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Metal Ballads as Low Pop? An Approach to Sentimentality and Gendered Performances in Popular Hard Rock and Metal Songs

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Abstract: Ballads are often among the bestselling songs of heavy metal and hard rock bands. Within these genres, ballads represent a way to address emotions such as love that are not part of the primary self-understanding of those genres. Still, “genre ideals and style” often seem to be at odds with the sentimental aesthetics of the ballad and its emotional expression and experience. In this article, we take a close look at the sonic, textual, performative, visual, and emotional-somatic articulation of love and the generation of sentimentality in three selected metal ballads. Even if the term “power ballad,” which is often used in reference to hard rock and metal ballads, refers to the simultaneity of “heaviness” in the sound and the thematization of love in the lyrics, sentimental ballads in the stereotypically more masculine-connotated genres nevertheless create friction and skepticism in their discursive evaluation, as they generate aesthetic discrepancies between concrete songs and genre conventions. Their quantitative popularity contrasts with their qualitative evaluation. Therefore, in a second step, we analyze the reception of the selected ballads, in particular their discursive evaluations in music reviews, in order to point out the ways of argumentation through which frictions are established. As a result, we show that evaluations are related to how love is addressed in the songs and to the extent of proximity of the ballads to genre rules.

Keywords: popular music studies; gender studies; discourse analysis; reception; evaluation; ballad; sentimentality; heavy metal; hard rock



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1. Introduction

Ballads are often among the most popular songs across genres, including heavy metal and hard rock. For instance, Metallica’s “Nothing Else Matters” is the band’s most-played video on YouTube with 1.1 billion views and more than 859 million streams on Spotify, making it their second most-played song.¹ The 2022 version of Guns N’ Roses “November Rain” achieved 14 million views within the first month; the original from 1992 reached number three on the charts.² In terms of what can be called second-order popularization, this popularity is displayed in charts or rankings, such as the top 100 music videos worldwide on YouTube, which results in a renewed popularization (Döring et al. 2021). What is remarkable about these sentimental types of ballad is that, despite their quantitative popularity, they are often devalued in journalistic discourses and have hardly been recognized as a serious subject by scholars. The present research gap seems to be related to a triviality bias that assigns the sentimental ballad to an area of popular music hypothetically referred to as ‘low pop,’ characterized by its inscribed devaluation and ambivalent mode of reception. We call this type of ballad the sentimental ballad in order to distinguish it from ballads in traditional ‘folk’ music or in medieval or classical literature that not only have in common the characteristic of narrativity but have also gained significantly greater attention in scholarship (Porter et al. [2001] 2013).

In this context, it seems to be precisely the aesthetic and performative production of sentimentality that, in its relation to divergent gender connotations in different popular music genres, is reflected in a discursive feminization in value judgments. This feminine

connotation of ballads in hard rock and metal is accompanied by their devaluation as something low, often affirmed by their popularity, which is itself connoted and devalued as feminine. Such gender connotations seem consistent with Richard Middleton's map of popular music genres, on which stereotypically masculine genres such as blues and rock are juxtaposed with the stereotypically feminine ballad (Middleton 1995, p. 474). Thus, where the ballad as low pop appears in genres with stereotypically more masculine connotations, such as hard rock or heavy metal, ambivalences arise that affect the self-concepts and popular images of such genres. In order to avoid reifying such gender stereotypes, on the one hand, and to account for the diversity of both rock and metal as well as the ballad, on the other, this article examines the aesthetics of diverse metal ballads as well as the discursive construction processes of their gender connotations, including the associated value judgments.

We illustrate the ambivalent evaluation between the song form ballad and the genre metal by assessing three examples: "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" (1998) by Aerosmith, "More Than Words" (1991) by Extreme, and "My Immortal" (2003) by Evanescence. Our epistemological interest lies in determining whether the evaluations of the songs in the relevant discourses of music criticism reveal a devaluation that points to a hierarchization of metal ballads as low pop. While the high/low distinction is increasingly replaced socially, the question arises whether such a distinction becomes significant in the realm of the popular (Döring et al. 2021, p. 6). To this end, and in a first step, we take a multi-perspective look at sonic and textual levels of the songs, the performative and visual levels of the music videos, as well as emotional-somatic aspects, especially the musical articulation of love and the generation of sentimentality. In a second step, we draw on discourse material about the ballad's reception, primarily journalistic critiques from the German magazine *Rock Hard*, in an explorative study of a small selection of cases, in order to highlight evaluation criteria through which frictions between song form and genre are established that might contribute to a high/low hierarchy in popular music.

Following the principle of theoretical sampling, we draw on the three songs as a "chain of selection decisions building on each other"³ (Strübing 2004, p. 30) that is based on contrasting criteria. The criteria for our selection were the assignment of the performers in the relevant discourse to the genres of heavy metal or hard rock, the gender of the performers and their gender performance, the representation of love in the songs, and the coverage of a broader temporal spectrum of the performers' popularity (Aerosmith has been popular since the early 1970s, Evanescence since the early 2000s). While providing contrasting aspects, the three selected ballads are all products by U.S. bands established within the global proliferation of American rock and metal music. By looking at a part of the German discourse in music criticism, we study the popularity of those ballads in a locally determined focus.

2. State of Research and Situating the Project

The ambivalence between the popularity of metal ballads and their friction with "genre rules" (Fabbri 1981), or with "genre ideals and style" (Lena 2012, p. 15), is also reflected to some extent in research. In his study "The Ballad of Heavy Metal" (2016), Andy Brown changes the perspective of looking at ballads as a deviation of the genre, describing the release of power ballads as singles by heavy metal bands as one key aspect of the increasing quantitative popularity and commercial success of heavy metal in the years 1984–1991. The same time period of heavy metal's enormous popularity is described by David Metzger in his analysis of formal, historical, and discursive aspects of the song form power ballad, where he lists the 1980s metal ballads as one among four phases. For Metzger, power ballads appear across genres. By detaching them from their sole reference to rock genres, he defines power ballads "by the use of both a musical formula based on constant escalation and an expressive formula that combines the euphoric uplift created by rousing music with sentimental themes and ploys" (Metzger 2012, p. 437).

