

*Critical Issues*  
Imaginative Research in a Changing World

**Heavy Fundametalisms**  
Music, Metal & Politics

**Edited by**

**Rosemary Hill & Karl Spracklen**

*Inter-Disciplinary Press*  
Publishing Creative Research

**Heavy Fundametalisms:  
Music, Metal and Politics**

# Critical Issues

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## **Introduction**

*Rosemary Hill and Karl Spracklen*

Heavy metal is a genre of dense sounds and ideologies: as a site for academic discussion it has often been ignored, but recent years have seen increasing curiosity as to what we can understand *about* metal and what we can learn *from* metal. The history of heavy metal music as a popular music genre has been examined in detail by a growing number of researchers such as Weinstein, Walser and Kahn-Harris. Metal can be understood as a self-referencing community in which action is communicative. Much of the metal scene exists outside of traditional or modern social structures; its meaning and purpose is the subject of discourse and debate. However, in many ways heavy metal can also be understood as a place that reaffirms instrumental rationalities and promotes instrumental consumption. Whatever individuals in heavy metal might think about the nature of the music, the community, and the genre; it is still a business operating in a market in a commodified, globalised industry. Metal is not a communal music played live in a free setting. Metal is part of the Westernised, commercial pop and rock music industry that has imposed itself on the rest of the world. Music is recorded and sold. The symbolic boundaries of the scene are shaped by the consumption of commodities such as records, tee-shirts and fanzines. Small labels and specialised shops and websites cater and foster demand for commercial products. People make a living from heavy metal. The most successful bands are booked by professional agencies to undertake tours in venues owned by multi-national corporations. More obscure metal bands send out press releases, establish websites, and upload music files. Rather than being truly democratic, communal and liberal, metal is governed by instrumental rationalities associated with the music business, and by ideologies of elitism that owe their origin to nationalist debates in European nation-states going through the phase of late capitalism. The music's construction of commodified outsider identities, its conformity to hegemonic masculinity and its globalised, globalising appeal is clear: from Black Sabbath to Metallica and the new wave of corporate bands such as Trivium, heavy metal has played and continues to play a key role in the globalised entertainment industries.

This eBook is a snapshot of the Second Global Conference of Heavy Fundametalisms: Music, Metal and Politics held in Salzburg, November 2009. Following on from the first Heavy Fundametalisms: Music, Metal and Politics Conference in 2008 and hard on the heels of the Metal and Gender Conference in Cologne, October 2009, this conference continued the exciting discussions about heavy metal and its multi-faceted relationship with power. The terms 'heavy metal' and power may be so strongly related as to suggest



they are cultural synonyms. Power in heavy metal music extends well beyond the boundaries of performance, seeping into other music genres and the cultures and subcultures that compose the scene. Metal power modification may be on plain display, but behind this, deep in the fabric of metal culture a plethora of debates can be surmised on what exactly power is and what can be understood by it, from the stage through to the politics, ideologies, culture and lifestyle in metal. Initial questions that were put forward to propel the discussions were,

What makes metal powerful? Is it the power of amplification, the brutality of the music, the violence of its discourse? Is power essential to the core of metal? Is metal a mechanism for the dissemination of power?

The conference, organised by Inter-Disciplinary.Net, investigated the varied relationships between heavy metal music and sexual potency, social agency, coercion, bodily strength, ideological domination, and myriad other forms of social, psychological, and physical power in modern human existence. As is usual with this series from Inter-Disciplinary.Net, the papers in this collection are presented here as delivered by the authors, subject to the usual editorial controls over standards, coherence, consistency and academic content. These papers, we believe, provide proof of the healthiness of Heavy Metal Studies as a discipline, and demonstrate that the aims of the conference were indeed met by the breadth and depth of the academic work presented. We feel privileged to share the inspiring opportunity to assess where heavy metal studies might go next, where further study is needed and what deeper analysis might tell us. The thirteen papers that follow deal with the theme of metal and power in different ways and we have divided them into four sections: Philosophy and Aesthetics; Nationalities and Warriors; Fans and Communities; and Technologies and Musicologies.

