

Emo: A Feminist Critique

*[First set of revisions and expansion]*

Thomas Fish

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Dialogues and Methods

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Emo, sometimes known as emo-core or emotional hardcore, is a genre of music that is related to punk rock. The term itself has a diverse group of meanings.<sup>1</sup> The history of emo music is outlined from its start in the 1980s until its time in the mainstream in the mid-2000s. Then, this genre of music and its aesthetics are put under a microscope and looked at critically through a feminist lens. The genre is looked at as a form of resistance against masculinity. The genre's ability to be a vector for oppression is also examined. These two views are compared to see if a subculture can be both a form of resistance yet a form of oppression at the same time. Finally, an explanation of why this genre of music includes these traits is developed.

## History and Background

### *Hardcore and Revolution Summer*

Punk, as a form of Rock and Roll, dates to the 1970s. Bands such as the Ramones, The Sex Pistols and The Clash created a form of music that continues to influence popular music. By the end of the 1970s, punk music was becoming mainstream. A form of music called “New Wave” was created that merged the music of punk with clean cut and well-dressed bands.<sup>2</sup> In opposition to this, hardcore punk was created. The genre took the punk music of the 1970s, stripped it down to its bare bones, and played it as fast as they could.

The genre was rooted in two cities on the opposite sides of the country: Los Angeles and Washington, DC. One of the strongest voices in the DC scene was a band called Minor Threat.

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- 1 The term has been used as a label for a genre of music, a lifestyle, a subculture, a stereotype and a way of dressing. For the purposes of this paper, I am examining the music and its fans. See “Defining Emo” in *The Rock History Reader*, edited by Theo Caterforis, for a listing of definitions off of the crowd sourced-online dictionary Urban Dictionary.
  - 2 Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 123.

Founded in 1980, the band played a fast, angry and intense version of punk rock. From the stage, the lead singer, Ian MacKaye, shouted at the audience about not using drugs, the evils of fundamentalist religion and the apathy of the band's peers.<sup>3</sup> (Straight Edge, a movement of teetotalers, came from the band's music.) This atmosphere attracted a violent and very macho crowd. Fights would break out on a regular basis, and the lead singers of bands would routinely find themselves being punched at by fans. By 1983, MacKaye and the rest of Minor Threat became disillusioned with the violence and broke up.

In 1984, a group of fanatical Minor Threat fans decided to start their own band. Named after a Stravinsky opera, Rights of Spring played a version of hardcore with a twist.<sup>4</sup> Instead of singing about politics or channeling anger into music, the band's front-man, Guy Piccatto, moaned about romantic problems and internal issues. In a cross between crooning and yelling, Piccatto sang lyrics such as “I am the fuck up that I can't forgive” to a slower and more athenatic type of punk rock.<sup>5</sup> MacKaye became a fan of the band, signed them to his label, and created a band with a similar sound named Embrace.

Rights of Spring, Embrace, and several other bands who adopted Rights of Spring's style of music started playing shows together in the summer of 1985. In the words of MacKaye, “We wanted to do something that we felt good about. We weren't interested in taking back the punk scene when we could just start another one.”<sup>6</sup> That summer, called “Revolution Summer” by the bands, included shows that were so emotional that the band as well as the audience would cry.<sup>7</sup> It

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3 Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute: A History of Protest Songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 347-350.

4 Andy Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock Teenagers and Emo* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2003), 11-13.

5 Azerrad, *Our Band*, 382.

6 Lynskey, *33 Revolutions*, 343-345.

7 Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Feral House, 2001), 175-176.

was at one of these shows that this type of music was first referred to, much to the dislike of all of the bands involved, as emotional hardcore which was shortened to emo. By the end of the summer, the bands involved broke up and the people involved moved onto other projects.<sup>8</sup>

### *Underground*

While emo died out in DC, the ideals of the genre, a deeply personal form of punk rock, moved across the country. In cities such as San Francisco and Seattle, and later in the Midwest, small emo scenes flourished in the early 1990s. Bands such as Jawbreaker married a poppier form of punk with the type of lyrics written by Rights of Spring.<sup>9</sup> Songs were slower and the lyrics were sung unlike past emo bands that spoke or yelled their lyrics. These bands had charismatic front men, who mesmerized audiences and sang about heartbreaks, deep emotional issues and, sometimes, feminist politics. The band Jawbox included nods to male privilege and the objectification of women in their songs. Many of these bands' albums sold moderately well. However, none of the bands from this era were able to gain widespread popularity.

