

This work has been submitted to **NECTAR**, the **Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and Research**.

Conference or Workshop Item

Title: Femme-liminale: corporeal performativity in death metal

Creator: Shadrack, J. H.

Example citation: Shadrack, J. H. (2014) Femme-liminale: corporeal performativity in death metal. Paper presented to: *Metal and Marginalisation Conference: Gender, Race, Class and Other Implications for Hard Rock and Metal, The University of York, 11 April 2014*. Also presented at: Pop Life Conference, The University of Northampton, 06-07 June 2014

Version: Presented version

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/6795/>



Contributor: Jasmine Shadrack, Lecturer in Popular Music, SoTA, University of Northampton, United Kingdom. Jasmine.shadrack@northampton.ac.uk

Title: Femme-Liminale: corporeal performativity in Death Metal

Abstract:

Given the research undertaken into notions of Dark Leisure (Spracklen, 2013), space becomes an engendered negotiated terrain not only in terms of performing masculine inscribed music such as Death Metal but occupying space within the scene itself.

Claiming identity through mapping one's relationship to societal constructs of self and notions of belonging within peripheric and marginalised music forms such as Death Metal means that gender becomes foregrounded. Death Metal in its socio-musical constructs is male; the virtuosity and dexterity required to compose and perform it has its legacy in patriarchal cultural practices such as lead guitar solos and traditional band formations being occupied in the majority by men. There are of course exceptions to the rule but they do not occupy leading positions in the genre. There exists a preconceived notion that girls can't play guitar, let alone Death Metal because its difficulty levels exceed a traditional three chord structure. Women's involvement is restricted to either bass under the assumption that it is easier than guitar (White Zombie, Bolt Thrower) or in some instances vocals. However this is dealt with as a novelty; Angela Gossow (Ex- Arch Enemy) providing a viable example.

Whilst an anti-hegemonic, anti-establishment ideological position is maintained in Death Metal, for women who transgress the boundary between audience member or "girlfriend" of a band member, to performing Death Metal, the liminality of experience means occupying a patriarchal space at the same time as transgressing sexist and sexualised gender tropes. Whilst it can be noted that men within the Death Metal scene do not necessarily knowingly ascribe to societal gender constructs as an overt operational paradigm of behaviour, seeing as no single person can divorce themselves in totality away from contemporary cultural texts and practices, fundamental gender codes underpin interaction on and off stage.

For women who perform Death Metal, the choice to either accept or deny constructs of femininity and 'sexiness' exists as polemics; to acknowledge the male gaze or to reject it can act as primary signification of manoeuvrability within the scene.

This paper seeks to deconstruct notions of gender performativity, subversion and extreme metal in order to present a narrative on liminality, sexualisation and corporeality.

Paper. Femme-Liminale: Corporeal Performativity in Death Metal.

- Intro slide - Modes of address and modes of engagement regarding gendered subjectivities and performativity within Dark Leisure (Spracklen, 2013) can operate as a fixed tablet of cultural traditions (Bhabha, 2004) until that is, a person transgresses these perceived cultural and socio-musicological boundaries. This is particularly true for women in a predominantly male dominated sub-genre such as Death Metal.

In order to fully examine modes of being within this framework, some significant ideological positions need to be identified. The anti-hegemonic, anti-establishment framework is clearly recognisable as the Death Metal modus operandi yet gendered expectations persist. One cannot fully divorce oneself from cultural normativity and gender roles in all their pervasive forms even though there is a clear rejection and oppositional reading presented and performed through music subculture.

The complexities of constructing this paper lie within a duality. In order for effective research to be engaged with, the typical academic rubric and theoretical applications are applied. However, this is not simply an area of interest and it is with difficulty that one writes oneself effectively out of the research enough for it not to become a collection of anecdotal narratives. The Death Metal musical and cultural performance is the lived experience for me and occupied my career for over a decade. By extension this informs one's research position and the recognition of Woman as the Zizekian Barred Subject provides the foundational paradigm of understanding corporeal performativity and liminality in Death Metal. The term 'corporeal' specifically references the experimental composer Harry Partch's use of the term, to move your body completely with the music you are performing, to achieve that transcendental state of 'oneness' with performance and creativity. The term 'liminal' is taken from Homi Bhabha's post-colonial text 'The Location of Culture' and is roundly applied. He states,

- 'Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation' (Bhabha, 2004)

This statement presents the clear identification of how difference can be articulated through socio-cultural texts and practices and sits well with Partch's notion of corporeality and performance. These two perspectives marry the active performance with the articulation of performativity. It is important to recognise these terms that could be said to potentially frame the re-encoding of gender normativity through female performance in Death Metal.