Despite these examples, ballads are among the less frequently addressed topics of metal research. This fact is reflected in sociologist Motti Regev's more general observation that there is a gap between two research perspectives in popular music research. Either research is devoted to the singularities of individual music scenes, or it is concerned with the so-called mass effects of popular culture, all too rarely taking into account the fact that neither the music nor its listeners adhere to such a classification (Regev 2013). Andy Hicken describes a subsequent explanatory approach for the low level of scholarly engagement with metal ballads in this way: When selecting music worthy of study, researchers pick up on insider evaluations from the corresponding scenes. Hence, insider constructions of ballads as irrelevant exceptions within the genre may lead researchers to focus on other pieces of music that are marked as relevant and authentic by members of the scenes. Hicken describes the appropriation of authenticity concepts by scholars:

“[T]he metal subcultures of the 1980s did, in fact, commonly consider power ballads to be inauthentic crossovers. Music journalists naturally sided with the subcultures on this issue. Popular music scholars may have, too—if we judge their interest by the paucity of scholarship on power ballads and the much larger body of work on the less commercially successful forms of metal.” (Hicken 2010, p. 204)

Hence, while the study of hard rock and metal ballads could hardly earn researchers much “subcultural capital” (cf. Thornton 1996, p. 11; Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 121), it may lead to a more comprehensive picture of the whole musical spectrum of said genres. Moreover, focusing on the ballad can potentially contribute to a better understanding of the relation between heavy metal and popular culture in general, as Brown (2016) in his contribution to a corresponding anthology has shown. Furthermore, the ballad is relevant to a broad range of popular music because of its productivity and proliferation across genres, including pop, hip hop, rhythm, as well as blues and soul. Therefore, studying ballads in hard rock and heavy metal can shed light on the genres' borders and their relations to other popular music genres, thus even contributing to a more comprehensive study of what Regev conceptualizes as the pop-rock continuum. Considering the characteristic content and expressive quality of the ballad, its potential study across genres may even open up a comparative perspective on sentimentality and the sentimental in popular music.

While this article will keep its focus on examples from hard rock and heavy metal, the cross-genre relevance of the ballad is the overall topic of our subproject “Low Pop: The Sentimental Ballad” in the Collaborative Research Center 1472 Transformations of the Popular at the University of Siegen in Germany.⁴ The project's starting point is the observation that sentimental ballads, as a measurably successful song form, represent the popular of popular music. They frequently occupy the top of the charts, run in heavy rotation on radio stations, and have the highest click counts on online platforms like YouTube and Spotify. In contrast to ballads' outstanding popularity, their evaluation in the accompanying discourses of music criticism is often ambivalent. Our interest lies in investigating to what extent the discursive devaluation of sentimental ballads reveals the existence of a high/low hierarchy in popular music. For this purpose, we resort to the German compilation series *Kuschelrock*, which assembles, and thus re-popularizes, a selection of previously popularized songs once a year as a CD. Serving as the data basis of our examination, *Kuschelrock* currently includes more than 1300 songs, predominantly sentimental ballads from first releases of the 1950s to the present, among them the three case studies analyzed here. The vast majority of the songs on *Kuschelrock* previously achieved a high position in the German charts; otherwise, they were mostly represented in the US Billboard Hot 100 or the UK Singles Charts. *Kuschelrock* concretely illustrates how the proliferation of Anglo-American pop/rock music (Regev 2013) established itself as a global, seemingly neutral model in Germany and its German-speaking neighbors in the second half of the 20th century. Until the 2000s, the Anglophone model of rock remained virtually untouched on compilations. Only in the wake of the increased popularity of German-language pop music in the 2010s does the overall constellation gradually shift.

The label *Kuschelrock* implies a collection of sentimental ballads that have become particularly popular in the Global North, with a focus on the US and UK. The discourse on heavy metal in particular, as well as on pop and rock in general, is characterized by the fact that “Anglo-American pop-rock became a world model, a source of inspiration and influence on local and national music fields in numerous countries” (Regev 2013, p. 43). Regev has described this global efficacy as an example of the expressive isomorphism of a particular aesthetic. Such isomorphism is not neutral in terms of power relations but is ultimately based on the inequality of global cultural influences. For Metal Studies, as for Popular Music Studies in general, this raises the challenge of critically reflecting on such inequalities. In that sense, we refer to Donna Haraway’s (1988) maxim of situated knowledge, as well as to the reflection called for in Adele Clarke’s methodology of situational analysis, both of the researcher’s position and of the inclusion of the silent, non-visible elements of social situations (Clarke et al. 2018). In this specific case, it follows, among other things, that we need to analyze the image of particular music as part of a specific temporal-spatial and socially configured co-constellation even when their situatedness in discourses remains invisible in favor of a supposed global validity of ideas about rock music. Our account of ballads and their relationship to metal deliberately makes no claim to universal observations. Rather, we understand our case study as exemplary for the reception of U.S. hard rock and metal ballads within the Global North with a focus on Germany.

