Is stage-gay queerbaiting? The politics of performative homoeroticism in emo bands.

Abstract

Queerbaiting is a fast-expanding topic in media and cultural studies. In 2015, this author attempted to define queerbaiting as a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the patronage of queer viewers via the suggestion of queer relationships, before denying and laughing of the possibility. Joseph Brennan's 2019 edited volume has greatly developed the concept as including a range of meanings from media industries pledge of allegiance to LGBT causes which is not delivered, and courting queer viewers via paratexts that imply queer relationships which don't exist in text. Applying the concept of queerbaiting to bands complicates these ideas, as the 'truth' or 'delivery' of queer representation lies not in a fictional text but the public persona of real performas. Through an examination of stage-gay, the notorious practice of queer performativity onstage by straight performers of emotional hardcore, I investigate how a restrictive notion of 'truth' in discussions of queerbaiting can actually close off the very possibilities of transformation and open-ended configurations of sexuality that Doty's formulation of queerness promised. Emo bands are the natural case study here, as emo is an offshoot of hardcore and punk that sought to complicate the hegemonic masculinities that dominated those genres, both in it's musical and lyric content, and the public and paratextual performativity of it's artists.

Queerbaiting is a fast-expanding topic in media and cultural studies. In 2015, I attempted to define queerbaiting as

A strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility. Denial and mockery reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes.[1]

In 2020 this seems, if not incorrect, then rather narrow. Joseph Brennan's edited volume *Queerbaiting and Fandom* develops the concept, as including at least the following meanings:

a) Media producers' publicly pledging some sort of allegiance to LGBT causes without without delivering on that allegiance
b) Courting queer viewers, for example via paratexts like trailers that imply queer

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[1]   [This author], *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture* (Iowa: Iowa University Press, 2020, 491).

characters and/or relationships, then not fulfiling those expectations

c) Unsatisfactory representation, such as needlessly killing off queer characters to avoid resolution to their stories.[2]

In the same volume, Nordin suggests that there are two sides to queerbaiting - one version has producers 'hinting at yet denying queer content, and the other one has producers promising gay characters yet not delivering proper represetnation'.[3] Most of the authors in Brennan's book are fairly clear that the deliberate *intent* of media producers is a key part of queerbaiting, as opposed to viewer interpretations of queerness or homoeroticism.[4] Obviously this becomes more complicated when we apply it to the concept of 'stage-gay'. 'Stage-gay' is a term invented by fans of emo and post-punk bands in the early 2000s. Known by the portmanteau 'bandom', this fandom flourished on LiveJournal from around 2002 before graduating to Tumblr, and centered around the three bands fans liked to refer to as 'The Emo Holy Trinity' (My Chemical Romance, Fall Out Boy and Panic! At the Disco). It also extended to some of their frequent collaborates and fellows signees to the labels Fuelled by Ramen and Decaydance, such as The Cab and The Academy Is…

 'Emo' is short for 'emotional hardcore', and the genre's relationship with both fandom and gender construction is very complex. The author explores this fully in a monograph, but in brief, emo emerges both as a reaction against and a development of the hyper-masculine, hyper-aggressive, capitol-P political punk scene of the 1980s which shunned both technical precision and the expression of much emotion other than rage.[5] Emo's politics are personal, and it's performers tend to position themselves if not as feminist then at least sympathetic to women, subject to the softer emotions of nostalgia, heartbreak and longing. Emo's genealogical descent from Romanticism has been noted in many places,[6] [7] and like the Romantics, it often tends to consciously or subconsciously construct a discourse of what Sam de Boise called 'beta male misogyny':[8] most men might be neanderthals, but the emo artist is a poet: how could any woman be so cruel, so crude as to reject him?! Emo lyrics frequently construct an age-old virgin/whore dichotomy: girls are either idealized or demonized, or as Jessica

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[2]   Joseph Brennan, *Queerbaiting and Fandom* (Iowa: Iowa University Press, 2019), 1-2.

[3]   Emma Nordin, "Queerbaiting 2.0: From Denying your Queers to Pretending You Have Them", in *Queerbaiting and Fandom,* 25-40, 39.

[4]   Brennan, *Queerbaiting and Fandom,* 8.

[5]   [This author], *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture.*

[6]   Craig.Schuftan, *Hey, Nietzsche! Leave Them Kids Alone!: The Romantic Movement, Rock and Roll, and the End of Civilisation as We Know It* (Kindle edition: ABC Books, 2012).

[7]   Sam de Boise, "Cheer Up Emo Kid: Rethinking the 'Crisis of Masculinity' in Emo," *Popular Music* 33, no. 2 (2014): 225-242.