In the first section Igor Gafarov argues that in the absence of philosophical agreement about Moral Good, what brings us together is aesthetics. In contradistinction to the Birmingham School's theory of subcultures, Gafarov contends that the most important unifying factor within the metal community is the shared enjoyment of the music itself: our shared aesthetics gives us a sense of community, and allows community members to build a shared identity. Daniel Frandsen's paper examines the way in which the heavy metal lifestyle is, on the surface, self-destructive for the individuals in the heavy metal culture, without being destructive towards the culture itself. Philosophical issues on the self, self-destruction and authenticity are central to Frandsen's argument, and are addressed in his paper. Christine A. James explores the aesthetics of gore in heavy metal, and the similarities between extreme metal's aesthetic representation and the 'Hell House'

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performances arranged by female Fundamentalist Christians in the Southern United States. James argues in each context the use of violence and gore has a value beyond merely shocking the audience, it is arguably a way that some women find their voice; both for fundamentalist Christians and fundamentalist gore metal fans.

The section 'Nationalities and Warriors' considers the role played by metal in constructing nationalities, and in representing war. Imke von Helden writes of the rise of Viking metal in Northern Europe. She explores its origins, its thematic reliance upon Norse sagas, the use of Scandinavian folklore and native languages. She discusses the success of Viking metal across the rest of Europe and the world, which effectively exports Viking and Nordic culture beyond Scandinavia. Caroline Lucas explores the ambiguous elements of English Black Metal, and the seemingly contradictory influences present in the music. Lucas examines the idea of power in metal, and the potential for applying Foucauldian theory as a framework for exploring power relations within composition. Samir Puri discusses the use of war imagery in metal, sonically, lyrically and in artwork, arguing that metal is both the genre most suited for portraying war and also a powerful tool for anti-war protest. He further discusses the use of metal in war situations by army personnel and by civilians caught in the crossfire. Finally he assesses the moral responsibility of metal artists towards their subject.

The section entitled 'Fans and Communities' contemplates the importance of heavy metal for fans in Europe and in the USA. We see fans dealing with topics such as misogyny, homophobia and social change within the context of their fan communities. Sonia Vasan's research asks, how can women death metal fans enjoy music that often presents violently misogynistic images? From her interviews with American woman who love death metal she draws conclusions that show that in spite of its anti-woman message, the power of death metal is transferable to all its fans, and empowers women to feel stronger in their everyday lives. Rosemary Hill's paper examines how *Kerrang!* Magazine represents women metal fans in its letters pages. Hill argues that a powerful myth can be read in *Kerrang!*'s design - the myth of the warrior - and she considers the ways in which women are represented as 'using' this myth. Hill concludes that the power of the warrior myth is so strong, and so essential to the culture of the genre, that women letter writers are frequently represented as interacting with it. Karl Spracklen investigates how fan forum discussions of Gorgoroth's Gaahl's announcement of his homosexuality are expressions of communicative discourse in a Habermasian sense. As such they explore ideas about how gender and sexuality are portrayed in the black metal scene, which at times offer a counter-hegemonic position. Lii Araste explores the history of the heavy metal subculture in Estonia's capital Tallinn from 1980 to the present day, against the backdrop of the fall of the Soviet empire. Using a semiotic

approach she demonstrates the different modes of communication fans use, and the importance of meeting places in forging a collective identity.

'Technologies and Musicologies' brings together papers that explore the science behind the music. Colin McKinnon's paper explores the sheer loudness of metal. He argues it is one of its defining characteristics and, unlike some other aspects, is also one of the most recognisable both to metal heads and to those outside the metal scene. He suggests that the power of metal may also be strongly linked to the listener's emotions, particularly when the music is very loud. Sarha Moore discusses the dissonant and powerful potential of the flat second, and argues that metal has developed a unique voice for this note. Moore shows that unlike in its rare use in Western pop and classical music it has positive and empowering associations that have much in common with the flat second's wide usage in other musical genres, particularly in the Middle East and Asia: the flat second is emblematic of the metal head's resistance to the Western status quo. Mark Mynett, Jonathan Wakefield and Rupert Till draw upon Mynett's eight years of experience producing within the metal genre, including releases through Sony and Universal and working with the likes of Colin Richardson and Andy Sneap, to demonstrate the problems and opportunities faced in finding the 'hyper-real' sound of modern extreme metal.

Karl Spracklen writes: Although there is a range of research and disciplines in this book, there is one common theme - the need to provide a critical gaze at the music of metal and its place in our lives. My perfect moment is head banging along to Enslaved's *Eld* (1997), but I'm not oblivious to the academic imperative to reflect, think and discuss: I am not a Viking, I have never burned a church, and I have never sacked Lindisfarne (though I have walked to it along St Cuthbert's Way). This book is not a justification of metal, our own tastes in music. It is, though, a justification for heavy metal music studies.

Rosemary Hill writes: The work gathered in this book shows how much we are already beginning to learn about heavy metal, but it also shows that considering metal music, its culture and communities can help us to understand such things as how aesthetics, gender or the role of flattened seconds function in our wider societies. I am thrilled to present this collection of papers, all of which reveal how much metal can teach us.