Women speak, perform and are engaged with primarily through their bodies, through their corporeality. According to Angela Carter in her text 'The Sadeian Woman', she states,

- ‘ – Man aspires,; woman has no other function but to exist, waiting. The male is positive, an exclamation mark. Woman is negative. Between her legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing, that only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning’ (Carter, 4)

Given the patriarchal nature of the hegemonic Symbolic Order framed by the significance of the male in music practice, production and performance, Carter’s timely statement highlights the engendered socio-cultural roles that restate the dichotomous active/passive, positive/negative binaries that pervade gender discourse. In the summer of 2000, when I bought my first guitar (a Jackson Charvel with reverse headstock) I knew I was transgressing a gendered boundary. I was a girl with a guitar. And more than that, I was a girl with a band. I used the male language of musical equipment and the masculinised fetish-character of the guitar and did not pay my gender much mind. In my naiveté, I thought if I refused to foreground my gender in a band scenario, then others would follow suit. In the most part, this was a true account but one does not pass through the eye of the abject storm without bearing some scars.

Death Metal is Male. It is one of the last remaining denizens of musical masculinity. It is the musical representation of that masculinity, of endurance, of action and technical virtuosity, of aggression. It is not a place for girls and if they are to be allowed, they must be bassists (so that they do not usurp the male dominance of the guitar) and occasionally vocalists (Angela Gossow of Arch Enemy remains one of my favourites). However, points of identification with women in the scene were few and far between as I was developing as a guitarist.

- Sean Yseult from White Zombie and Jo Bench from Bolt Thrower (both bassists) were the only two women that represented our gender in this field. There were no female Death Metal guitarists. In over a decade, I never played a gig or shared a festival stage with any other women. As the sub-genre has evolved over time, drawing its patriarchal influences from 70s Rock, Punk and Classical set within a nihilistic ideological position, the tightly constructed riff-o-rama that constitutes the make-up of the compositions, the art-objects in the form of albums, the artwork, the merchandise, as a rule of thumb, the female has been used as content for song lyrics (Pantera are an effective example of this), for artwork and band names (the band Prostitute Disfigurement is significant here) that when this creates its meta-narrative, the othered abjection of the female is evident. This frames and informs women’s occupation of space within the Death Metal scene and as Doreen Massey states, ‘space unfolds to interaction’ therefore deconstructing that interaction requires interrogation.

The Death Metal space is engendered masculine and by extension, any woman in that space will be subject to, not only the Male Gaze, but a Death Metal rubric that acts as a DIY psychological decoding in order to gain in the first instance, acceptance, and in the second, a patriarchal shepherding (Gutman, 2008) that monitors behaviour, interaction, musical allegiances and sexual attachments. In the journal article ‘Occupying the Simulation: the

sexualised panopticon', Shadrack states, 'women experience a lack of connection, through patriarchal shepherding, by being islanded'. The two processes at work here, patriarchal shepherding and islanding, according to Marta Gutman, suggest that social and leisure spaces are controlled, formatted and monitored by patriarchy so that any female transgression outside of the shepherding pathways will result in the subject becoming islanded, separated and exiled from ontological engagement. The mode of being is removed and the Barred Subject is deposited in a liminal space outside of the Symbolic Order. How women negotiate this terrain means rejection of both of these tropes and injection back into the Symbolic Order through the active. As Helen Tiffin suggests, women don't necessarily need to, '...subvert dominant discourse with a view to taking their place but [should] evolve textual strategies which 'consume' their own biases as they expose, and erode those of the dominant discourse' (Tiffin, 1996). This is what I did, perhaps without fully realising it at the time. I knew the best way to challenge preconceptions of gender, music and performance in Death Metal was to get up on stage and do it myself, so the bias that was evident would consume itself through action, rather than allowing my gender to remain passive and at point zero, waiting for that masculinised meaning to be imposed. Throughout this process, the recognition that I refused to be a socio-cultural and musical palimpsest was significant. By taking the initiative within a male dominated arena, simply by the act of doing, meant that the imposition of a pre-ordained patriarchal narrative could be resisted. By taking my place on the stage, I rejected this narrative, transgressed the shepherding and carved out my own performative space.

How that space operates is complex. The 'spurious charade of maleness and femaleness' that Carter discusses is none more evident than at a Death Metal gig. A hierarchy exists but they are different depending on 'how' you are occupying space at the event. The way men exist in this space operates in an explicit format; they are fans or musicians or in many cases, both. The hierarchy falls that fans are lower than musicians in the band on stage, who occupy the apex of performed masculinity. The way women exist in this space is more complicated and the hierarchy functions differently. If you are a fan, and you outwardly display your insignia, your sub-cultural currency (Thornton, 1997), your tattoos, and you obey the Male Gaze, however re-encoded it becomes, then this elevates women to a particular mid-range. If you are a band girlfriend, then you are not there because of the primary signification which is the music. You are there because of your sexual attachment and are therefore exiled. However, if a band member has a girlfriend who is also into the music that garners extra points if you will. If you attempt to transgress these two pre-ordained locales for women and attempt to perform at the apex, on the stage, then you need to be better than the boys. The veneer of social acceptability within Death Metal means that, even though you may have ticked all of the Death Metal boxes in terms of socio-cultural and musical signifiers, if you can't play your instrument or you make a mistake on stage, you will also be exiled. However, the exile experienced will be worse than the band girlfriend because at least they know their place.