[8]   Sam de Boise, "Cheer Up Emo Kid".

Hopper succinctly put it, 'muses at best, cum-rags or invisible at worst'.[9] Women are very rarely subject-narrators in emo, but strictly objects or address, worship or remonstration. But this is not the space of a full recount of emo gender politics. Here we focuses specifically on emo bands' penchant for stage-gay:that is, demonsrtations of male/male affection and eroticism, up to and including full kissing and simulating sex onstage. Given that no-one in any of the Trinity bands has ever come out as being in a same-sex relationship - and indeed, have denied their existence - this looks on the face of it much like the queerbaiting Brennan's book explores: a performance of queer radicalism enacted by straight, primarily White men who don't actually actually have to pay the political costs of queerness.

However, as I will argue, there are several factors that complicate this. Firstly, there is the question of 'reality': the stage is a space that exists somewhere between the fictional script and the everyday political life of human beings. It is real, but not true. Secondly, there is the question of intent: as Brennan writes, producer intent has typically been considered a key factor in queerbaiting strictly speaking: queerbaiting is designed specifically to draw in queer viewers (and their money) before undermining their investments, both emotional and finacial, in favour of the heternormative majority. When considering emo bands intentions in performing stage-gay, we should look first to explicit statements made by band members about it's purpose: not to take them as transparent statements of fact, but as performative elements in the Butlerian/Foucauldian sense, which combine with other visual and audible statements to construct a discourse of queerness. Thirdly, there is the unusually close relationship, enabled by the spread of home internet in the early 2000s, between emo fans and the performers they favour. In fact, as the author has demonstrated, the boundaries of emo as a genre and the definition of the 'Emo Trinity' is largely a matter of fanwork, fan archiving and fan criticism, which was eventually reuptaken by the music industry as the term 'emo' gradually shed it's derogatory connotations.[10] We should also take account of the socio-cultural contexts in which stage-gay first came to public note: two boys kissing onstage at a hard rock festival in 2002 is an entirely different statement to the same gesture made in a queer-friendly club in 2020. Finally, and crucially, there is the question of what exactly we mean by queer. Monique Franklin argues that as the term queerbaiting has gained currency, it has gathered an increasingly 'absolutist perspective of representation' which sacrifices both nuance and potential for alternative ways of reading:[11] which sacrificies the very fluidity that Doty aimed to indicate by the

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[9]   Jessica Hopper, "Emo: Where the Girls Aren't", *Punk Planet* 56 (2003): http://www.rookiemag.com/2015/07/where-the-girls-arent.

[10]   [This author], *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture.*

[11]   Monique Franklin, "Queerbaiting, Queer Reading and Heteronormative Viewing Practices", in *Queerbaiting and Fandom*, 41-52, 41.

word 'queer'.[12] 'Queer' is not one side of a binary on which the other side is 'hetero-': the word we would be looking for in that case is 'homo-'.

First, I will recap the very little work that has been done so far on 'celebrity queerbaiting'. I would not call the members of the Emo Trinity bands celebrities, except in a strictly subcultural sense, but it does not really matter here how well-known the subjects in question are outside their own fandoms: we are concerned with the subject of straight men who perform queerness before an audience whilst presenting as their own 'persona', rather than as a fictional character. Building on this idea of 'persona', I will then briefly outline the theory of performativity through which I intend to analyse the practice of stage-gay and go on to outline some key examples. I will then combine the lens of performativity with the sociological theories of Robert Heasley and Jane Ward, in order to conclude that whether stage-gay can be really read as queerbaiting depends both on how we consider the 'reading', the 'queer' and the 'real'.

Brennan and McDermott write that 'queerbaiting rests on the notion of the "true" meaning of a text' and debates over who has access to that truth. In celebrity queerbaiting the authentic meaning is the person's 'real' sexuality.[13] Celebrities including pop stars Nick Jonas and Harry Styles have been accused of baiting queer audiences by posing and performing in queer-coded ways. Brennan and McDermott document a thread on the popular LGBT site Datalounge discussing with a pointedly homoerotic photoshoot staring Jonas is an example of 'pandering' or simply 'showing his gay fans what they want to see'.[14] They argue that 'for many critics, "privilege" surrounds those accused [of queerbaiting] [...] Those who employ the term as a form of activism argue that queerbaiting allows celebrities like Jonas to reap rewards without risking mainstream appeal'.[15] This is an easier charge to make of genuine pop stars in 2020 than it is of alternative rockers in the early 2000s - bands like My Chemical Romance certainly *did* risk their mainstream appeal, such as it was, by dressing in feminine clothes, making out instage and upbraiding their contemporaries for misogyny. Both MCR and Panic have been bottled at rock festivals (e.g. Reading in 2006), to shouts like 'faggots': those of us who were old enough to attend hardcore and rock shows in the early-mid 2000s will recall when there was nothing particularly remarkable about this virulent subcultural homophobia. Secondly, Brennan and McDermot write that 'even [in] the most gratuitous of queerbaiting gestures [...] actualization will always be