## **PART I**

### **Philosophy and Aesthetics**



## Metal Community and Aesthetics of Identity

*Igor Gafarov*

### **Abstract**

This article deals with the phenomenon of metalhead community in the light of contemporary societal changes. Using the theories of Wolfgang Iser and Alasdair MacIntyre, the author attempts to show what factors led to the rise of an 'aesthetics of identity,' a specific aesthetics that can be a strong identity-building mechanism. The article also proposes an alternative to the classical subcultural view of musical communities, and metalhead community in particular.

**Key Words:** Aesthetics, community, heavy metal, identity, post-subculture.

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The main goal of this article is to look at the formation and specifics of identity in the metal community as an academic problem. This goal is determined by the current situation of the fundamental societal changes, amongst others those in basal assumptions that lead to the plurality and ambiguity of social structures and life-worlds. I assume that in our times collective identities, which subordinate individuality to common interest, are no longer normative. Instead, they give place to individual constellations that cannot be integrated by given norms, hierarchies and forms of organisation, but are determined by disintegration or 'risky freedom'. I also assume, that the monopoly of dominating culture is slowly replaced by plurality of the forms of cultural expression, as the importance of small groups and alternative movements or so-called 'subcultures' is growing. These groups of people with common interests slowly become the most important environment and source of identity.

From such communities, the most interesting to us is the one that is integrated by common musical taste - the metal community. I have chosen that group as an object because it receives very little attention in social theory despite the very active processes of building its own identity and value system. Even those researchers that turn their attention on this musical genre and community still mostly misinterpret it, in part because of the classical musicological division in art and non-art (or pop) music. Not only multiple 'rock and pop' encyclopaedia, but even academic journals, such as *Popular Music*, include in the notion of pop-music everything from rock and metal to genuine pop. This ambiguity and theoretical inability to draw the lines between the commercial musical industry and other genres makes it impossible to understand the specifics of identity in musical communities.

The diversity of genres is seen as a simple plurality of taste so that strong identity with a particular genre could only be understood as an irrational deviation. In respect of analysing the communities themselves, such a point of view brings in strong ethnographic overtones,

For my analysis of identity building in the metal community I propose the hypothesis of the existence of 'aesthetics of identity'. To explain how exactly aesthetics can become the fundamental motivating and integrating force, I turn to the ideas of Wolfgang Iser<sup>1</sup> and Alasdair MacIntyre<sup>2</sup>.

Primarily the changes are connected with the aesthetisation of reality observed by Iser. Beyond the surface aesthetisation - the growing role of design, the invasion of art in everyday life - Iser speaks of deep aesthetisation that influences the perception of reality itself. It becomes mutable and is no longer something solid, unchangeable and inescapable. Thus, due to technical advancement, reality is perceived as aesthetic, meaning not its beauty, but artificial character. In these circumstances Iser speaks of 'styling' as an important individual practice, a step towards an emerging 'homo aestheticus'.

MacIntyre, on the other hand, speaks of the decline in the importance and integrating strength of moral, political and social values. He characterizes the way of thinking of a contemporary human as moral emotivism. People in the contemporary world speak as if they refer to some moral foundations and act as if there were some moral values behind their actions. But MacIntyre insists that it is not so: instead of moral values, the foundation is comprised of freely joined fragments and pieces of old fundamental structures. That is also the reason why contemporary moral and political philosophy is so fragmented, incoherent, and inherently conflicting. The absence of moral standards that can be referred to with the purpose of determining one's rightness or judging the argument, the impossibility of common ideas of Good or human destiny lead to the global failure of 'moral language,' or of any kind of moral argumentation. Thus any argument could be seen as an argument about opinions, and the choice of those as free choice and auto creation of one's identity.

It such circumstances it seems to me to become possible to speak of the 'aesthetics of identity', when the new integral aesthetics that encompasses both the sphere of everyday life, lifestyle and design and the sphere of moral values and societal critique becomes an integrating force for the people with shared aesthetic preferences. Aesthetics can unite contemporary communities because, due to the global aesthetisation, it only becomes something constant, becomes the field where every sentence has sense. Unlike religious, moral or social positioning, to aesthetics one cannot now be indifferent. One can insist on having absolutely no opinion as to the existence of God or possibility of

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an ideal society, but even saying 'I just listen to/read/wear what I like' enters the field of discussion on aesthetics and has some sense.

