendered.

The mass culture/high art dichotomy is therefore based upon the duality and attendant hierarchy of feminine/masculine so that it is not only James Blunt fans whose cultural status is devalued, but *all* women fans, by dint of their sex. The objects of their fandom are similarly devalued, and the modes of their fandom devalued too. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber show that the Subcultural Theory of the CCCS focuses on men's culture, ignoring women's culture (McRobbie and Garber 1991, p. 1), which they argue takes the

form of teenybopping (McRobbie and Garber 1991, pp. 12-14), the focus of which is pop music, and therefore subordinated as feminine in the rock/pop binary. McRobbie and Garber, even as they are critical of Subcultural Theory's gender-blindness, thereby preserve the duality of women and men's culture, leaving intact the rock/pop and high/art mass culture hierarchy. Sarah Thornton (1995), also notes how Subcultural Theory asserts a duality; members of subcultures create a communal identity defined against a demonised 'other': 'labelling is crucial to the insiders' and outsiders' view of themselves as different' (Thornton 1995, p. 119), and in the case of 1990s dance culture the outsiders belong to the 'mainstream'. In her consideration of the process of how 1990s dance culture, initially considered a subculture, came to be considered 'mainstream', Sarah Thornton looks at the relationship between theories of high art/mass culture and theories of subculture/mainstream and finds remarkable similarities. Where mass culture is the foil for high art, so those involved in 'subcultures' treat 'mainstream' as the foil for 'subculture'. 'Mainstream' is a label given to the culture that is currently most popular, to the extent of being considered 'the norm'. 'To some degree the mainstream stands in for the masses [...] derivative, superficial and *femme*' (Thornton 1995, p. 5). It is associated with pop music, fashion, herd mentality, passive consumption, and lack of discernment or real taste (Thornton 1995, pp. 99-100). 'Subcultures', on the other hand, are authentic, intelligent, original and independent. The mainstream is female, working class, and 'naff', and the subcultural contempt shown it is summed up in the phrase 'Sharon and Tracey dance round their handbags' (Thornton 1995, p. 99). Like mass culture the concept of the mainstream, then, is strongly allied to femininity. Thornton argues that as the dance scene grew in popularity and as women began to move into it, its underground and alternative status was compromised; it became the mainstream and as such 'feminized' (Thornton 1995, p. 100). What is notable in Thornton's description of the mainstream is its resemblance to descriptions of 'mass culture' and that it is the focus of many of the same criticisms. Just as 'mass culture' formed the lower end of a dichotomy with high art, so 'mainstream' falls into a dichotomy with 'subculture' or with 'alternative' culture that is 'cool', discerning and requires a greater degree of engagement to reap pleasurable rewards. 'Subculture' or 'alternative' is the new 'high art'. In *Kerrang!* ideas about rock as authentic and pop as being manufactured can be found amongst many letters from the angry discussions of battles with 'townies' in the early 2000s to the criticism of Kelly Clarkson (or 'Crappy Clarkson' as *Kerrang!*'s letter headline calls her [*Kerrang!* 2007, p. 4]). The dualism of rock/pop and subculture/mainstream and its attendant devaluing of

women fans thus underpins the myth of authenticity and reveals the necessity of masculinity for its successful propagation. Following Sarah Thornton's reading of the devaluation of women's culture, the debates around emo position heavy metal as an authentic, rock-aligned 'subculture', whilst emo is contrastingly represented as an authentic, pop-aligned and feminised 'mainstream'. Whilst the ideological binary is perpetuated, options for the participation of women (excluding a few exceptional women) in the metal community remain limited to 'groupie'.

Kerrang!'s ideology supports this binary whilst paying lip service to an idea of inclusivity that includes gender equality: the myth of equality and inclusivity tells women and men community members that they are already equal, that no discrimination occurs, and this disempowers women from being able to mount a case that contests the gendered binary and from challenging any sex discrimination within the community. It prevents them from crossing the line (fuzzy though it may be to men in the community, it is much clearer to women) to fulfil any musical aspirations they may have.

