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Gerd Bayer, *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*

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L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

bien menée, les applications présentées peuvent s'avérer peu convaincantes. Par ailleurs, du point de vue de l'édition, on regrette l'absence d'un index des figures (qui permettrait de naviguer beaucoup plus aisément entre les différents exemples, parfois difficiles à retrouver), et la présence de trop nombreuses coquilles dans la seconde moitié de l'ouvrage nuit un peu à la lecture.

Néanmoins, il s'agit d'une étude riche (on citera encore l'analyse stylistique du *heavy metal* selon le critère harmonique réalisée dans le chapitre 5) et très référencée, qui contribue en outre à rétablir une relative continuité entre « musiques populaires » et « musiques savantes » : l'auteur inscrit ainsi son propos en accord ou en opposition avec les théories musicologiques les plus importantes et tend à réduire le schisme qui sépare souvent de façon excessive les deux domaines précités. En tous les cas, cet ouvrage est un apport non négligeable à l'étude des musiques rock en général.

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Bérenger HAINAUT

Gerd Bayer (ed.) *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, 201 p.

I RECALL BEEN SHOWN a proof copy of this volume, by one of its contributors, at the self-proclaimed, *First Global Conference: Metal, Music and Politics*, held in Salzburg, Austria in 2008. That conference call had taken me by surprise, in the sense that prior to it there was a view that there simply wasn't enough 'metal scholars' around to make a conference exclusively dedicated to the subject, viable. Another surprise was that the majority of papers presented there were concerned with the philosophy and cultural politics of metal, particularly extreme metal styles, rather than musicology or indeed sociology. And now here was an edited volume, specifically focused on Heavy Metal Music

in Britain, about to be published! So I think that my initial impressions of this volume were clouded by a sense of chagrin that the field of metal studies – *wished for but not really imagined as possible* – had suddenly formed itself overnight and was overwhelmingly populated by scholars of comparative literary studies, philosophy and ethics, religious studies and cultural theory. Hindsight, to quote Dave Mustaine, 'is always 20:20' but it now seems clear that the appearance of this edited volume was highly significant in at least two respects. First, because of its explicit invitation to 'do Cultural Studies with earplugs' and thereby highlight

the curious lack of interest shown by cultural scholars towards the divisive popular cultural form of heavy metal, unlike that extended to hip-hop and punk (p.1). Second, because the range of papers and disciplines it offered – encompassing comparative, classical and literary theory/philosophy, history and popular cultural analysis – reflected a hitherto unidentified groundswell of interest in the study of heavy metal in the arts and humanities, dating from 2000 (Brown 2011: 218-220). It is hardly an exaggeration to argue that it is this widening of scholarly interest – beyond psychology, sociology and even musicology – that has afforded the study of metal music and culture, a new-found academic legitimacy that continues to inform its scholarly expansion.

What is also significant about this volume is that it specifically focuses on the study of heavy metal in the formative context of the UK (but see also Cope (2010), suggesting that metal's subsequent commercial success in the US billboard charts, sub-genre bifurcation and globalization, all in their various ways mark a 'turning point [after which] heavy metal somehow stopped being a particular British tradition' (p. 2). This historical and national framing is productive in allowing the various authors to explore heavy metal as a rock-cultural response to the failure of the youth counter culture (a utopian formation for sure but one that excluded most of the white working class) but more complexly, a class-cultural response to the re-making of British national identity in the post-Second World War period, either as a dystopian discourse of warning and condemnation of modern society and morality or as an unconscious impulse to fill the void of national loss, in the wake of the British Empire, via a 'language of metaphor' (Bhabha quoted by Bayer, p. 183). But this is not an account of subcultural formation as a kind of reactionary 'amnesia' to further a post-impe-

rial *Englishness* project; despite heavy metal fandom's obvious whiteness, it does not replicate the logic of the historically-contemporaneous, working-class skinhead movement. Indeed, in contrast to the CCCS (Hall and Jefferson (ed) 2002) claims that postwar youth cultures 'unconsciously' reconstitute a mythical or re-imagined working class in their leisure 'styles', many of the authors here demonstrate the extraordinary creativity, as well as the many literary and classical borrowings, that metal musicians employ to 'imagine' the heavy metal community as a national tribe.

For example, Laura Wiebe Taylor's account of the apocalyptic and dystopian narratives to be found in heavy metal's dark and disaster-focused science fiction imagery belong, or at least borrow from, a British dystopian tradition, which is concerned with the consequences to the planet and humanity of capitalist modernity and technology, in particular. It could also be argued that the themes of heavy metal music also reflect those of the literary SF/fantasy writers, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Wyndham Lewis, whose utopian/dystopian imaginings populated the inter-war years; phantasmagoric writings characterized by a deep pessimism borne out of the experience of the trenches of the Great War and the apparent escape into a mythical/heroic fantasy world. But certainly not one without its monsters and devils, re-imagined as mythical and seemingly eternal tyrants. In this respect it is notable how commentators have identified the quintessential Englishness of progressive rock – traced through the public school background and presumed 'classical' influences on some of its key bands – as defined by a liking for SF/fantasy narratives (see, for example, Macan, 1997). Yet are unable to recognize this cultural sensibility in the largely working class-originated genre of heavy metal.