The next generation of bands only took the emotional and musical content of the genre and left the political content behind. Feminist critic Jessica Hopper writes “emo went from being vague and undefined to this specifically emotionally overbearing music”.<sup>10</sup> The music became better sounding but not fully polished, yet. Many of these bands, such as Texas is the Reason or The Promise Ring, had a lyrical style that took mundane problems of life and made them the subject of a song.

The emo aesthetic came close to coming into the mainstream with Weezer's second album

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8 Most famously, half of Embrace and half of Rights of Spring came together to form the fiercely independent band Fugazi who toured and put out records from the late 1980s until the early 2000s.

9 Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good*, 20.

10 *Ibid*, 30-31.

*Pinkerton* (1996). The band's first self-titled album (the *Blue Album*), and almost every other album put out by the band, was filled with fun pop-rock songs. *Pinkerton*, on the other hand, was filled with dark songs about struggling with stardom, hookups and failed romances.<sup>11</sup> The record sold miserably and Rivers Cuomo, the lead singer, deemed it a failure. However, the album found a cult following on the internet and the album ended up being certified gold. What *Pinkerton* showed the recording industry was that there was money in “sensitive, self-questioning boys complaining.”<sup>12</sup>

### ***Mainstream Popularity***

In the early 2000s a string of emo bands, backed by major labels, released a string of well selling records. “The Middle” off of Jimmy Eat World's 2001 self-titled album received intense airplay and the album went platinum within the first year.<sup>13</sup> MTV resurrected their unplugged series just for Dashboard Confessional. Labels such as Vagrant and Drive-Through, backed by the major labels, turned emo into a business model.<sup>14</sup> Both labels churned out all male bands that played songs about romantic problems with females and spending time with male friends. By 2007, bands such as Fall Out Boy, the All American Rejects, Brand New, Hawthorn Heights, My Chemical Romance, Panic! At the Disco, Bright Eyes and Death Cab for Cutie were selling billboard charting albums in quick succession.<sup>15</sup> This is when emo music was at the height of its popularity.

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11 *Ibid*, 50.

12 *Ibid*, 45.

13 *Ibid*, 108.

14 *Ibid*, 87, 126.

15 Leslie Simon & Trevor Kelly, *Everybody Hurts: An Essential Guide to Emo* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 129.

## Philosophy (Feminist Perspective)

### **Resistance**

In Patrick Hopkins's paper *Gender Treachery*, he outlines the traits of masculinity in Western society, examines how people resist this conception of masculinity, and what sort of effects. To be a male one must have an unknown number of characteristics that prove that he is not a woman. While this number includes most of the traits that are traditionally seen as masculine, it does not include all of them. A person with all of the traits would be seen as a parody of masculinity. The list of traits that Hopkins includes is:

heterosexual prowess, sexual conquest of women, heading a nuclear family, siring children, physical and material competition with other men, independence, behavioral autonomy, rationality, strict emotional control, aggressiveness, obsession with success and status, a certain way of walking, a certain way of talking, [and] having buddies rather than intimate friends<sup>16</sup>

This list of traits is a mixed bag. There are some positive traits, in moderation, such as independence but the majority of these traits are self-destructive, at best, or harmful to other people. Highly valuing aggressiveness, for example, can lead a person into physical altercations that have the ability to ruin the lives of both parties involved.

Resistance occurs when an individual refuses to participate in this conception of masculinity. Hopkins discusses groups that by and large do this, such as cross dressers, but he does not pigeonhole resistance to just these groups. Resistance is an action that is possible for any person to participate in. A straight male, whose identity does not rely on being male to exist in a stable form, can be said to resist masculinity.

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<sup>16</sup> Patrick T. Hopkins, *Gender Treachery: Homophobia, Masculinity, and Threaten Identities*, 98.

Emo resist this paradigm. The clothing of emo bands as well as fans can be described as cross dressing. Fans of emo are known to wear tight skinny jeans, often call “girl jeans.”<sup>17</sup> Sometimes this isn't a misnomer. Male emo fans are known to wear jeans that were originally designed to for women. The wearing of the apposite sex's clothing is not restricted to just blue jeans. Male emo fans are also known to wear jackets and other apparel that were originally made for women. The hair styles of male emo fans are more often seen on women than men. The hair of many male emo fans is long and has been straightened, an act that is almost unheard of for men.<sup>18</sup>

Emo music has, from the start, been very emotional. The lead singers of bands traditionally sing about topics and in a way that is often considered too emotional for a male. This breaks the conventions that males should have a tight emotional control and should be aggressive.