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[12]   Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University Of Minnesota Press, 1993).
[13]   Joseph Brennan and Michael McDermott, 'Celebrity Queerbaiting', in Brennan, *Queerbaiting and Fandom*, 123-41,123.
[14]   "Celebrity Queerbaiting", 131.
[15]   "Celebrity Queerbaiting", 125.

denied'.[16] This depends both how one defines actualization, which in turn depends on how we define the 'real'.

Stage-gay really takes two forms. The first takes place literally onstage at concerts, and consists of homoerotic gestures between bandmates including hugging, touching, kissing and indeed simulating sex. Each Trinity band has a particular 'pairing' most notorious for stage-gay (i.e., Frank Iero and Gerard Way from MCR; Pete Wentz and Patrick Stump from FOB and Brendon Urie and Ryan Ross from Panic, the latter of whom was eventually replaced by Dallon Weekes). The second kind of stage-gay concerns paratexts from television, magazines and social media: poses, gestures, signs, the wearing of items t-shirts reading 'I <3 [the other member of the pairing in quesion]' and even explicit sex jokes. MCR particularly had a habit of baiting interviewers who expected them to conform to the tropes of 'cock-rock' masculinity. For example, when an interviewer informed Gerard Way in a Fuse segment that a fan wanted to know whether he 'sleeps naked', which he denied, Frank Iero immediately said with a straight (no pun intended) face 'Well, he told *me* it had to be that way'.[17] I have written before that gay jokes are a hallmark of queerbaiting, and this is true, but typically the humour operates the other way around: friends are mistaken for a couple, and humour is generated by their awkward response (see especially the BBC's *Sherlock* and the CW's *Supernatural*). This joke reverses the trope: the interviewer operates according to a set discourse of 'cock rock' masculinity in which the frontman is sexually available to female fans, which is then overturned by the response. Having attended the concerts of all three bands over a period of nearly fifteen years now, I think it is safe to say that in recent years, the stage-gay has been toned down, possibly because it is rather less striking a statement in mid-sized arenas in 2020 than in hardcore and alternative rock clubs in 2004. Bands were quite explicit about why they did this: when a Spanish fan accused Gerard Way of queerbaiting via Twitter: 'so you pretende [sic] to be gay for get our attention [sic]and buy more MCR's albums? You're very clever',[18] he responded archly, 'Actually, the purpose of the stage persona was to challenge gender standards and homophobia.Not for slashfiction #pointmissed'.[19] We'll return to the comment on 'slashfiction' [sic] later, but this is an explicit denial of the implied deception in queerbaiting. Again, this is not to say we can take artist's word as fact, but it certainly offers an alternative construction of 'producer intent' and thus how stage-gay might be interpreted. And indeed, there were good-faith personal risks involved in stage-gay: wearing a homemade t-shirt reading 'homophobia is gay' to a hardcore club show in the early 2000s, as MCR's rythym guitarist Frank Iero once did,

16   "Celebrity Queerbaiting", 137.
17   FuseNetworks, "My Chemical Romance answers fan questions", YouTube, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fFMmYPRmQQ.
18   Teffy Ramone, Twitter, 2013, https://twitter.com/teffy_ramone/status/348532485405159426.
19   Gerard Way, Twitter, 2013, https://twitter.com/gerardway/status/348534038497206272.

courted a real risk of retribution both in sales and physical violence.

