

Since MTV's inception in 1981, the network has continuously exploited the adolescent search for identity and tendency toward improvised communities in order to drive consumption. By tapping into adolescent desire for acceptance and security, the network creates multiple communities based on style and music to cater to the tastes of a diverse youth market with ever-growing spending power. Teens, by virtue of their insecurity and anxiety over acceptance, are continually targeted as an audience willing and increasingly able to *buy into* an identity that can link them to an accepting community that, regardless of style or music, centers on the necessity of both consumption and conformity. The message of MTV is simple and consistent: Buy and Belong (Aufderheide 57). Masked as a channel of irreverent rebellion, MTV is actually an arena for the continued colonization of the youth as avid consumers of both products and dominant cultural paradigms. One of the ways this is accomplished is by perpetuating a constructed vision of adolescence that centers on hetero-normative love and romance as the ultimate goal of *all* teens and the only means to happiness and acceptance.

I explore the ways that MTV attempts this work by distributing a packaged and commodified version of the 'Goth' subculture that is designed to appeal to and generate reactions in teens associating themselves with the culture of 'Goth'. By producing and promoting videos encoded with markers of 'Goth'—i.e. melancholy, alienation, gothic style and the elevation of 'difference', MTV deliberately co-opts the image of this particular subculture in order to fuel youth consumption of the ideology of romance and the products associated with it. It is my belief that it is not 'goth' specifically that is being targeted for co-option but, rather, identification with a subculture that promotes alternative ideologies in regards to gender, sexuality and conformism. Using the music and videos of the rock/goth band Evanescence, my goal is to examine the ways that these ideologies are negotiated, and potentially resisted via cultural productions that are created by fans and distributed to other members of the fan community via internet sites such as YouTube.

I am most interested in the ways in which fan-produced art works to disrupt this process and, in this case, re-claim the music of Evanescence as a means of creative expression and empowerment for fans. By comparing commercially produced videos and those created by fans I will illustrate the ways in which a band constructed to reinforce and capitalize on teen obsession with heterosexual romance is appropriated by the fans to discuss issues pertinent to their real lives such as alternative sexualities, parental indifference, divorce, depression, angst and abuse. In this way, the fans are, as Henry Jenkins would put it, using the music like silly putty "stretching its boundaries to incorporate their concerns" and "remolding [it] to fit their desires" (Jenkins 156). It is this definition of fandom that I wish to draw upon in my discussion of fan-made music videos.

Evanescence, as a musical product, has been created as an attempt to colonize teens within the Goth subculture and engage them as active consumers in the music and style markets by using the ideology of hetero-normative romance and the structure of melodrama as a draw. Fans who associate themselves with the values of Goth, consume the music and the videos already encoded with specific ideological meanings and, by creating their own videos, adjust those meanings to fit their own experience.

This appropriation is a creative form of what Stuart Hall has identified as negotiated reading.

As a youth community, the subculture of Goth is an attempt to negotiate the anxiety and insecurity of adolescence by overtly rejecting the 'buy and belong' ideology in their refusal to consume what MTV (and other mass media image makers) offer up as identity. Stereotypes of the goth subculture are various and abundant—from suicidal depression, obsession with death, melancholy, white face makeup, black wardrobe and the self-destructive behavior of cutting, to associations with vampires, Satanism and the occult. However, the community's 'self-definitions' locate the essence of goth in creativity, resistance to labels, open-mindedness, acceptance of alternative lifestyles (particularly sexuality) and a consistent questioning of the values of 'normal' society.[1]

In keeping with the melancholy associated with the genre of Goth music, an overwhelming majority of Evanescence's songs are rooted in melodrama and tragic romance. As such, they function to reinforce the elevation of heterosexual romance and love over all other concerns. This is evidenced by the commercial videos used to promote the music on MTV. This is most obvious in their biggest hit "Bring me to Life"—a song about a woman who feels dead and can only be brought to life by love: "Frozen inside without your touch, without your love/Darling—only you are the life among the dead." [2] The call is answered by the lead singer of 12 Stones (another band on Evanescence's label) Paul McCoy, who echoes the feeling of numbness and begs to be saved. The video produced for this song was played worldwide on *TRL* and is highly requested on [mtv.com/overdrive](http://mtv.com/overdrive). It uses gothic imagery and themes in order to emphasize the melodrama of the lyrics and further reinforce heterosexual romantic love's place as central to happiness. The video's simulated performance[3] is inter-cut with images of a dark and lonely urban landscape to produce a sense of alienation, fear, and intense emotional longing—themes that resonate with an insecure adolescent audience that has been conditioned by popular culture to believe that heterosexual romance should alleviate these feelings.