3. Ecstasy: The Heteromasculine Articulation of Love

3.1. Aerosmith’s “Don’t Want To Miss A Thing” (1998)

Songwriter Diane Warren wrote “Don’t Want To Miss A Thing” in 1998 for the disaster film *Armageddon* (dir. Michael Bay 1998); Aerosmith recorded this and three other songs for the film’s soundtrack album.⁵ The song is Aerosmith’s first one to reach No. 1 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100, as well as charting in the top ten in 22 other countries in Europe, Australia, and Canada. Stream and click numbers on Spotify and Youtube also indicate it as Aerosmith’s most popular song.⁶ As a ballad, “Don’t Want To Miss A Thing” is not an exception in the band’s repertoire but rather represents an important characteristic of their sound as is indicated by further ballads, such as “Dream On,” “Crazy,” “Cryin’,” “Amazing,” and “Hole in My Soul,” all included in the Spotify list of Aerosmith’s most popular songs, as well as by the band’s representation on *Kuschelrock* with a total of five songs.⁷ It is important to note that the sound of the ballads does not deviate too much from that of other songs of the band. Rather, instrumentation and vocals are used in a remarkably consistent way. In contrast to the following example of the band Extreme, the ballad is neither an exception in Aerosmith’s repertoire nor in their sound.

“Don’t Want To Miss A Thing” can be described as a power ballad, which David Metzger in his seminal study characterizes as follows: “The songs are defined by the use of both a musical formula based on constant escalation and an expressive formula that combines the euphoric uplift created by rousing music with sentimental themes and ploys” (Metzger 2012, p. 437). In sync with Metzger’s definition, “Don’t Want To Miss A Thing” continuously increases in the use of strings, drums, guitars, as well as the expressiveness of Steven Tyler’s vocals, reaching a climax in the transition from bridge to chorus. At this point of the song, Tyler’s scratchy, partly shrill and screeching voice expresses a declaration of love in superlatives: “I just wanna hold you close/I feel your heart so close to mine/And just stay here in this moment for all the rest of time/yeah, yeah, yeah.” Such superlatives, similar to ‘forever,’ ‘only,’ ‘never,’ or ‘no-one else,’ are frequent stylistic devices in the lyrics of sentimental ballads, as our analysis of the 1300 *Kuschelrock* songs has shown.⁸ Moreover, the fact that the protagonist of this escalation elsewhere repeatedly addresses the missing of the beloved (“I don’t wanna close my eyes [. . .] ‘Cause I’d miss you, babe”) reveals the combination of “the sorrow of sentimentality and the stimulation of uplift” characteristic of a power ballad (Metzger 2012, p. 441).

Said combination is underscored visually in the music video, which collages the band’s performance with clips from the film *Armageddon*. While the video expresses a

sense of sentimentality through (partly tearful) farewell scenes of the film plot, ecstasy receives its visual equivalent in the launch of a rocket. A rocket launch enables various associations, such as a high degree of technical specialization (as in the saying “it’s not rocket science”), the “space race” between the Soviet Union and the USA in the 1960s, or today’s new “space imperialism” of super-rich tycoons, such as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. Not least with the last example, rockets are often plausibly interpreted as phallic symbols in journalistic coverage (Onibada 2021). At the same time, rocket launches are accompanied by highly emotional media coverage and usually by passionately applauding audiences at the respective locations. On an auditory level, a rocket launch is accompanied by an enormous noise, which is replaced here by the song’s loudness peak. The music even delays the actual “take-off” by inserting a full additional bar before delivering the chorus in its loudest version, hence emphasizing the ecstatic nature of the performed climax. Reading such audiovisual ecstasy in terms of sexual desire would clearly associate it with a phallic version of erotic pleasure that, while far from being universal, “comes into line with the discursive practices associated with imperialism, capitalist expansion, and scientific risk-taking” that Susan McClary has plausibly identified as dominating strands of European-American modernity (McClary 2002, p. 127). While McClary critically reveals narratives of androcentric sexual power in classical music, she carefully circumvents stereotypical associations of aggression with rock music by stating that said narratives turn “violent [. . .] more often and more devastatingly in nineteenth-century symphonies than in heavy metal” (ibid., p. 130). However, apart from heavy metal’s relation to sexual violence being diverse and complex (Hill 2016), it is clear that the combination of a power ballad climax with the pictures of launching a heroic rocket mission connects the video of “Don’t Want To Miss A Thing” with narratives of male power that have been well established in the cultures of the Global North.⁹

Interestingly, the song’s masculine-connoted power symbolism contrasts the sentimentality of the lyrics and the emotional expressivity of the music as well as the gender ambiguity of Steven Tyler’s performance. The singer’s exalted gestures and facial expressions, especially the play of closed eyes and his demanding gaze into the camera as well as his extravagant mouth movements, can be read as appropriations “of the elements of appearance that have been associated with women’s function as objects of the male gaze,” revealing androgyny in heavy metal (Walser [1993] 2014, p. 124).¹⁰ To this degree, Tyler’s performance is consistent with photographs and concert videos of Aerosmith from the 1970s and 1980s, which show him in tight-fitting, strikingly patterned, low-cut clothing, with black make-up on his eyes; at concerts he moves expansively across the stage.¹¹ Hence, the video for “Don’t Want To Miss A Thing” combines expressions of sentimentality and uplift with a culturally established heavy metal androgyny that allows for the inclusion of feminine elements without destabilizing heteronormative masculinity. The question remains concerning the extent to which such a reading of the song and video as a heteromale articulation of ecstatic love or loving ecstasy is consistent with Aerosmith’s reception.