 Contra the Tweet above, most fans are aware that the celebrity or performer we can watch onstage, on television or our computer screen is both a real person and something else simultaneously. Especially in the case of explicitly theatrical bands like Panic and MCR, who like use glam rock and even some camp influences in their stage shows, it is taken for granted that say, Panic's frontman Brendon Urie is a real person who exists in the world, *but* that that person isn't quite synonymous with the 'Brendon Urie' who performs as Panic's flamboyant frontman. Many theorists would agree with Way in calling this latter identity a 'persona'. The term 'persona', which is from the Latin for 'mask' was initially used by psychologists to describe the types of public performance we all take part in daily in our different life roles, or in Goffman's classic formulation, our 'front-stage'.[20] The rise of celebrity culture combined with the ubiquity of social networking has given rise to more refined uses of the term: as Marshall, Moore and Barbour put it, the 'practice of constructing a public mediated identity is now pervasive and proliferating'.[21] It is not a question of 'truth' or 'falsity', but simply a matter of highlighting the constructed and managed nature of public identity, for 'persona describes the wider practice of constructing and constituting forms of public identity, with celebrities providing some of the most visible, performative and pedagogic examples of the practice' .[22] Indeed, the contemporary demand for musicians to maintain a networked persona across multiple social media platforms[23] has in some ways made the constructedness of the stage-persona more distinct. Once during a now-deleted Livestream in which Brendon Urie showed fans a rather a mundane day of work in his home studio and household chores and playing with his dogs, some complained that he did not do more 'rock star shit', to which he responded, 'that's what I've been trying to tell you guys! 90% of my life is normal and boring, rock star shit is for rock star hours only!' This is not to imply, of course, that social media is somehow 'really real' as opposed to the stage: indeed, a performance of 'normalness is one of the ways emo bands construct authenticity,[24] but only to show that the network of sites showcasing a much more mundane, everyday personal life explicitly highlight the performativity of stage-business.

Dovetailing neatly with the concept of a persona, 'performativity' is a term coined by

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[20]   Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1959)

[21]   David P. Marshall, Christopher Moore and Kim Barbour, "Persona as Method: Exploring Celebrity and the Public Self Through Persona Studies", *Celebrity Studies* 6, no. 3 (2015): 288-305, 289.

[22]   "Persona as Method", 289.

[23]   See Nancy K. Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2018).

[24] [This author], *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture.*

Judith Butler,[25] building on the discourse theory of Michel Foucault.[26] [27] Essentially, this is an atheist and anti-essentialist understanding of meaning which denies the presence of an absolute 'truth' or 'reality' behind signification to which we can penetrate by the act of interpretation. On the contrary, say Foucault and Butler, signification is what constructs social reality. An example I like to illustrate the concept with is 'medicine'. There is no 'thing' called medicine that exists externally of contemporary medical discourse. What medicine is, at any given moment, is constructed of whatever is taught in medical schools and practiced in doctor's offices and hospitals. Like a number of queer theorists who take issue with identitarian definitions of queerness, Butler applies discourse theory to gender and sexuality. She adapts the term 'performativity' for J.L. Austin's 'performative utterances',[28] which describes a verbal command that brings a state of being into action when uttered by an authorized person in the appropriate context ('You're fired; I now pronounce you married; 'We find the defendant not guilty'). Performativity refers to styles of dress and bodily gesture as well as visible and audible signifiers. In discourse theory, such signifiers are usually called 'statements', in order to avoid the connotation of their being 'something else' behind the signifier (the implied signified). If we conceive stage-gay as a series of time-bound, context-specific performative statements, it seems to me neither that demanding the 'inner truth' of a performer's sexuality as the only true form of 'actualization' is missing the point. Pefromativity is the actualization of sexuality, and the homophobic and misogynist response from early hardcore shows demonstrates it's effectiveness. Indeed, MCR's Gerard Way once contended that getting bottled at a rock festival was his band's 'greatest victory at a show' because it proved that music was 'getting dangerous again'.[29] the excessive focus on the 'truth' of individuals' life is actually falling into Nordin's trap of limiting the meanings and possibility of queer performativity and queer reading. If personas are the 'the material forms of public selfhood',[30] we ought to read stage-gay, I would argue, as statements that construct a persona in action. Marshall and his colleagues contend that 'this kind of interpretation is an acknowledgement that the construction of a public self is always working with the material identity of previous discursive formations of identity'.[31] In the example of the bottlings at festivals like Download and Reading, the emo bands' queer personas were constructed against a material formation that characterises these shows, their performers and their audiences,

[25] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993).

[26]   Michel Foucault,*The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (London: Allen Lane, 1979)

[27] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002)

[28]   J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[29]   subln Reinhardt Haydn, *My Chemical Romance: This Band Will Save Your Life* (London: Plexus, 2013).

[30] Marshall et. al, "Persona as Method", 290.

[31] "Persona as Method", 292.

as hyper-masculine and heterosexual, prioritizing forms of music coded and policed as masculine territory.