This is the operational paradigm of behaviour I experienced, Woman as the Barred Subject, for over a decade and the only way to negotiate and re-encode this terrain was to work

very, very hard. I was aware of the Male Gaze but I was there to do my job, even if it was perceived as a man's one. We would turn up to a venue, unload, set the stage up, get sound-checked and all the while I can see eyes on me, I can see the cognitive and psychological processes I am being filtered through in order for them to work out what I was even doing there. 'Oh, perhaps she's just helping out, she's just 'with the band'' was something I was frequently confronted with.

- When it came time for us to be on stage for the performance, I'd turn my amp on, sling my BC Rich Warlock 1987 class axe series over my shoulder and kick my distortion on. That very precise, active declamatory positioning primed the next half an hour of our set. Two things are worthy of note at this juncture, the guitar I used and the type of distortion applied. Both of these signifiers are intrinsically male; there is an assumption that women are not supposed to be aggressive or assertive and Metal, particularly Death Metal, provides both of these as modes of address and engagement. My Warlock was a classic series which meant to anyone into the scene, that I demonstrated knowledge of the instrumentation and what it could do. It was black and spiky and incredibly neck-heavy to play. It was an act of endurance even performing with such an instrument. No guitar has ever looked so metal, even if the aesthetics outweighed the tone of future BC Rich's, the 1987 series I played was the perfect balance of looking and sounding the part, as the EMG pick-ups and the Floyd Rose system meant it was built for playing heavy music. I later changed to a 7 string Ibanez Universe followed by the S Series when I joined Theoktony because the music we played was a combination of Death and Black Metal and the extra string provided the difference in timbre necessary to fulfil both remits.

I was heavily influenced by the NWOAHM and DM in the 1990s and Dimebag Darrel and Trey Azagthoth from Morbid Angel's sound was the bar against which my distortion was measured. It was full of bottom end with a high treble setting with the middle taken out completely. It was warm, aggressive and set the timbre of the music played. Invariably the distortion type applied by bands will denote what genre or sub-genre the music will be placed into. I went for the heaviest distortion I could get, aware on some latent level, that the heavier I sounded, the deeper into a masculinised territory I was stepping. Using a Peavey XXL cab and head meant the inbuilt distortion gave me the sound I had in my head, the sound of Death Metal. It's possible to suggest that the actual sound of Death Metal distortion is the sonic representation of anger, of aggression, of assertiveness, of masculinity. There is no ignoring it, it occupies significant musical space within compositions and it characterises everything it is applied to. By immediately engaging with this timbre and mode of playing, what it represented culturally meant that I was able to recalibrate and re-encode it simply by using it. I remain unsure whether this meant that I feminised the sound but it created a different level of engagement, so much so that after I first started more and more women would come to the shows, perhaps feeling they were represented and there was a point of identification.

As is typical of a Death Metal audience, which has a high percentage of other Death Metal musicians in attendance, men would stand in front of me with their arms folded, waiting to be disappointed or with the facial expression which stated 'impress me'. This was a consistent mode of behaviour and interaction for many gigs over a ten year period but what happened when our set was over provided some very interesting reactions, sometimes genuine appreciation or veiled sexism. This would range from 'great set' to 'you play quite well.....for a girl'. When the polemics of this were experienced, learning to ignore the verbal sexism became an important paradigm of existence in this context. The active engagement with music and performance wasn't enough to silence all of my critics.

This is where we return to the notion of active movement, of corporeality. Make no mistake, if you are in a metal band, remaining static whilst you perform negates the performance itself. The physicality, endurance and focus required to ensure precise playing whilst head-banging for example, takes practice. The engagement with corporeality informed my re-encoded gendered performativity because there were some vital elements that needed to be achieved and maintained to avoid the patriarchal exile. The usual gendered signifiers attributed to women, in terms of clothing for example, meant that I dressed like the boys. There was no space for pretty clothing or high heels because this represented the feminine and there was no space for that within such an overtly masculinised locale. Band t-shirts, the more illegible the insignia, the cooler I was by extension, trainers and camo shorts or baggy jeans were the uniform.

- The only visible female signifiers that were noticeable were eyeliner and breasts, everything else were the same as the rest of my band.