'Aesthetics of identity' could be understood as an answer to the challenge of pan-aesthetised world. Even partial decline of big religious, political and ethical discourses leads to the vision of a contemporary human as a nomad, who gathers his/her identity from the shards of an old broken world. The strengthening of an aesthetic field means that aesthetics plays at least as important a role as these big discourses in the building of collective identity, in the creation of a project of societal life.

But the aesthetics of identity as it functions in musical communities acts not only as an integrative force, but also opens a space for personal freedom. The focus of collective interest on musical taste in these communities means that existential support does not work in imposing a unified world view, but rather as proposing some aesthetically fitting material for filling the lacunae in the personal project. So in the metal community the people who are not really interested in religion can pick up some of the ideas near to the aesthetics of the musical genre, be it Satanism of one or another kind or paganism. Yet these ideas are not a necessary part of identity and do not usually work as a criterion to determine whether someone is a 'proper metalhead'. Along the same lines, metalheads who are not interested in pursuing fashion of any kind can refer to the rough 'canon,' yet these clothes do not have the character of 'subcultural uniform' of old. So the paradoxically obvious fact that the music - the aesthetics - is the fundamental integrating factor and the absence of any real authority can help the members of the community view this integration as a field of personal freedom, a playground of self-determination and self-building.

Such a way of looking at the metal community undermines the established way of seeing it as a 'subculture'. This term entered the academic field in the 1920s and was used to describe partially culturally autonomous, deviant, often criminal, groups. In the 1950s and 1960s this term of criminology and applied sociology was redefined in the theoretical works of Birmingham School<sup>3</sup>. In this neomarxist project the idea of subcultures replaced the classical idea of the proletariat as a revolutionary class. In the later usage of the term the socio-critical overtone was abandoned and as a result it has lost any resemblance to a strict definition in practical sociology. As the necessity of finding a new term was recognised, some other terms were proposed, in particular 'public'<sup>4</sup>, and 'neo-tribes'<sup>5</sup>. Yet the first two of these describes only one part of any aesthetic community - in the case of musical communities either only listeners or only musicians - while the second refers not to the global communities of taste, but to the very local small and enclosed groups.

To move away from this usage of terms for musical communities and the metal community in particular I propose to refer to the term



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'participatory communities' that appeared in the well-known work by Richard Barbrook 'The Class of the New'<sup>6</sup>. It seems to me that this term manages to capture both the integrated character of this community as well as its involvement in the big social picture, as opposed to the encapsulated 'subcultures' or 'neo-tribes'. It also hints at some traits of the community, such as inner autonomy, creativity and participation in social activities.

In the conclusion I will recall the main theses of my work. The contemporary world is characterised by both popular ethical emotivism and aesthetisation of lifeworld. In such circumstances the integrating force of aesthetics, especially that of music, increases dramatically. 'Aesthetics of identity' enters as an important practice of self-determination and personal freedom in musical communities. The most adequate name for such communities is 'participatory communities'. Except for the theoretical foundation most of these theses demand grounded empirical research, which would be my goal in the near future.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> W Welsch, *Estetyka poza estetyką: o nową postać estetyki*, Polskie towarzystwo estetyki, Kraków, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> A MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> D Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Methuen, New York, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> M Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, New York, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> M Maffessoli, *The Time of the Tribes. The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> R Barbrook, *The Class of the New*, in *OpenMute*, June 2006, viewed on 03 January 2009, <[www.theclassofthenew.net](http://www.theclassofthenew.net)>

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# **Living for Music, Dying for Life: The Self-Destructive Lifestyle in the Heavy Metal Culture**

*Daniel Frandsen*

## **Abstract**

Since the early days of Heavy Metal, the musical tradition has evolved in many directions. One thing that seems to remain the same across the different sub-genres is the lifestyle among the fans and certain musicians. To the core fans of Heavy Metal, the music is the most important thing. The reason why they go to work is to earn money, to be able to buy music and go to concerts. At least, that is what they will say, if they are asked the questions. Like musicians, they say they 'live for the music', even if they are not themselves musicians of any kind. Alcohol has always been a large part of the Heavy Metal lifestyle, both on and off the scene, and it still is to this day, especially among the young fans. The music is meant to be played loud, and the fans literally choose to risk their sense of hearing, each time they set foot at a venue, and even when they play a CD at home. The Heavy Metal lifestyle is, on the surface, self-destructive for the individuals in the Heavy Metal culture, without being destructive towards the culture itself. The culture survives from the self-destructive individuals, who claim to remain true to the culture. How and why can a rational being choose its own destruction? Is it possible to live this lifestyle, and still live according to one's authentic self (or nature)? Can the authentic nature of a human being be self-destructive? Philosophical issues on the self, self-destruction and authenticity are central to the above-mentioned debate, and will be addressed in this paper.