MTV consistently works to reinforce the insecurity of its audiences in order to fuel their desire to buy and belong by offering them promises of love and acceptance. Aimed at an audience of teens searching for a community to belong to, these multiple components reinforce the necessity of conforming, if not in terms of image definitely in terms of ideology. With MTV's switch to programming rather than music, access to videos is largely limited to online streaming on the "overdrive" section of [mtv.com](http://mtv.com). Users searching for Evanescence videos on the site are given a choice of 7 songs, of which, only one is not specifically about some aspect of romantic love and/or romantic obsession. As if the repetition of these videos were not sufficient to reinforce the centrality of romantic love and all of its inherent melodrama, MTV Overdrive directly links romance with consumption by suggesting that this love can be attained by purchasing the products whose advertisements 'book-end' the online videos and insert their promises into the "flow" of meanings on Overdrive (Williams 231-237).

This connection between the melodrama of romance and consumption is further reinforced by the constructed image of Evanescence's female lead singer, Amy Lee. It is Lee herself that is the ideal product; encompassing all of the melodrama, style and mood of the music, she is constructed as an object of identification and obsession that functions to promote the consumption of the band's music and merchandise. This image, the cover art for the band's debut album, is encoded with the same elements



found in the commercial videos.

Lee's heavily lined eyes, long black hair and pale skin are all markers of Goth style and the blue tint and water-like lines produce a melancholic effect. Lee's voice, alternating between soft ethereal crooning and passionate belting perfectly accompanies the band's combination of grinding guitar rhythms and melodic piano. Promotional images of the band always feature Lee front and center and often alone. Metonymically, Lee *is* Evanescence; the band's success is completely dependent on her image, voice and star text. In interviews Lee comes across as tough and rebellious yet emotionally vulnerable—a dichotomy at the heart of the Goth persona. As a commodity, Lee can be *purchased* by the fans by subscribing to the Evanescence forums.[4] This 'unofficial' site gives fans that are willing to pay a fee access to Lee and the chance of a direct response. Lee's comments on web forums are centered on the 'drama' in her life and her own emotional and/or romantic struggles; paying the site's monthly fee allows fans to vicariously participate in those struggles. The website also has an entire thread devoted to Amy Lee products: key chains, earrings, t-shirts, posters, etc. that fans can purchase in order to display their loyalty to Amy. In this way, fans are literally purchasing a gothic identity that is bound up with the centrality of hetero-normative romantic love. However, fan art communities, by virtue of their appropriation of the music for their own pleasures and creative expression disrupt this process of consumption and conformity as a means to ultimate acceptance and love by adapting the music to fit their own desires.

The videos created by fans, often based on the same audio tracks as commercial videos, deal with hetero-normative romance in terms of its limited capabilities and dangers rather than its transcendence. Of course, the tendency of fans to negotiate different meanings from pop culture products is well documented. Much work has been done to study the significance of fan-produced fiction ('fanfic') based

on television shows, films (and even video games) which takes existing characters, themes, and plots and twists them for their own purposes. With changes in technology that enabled the easy creation of digital videos with programs such as Windows Movie-maker, Adobe Photoshop and the like, fanfic has moved from purely textual to video.

In my own work I have looked at what are termed ‘vids’ made by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fans during show’s seven year run. Fans cut and edit clips from all seven seasons of the show and set them to music in order to tell the ‘story’ of a specific character, theme, relationship or event. These vids are still being created and circulated via YouTube and MySpace. Video creators then request feedback and discuss the themes/relationships explored. Song choice is especially important in these vids in order to establish moods, explore character relationships, and make claims about the show’s themes.

The music of Evanescence, because of its dark and brooding romantic themes and gritty rock rhythms, lends itself well to the exploration of melodramatic televisual and fantasy relationships. Unsurprisingly, many of these *Buffy* vids utilize the songs of Evanescence—specifically “Bring me to Life” and “My Immortal” (a song about the inability to let go of a romantic partner and the ‘haunting’ that results). Aside from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Evanescence songs have been used in vids centering on various anime, video games such as *Kingdom Hearts* and *Final Fantasy*, and several non-animated television shows inspiring fandom (*Heroes*, *Firefly* *Battlestar Galactica* to name a few). While these types of vids are abundant and definitely worthy of further study, the Evanescence videos I focus on in this paper are not based on a secondary media source such as a television show, an anime or a video game.