3.2. The Reception of Steven Tyler’s Masculinity and Aerosmith’s Ballads

The appearance of Steven Tyler’s stage persona has been part of the discourse surrounding Aerosmith since the band became popular to a larger audience with their third album *Toys In The Attic* reaching number 11 of the Billboard Hot 200 in 1975. Retrospectively, in a 2016 interview, Tyler puts his gender appearance on stage in context with Aerosmith’s music:

“I have never been afraid to show my androgynous side because I live through music,” he said. “I think music is very feminine. In fact, I think I’ve got a—being a male, you know, like I’ve got 70, 60, 70 percent feminine in me that I live through, you know. I’ve got three daughters and a beautiful son and I live through female through my fashions, my hair, the way I dress. It just makes me—it seems to me that it goes along with the music, the Aerosmith music.” (Toce 2016)

Interestingly, at an earlier point in their career in the mid-1970s, Aerosmith were perceived precisely as distinct from the gender ambiguity that is characteristic of glam rock protagonists, such as Alice Cooper, David Bowie, and Lou Reed, as is evidenced by a 1975 review¹²:

“Through with each album, they get better at minimizing their weaknesses—(Tyler’s sometimes colorless voice, weak ballad material)—and capitalizing on their virtues (Perry’s tough, classy guitar playing) it is Tyler’s ability to project crude, leering sexuality that makes Aerosmith attractive. Coming after a brief era when rock’n’roll fans in their adolescence were bombarded with the exaggerated sexual ambiguity of Alice, Bowie and Reed, it must be reassuring to have a band that knows everything we’ve wanted to know about sex all along: that it’s dirty.” (Robins 1975)

The evaluative demarcation made here between Tyler’s sexuality and the gender ambiguity of other artists is brought into a context on a musical level with a demarcation from the “weak” ballads. Via the feminine connotation of ballad pop suggested by Middleton in his map of musical genres, its devaluation is simultaneously constructed in juxtaposition to “male” rock: “Gauging authenticity, then, has often involved a process of raising ‘artistic’ (male) rock above ‘commercial’ (female) pop” (Meier 2008, p. 241).

This principle is also mirrored in an interview with songwriter Diane Warren, who associates Tyler with a “macho rock star” masculinity that is making her ballad “Don’t Want To Miss A Thing” “cooler” than a female singer could:

“And so when I wrote the song, what was so cool about when Aerosmith did it, when Steven Tyler sang it, it became a different thing, because if you hear a girl singing that—when I wrote it I thought it would end up being like Celine Dion or somebody like that, you know, back in the day—I mean, who’s a great singer—but it’s so much cooler to hear someone like Steven Tyler—this gruff, macho rock star, this amazing tough guy—for him to say that lyric, it just brought a whole other dimension to it. I don’t think it would have been the same hit, or the same standard, if it wasn’t for someone like Steven Tyler doing that song.” (Fawbert 2016)

Warren, too, places Tyler’s masculinity in a dualistic opposition to the ballad as a genre. On that basis, she then evaluates his performance of this very ballad as an interesting clash and a challenge. By neglecting the androgynous aspects of the singer’s performance, Warren emphasizes Tyler’s untouched “macho rock star” masculinity as contrasting the femininity of established ballad divas like Celine Dion.¹³

While an award-winning ballad composer like Warren would certainly not devalue the ballad genre per se, metal music criticism, too, agrees on the quality of Aerosmith’s interpretation of her ballad, as the following review by the German heavy metal magazine *Rock Hard* indicates¹⁴:

“That, for example, Steven Tyler & Gang, after the nevertheless rather disappointing ‘Nine Lives’ CD, would once again come along with such a commanding performance as on ‘I Don’t Want To Miss A Thing’ (terrific earworm penned by Diane Warren) [. . .] probably surprises even the most optimistic members of the Aeroforce [. . .].”¹⁵ (Rock Hard 1998)

The contrasting ratings between 1975’s “weak ballad material,” suggesting devaluation as low pop, and 1998’s “commanding performance” demonstrate the tension within the discourse around legitimate gender roles, genre rules, and authenticity. The accompanying gender connotations of the first with femineity and the latter with masculinity seem to become ambivalent in their evaluation as soon as those songs become popular. The range of evaluations also points to the mutability of these concepts in their interplay with other social discourses when considering the dates of the critiques. Such changes, visible in diachronic perspective, highlight the importance of “temporal-specific listening” suggested by Stan

Hawkins: “Understanding the reception of artists along a timeline tests assumptions based on popularity and success” (Hawkins 2016, p. 2).¹⁶

Although the scope of our discourse analysis has its limits, it nevertheless allows us to conclude that Aerosmith’s interpretation of the power ballad as ecstasy seems to involve no serious challenge to the band’s heteromasculine rock band status. Rather, their highly lauded approach to combining the expression of sentimental emotions and feminine sensibility with a powerful performance of uplift is regarded as in sync with stereotypical images of hard rock masculinity. The huge popularity of the song in 1998 thus is no risk to the band’s assignment of authenticity in relation to the hard rock genre.

4. Exceptionalism of Intimacy

4.1. *Extreme’s “More Than Words” (1991)*

Unlike Aerosmith, who achieved great popularity on the charts in the U.S. and Europe with several ballads during their 50+ year band history, the reception of Extreme’s “More Than Words” emphasizes the song’s exceptional status: “‘More Than Words’ was an anomaly in not just pop, but hard rock; acoustic guitars were standard in many a power ballad, but they were often surrounded by bombastic production and splashy solos” (Johnston 2015). The exceptional status here is established by the deviation from the typical sound of ballads by rock bands at the time of their creation, which again demonstrates the importance of temporality as a category of analysis. Instrumented exclusively with acoustic guitar, with Gary Cherone’s soft vocals partly changing into the head voice, as well as the second harmony voice of guitarist Nuno Bettencourt, the song lacks the powerful elements of sonic uplift characteristic of a typical power ballad. Among all the tracks on the album *Pornograffiti* (1990), “More Than Words” is the only purely acoustic one. If the description of the song as an exception initially refers solely to its unamplified sound, specifics of this exception can also be identified in the lyrics and music video. The protagonist of the lyrics describes his need for affection and closeness, his need for feeling that he is being loved. He thus takes on a position in which he shows himself vulnerable: “All you have to do /Is close your eyes and just reach out your hands /And touch me /Hold me close don’t ever let me go.”