6. Consequences of gendered ideology

To return to metal, Brown (2003) and Gafarov (2010) have both elaborated on the problems Subcultural Theory has encountered when brought to bear on metal, and Subcultural Theory itself has been the subject of much criticism from a variety of quarters (Bennett 1999; McRobbie 1991; Redhead 1990, amongst others). However, the myth of authenticity shows that the metal community as represented by *Kerrang!* positions itself as *different* and *authentic*, and in opposition to the mainstream. In terms of the ideology of the magazine, therefore, Thornton's description of the subculture/mainstream dichotomy also describes metal's self-definition. Because anything which is associated with women or with femininity, for instance via its large female fanbase, is positioned as mainstream, emo, with its large female following and its rejection of many of the masculinist tropes of rock, presents a significant danger to the ideology of metal as different and authentic, the risk being that metal will become 'mainstream' and so lose cultural value. Therefore, preserving the gendered boundaries of what is and is not metal is extremely important, and the arguments and actions against emo and My Chemical Romance's inclusion in the metal genre can be read as defensive manoeuvres to prevent metal becoming mainstream. However, this fear of the mainstream is a subterfuge driven by the desire to maintain metal's masculine exclusivity whilst retaining the myth of equality. This sophistry

presents a serious problem to those wishing to challenge metal's gender bias. Schippers discusses similar problems in the alternative rock community of the early 1990s. She argues that both feminist and anti-feminist arguments around equality combine to create an ideology which claims that both women and men are equal and have the strength to reach their potential: to suggest otherwise is to assert that women are victims. The result is that even discussing gender as a barrier is seen to be sexist because women can do whatever men can do (Schippers 2002, pp. 157-180). This attitude is mirrored by *Kerrang!*'s myth of equality which is so strong that pronouncements of sexism in metal are construed as misunderstandings and the complainant as an outsider. This problem can be seen in the *Kerrang!* community in letter writers' retorts to the interview responses of Lyn-Z, bassist of art-punk band Mindless Self-Indulgence, whose husband is the aforementioned Gerard Way. Lyn-Z's remarks set out a specifically feminist agenda in which she bemoans the lack of female role models amongst rock and metal musicians, and expresses outrage and frustration at becoming known for her famous husband rather than her own musical achievements, saying, 'it's fucked up and totally offensive that my name has totally disappeared and I am now referred to as "Mrs Gerard Way"' (Lyn-Z quoted in Parsons 2008, p. 30). Letter writers dismissed her claims, one in particular arguing that the quality of her bass playing, combined with the greater fame of her husband were all reasons why her arguments could not be called 'feminist':

Three things really pissed me off about your interview with Lyn-Z (K!1211)... The first, that girls need to see a woman onstage to be able to believe that they could make it as a rock musician. I don't know about any other female K! readers, but I never looked at Steve Harris, or Tony Iommi, and thought, 'damn it, I can never do that because he's a guy and I'm a gal'. Clearly the woman believes she's a feminist, but she thinks like a sexist. The second, that if girls do need a good female role model (and they are good to have around) she's the one be it. She admits to being a shitty bass player and yet thinks girls should look up to her just 'cos she's a female and onstage. The third, that she thinks that people calling her Mrs Gerard Way is sexism. It's not. It's because she married GERARD WAY. If she was already famous, or he was less famous, then she would have kept her name, but right now, it's thing she's most known for. Unfortunate, yes, but not sexism.

(Resh Giwa 2008, p. 4)

This letter achieved letter of the week status, and as such it represents *Kerrang!* as the protector of the true nature of feminism, rather than establishing a conversation about the problems faced by women in their quest to be recognised and valued musicians (for discussions of the obstacles see Clawson 1999, Cohen 1996 and Bayton 1998), and what could be done to overcome them. Combined with the title of the original article in which Lyn-Z was interviewed – 'Get Over It!' – a strong and intelligent potential role model for young female fans is ridiculed, just as other strong women of the genre are similarly belittled (see, for example, Ian Winwood's interview with Arch Enemy's Angela Gossow in issue 1178 in which he focuses upon whether she's had plastic surgery rather than on the new album she was intending to promote (Winwood 2008, pp. 22-26), also the general treatment of Courtney Love as mentally unstable and My Ruin singer Tairrie B as difficult). *Kerrang!*, with its large female readership, has the potential to influence its readers, educating them about the ideology of the metal community (including appropriate beliefs, behaviour, tastes, fashions, modes of expression) and the gender roles that they may play in the community. That this ideology is set forth by editorial agenda and is not necessarily the 'lived experiences of fans' (Andy R. Brown 18th November 2009, email message to author) may well not be recognised by readers: as Barthes argues, the power of myth is in the way that it naturalises ideology. Thus the myth of equality and inclusivity has a direct bearing upon women metal fans' ability to view themselves as able to step beyond the boundaries set by *Kerrang!*'s ideology, in the case of women envisioning themselves as musicians, *Kerrang!* offers discouragement by demeaning potential role models, presenting life for women musicians as difficult in that they will be subject to questions about their bodies instead of the music: it would seem to be safer to be a fan.