I was being assessed, judged, and shepherded by patriarchal pathways with the risk of exile and being islanded (Gutman 2013) every time I stepped onto the stage. As my career developed and the bands I was in got signed to independent labels, the gigs became more high profile. The career high points were playing with Severe Torture (with Deicide's drummer at the time), Napalm Death and Morbid Angel. I was signed to Anticulture Records and later Feto Records, the owners of which meant that Mick Kenny (Mistress, Anaal Nathrakh) and Shane Embury (Lock Up, Brujeria, Napalm Death) were my bosses and the legitimacy of my position was cemented. I was surrounded by men, in business and in music practice, production and performance, consistently.

This masculinised mode of engagement meant that ideas surrounding performativity, identity and confronting the abject through sexist tropes was a constant and irrefutable paradigm that at times, was very difficult and exhausting to contend with and at others, I enjoyed exploding the myth surround women, guitars, Death Metal and performativity. As Carter states, 'myth deals in false universals' (1978, 5) and it was important challenge these head on. I was aware, because of my gender that I experienced what Zizek calls subjective destitution from the Symbolic Order (Zizek, 2013). Traversing the fantasy, in this context, that of becoming an accomplished touring and signed musician within the desired field, signalled a collapsing of Baudrillardian simulacra in order to achieve the perceived real yet that real was to some degree, the desert. When one's everyday-ness collides with the

perceived object or trajectory of desire (I want to play gigs with my heroes for example) projected me into hyperreality because I was sharing the stage with bands I'd grown up with, invested in, pawed over each and every album cover, knew where and who recorded them, what the line up changes were, who they were signed with, meant the boundary between the fantasy and the real became inextricably blurred to the point that there was no degree of separation. Maintaining identity within this framework and a renegotiated gender identity was an ongoing colloquy. As Said states,

'Identity – who we are, where we come from, what we are – is difficult to maintain in exile...we are the 'other', an opposite, a flaw in the geometry of resettlement, an exodus' (Said, 1999)

Whilst the frame of what Said discusses here is that of identity, belonging and diaspora in post-colonial terms, one cannot miss the significance of the statement when applied to this context. I knew I represented the other, the opposite, and even though I had worked very hard at my guitar, performance and each of the bands I was in, I remained to some degree in exile because of my gender. Whilst I hadn't paid it much mind during the first 7 years or so, it became increasingly apparent that my gender was being foregrounded more and more as time went on. Whether this is attributable to the manner in which society has become increasingly open and hostile to women or whether I just began to notice it more clearly, remains to be seen. However, I was able to survive for the time I had because of one very important reason – all the men I had ever worked in bands with, had never made an issue of my gender. There was never any sexism experienced from them that made me feel undermined, under-valued or exiled. Unfortunately this dwindled the more successful we became and the fight for space, representation within the traversed fantasy and ego started to dominate. This is ultimately why I decided to resign at the end of 2008 and walked away from the Death Metal scene entirely.

Some male fans of the band attempted to interpellate me into sexist tropes by commenting on my appearance rather than my playing, or vice versa, with the occasional 'nice tits, shame about the playing' comments thrown in for good measure. Whilst I resisted and rejected the interpellation, the fact that this was increasingly becoming the operational mode of behaviour of men towards me started to make me feel less safe; for example the attempts to grope me when I got off stage often meant that my band mates had to jump in. On one occasion this actually happened whilst I was on stage, mid song. Other instances involved me being followed to the toilets, or there were men waiting outside when I came out. I would also experience the opposite of this too; for example having fans, in the majority men, saying complimentary things about my playing style, guitar technique, being congratulated on choosing the 'right' guitar, calling me the Death Metal Goddess. Whilst this seems unproblematic, I had forged a shaky path. As Carter states,

- 'If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often

used on them by men). All the mythic versions of women.....are consolatory nonsenses' (Carter, 1978, 5)

I was just a guitarist. I wasn't a slag and I wasn't a goddess. I was just a guitarist but I wasn't allowed to exist as just this. I was re-encoded, recapitulated, interpellated into othered female constructs whether I had any agency or not. The negotiation of this behaviour, the surreptitious covert sexism, whilst existing in that space as a performer was difficult. Passing these experiences through an analytical lens, demonstrates that, as Guyatri Spivak suggests, 'when one takes a whack at shaking up that patriarchal structure, one sees how much more consolidated the opposition is' (Spivak, 1992).

Ultimately, the men who treated me as an equal were the other bands I played with. The fans operated within a much more complex paradigm. There are some very significant female performers in Death Metal that are emerging such as Somi Arian from Mortad, Grace Perry from Landmine Marathon, Krysta Cameron from IWrestleDaBearOnce yet these are all vocalists. Female Death Metal guitarists remain very few and far between.

Given that our knowledge is determined by the social boundaries upon it (Carter, 1978), the corporeal performativity of women in Death Metal will always be inscribed with gendered prejudice until female subjectivities take legitimacy for themselves, instead of waiting for it to be given.

➤ Thanks for listening!