In the music video, the band stages the exception from their usual sound. The video begins with a tracking shot over the knobs of an amplifier, which can be heard humming but is then turned off. Likewise, the bass guitar and the drum sticks are put aside. Those utensils that refer to the sound through which the band experienced genre assignments and which are not used in this song, such as hard rock or funk metal, are visually “immobilized” in the first sequences of the music video. In that way, the music video marks the song as a ballad, or more accurately, it marks the song as the ballad of a rock or metal band. After this exposition, the camera focuses on Gary Cherone and Nuno Bettencourt, moves alternately over the hands and torsos of the two musicians, shows their unbuttoned shirts, their long hair through which they run their hands, their painted fingernails, to a perspective in which both musicians can be seen side by side in one shot facing each other. The tracking shot follows a lustful gaze, which—if it the musicians were read as female—could be described with the term *male gaze* coined by Laura Mulvey. In this sense, Cherone and Bettencourt are simultaneously “looked at and displayed” (Mulvey 1975, p. 11). Since sexuality and desire do not appear fixed in the staging, this also applies to the reception, which allows for polysemous readings and perspectives. The two band members not involved in the performance are later seen in the role of the audience as they wave lighters, referencing the practice at concerts of holding up lighters (or, more recently, cell phones) when a ballad is played, thus also contributing to the framing of the song as a (stereo)typical ballad.

The song and music video convey a sense of intimacy created on an auditory level by the solely acoustic accompaniment, on a lyric level by sharing the protagonist’s feelings, and through the visual staging by creating proximity to the physical presence of the two performers. The intimacy in the auditory and visual interaction of the two musicians involves and keeps out the recipients at the same time. This is the paradox of media

technologies, which Kornelia Hahn characterizes with Georg Simmel as “both distancing and intimization” (Hahn 2014, p. 17).¹⁷ The bodily–tactile representation of love through intimacy in the lyrics as well as in the video clearly deviates from that of the conventional power ballad. Thus, the song does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about those “concepts, images, and experiences of power” that characterize heavy metal according to Robert Walser ([1993] 2014, p. 2). Nor can their performance be characterized by “hypermasculinity or androgyny as visual enactments of spectacular transgression” with regard to gender aspects (ibid. p. 109). An extreme turn away from these genre rules as well as from associated stereotypical gender rules is presented in “More Than Words” by *showing* the presence of these rules in their music video performance. By performing exception and especially by simultaneously performing reflection on this exception (e.g., turning off the amplifier, waving lighters), Extreme paradoxically take a position of simultaneous distance and intimacy.

4.2. The Reception of Extreme’s Crossing-Over

In a 2015 interview, Bettencourt describes retrospectively how the song’s divergence from the band’s customary sound caused their record label to hold back on the release: “And they were like, ‘Where are we going to put this? Rock stations aren’t going to play it, and it’s too adult-contemporary. You guys aren’t that’” (Johnston 2015). The assumptions of the label’s representatives about what recipients want to hear and thus buy (and what not) mirror connections between music industry marketing principles and genre differentiations, as described by Simon Frith: “The marketing and packaging policies, in other words, that begin the moment an act is signed are themselves determined by genre theories, by accounts of how markets work and what people with tastes for music like this want from it” (Frith 1996, p. 76). Lena’s industry-based concept of musical genre further emphasizes the importance of genre for the market economy perspective that aims at winning over as many consumers as possible for a musical product. To achieve this, “efforts are directed toward codifying, simplifying, and teaching the genre conventions” (Lena 2012, p. 41). The fact that a deviation, or a “crossing-over,” of the conventions expected by the target group represents a marketing challenge explains why Extreme’s label showed reluctance to release “More Than Words” as a single: “Crossing over is inherently risky. If it works you gain access to a larger audience but this could be at the expense of your core audience” (Brown 2016, p. 63). That taking the risk of “crossing-over” generally involves the chance of greater popularity, radio airplay, and increased sales of their albums (ibid., p. 64; Metzger 2012, p. 448) was indeed confirmed by the success of “More Than Words”, at least from the marketing point of view. However, as Brown reminds us, the band’s relation to its core audience was also affected by its crossing-over.

With regard to Extreme’s “core audience” in terms of their (hard) rock fans, it is revealing to take a look at the discourse in music criticism not the least since the latter includes evidence on how the evaluation of crossing-over from rock to ballad-pop is combined with assumptions about the genres’ gendered connotations. For instance, a review published in the German magazine *Rock Hard* about *Pornograffiti’s* follow-up album *III Sides To Every Story* (1992) refers to “More Than Words” and its popular success in an insinuating manner:

“The replacement program turns out to be extremely worth listening to upon closer inspection, but it remains to be asked whether EXTREME haven’t dug their commercial grave with this follow-up to their big breakthrough. [. . .] Brian May will understand ‘III Sides To Every Story’, but the little girls will NOT understand. Any bets: this disc will not be a smash.”¹⁸ (Rock Hard 1992)

This passage makes use of a stereotypical dualism by assigning the *Pornograffiti* album with its commercially successful track “More Than Words” to a female, and even childish audience, while claiming its allegedly non-commercial successor for adult expert listeners like the male guitar hero of established rock band Queen. Such assignments obviously reify the gendered devaluation of the most popular music as well as its presumably female

teenage audience in contrast to anti-commercial, independent rock music. The latter is then defined by its delimiting from the notion of popular music understood as being commercially successful, which gives rock the possibility of being valued as authentic instead. This dualistic connotation goes along with pop as being stereotypically associated with femininity and rock with masculinity, as Richard Middleton shows in his genre map. The gendering of those connotations suggests an exclusionary effect on a possible evaluation of women as authentic. We are not concerned here with a schematic definition, which the representation on a map might easily suggest, but rather with the awareness of questioning the lower visibility of women because “certain types of people (teenagers, females, and the middle-class) are more likely to be subjectively inauthenticated by other members and this one-sided view is objectified by the analyst” (Muggleton 2000, p. 154–55).¹⁹

Extreme’s crossing-over from their customary sound through the highly popular ballad “More Than Words,” including the articulation of love through intimacy, contributes to a discursive feminization of the band that affects their evaluation as an “authentic” rock band and their masculinity. Constructions of metal masculinities run along lines of demarcation from the feminine as well as mark stereotypical notions of (male) norm and (female) deviance at the gender level. Criticism of scholarly research’s adoption of this narrative of women’s exceptional status in metal is strikingly parallel to the scant attention paid to ballads. This, too, may be an indication of the interlocking construction of authenticity and masculinity: “By marking the female as male reification embodied, scholars make no effort to understand the masculinity itself. At the end of this assumption lies one conclusion: that authentic heavy metal fans and performers are male, and anything else is not real” (Clifford-Napoleone 2016, p. 42).