The debate around emo's place in the metal genre and My Chemical Romance's inclusion in *Kerrang!* Gives clear evidence of how the gendered ideology of *Kerrang!*'s representation of the metal community works to exclude women and devalue femininity, allowing metal to retain its status as masculine and of higher value. Whilst the ideology makes myths that promote the community's equality and inclusivity, the necessity of preserving a myth of authenticity, that works alongside the masculine high art / feminine mass culture ideas behind the subculture/mainstream dichotomy, means that the feminine must be marginalised, excluded and denounced whenever it seeks inclusion in the metal genre. Keeping female community members from challenging the dominant myth of authenticity means that a strong myth of equality must be propagated, even as women are

limited to the role of fans. As Resh Giwa's letters makes clear, this is done by implying that it is women's individual failings rather than structural problems that prevent them from imitating their role models (male and female).

6. Emo as potentially transformative

Whilst emo is positioned as mainstream to metal, women will remain marginalised. However, a rethinking of emo as metal allows us to conceive of a more ideologically inclusive metal community in which gender boundaries can be more fluid. The influx of young metal fans that emo brings gives the prospect of changes to the conservative gender sexual order of metal, as Schippers argues,

If [...] we decide to buck the rules and refuse to follow the expectations for femininity and masculinity in a given setting, we could possibly disrupt the relationship between masculinity and femininity. If done collectively, a group of people could possibly set a new course for gender structuration.

(Schippers 2002, p. xii)

With the increased female readership of *Kerrang!* women have become increasingly visible in fan photographs and as letter writers, and as a result the bands that are believed to appeal to them do receive greater coverage on the letters pages and in the magazine. *Kerrang!*'s move to a yellow and black design in 2008 further emphasises this shift as it forms a symbolic break with the past, similar to the break Paul Rees was attempting to establish with the design changes at the beginning of the century (Darby 2002). In 2009 Nichola Browne took over as editor of *Kerrang!*, only the second female editor in the magazine's history. Currently female musicians, even those in emo bands such as Paramore's Hayley Williams, remain the exception rather than the norm. However, Williams has received a lot of coverage in *Kerrang!* (not all of it respectful) and, as a young rather ordinary-looking woman (she wears jeans and t-shirts rather than the more sexually-accentuating bodices of, for instance, Marta Peterson of Bleeding Through) is one of those role models that Resh Giwa claims are 'good to have around'. *Kerrang!*'s acceptance of emo and its attendant female fanbase, then, allows for the potential for women fans to be treated more respectfully, other than as groupies, and for women fans to permeate the fan/musician barrier, becoming performers, songwriters and musicians, and to take on other roles in the metal community, allowing women's voices to be more widely heard. Furthermore, as the video coverage of the 2008 *Daily Mail* protest shows, female My

Chemical Romans fans are articulate and thoughtful and, with feminist messages coming from the lead singer of their favourite band, there is every chance that the inclusion of these women in the metal community will allow for the problematic gendered ideology to be challenged in a way that Schippers argues was not possible for alternative rock fans. Metal's horizon broadens and a new gendering of the genre becomes possible. Rather than being contested this new horizon needs to be embraced. Whether the proliferation of emo fans will change the gendered ideology of metal remains to be seen, but I am hopeful that as My Chemical Romance's young fans grow to adulthood we will see women's participation in the community in more roles than that of 'groupie'.

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