We should also consider the uses values of stage-gay by queer and gay fans who could see themselves and their desires represented at a rock show, probably for the first time. As Brennan and McDermott put it, 'queer analyses of star images are focused not on locating the truth of a star but rather on what meanings have been produced and to what ends queer audiences are recieving and utilzing those meanings'.[32] Southerton and McCann believe that 'accusations of queerbating might occlude disruptions of heteronormative paradigms unfolding in celebrity fandoms'.[33] Again, emo bands aren't exactly celebrities, but the point stands. Southerton and McCann give the example of real person slash - in which fans write fanfiction with band members in queer relationships - as 'creat[ing] the conditions for queer desire and queer readings regardless of whether queernes is 'made real'.[34] Predictably, emo fandom has produced reams of real-person slash, which is frequently acknowledged with good humour, by its subjects. For instance, there is one notorious Panic! slash story known as 'the milk fic', concerning Brendon Urie and his former guitarist Ryan Ross, who were major proponents of stage-gay. The 'milk' in question is naturally being used for a particular sexual purpose, and this story has gained the reputation of being the most extreme and shock-inducingly kinky story in fandom. Asthis author has written elsewhere, this is largely a fandom meme and in-joke: the milk fic isn't really *that* shocking, by the standards of what can be found on the internet. What makes it a particular subject of notoriety and hilarity is the number of band members who have used social media to *describe their reading* of the story in generally positive terms. Gerard Way, who by this point had stated to have 'made peace with fanfic long ago',[35] Tweeted that he found it 'well written' and less shocking than it's reputation would suggest;[36] Brendon Urie himself actually wrote and sang a little song about it on the now-defunct short video platform 'Vine' (to the tune of Kelis's 'Milkshake'. Naturally). Indeed, emo fandom boasts the only example I have ever seen where a subject of RPS has contributed their own story based on their most popular pairing.[37] A few factors influence this striking instance of fandom/industry convergence, notably the particular emergence of emo via social

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[32] "Celebrity Queerbaiting", 124.

[33]   Clare Southerton and Hannah McCann, "Queerbaiting and Real Person Slash: The Case of Larry Stylinson", in *Queerbaiting and Fandom,*161-63, 161.

[34] "Queerbaiting and real person slash", 162.

[35] Gerard Way, Twitter, 2016a, https://twitter.com/gerardway/status/725081637092872192?lang=en.

[36]   Gerard Way, Twitter, 2016b, https://twitter.com/gerardway/status/725093778638274560

[37]   See [this author], "Reading Real Person Fiction as Digital Fiction: An Argument for New Perspectives", *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 6 (2018): 568–586.

media in the early 2000s,[38] and the unusually close relationship between scene participants and performers, who again, are not really 'celebrities' in the sense that film or pop stars are. This kind of ratification of fan practice from the subjects involved - as opposed to Way's previous assertion that stage-gay was not intended to be used for fanfic - does not make stage-gay any more or less 'real', but grants a kind of license or authorization to queer fan practice, resulting in a freer space of play.

Much has also been written on the uses of emo by non-masculine male fans, both straight and gay-identifying, to articulate their emotions and offer alternative gender expressions.[39] [40] [41] [42] Whilst I should repeat here that no-one in any of the Trinity bands has ever come out as being in a same-sex relationship, performers frequently make public statements of what we might call their gender-queerness, not only in the sene of wearing makeup and blending sounds traditionally coded as 'soft-feminine' with the harder legacies of post-punk, but in literal statements in media. Brendon Urie has declared himself to be 'pansexual',[43] despite being married to a woman, frequently rainbow flags at Panic concerts, and is happy to discuss which men he considers attractive). Gerard Way has discussed his gender identity in a Reddit question and answer session, stating that he has always identified strongly with women, was fairly comfortable being mockingly called a 'girl' as a child, and that 'masculinity [...] has always made [him] feel like it wasn't right for [him]'.[44] Pete Wentz has appeared on the cover of the gay lifestyle magazine Out, provactively posed above the heading 'Yeah, I am a fag'. The feature inside clarifies that whilst he isn't actually gay, he finds the epithet people have used as an insult against him for most of his life to be fitting enough: 'There is a sense of self-empowerment or recapturing who you are by people calling you 'fag', and being like, 'Yeah, I *am* a fag.' Even though you're not. What does somebody respond? That dude has *nothing* to say about that again.[45] I suppose in one sense, this could be taken as an extreme act of queerbaiting by the editors of the