5. Melancholy, Femininity, and Dark Romanticism

5.1. *Evanescence’s “My Immortal” (2003)*

Our selection of examples presents a spectrum of songs as rich in contrast as possible in order to illustrate the occurrence of ballads in hard rock and metal in the diverse references to genre conventions and modes of representation in addressing love that arise here. As we have shown in our analysis of Aerosmith and Extreme, music crisis tends to evaluate ballads either as weaker or as an exception in relation to other songs of the band’s repertoire. Performing a ballad thus affects the bands’ discursive attribution to genres, such as hard rock or heavy metal. Still, the male performers of these two bands could reify their rock band status by referring to the power concept of heavy metal and by showing a self-reflexive performance of such genre rules. When we now turn to Evanescence, a female-fronted metal band, performing a ballad, this initially seems to indicate a double exceptional status. Not only does the ballad mark an exception in the genre of heavy metal, but here, in addition, does the gender of the singer. The U.S. goth metal band Evanescence with singer Amy Lee released the song “My Immortal” in 2003, and it reached number 7 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 as well as various top 10 rankings in Europe. The single version is a piano ballad with string ensemble and electronic effects, to which the full band is added only in the bridge.²⁰

In the lyrics, the protagonist describes her dark, melancholic feelings, such as fears, pain, and tiredness, which she feels due to the absence of the addressee: “I’m so tired of being here /Suppressed by all my childish fears”; or in the prechorus: “These wounds won’t seem to heal /This pain is just too real /There’s just too much that time cannot erase.” The absent person haunts the protagonist like a ghost, robbing her of her sanity: “Your face, it haunts my once pleasant dreams /Your voice, it chased away all the sanity in me.” The lyrics can be understood polysemously, as addressing a separation or the death of a loved one, and they have also been understood in both ways in reception.²¹ By addressing death, mourning, loneliness, and madness, the lyrics include typical motifs of the gothic genre with its focus on the “dark sides of human nature” and “individual sensitivity” (Braudry 2003, p. 250). Such dark motifs and feelings being associated with the current of dark romanticism in terms of cultural history are also taken up in the ballad’s music video.

The video was shot on site of the gothic architecture of the Barri Gòtic in Barcelona, whose canyons of houses seem narrow and hopeless and at the same time empty and deserted. That emptiness is only contrasted by children at play whose lightheartedness, however, seems more like a distant memory, while autumn leaves further emphasize this transience. This scenery forms the background against which a female character embodied by Amy Lee occurs either moving slowly or just lying statically, embodying the sung lines about injury with bandages on her hands and feet. Lying down, in a white dress, with flowing hair and pale skin, she reminds us of the figure of the reclining woman as, for example, Johann Heinrich Füssli nightmarishly depicted her in the painting *Der Nachtmahr* from 1781 (cf. Krämer 2012, p. 16) or as John Everett Millais presents her in the painting *Ophelia* from 1852. Accompanied by Ben Moody on the piano, whose posture conveys a feeling of sadness or depression, the band in the next room marks a point of difference in their powerful performance. With the references to the gothic and black romanticism, the song becomes readable as belonging to the goth genre. Yet this reiteration of genre markers updates the legibility of the genre as the song is being placed within its context (Brackett 2015, p. 195), “relying on an audience familiar with the basic aesthetic structures—the motifs, typical characters and plotlines of the genre” (Braudy 2003, p. 253).

The connection of ballad with the goth genre is of general interest with regard to relations between the ballad as a song form and diverse popular music genres, since not all genres share the same representation of emotionality and sentimentality. In that sense, a goth ballad like “My Immortal” gains an intersecting affective potential from its ballad character as well as from its references to goth. This becomes particularly clear when comparing this example to Aerosmith’s “Don’t Wanna Miss A Thing.” While that power ballad enables Aerosmith to approach emotions such as love despite their rock band status (Metzer 2012, p. 439), such a contradiction does not apply to Evanescence due to the affective overlap between the goth genre and the ballad. The same overlap concerns Amy Lee being a female singer with the connotation of both the goth genre and ballads with femininity.

Amy Lee’s role in Evanescence reflects the observation that there is a greater participation of women in bands in sub-genres such as symphonic metal or goth metal, although this usually relates to the task of singing (cf. research by Charlene Bénard described in: Jung et al. 2022, p. 270). Lee’s singing is melodic, her clear, bright voice recalling operatic singing styles. This also includes the fact that in her vocal performance, Lee does not use stereotypically masculine-connoted rock vocal styles as described by Suzanne C. Cusick, who uses Eddie Vedder (Pearl Jam) as an example of “a voice with a harsh, forced timbre, a sound so rough it is often hard to distinguish whether he is in tune or not—indeed, the distinction seems not to matter” (Cusick 1999, p. 34). Although Lee does not challenge stereotypical gendered norms in symphonic or goth metal through her singing or her image, what is still not clearly visible or audible is the fact that in addition to her role as a singer with Evanescence, she is also a composer and pianist in the band. Despite rather normative stagings of femininity, as seen in Lee’s performance, studies show that the performativity of hyperfemininity in goth scenes is empowering for these women: “Goth women [. . .] seem to take control of their own image precisely by projecting an excessive femininity and sexiness which invites the male gaze only to confound it and keep it at a distance” (Brill 2008, p. 65).