While metal musicians access to such themes has most often come through popular literature and film (for

example, try to count how many of Iron Maiden's song titles are either the titles of films or best-selling paperbacks), Iain Campbell examines how much this 'cultural borrowing' is from the literature and mythology of the classical world; albeit a mediated and not always accurate usage (a point made more sympathetically by Rober Walser (1993). But Bryan A. Bardine is probably right to emphasize the absolute centrality of the Gothic tradition to metal's compositional aesthetics: 'the supernatural, the occult, insanity, criticism of religion' and interestingly 'female powerlessness and other-wordly settings', and in keeping with the comparative-literary focus of the book, the claim that such themes are redolent of and, in some senses, a continuation of 'Romanticism's critical dialogue with the Enlightenment' (p.8).

The project of situating metal in its originating British context is fraught with problems though. Deena Weinstein, in a chapter that essentially restates her well-known account (1991), also takes the opportunity to rework her core themes of class identity and masculinity. In stark contradiction to her previous claim (2000: 104), Weinstein states, 'British heavy metal is not masculinist' (p. 18). How are we to understand this shift in language? Because it allows a distinction to be drawn between *masculinism* and cultural masculinity: 'despite being male-made and guitar-centred, British heavy metal is neither misogynistic nor an expression of machismo [...] there is no binary of male/female, no invidious elevation of one gender over the other' (p. 18). Although cultural masculinity draws on key features of biological and social masculinity, it is able to 'float free' or escape their essentialist logics because of the sheer amount of cultural work or 'play' that heavy metal has done to detach it from a narrow social (and therefore narrowly patriarchal?) logic. This view of the cultural politics of heavy metal as a 'masculinity project' played out in a vibrant

musical practice, is a provocative one. But it is also a claim that is open to contestation specifically in terms of the content of the records that compose the diverse recordings that constitute the *New Wave of British Heavy Metal*, for example.¹

Perhaps the most provocative claim in the collection, however, is that articulated by Ryan Moore, when he argues that 'heavy metal's devils, monsters and evil spirits are actually metaphors for social power' (p. 148). Drawing a startling comparison with E.P. Thompson's account (1963) of the 'chiliasm of despair' or *disorientation in defeat* experienced by the working class movement a hundred or so years earlier, Moore employs the classical Marxist concept of reification to explain how both class-defined groups imagine the actual forces of power that control their existence as "inhuman or supernatural beings that cannot be comprehended, much less resisted, by ordinary human beings" (pp. 147-8). In heavy metal culture, Moore identifies three types of reification: 'the representation of power as demonic or supernatural; the displacement of power into ancient mythology and history; and the fetishism of commodities and spectacles that signify power' (p. 149), applied to the music of Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden and Judas Priest, respectively. There is much here that is important to debate but one has to question why a 'social realist' account of power is the only litmus-test of the capacity of a sub-cultural formation for collective forms of 'resistance and empowerment'?

1. Despite the musical innovation of the NWOBHM, its gender politics, as gleaned from lyrics and thematics, is far from liberated or "free floating", most often trading upon exploitative existing gender tropes and images to make its point. For example the band name *Angel Witch* and the lyrics to Diamond Head's 'Am I Evil', to name but two examples.

In some respects, Magnus Nilsson's equally well-argued chapter 'No Class? Class and Politics in British Heavy Metal', offers a literal challenge to Moore's criteria of 'politics proper' by exploring the evidence of class consciousness to be found in the 'proud-pariah' lyrics of the band Motorhead, concluding that despite the obvious lack of class as socio-economic position and interest, this 'narrow definition of politics' ignores the 'symbolic [...] significance that an empowering sense of [a disreputable, vulgar, anti-bourgeois] community can have for oppressed groups' (p. 173).

Liam Dee's piece on Grindcore's 'extreme realism' is in some ways a corrective to this optimism, though. First, because it locates the debate about realism vs. experimentalism as one that echoes that between Adorno and Brecht about the radical potential of art itself or, in this case, the musical style of Napalm Death, ENT and others bands. However, Napalm are neither finally one or the other because their didactic realism undermines their experimentalism; while such experimentalism undermines their realism. For example, the growling and pig squeals make the political sloganeering of the lyrics impossible to comprehend (although this point would have been better demonstrated through some musicological analysis to balance the discussion of aesthetics). Helen Farley's piece reminds us that not only is heavy metal's signature heaviness drawn from the electric and rural blues' stylings of African-Americans but also its thematic obsession with the devil, the satanic and six-string guitar virtuosity, also. However, it becomes harder beyond the Atlantic context of this borrowing to explain how such tropes then begin to develop a life of their own, especially to the extent that Metal's blues roots are not only not acknowledged but actively rejected.

Benjamin Earl's piece is in many ways the odd one out in this volume, drawing as it does on the ideas of Bourdieu about cultural fields (1993), in order to re-think the history of the relationship between con-

ceptions of mainstreams, undergrounds and notions of musical authenticity in metal. But what is also clear from recent work is that this is an important strand of current enquiry that will underpin future work and arguments in the next phase of development of metal studies. Ashgate should be praised for their contribution to the development of this academic field with their numerous titles – including this one – but further dissemination requires this material being available as a series of affordable paperbacks.

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