

Defining the Self in the Digital Age: Armageddon and the Collapse of Duality

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Armageddon – the final battle between good and evil at the end of the world. aespa, a four-member girl group under SM Entertainment, debuted in November 2020 and has garnered significant attention for their highly conceptualized world-building. The group's name, "aespa," combines "ae" (Avatar Experience) and "aspect," signifying duality. This core concept revolves around encountering one's avatar in the digital realm and experiencing a new world. Known as a "Metaverse Girl Group," aespa distinguishes themselves through their intricate narrative. Nearly three and a half years after their debut, aespa released their first full-length album, Armageddon, in May 2024, accompanied by the promotional message "Only I can define myself." K-pop music videos often extend beyond performance, conveying themes, ideologies, and social or political messages. The Armageddon MV strategically blurs the line between human and AI through its deliberate use of generative AI and intentional visual shifts, symbolizing the inevitable intertwining of AI and humanity. By challenging conventional binary oppositions, the MV reinforces the idea that individuals alone can define their identities in an era where digital and real selves converge.

One defining characteristic of the Armageddon MV is its seamless fusion of live-action footage, CGI, and AI-generated imagery. At times, these elements overlap, and their rapid alternation throughout the MV intentionally blurs the boundaries between reality and the virtual world, challenging the audience's ability to discern authenticity. This ambiguity highlights the question, "Which scenes were created using generative AI?" Some viewers criticized the MV as an "unethical MV utilizing generative AI," but most scenes identified in these critiques were, in fact, created using CGI. The actual duration of AI-generated visuals amounted to only two seconds out of the entire 3-minute and 32-second video. The first depicts a dramatic battle scene rendered in a classical Baroque style, where combatants are engulfed in smoke and clouds in an instant (1:14), and the second portrays an urban landscape lined with ruined structures, gradually collapsing one after another (3:16). The production team and CGI team likely had an extensive amount of filmed footage featuring the group members or additional two seconds of CGI, having ample material to cover the two-second segment without using generative AI. Despite this, the deliberate decision to incorporate generative AI for such a brief duration suggests a purposeful artistic choice. By inserting this short segment, the MV raises the fundamental question,

"What constitutes authenticity?" and intentionally obscures the distinction between AI-generated imagery and human expression.

Beyond its use of generative AI, the MV further reinforces this ambiguity by incorporating visual elements that allude to AI technology. For instance, in the scenes at 0:30, 1:47, and 1:59, numerical indicators such as "person -%" appear alongside actual human figures, while the text "prompt: authentic" is displayed in NingNing's scene at 0:58. In the context of machine learning, the term "prompt" refers to the input data provided to an AI model to generate responses. The directive "authentic" serves as an instruction for AI to produce an output that appears realistic and human-like. These references to AI technology introduce philosophical inquiries into authenticity and self-perception, prompting questions such as "What defines authenticity?" and "What constitutes the foundation of one's sense of self?" By integrating live-action footage, CGI, and AI-generated imagery, Armageddon ultimately suggests that in an era where artificial intelligence permeates daily life, the distinction between real and artificial is becoming increasingly complex.

A second defining feature of the Armageddon MV is its emphasis on duality, achieved through parallel editing and choreography incorporating linear movements. At 0:09, the screen is symmetrically divided along a horizontal axis, while at 0:47, it is split vertically. In Giselle's scene at 1:30, footage captured from the front and back is displayed simultaneously, reinforcing the theme of duality. The choreography also mirrors this concept, particularly in the chorus segment featuring the lyrics "Imma get it done," where the members perform vertical hand movements. Despite being a four-member group, the choreography frequently emphasizes bilateral symmetry by positioning one member behind the others while three are placed in the foreground. Notably, when all four members appear aligned, they are either arranged along a diagonal or positioned in a perfectly straight horizontal line, as in the final chorus (2:50), emphasizing symmetry and linear composition. Moreover, many of the scene transitions utilize vertical or horizontal sliding motions. At 2:37, a large creature lowers its hand toward Karina, followed by Karina performing a downward hand motion synchronized with the lyric "Drop." This match cut highlights the connection between choreography and visual composition, reinforcing the structured linearity of the MV.

However, while the MV until the second chorus emphasizes parallel structures and duality, the bridge marks a shift in focus from linear to more curved compositions, gradually dissolving this opposition. At 2:28, NingNing moves in a circular motion; at 2:36, Giselle rotates; and at 2:43, swirling water effects transition from Karina to Winter. At 3:00, a rapid zoom-in sequence focusing on the members' faces enhances spatial depth, breaking away from the rigidly linear compositions of earlier scenes. This visual shift from straight lines to

curved, multidimensional elements symbolizes the entanglement of seemingly opposing forces. This MV suggests that two elements traditionally perceived as opposites ultimately become intertwined. The concept of "Armageddon"—the final battle between good and evil—serves as a metaphor for this visual progression, which fundamentally challenges the binary opposition between "good" and "evil." Rather than existing as parallel forces, these opposing entities are portrayed as inevitably converging.

It is important to recall that this MV faced criticism for its use of generative AI, with some deeming it "unethical." As technological advancements continue to accelerate without restraint, AI's rapid development is often portrayed as a source of "evil," while humanity is increasingly associated with "good." In alignment with the visual logic of this MV, the binary opposition of "human = good, AI = evil" does not merely exist as parallel forces but, much like the convergence of opposing elements depicted in the video, inevitably leads to the blurring of the boundary between humans and AI. This MV thus raises a fundamental question: In a world where the distinction between human and AI identities continues to blur, how do individuals define themselves? The answer to this inquiry can be found in the message that aespa has consistently conveyed throughout their album promotion: "Only I can define myself."

Through its sophisticated use of CGI, AI-generated imagery, and intentional shifts in visual structure, this MV challenges the conventional notion of binary oppositions. By transitioning from linear compositions to more curved and fluid ones, the MV dissolves the rigidity of dualism, illustrating that these opposing forces do not merely exist in conflict but rather evolve and become inherently entangled. This shift in the representation of duality suggests that humans and AI are no longer strictly separate entities but exist in an interwoven relationship, compelling viewers to reconsider notions of authenticity and self-definition. At the same time, in a world where AI increasingly influences and controls human lives, this MV strongly asserts that individual identity should not be dictated by external technological or societal frameworks but should instead be actively and autonomously shaped. aespa's consistent message—"Only I can define myself"—remains central to their artistic identity as a metaverse group in the digital age. As technology continues to blur the boundaries between humans and AI, aespa conveys through this MV that the right to self-definition remains an unshakable human prerogative.

Reference

aespa. "Armageddon." YouTube, SM Entertainment, 27 May 2024, <https://youtu.be/nFYwcndNuOY>.