5.2. Genre and Gender Correspondence in the Reception of “My Immortal”

Looking at the song’s reception through a music review of the album by the German magazine *Rock Hard*, “My Immortal” is discussed favorably by associating it with good songwriting. In comparison to the already cited review of Extreme’s “More Than Words” in the same magazine, the author here does not comment on the ballad being an exception with regard to the repertoire of the band or the genre of their musical work. Naming the Irish New Age Singer-Songwriter Enya as a reference still puts Evanescence outside of the typical genres usually discussed in the magazine.

“On ‘Fallen’ irresistible hits rule, like the opener ‘Going Under,’ the impossible to get out of your head ‘Everybody’s Fool’ [. . .] or the ballads ‘My Immortal’ and ‘Hello’ with typical Enya characteristics (!), where the main focus is on good songwriting and not on hip coolness. Nevertheless, there are voices that already call “Fallen” a safe album, a plastic product for the masses. And that is absolute nonsense, because ultimately the eleven pieces possess an elementary component of good music in excess: namely soul [. . .].”²² (Kaiser 2003, *Rock Hard*)

The appearance of the album in a *Rock Hard* review indicates that the magazine’s metal fan readership it supposed to accept it as metal album. Although the author mentions the accusation of commercialization and selling-out in the review, he personally rejects it. However, “good songwriting” instead of “hip coolness” and “soul” in the music evince a vocabulary that assigns quality and authenticity for “female metal” but delimits this assignment via a strict separation from male-connnoted quality and criteria of authenticity. Because Amy Lee has the role of the singer and thus moves within the legitimate gender roles for women in the goth genre, does not take over any male-connnoted parts of metal singing in her vocal style, and transports rather female-connnoted feelings (sadness, pain) in the lyrics, she does not challenge any gender-related boundaries in the sense of a queer reading.²³ The ballad, thus, seems to be both genre- and gender-adequate in its depiction of love as melancholy.

6. Conclusions

Our guiding question was how ambivalences are aesthetically and discursively generated in relation to metal ballads and whether a devaluation is evident in the evaluations of ballads in the relevant discourses of music criticism, indicating an axiological hierarchization of metal ballads as low pop. This hierarchy implies that low pop is popular in a quantitative sense but would be considered low in a qualitative sense. Using three examples with conventions in hard rock and metal, we wanted to illustrate the tension between the popularity of ballads and their genre-related friction by looking at differentiations in the representation of love in the audiovisual performances, placing them in relation to the evaluations from the discourse surrounding the songs. It seems that not only the fact that love is addressed contributes to this friction, but also *how* love is addressed and by whom. While the handbook definition of *Grove Music Online* describes ballads simply as “pop songs with sentimental or narrative texts and (usually) a slow tempo” (Porter et al. [2001] 2013), we would add, first, a differentiation regarding the wide range of popular music genres in which ballads can be found and, second, the supplementation of different ways of addressing sentimental topics such as love. The interaction of both influences the ways those songs are valued in the discourse. Regarding heavy metal and hard rock ballads, the valuation varies according to the gender attributions of the performers as well as according to (sub-)genre rules, as the example of Evanescence has shown, but also according to the proximity to attributes such as “power” and “heaviness,” as the discourse around Aerosmith reveals. The representation of intimacy in lyrics, staging, and sound seems to create a greater distance between the enormous popularity and its evaluation in metal discourses, at least in the case of “More Than Words.”

The aesthetic and discursive distance from genre conventions is closely related to constructions of metal masculinities. While Aerosmith affirms their heteromasculine rock band status in the power ballad “Don’t Want To Miss A Thing” with musical escalation and a superlative formulation of love as ecstasy, Extreme are discursively feminized through the crossing-over of their sound and articulation of love through intimacy. Marking them as exceptions in relation to the metal genre thus runs directly along the demarcation of the feminine. Even if this deviation is not (always) connected with a discursive devaluation, it is nevertheless connected with an exclusion from the realm of masculine-connnoted quality and authenticity criteria of the genre. The fact that metal ballads achieve great chart placements and other signs of popularity seems to be equally problematic for male and female performers, with the difference that male performers such as Extreme have to

face the accusation of wanting to be attractive to “little girls” in addition to the charge of “selling-out.” Whether popular metal ballads are perceived as purely “plastic products for the masses” is linked to the categorization of genre-typical quality criteria despite their popularity. Both Aerosmith’s power ballad and Evanescence’s goth ballad have in their notions of love sufficient proximity to (sub)genre-typical concepts, such as ecstasy and melancholy. An axiological devaluation of metal ballads is evident when popularity coincides with the most widespread lack of genre conventions, as becomes evident in the example of Extreme’s exceptional song.

In the music reviews we analyzed in this article, we find evidence of the genre map modeled by Middleton, which diametrically demarcates hard rock and metal from both the very popular and pop styles. The cited critiques point to the connection in connotations of popularity with pop styles, emotionality, intimacy, femininity, weakness, and feminization. With this article, we have exemplified how exactly such connotations are constructed using the three divergent examples and their discursive evaluation.