One of the most common insults that are leveled on emo music and at male emo fans, by other males, is that they are “girly” or not real men.<sup>19</sup> This insult is commonly used by males as a way of pointing out a person who does not live up to the masculine paradigm. It signifies that in the eyes of the speaker, a person does not live up to their internal standards of masculinity.<sup>20</sup> If the genre was not resisting the paradigm of masculinity, this would not be a common way of describing the genre and its fans.

The actions of emo fans and bands and well as the way the genre is described show that the genre's participants do not follow the traditional depiction of masculinity. In a way,

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17 Simon & Kelly, *Everybody Hurts*, 36.

18 *Ibid.*, 40.

19 “Defining Emo.” In *The Rock History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Theo Caterforis, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013).

20 Hopkins, *Gender Treachery*, 96.

participant in emo music cross dress and express their emotions in ways that are not normally seem among men. Because of this, male emo fans are popularly referred to as girly. It is fairly safe to say that to some degree, the genre upsets the standing paradigm of masculinity and that it can be a form of resistance.

### **Oppression**

In Iris Young's "Five Faces of Oppression," she puts forth a five part test for oppression.<sup>21</sup> Oppression in this use is not the dictionary definition of oppression where a ruler subjects a group of people to tyranny. Instead oppression refers to the "disadvantages and injustices some people suffer because of the everyday practices of a well-meaning liberal society."<sup>22</sup> Groups that are oppressed suffer from an inability to fully express their capabilities and thoughts due to systematic constraints. These constraints can manifest themselves as norms, habits and even symbols. For a group to be able to be referred to as oppressed they need to fulfill at least one of Young's criteria: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.<sup>23</sup>

The people in power in emo are by far men. The vast majority of record label executives for both independent and major labels are men. Most of the concert promoters and managers are men. A quick perusal of the artists signed to Fueled by Ramen and Vagrant, two of the current centers of emo music, show only one band with a female member, Paramore. None of the bands have a person of color in their membership; emo music is still being made by white males. But,

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21 This project does not look critically at this definition of oppression or critically at the concept of oppression itself because discussions of both of these topics are already available in the literature and it would take away from the critical analysis of the music.

22 Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," in *Rethinking Power*, Thomas Wartenberg, ed. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 41.

23 *Ibid.*

the majority of emo fans are no longer young men. Women make up the largest demographic.<sup>24</sup>

Emo music's depiction of women falls into one of two categories. Women are either faceless and nameless actors who have broken the heart of the front man or they are faceless and nameless actors who the front man lusts after. The feminist writer Jessica Hopper states:

Our existences, our actions are portrayed SOLELY through the detailing of neurotic self-entanglements of the boy singer—our region of personal power, simply, is our breadth of impact on his romantic life.<sup>25</sup>

Punk/emo band Cursive make a similar claim that other emo artists, on their record label used women to make themselves miserable – “Fall in love to fail, to boot your CD sales.”<sup>26</sup> Once they were miserable, the front men were able to write the kinds of songs that sold well.

For example, the front man of Brand New sings “And even if her plane crashes tonight she'll find some way to disappoint me, by not burning in the wreckage, or drowning at the bottom of the sea ” in their first single “Jude Law And A Semester Abroad”.<sup>27</sup>

While breakup songs are normally over the top, the amount of violence here is concerning. Not only is that but the name of the former partner or any indication of her agency not mentioned. She has been reduced to a nameless and faceless object to be angry at. She has stopped being a person to the singer.

A similar theme is found in a New Found Glory song. The speaker tells a female, who he is having romantic troubles with, “though you swear that you are true, I still pick my friends over

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24 Jessica Hopper, “Emo: Where the Girls Aren't,” *Punk Planet* 56 (2003). and Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good*, 137.

25 Hopper, “Emo”.

26 Cursive, “Art is Hard,” from *The Ugly Organ* (Omaha: Saddle Creek Records, 2003)

27 Brand New, “Jude Law And A Semester Abroad” from *Your Favorite Weapon* (New York: Triple Crown Records, 2003).

you.”<sup>28</sup> The lyrics come down to male friends are better than girls as well as that the only use of women, in the mind of the speaker, is romantic. Platonic friendships with women do not exist.

Lyrics such as this are a form of cultural imperialism. They create a false normal for the listener as well as create a situation where women are turned an “other.” They are considered outsiders to the group. In addition, emo music's heavy use of melodramatic romantic songs from only the male point of view leads to the marginalization of women. These songs foster an idea, in the minds of both male and female fans, which the only use for women is for romance. Female friendships don't exist.