In order to identify the way the music, on its own, is appropriated by fans to negotiate the ideology of hetero-normative romance I have limited my focus to videos where only the music, and not televisual relationships, is the object of negotiation. In my exploration of fan-created Evanescence music videos on the web I have identified three general types or ‘genres’ that signify different methods of fan-negotiation: performance, tribute and narrative. Although all three types are interesting in terms of reception and negotiation, the narrative format is unique because it appropriates the music for the purpose of resistance. In performance videos the fan dresses up like Lee, takes a microphone, and performs in her persona by either lip synching or singing along karaoke style. The tribute video is similar in that the focus is on identification with Lee herself; in these videos fans cycle published images or video stills of Amy Lee as the music plays in the background. There are also moving video forms of the slideshow in which clips from commercially produced videos are cut out, edited together, and used with a different song.[5] In this way the image, voice and performance persona of Amy Lee is copied and re-distributed. Performance and tribute videos, illustrate the ways in which Lee’s star text is being consumed and consistently re-interpreted by music fans. However, these videos do not directly resist the meanings encoded in the songs or commercial videos that they draw upon; ideologically resistant readings are only evident in the narrative format.

It is only through close analysis of narrative videos that we can see the ways in which fans are appropriating the music of Evanescence to negotiate the ideology of hetero-normative romance. Although these videos also include elements of identification (image, style, and sometimes simulated performance) they take things a step further. In constructing these videos, the fans are not simply trying on the image of Evanescence. Rather, they are adding their own voices by pushing the boundaries and questioning the themes represented by the music itself. In these fan-produced videos love and romance is not a means of alleviating alienation, fear and loneliness—instead it is a catalyst for obsession, violence, depression and even suicide.

One such video is for the unreleased track “Anything for You.”[6] This song does not have a commercially produced video and only appears on an unofficial demo CD from 2002. This video was

produced for this song by a young man whose handle is dracx619.[7] Called “Anything for You—Extended Version”, the beginning of the video contains 2.5 minutes of live acting and dialogue in which the characters are introduced. All characters are played by teens and the video is shot in a neighborhood near a high school in California. The cast is racially diverse (two Hispanic females, one Hispanic male, one African American male and one Caucasian male) and the female characters, by virtue of their ethnicity and average size, do not reflect the types of bodies typically represented on MTV—i.e. on shows such as Laguna Beach, etc. [8]

The video opens with a discussion between the female protagonist, Ariel, and her best friend. The conversation is shot utilizing shot-reverse-shot filming techniques to record the girls’ walk home from school. After discussing midterms and Ariel’s strange behavior after her parents divorce, Ariel confides in her friend that she loves Eric (though she just met him) and their love will be “perfect”. This allusion to Disney’s 1989 animated version of *The Little Mermaid* is obviously deliberate. Not only is it a pop culture reference specific to the 18-25 age range, it is also extremely significant because the relationship of these teens mirrors that of their cartoon counterparts. The director assumes his audience will understand the link between his Ariel and Eric and those that the intended audience grew up with. Unlike the Disney version, this romance is not framed as an ideal fantasy that results in transcendent bliss but a catalyst for horror.

In terms of format, this video simulates the style of commercially produced music videos perfectly. The first shot is of Ariel, in silhouette and backlit by strobes. In the bottom left corner we get the video’s production information much like it would be listed on MTV: artist, song, director and production company. As the video progresses we get very fast cuts in black and white of Eric and Ariel’s date. Ariel tries to initiate Eric into sexual behavior but he rejects those efforts. The camera cuts to Eric walking down a hallway where he opens a door and finds evidence of Ariel’s obsession—drawings, photos, and scrawlings of “Ariel and Eric forever” papering the walls. The obsessive nature of her attachment frightens him and he runs away. Ariel, throughout the course of the video deteriorates mentally and emotionally—she stalks Eric, violently attacks her best friend in a jealous rage and eventually becomes insane. This progression of events illustrates that romantic love’s ability to alleviate the trauma of depression and divorce is extremely limited—in fact, it exacerbates the existing problems and leads, unchecked, to madness.

This interpretation of song’s lyrics directly challenges the ideology presented. Like “Bring Me to Life”, “Anything for You” is a song about isolation and the intense emotional longing that can only be resolved through love and romance. Additionally these lyrics descend into the realm of self-delusion and a willing loss of self-identity.