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Notes

- ¹ Metallica “Nothing Else Matters”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAGnKpE4NCl>, accessed on 15 November 2022; Metallica page on Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/artist/2ye2Wgw4gimLv2eAKYk1NB>, accessed on 6 December 2022.
- ² Guns N’ Roses, “November Rain,” 2022 version on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_fvXrgAm1A, accessed on 9 December 2022; Guns N’ Roses, “November Rain,” 1992 Billboard chart history: <https://billboard.elpee.jp/single/November%20Rain/Guns%20N%27%20Roses/>, accessed on 6 December 2022.
- ³ Strübing’s formulation in his German-language text is “Kette aufeinander aufbauender Auswahlentscheidungen”.
- ⁴ For a detailed description of the research program, see: <https://sfb1472.uni-siegen.de>, accessed on 17 October 2022.
- ⁵ Among Diane Warren’s compositions, over 30 songs, including numerous ballads, have reached the Top 10 on the Billboard Hot 100, including nine number one songs, such as “Look Away” (Chicago 1988), “If I Could Turn Back Time” (Cher 1989), “Because You Loved Me” (Celine Dion 1996), “Un-Break My Heart” (Toni Braxton 1996), and “Have You Ever?” (Brandy 1998).
- ⁶ Artist page of Aerosmith on Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/artist/7Ey4PD4MYsKc5I2dolUwbH>; link to the music video “Don’t Want To Miss A Thing,” uploaded to YouTube on 22 August 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn8QPRYWAdk>, both links accessed on 19 October 2022.
- ⁷ “Cryin’” on *Kuschelrock 8* (1994), “Hole in My Soul” on *Kuschelrock 11* (1997), “Don’t Want to Miss a Thing” on *Kuschelrock 13* (1999), “Fly Away From Here” on *Kuschelrock 15* (2001), and “Lay It Down” on *Kuschelrock 16* (2002).
- ⁸ As an example, here are some excerpts from the lyrics of the duet “Endless Love” by Lionel Richie and Diana Ross: “My love, there’s only you in my life /The only thing that’s right [. . .]/And I, I want to share /All my love with you /No one else will do [. . .] /You will always be /My endless love”.
- ⁹ See also Amanda Howell’s research on music and masculinity in *Armageddon* and other popular “Militainment” movies (Howell 2015).
- ¹⁰ Walser refers to Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which she posits a feminist theory of the pleasure of looking in cinema (Mulvey 1975).
- ¹¹ See, for example, the concert recording of the song “Toys in the Attic” from 1975 [date not verifiable]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9suQV31jTI>, accessed on 19 October 2022.
- ¹² On androgynous performances of masculinity, see (Auslander 2006; Berressem 2019).
- ¹³ For a discussion on the diva and other images of female pop stars, see (Lieb 2018).
- ¹⁴ *Rock Hard* is a German music magazine with a focus on heavy metal, which has been in existence since 1983 and is published monthly.
- ¹⁵ The original German text reads: “Daß beispielsweise Steven Tyler & Gang nach der doch ziemlich enttäuschenden ‘Nine Lives’-CD noch einmal eine so souveräne Performance wie bei ‘I Don’t Want To Miss A Thing’ (bärenstarker Ohrwurm aus

der Feder von Diane Warren) [. . .] über den Deich kommen würden, überrascht wohl selbst optimistischste Mitglieder der Aeroforce [. . .]" (Rock Hard 1998).

- 16 At this point, it should be noted that a spatial situatedness should also be considered in such analyses.
- 17 With regard to auditive stagings of intimacy, some recordings of popular songs use breathing and other body sounds made hearable by use of compression effects to emphasize intimation (Dibben 2014). In contrast to these elements, the studio production of "More than Words" does neither use this effect nor does it dispense with the delay effect that auditive enhances the perceived distance from the voices. It would be beyond the scope of this article to assess the extent to which these aberrations from what Dibben frames as stagings of intimacy in her 2014 article are due to historical changes in recording technology and its use since the 1990s.
- 18 The original German text reads: "Das Ersatzprogramm entpuppt sich bei genauerer Inspektion zwar als überaus hörens Wert, aber es bleibt zu fragen, ob sich EXTREME mit diesem Follow-Up zum großen Durchbruch nicht ihr kommerzielles Grab geschaufelt haben. [. . .] Brian May wird 'III Sides To Every Story' verstehen, but the little girls will NOT understand. Jede Wette: Diese Scheibe wird kein Smash" (Rock Hard 1992).
- 19 Muggleton's research draws on early punk research at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham.
- 20 Older versions of the song exist, the earliest dating back to 1997. One version was released on the demo album *Origin* (2000) and another on the EP *Mystary* (2003). Yet another version of the song appears on the band's fourth album, *Synthesis* (2017). The version on the album *Fallen* consists only of piano and strings; this is also the version on *Kuschelrock 18*. The single, however, is the version in which the full band enters on the bridge.
- 21 As an example, here is the description of the song as part of a list of sad songs by author Tom Reynolds at the *Guardian*, as well as a Reader Review of the album *Fallen* by Greg Coughlin at the video game website *IGN*: "A whimpering post-breakup tune in which lead singer Amy Lee pitifully mourns the end of a relationship over a piano accompaniment that sounds like Pachelbel after the Prozac wore off" (Reynolds 2005); "'My Immortal' is a song of pain and despair caused by the loss of a family member or very close friend and how it drove her to the edge of insanity" (Coughlin 2003).
- 22 The original German text reads: "Auf 'Fallen' regieren unwiderstehliche Hits wie der Opener 'Going Under', das nicht mehr aus dem Kopp zu kriegende 'Everybody's Fool' [. . .] oder die mit typischen Enya-Merkmalen (!) aufwartenden Balladen 'My Immortal' und 'Hello', bei denen das Hauptaugenmerk auf gutes Songwriting und nicht auf hippe Coolness gelegt wird. Es gibt trotzdem Stimmen, die 'Fallen' schon jetzt als Nummer-Sicher-Album bezeichnen, als Plastikprodukt für die breite Masse. Und das ist absoluter Quatsch, denn schließlich besitzen die elf Stücke einen elementaren Bestandteil guter Musik im Übermaß: nämlich Seele. [. . .]" (Kaiser 2003, Rock Hard).
- 23 What is not visible in the music video, however, is that in addition to her role as a singer with Evanescence she is also a composer and pianist.

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