Another example of this comes from songs of the opposite trope. The singer isn't, and mostly will never be, in a relationship with the girl he is singing about. Death Cab for Cutie's front man sings:

There are days when outside your window,  
I see my reflection as I slowly pass  
And I long for this mirrored perspective,  
when we'll be lovers, lovers at last<sup>29</sup>

Lyrics which are both creepy and stalker-y. The female in this situation does not seem to know of the speaker in this situation. She does not seem to have the ability to say yes or no to the speaker's advances. In this case the female subject of the song is little more than a statue for the feelings of the male speaker to be cast on to.

Both tropes culminate in Fall Out Boy's song “Sugar, We're Going Down.” The speaker

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28 New Found Glory, “My Friends Over You,” from *Sticks and Stones* (Sherman Oak, CA: Drive-Thru Records, 2002).

29 Death Cab for Cutie, “I will Possess your Heart,” from *Narrow Stairs* (New York: Atlantic Records, 2008).

admits that he has reduced his former lover to a “line in a song.” The listener knows that the singer is unhappy with a former significant other but knows no other details. Later in the song the speaker brings up the stalker trope with:

Oh, don't mind me  
I'm watching you two from the closet  
Wishing to be the friction in your jeans  
Isn't it messed up  
How I'm just dying to be him?<sup>30</sup>

Yes, it is messed up that the speaker is doing this. Calling this creepy or stalker-y gives these lyrics too much credit. These lyrics are downright alarming.

What this does is it normalizes violence against women. The lyrics speak of these actions in a way that one would talk about last night's ball game – as something trivial. Though enough repetition the horrible can be turned into normal and mundane. Both the Death Cab and the Fall out Boy songs do this with stalking.

It is possible that an individual would get the message that actions like this are what people are supposed to do. In the same light female fans get the message that being crept upon is normal and should be seen in a positive light. This type of song also continues with the idea that women are nothing more than objects to cast romantic desire on.

Emo is an oppressive force against women. The lyrics of emo songs fulfill several the criteria for being a source of oppression. They act as a form of cultural imperialism where the male majority creates stereotypes about the female minority and at the same time painting them

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30 Fall Out Boy, “Sugar We're Going Down,” from *From Under the Cork Tree* (New York: Island Records, 2005).

as “the other.” These same actions marginalize women by showing them as little more than objects of romantic desire. The genre also trivializes and normalizes violence against women.

While it is true that several other forms of popular music contain more overt forms of sexism, such as heavy metal and rap, the fact that the sexism is covert does not make the sexism any better. Stabbing someone in the back is no better than stabbing them in the front – the damage is still being done.

### ***Compatibility?***

How can a genre be both a source of resistance against masculinity and a form of oppression? This double bind comes from viewing the genre on a macro versus a micro level. Picture a bucket. From far away it may look solid and look like it has the ability to hold water. But if one would look closely, they would see that the seemingly solid bucket was filled with tiny pinprick sized holes. The seeming good bucket is actually useless for the task of holding water. The genre works in the same way.

On a macro level, lyrics individual songs melt together to form broad generalizations. The emotion of the performers rises to the top and is remembered. The same thing is true with the fashion choices of people involved with the genre. At this level, the oppressive and sexist themes, unfortunately, disappear to the viewer. A critic needs to utilize both views to get a full picture. Without a look at the songs themselves, a critic would be left with a positive view of the genre.

The reasoning for these themes can be explained by Hopkins. I believe that these themes arise in the music because of the resistive nature of the aesthetic. It is the way that the male front

men of the genre's bands maintain their male identity.

The public shows of emotions that are not anger, by the singers open themselves to having their manliness tested. The most common way that a male tests the masculinity of another male is by calling the first male a “girl.” Failure to pass this test results in a male having no personal identity. There is one way to pass this test. A male needs to show that that he has other qualities of masculinity besides the one being questioned. Aggressiveness and anger is shown and proven by threatening to get into a physical altercation with the person issuing the test. Other attributes of the gender are proven through athletic prowess and other responses to the test. However one responds to this it is still the masculinity test.

I believe that emo uses this method to “prove” that it is as masculine as other forms of music. The genre is already subjected the masculinity test on a regular basis. It is a common insult to level on the genre that it is girly and that the fans of the genre are not real men. The participants then have to respond. Their response, via their music, is that they participate in masculinity by dominating women. Since the genre has many places from where this can be challenged (the emotion of the music, the dress of the fans, etc.) it doubles down on one of the new avenues of proving its masculinity left for it.

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