[38]   See [this author], *Emo: How Fandom Defined a Subculture.*
[39]   Matthew J. Aslaken, "Middle Class Music in Suburban Nowhere Land: Emo and the Performance of Masculinity" (MA diss., Graduate College of Bowling Green, Bowling Green State, Ohio, 2006).
[40]   Bryan M. Peters, "Emo Gay boys and Subculture: Postpunk Queer Youth and (Re)thinking Images of Masculinity", *Journal of LGBT Youth* 7, no. 2 (2010): 129-146.
[41]   de Boise, "Cheer up Emo Kid".
[42]   Emily Ryalls, "Emo Angst, Masochism, and Masculinity in Crisis", *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2013): 83-97.
[43]   In Beatrice Hazelhurst, 'Brendon Urie Lays It All Out', *Paper,* July 6 2018, https://www.papermag.com/brendon-urie-lays-it-all-out-2584081623.html
[44]   Gerard Way, 'I am Gerard Way, musician, artist, creator, and cousin of Joe Rogan- Ask me anything! PS my album Hesitant Alien just came out', R/IAmA, Reddit, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/2i1840/i_am_gerard_way_musician_artist_creator_and/
[45]   In Shana Naomi Krochmal, "This Charming Man", *Out,* June 29 2008, https://www.out.com/entertainment/2008/06/29/charming-man

magazine themselves, in choosing that pull-quote as a title page to prompt magazine sales: but again, that requires reducing queerness to an identarian rigidity that, as Nordin writes, may actually strengthen the heteronormative framework: as though all feminine men must be gay, all masculine girls must be trans, and everyone needs to abide by the New Rules of Gender. Queerbaiting, after all, is defined as never being 'actualized'. But if we consider the celebrity (or subcultural celebrity) as a networked persona that exists across the stage, screen and magazine page, one wonders precisely what are the critireia of 'queer actualization'. How queer is 'queer enough?' Literally having sex with other men? According to Jane Ward, this is a misconception.

In the brilliantly titled, 'Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men', Ward warns against an identitarian conception of sexuality that assigns some sort of ratification-label to individuals on the basis of particular sexual acts.[46] She has studied the range of homosexual and homoerotic behaviour between different kinds of men who identify themselves as srtaight. She contends there is nothing unusual about this - that on the contrary, male/male homoeroticism is fundamental to the construction of heterosexual norms. After all, if we can neatly decide what kinds of queer activity 'count' as gay, and which don't - something Ward's students seem entirely convinced of their judgements in - it is much easier to maintain the boundaries of 'normal' and 'abnormal' and assign invividuals to those boxes. As Ward puts it,

To the extent that sexual contact between straight white men is ever acknowledged, the cultural narratives that circulate around these practices typically suggest that they are not gay in their identitarian consequences, but are instead about building heterosexual men, strengthening hetero-masculine bonds, and strengthening the bonds of white manhood in particular [...] In particular, I am going to argue that when straight white men approach homosexual sex in the "right" way—when they make a show of enduring it, imposing it, and repudiating it— doing so functions to bolster not only their heterosexuality, but also their masculinity and whiteness.[47]

Sex between men doesn't make them gay, says Ward, and it certainly doesn't make them queer. Men have sex with men according to all sorts of 'hetero-masculine scripts' like 'adventure, male bonding, hazing, humiliation, national security' that function to 'function to displace or mask homosexual attachments—even in the context of homosexual sex'.[48] Her focus on whiteness, she notes, is 'to think about the ways that whiteness and masculinity—as a particular nexus of power—enable certain kinds of sexual contact, sexual mobility, and sexual border crossing that are not possible, or at

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[46] Jane Ward, *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men* (London and New York, NY: NYU Press, 2015).

[47] Ward, *Not Gay,* 4-5.

[48] *Not Gay,* 30.

least don't carry the same cultural meanings, when enacted by men of color'.[49] She gives the example of politician John Hinson, who's sexual liasons with another man were generally accepted as a sort of anomaly, a regretable error but no real threat to his heterosexual status….until he was discovered with a Black partner.[50] At this point, says Ward, the 'queerness' of the encounter suddenly enters public discourse. Emo is often considered a White genre - it does, after all, descend from hardcore - but this isn't particularly accurate when it comes to the Trinity bands. MCR's lead guitarist is Latino; Cobra Starship's Gabriel Saporta is Uruguayan, Pete Wentz is half Black and Brendon Urie is of Polynesian heritage. But in any case, over and above the queerness of interracial homoeroticism, we should consider the fact that stage gay in the early 2000s effectively functioned to disrupt ward's heteromasculine scripts - the heteromasculine script of the hardcore festival, a privileged site of heteronormative male bonding, was ostentatiously queered by a bunch of 'fags' with electric guitars taking pride of place on the stage. 'Some of us,' says Ward, 'for understandable reasons are very invested in sexual and gender normalcy; others, for less well known reasons (which need hardly be innate), desire rebellion, difference, or outsiderness—a desire that may have been present for as long as we can remember'.[51] She notes that whilst she might occasionally use the terms gay and queer 'interchangeably', she has tried to reserve her uses of queer 'for instances in which I am describing what some might call "the gay left," or the movement to resist gay assimilation and celebrate sexual and gender non-normativity'.[52] Identitarian politics, she writes, 'works to elide the casual, performative, and antidomestic forms that queer sex takes'.[53] Could there be anything more performative, anything less domestic, than stage-gay on a tour stop at a hard rock festival? In an odd sense, says Ward, queerness has in these instances been 'taken up by straights', as 'gay identity is [increasingly] tethered to love and biology [...] monogamous same-sex love and the gay and lesbian families presumed to ultimately result from this love'.[54] In Ward's schema, makeup wearing straight boys, making out at a hardcore festival over their phallic guitars would certainly qualify as much queerer than two gay men getting married in the suburbs: 'in sum, while the field of queer erotics has narrowed with this turn to homonormative love, the field of hetero-erotics is everexpanding [...] In many ways, straight white men's homosexual encounters look remarkably like the kind of queer collective sexuality I am describing here: communal, public, kinky, and defiant'.[55]