I’ll believe all your lies  
Just pretend you love me  
Make believe, close your eyes  
I’ll be anything for you[9]

This is only one example of a fan-produced video that directly works to undercut the ideology of romance—there are several that can be found easily via a simple YouTube search, each deliberately problematizing the romantic ideal.[10] YouTube’s role in this process, as the site for distribution and discussion, cannot be emphasized enough because it facilitates the creation of a fan-based community. YouTube’s call to “Broadcast Yourself!” is answered by fans who are seeking not only an organized place to post their videos for viewing, but also a way to make connections, seek approval and share their love of

music. Comments left by viewers of fan-produced videos on YouTube discuss the ways in which the video reminds them of their own traumatic adolescent years and comment on the meanings that they interpret. Often, viewers comment on the video's format, realism and similarity to commercial videos. In the comments section the directors have the opportunity to respond to feedback, further discuss the music and share their thoughts about the meanings presented.

In this way we can see how communities of fans, brought together via internet distribution sites like YouTube, thoughtfully and critically interpret the ideologies encoded in their favorite music and appropriate it for their own intellectual, emotional, and creative pleasure. However, is it really sufficient to state that appropriation is tantamount to empowerment? After all, Adorno is not absolutely wrong when he describes the customer as the "object" rather than the "subject" of the culture industry. The pleasure of the music for the fans is secondary and constructed to keep the masses occupied (Adorno 2). Popular music is still a packaged commodity produced for profit that has the side-effect of ideological reinforcement.

We have established that MTV, as much as it appears to be a center of unorthodoxy, has always been 'corporate'. Music videos, clearly, are commercials in themselves—for the station, the musicians, the records, etc.; they blur the boundaries between artistic expression and commodity. In the case of Evanescence, these videos distribute conformist ideologies promoting the centrality of hetero-normative romance and consumption to mass audiences of youth who are struggling to resist that same consumption. It must be acknowledged that music, regardless of fan appropriation, is still a product and the focus is still on purchasing. All of this operates within an exchange of commodified cultural objects. Fans, in personalizing the product, are also implicated in this process. Music is still be purchased, shared and circulated; the bottom line is still being met.

However, taking all of this into account it is still impossible to ignore the ways in which fans not only get pleasure out of ideologically-encoded commercials for studio-produced music, they also deliberately appropriate that same music to express their thoughts, interpretations and emotions. Fans have created a space for negotiation of these products and their accompanying ideologies. Bypassing the corporate structures of MTV and other entertainment 'economies,' they produce these videos and distribute them not from the top down, as Adorno claims, but from the bottom-up; fans may be targeted as the 'object' of the culture industry, but via the process of cultural production, they are working to elevate themselves from secondary to primary status—from passive audiences to critically thinking consumers with the ability to distribute their negotiated and resistant interpretations of dominant ideologies to a global audience.

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## Websites and Other Resources:

YouTube: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

The Urban Dictionary: [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)

EvBoard, the Evanescence Forum (Official Evanescence paid-subscriber forum):  
<http://www.evboard.com>

Evanescence is not a Christian Band: <http://www.notachristianband.com/>

A-Z Lyrics Universe: <http://www.azlyrics.com/>

MTV Overdrive: [www.mtv.com/overdrive](http://www.mtv.com/overdrive)

*Fallen*. Evanescence. Wind-up Records, 2000.

*The Open Door*. Evanescence. Wind-up Records, 2006.

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[1] [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)

[2] *Fallen*. Evanescence. Wind-up Records, 2000.

[3] By this I mean the video's use of emotive lip syncing and the appearance of actual band performance. This is combined with images associated with specific emotions. This video format has been classified by critic Joe Gow as "enhanced performance."

[4] <http://www.evboard.com/>

[5] An example of this type:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oK31r5TVU18&mode=related&search=>

[6] Link to this video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSmp9rCm3gA>

[7] YouTube profile found at: <http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=dracx619>

[8] It is important to note at this point that the 'extended version' of this video is no longer accessible via YouTube. Although the link still appears under a search attempts to access it are met with the message that this video has been removed by the user. The video available now does not include the live acting sequence before the music begins.

[9] Lyrics and Discography listed at: <http://www.notachristianband.com/ly-demo3.shtml>

[10] Another video by the same fan for the song "Missing" deals with parental alcoholism and indifference, cutting, and the importance of friendship. It also utilizes an 'intro' of sorts with live acting to set up character relationships and set the tone. Found at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9EWT3pTdNo&mode=related&search=>