Of the possibilities put in play when we refuse to limit queerness to identitarian politics,

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[49] *Not Gay,* 6.

[50] *Not Gay,* 77-81.

[51] *Not Gay,* 36.

[52]   *Not Gay,* 37.

[53]   *Not Gay*, 45.

[54]   *Not Gay,* 199.

[55]   *Not Gay,* 199-200.

one of the most relevant here is the rise of 'queer straight masculinities'. This concept of queer straight masculinities - which I think is fairly well 'actualized' in the performative statements above - was first proposed by Ron Becker in a study of 2000s television,[56] but developed substantially in a sociological sense by Robert Heasley. Heasley defines queer masculinity,' as 'ways of being masculine outside hetero-normative constructions of masculinity that disrupt, or have the potential to disrupt, traditional images of the hegemonic heterosexual masculine'.[57] He proposes a 'language and a typology' of such masculinities,[58] not meaning to suggest that each individual will fit neatly into one category - it is much more likely, as he writes, that queer straight men will display some properties from a range of the categories in different times and place. Nonetheless, he divides queer straight masculinity into five types:

(1) straight sissy boys
(2) social justice straight-queers
(3) elective straight-queers
(4) committed straight-queers
(5) males living in the shadow of masculinity.[59]

Naturally, given that emo is a form of public performativity with an explicit mission statement to destabilise the masculine hegemony of hard rock, my attention went directly to the second category. 'Social justice straight-queers' are, just as they sound, feminist men and gay allies who

take action publicly and at the risk of being responded to as if they were gay. Thus, their actions represent risk taking, placing the straight-queer in a position of being threatened, stigmatized, orviolated as a result of association with gayness. A key element in this category is the public expression by straight males, verbally or through action, in ways that disrupt both heterosexuality and masculinity.[60]

This could literally be a description of stage-gay at early 2000s hardcore show. The personas of emo band members usually tend to construct themselves as belonging to categories 1 and 6, i.e., men who simply cannot and will not perform masculinity conventionally (1), and men and boys oppressed by hegemonic masculinity (6). The 'straight sissy boy', Heasley writes, 'presents to others as queer, though that is not his intention nor identity, and experiences a response from the dominant culture, and perhaps from queers, as being queer'.[61] This partly describes the personas of, at the

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56   Ron Becker, "Guy Love: A Queer Straight Masculinity for the Post-Closet era?" in *Queer TV*, ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham, (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), 121-40.
57   Robert Heasley, "Queer Masculinities of Straight Men: A Typology", *Men and Masculinities* 7, no. 3 (2005): 310-320, 310.
58   *ibid.*
59   Heasley, "Queer Masculinities", 315.
60   "Queer Masculinities", 316.
61   "Queer Masculinities", 315.

very least, Gerard Way, Pete Wentz, Ryan Ross and Brendon Urie, all of whom are frequently percieved as gay: though given that they are all public performers who make deliberate references to glam-rock, camp and new romanticism with their wardrobe choices, there is probably more of a public intention that overlaps into category 2, the social justice straight queer. Conversely, Heasley describes young men in category 6 as going some way towards imitating the normative masculine in public space, but feeling privately at odds with it:

They sit quietly in the back of the classroom, baseball caps on backwards, seldom displaying emotions in response to anything being discussed [...] In their dorms, they play computer games and do not socialize much with the "jocks" in the hallways or the guys who get drunk most nights and throwup in the bathrooms [...] Yet when I read their essays on gender and masculinity for the sociology course I am teaching, I see that all three express frustration with all the guys they know who act out, who are loud and so often drunk, who are homophobic and sexist.[62]

At this stage, Heasley notes, the boys aren't actually doing anything: they don't speak up against sexism or homophobia, and they don't draw attention to their non-normative status: 'they wear their baseball caps, play their video games, and do not take risks'.[63] Emo band members often describe themselves as having been like this when they were younger, as nerdy and introverted with quiet hobbies, in Healey's own words, 'liv[ing] inside the space of computers, musical instruments, books, or other such places that provide safety from the storm of hetero-normative masculinity',[64] before coming to terms with their non-masculinity and adopting the performative behaviours that fall better into categories . Fall Out Boy and MCR very frequently describe themselves as having been geeky and nerdy kids who 'created [their] own space in [their] heads',[65] and FOB frontman Patrick Stump once admitted to having been so quiet in high school that when FOB returned to their hometown of Chicago from their first tour, kids who had been in his classes did not remember him.[66] There is no reason to suppose these stories aren't true, and that boys who grow up to become emo musicians aren't generally of this type: they probably are. But from a cultural studies perspective, what is really more important is the contribution of these paratexts to the performer's networked persona, which given their relative success in adulthood, offers a kind of legitimation to boys still living in the shadow of masculinity. Indeed, it has always been my contention that, just like Romanticism, emo is rather more gender-radical for non-masculine boys than it is for girls of any description: ultimately, the subject-narrator is almost always

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[62]   "Queer Masculinities", 314.
[63]   *ibid.*
[64]   "Queer Masculinities", 319.
[65]   Gerard Way, interview in "Life on the Murder Scene" documentary, Reprise Records 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGeJ4eqV4No
[66]   Patrick Stump, interview in "Rock Star Guide to Fall Out Boy", *Fuse*, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wftA4-0WUBA

male.

So is stage-gay queerbaiting? The answer depends primarily on how one defines queerness, it's relation to identity, and how far one is invested in an interior truth or reality of sexuality as opposed to sexuality as a performative construction. Carillo-Vincent calls emo a 'critique from the center': a critical view of straight masculinity, by and for straight(ish) boys.[67] Moreover, and as a final point, most discussions of both queerbaiting and queer-straight masculinities align themselves in some sense with a feminist perspective. Emo vary rarely displays the blatant misogyny of mainstream hip-hop or cock-rock (words like 'bitch' are more-or-less taboo), but it certainly suffers from a) a lack of female subject narrators and b) a virgin/whore complex that casts women as either idealized muses or the treacherous cause of all male suffering. Emo queerness *serves* queer boys a lot more directly than it does queer (or any) girls - which is not to say girls cannot reappropriate it's texts, in traditional fandom fashion, but they are positioned as outsiders to the central narratives. For example, Karen Tongson proposes a 'twisted version of how emo and feminism (primarily of the second wave variety)' might be read as 'strange bedfellows':

Emo has benefited from and ultimately exploited a second-wave feminist emphasis on emotional earnestness, and has implicitly put into octave-chord practice the idea that the "personal is political" in the musical staging of its own critique of suburban repression and alienation.[68]

In appreciating the queerness that emo shares with feminism - their distaste for the masculine-feminine marriage of man and wife with their 2.4 children, the happy capitalist subjects, Tongson suggests that 'we can crawl out of the rut of a masturbatory, "boy-centric" musical critique that dwells like a needle in a broken groove'.[69] Of course, this is what fans are always doing - selecting, creating, redacting,

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[67]   Matthew Carillo-Vincent, "Wallflower Masculinities and the Peripheral Politics of Emo", *Social Text* 31, no. 3 (116) (2013): 35–55.,

[68]   Karen Tongson, "Tickle Me Emo Lesbian Balladeering, Straight-Boy Emo, and the Politics of Affect", in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006): 55-66, 58.

[69]   Tongson, "Tickle Me Emo", 58.

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interpreting material to their queer needs. The peculiarly close relationship emo bands share with their fans - in which fandom, as I have argued, has played a prominent shaping role in the definition of what emo *is* - render these opportunities all the more pertinent. Stage-gay in emo is onyl queerbaiting if fans are concieved as satisfied by the narrowest definition of the queer possible, and moreover, if we read fans as simply

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- 'I am Gerard Way, musician, artist, creator, and cousin of Joe Rogan- Ask me anything! PS my album Hesitant Alien just came out'. R/IAmA. Reddit, 2015. https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/2i1840/i_am_gerard_way_musician_artist_creator_and/
- Twitter, 2016a. https://twitter.com/gerardway/status/725081637092872192?lang=en
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accepting passively what media texts have to offer. Practices from RPS to videomaking to gif collections to music criticism more-or-less negates this proposition. Emo may be gender reformist rather than gender-radical. But radical possibilities circulate in it's networked texts, both appropriated and shaped by its fans.