**Key Words:** Authenticity, heavy metal, self-destruction, identity, identity-creation.

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## **1. Introduction - The Authentic Self**

Throughout the history of philosophy, there have been numerous attempts to describe what is the *right* way for a person to live her life. Spinoza claimed that to live the free life one must live according to one's nature, which means to live as the part of the whole: to be *true* to one self. According to Rousseau, the authentic life is the original or natural life. This basically means that humans, in their search for authenticity should go back into nature, by removing itself from society - or rather, have society turn into nature again.

The term to be 'true' is often found in the Heavy Metal culture - mostly among fans, who seem to put a big effort in attempting to be true (to the Heavy Metal culture). When someone fails to live up to the standards for being authentic, so to speak, they will usually get labelled as posers, i.e., someone who tries to show herself off as being something she is not. This phenomenon has to be examined from the inside, since it will not be possible, for someone outside the Heavy Metal culture, to distinguish between a so-called poser and someone who is true, according to that culture. On the surface they are too much alike. Why is this so? The Heavy Metal culture is at certain levels defined by the people who made it, which to a certain extent is the musicians, especially the early Heavy Metal bands. This is a matter to which I will return.

Is it possible to be authentic, and if so, how is it possible? These two questions demand a description of the self, which would take up too much space for an article this size. Therefore I will not go into a long debate about what kind of thing the self is, as such, but merely use certain well-known theories in an attempt to find a relation between the self, being authentic, and music. One thing that must be stressed at this point is that the people I have in mind, when I talk about Heavy Metal fans (and other people who listen to music), are primarily young adults, since it seems to be the age-group who most frequently listens to music, and identify themselves with a certain musical sub-culture.

## **2. The World as Absurd and Alienation**

In the end we are all going to die, in one way or another. Life as we know it, cannot be eternal, and that can lead to a feeling of absurdity: 'Why bother doing anything, if I will be dead anyway?' or 'I have to make the best of it, since I cannot know whether my life will end in the morning'. This feeling of absurdity is described by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as a feeling that arises in the realisation of the world's irrationality and the self's constant attempts to find the rational in the world. This is an obvious impossible task, and therein lays the absurdity. Why attempt to do something that will be impossible (perhaps even by definition)? Camus says that we cannot do anything else, and that we therefore will be in this constant feeling of alienation from the world.<sup>1</sup> A feeling of not belonging to the world. My claim is that a similar feeling can be found among Heavy Metal fans. However, it is not as much alienation from the world, as it is alienation from modern society - especially the people outside of the Heavy Metal culture. By analysing the culture, it becomes clear that there is the unspoken assumption that Heavy Metal fans are different from the people not in that culture. This assumption goes deeper than just the individual tastes in music.

What we end up with here is a world without meaning. As Sartre claims, life is meaningless, but that it is not a bad thing, since we are able to

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create meaning in our lives, on our own, through the freedom with which we are forced to live. And with freedom comes responsibility, which I will return to a bit later. Realising that we are free to do what we want enables us to do things that may seem irrational and even counter-productive, like spending our money on going to concerts instead of buying food, or drinking heavily on a weekday, and then having to go to work with a hangover. Looking at this from a strictly rational perspective, it is what could be called bad or even stupid behaviour, but there are reasons for choosing that kind of lifestyle. Sartre claims that we cannot want to do an evil deed, since we will always see what we choose to do, as a right (or good) thing to do, perhaps only in the moment when the choice is made. So, the self-destructive lifestyle is not chosen because of the bad things. Heavy Metal fans do not spend their money on concerts, because they want to be unable to eat for a few days (if that happens), or drink a lot of alcohol because they want to go to work or school with a hangover. They do it because of the good things that they get from doing it, in spite of knowing about the bad consequences that will follow on the next day. What are the good things people can get from this kind of behaviour? This theme will be examined later.

### **3. Music and Self-identity**

A common belief among people is that judgements about music are only about music. According to Theodore Gracyk this is a false belief, since judgements about music, to a certain extent, always will be judgements about other people. When evaluating music, you are saying something about the people who like that particular kind of music. The main reason for this, is that music is a central part of identity-creation.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that there is an assumption behind this claim, namely that the self is constructed, and not something we are born with. If the self would not be a construct, we would not be able to create our own identity. Gracyk describe this identity creation with reference to David Hume, who argued that there is no such thing as a self that remains the same through ones life. It is impossible to find something, by introspection that is the self that remains constant. So when we look for the constant self, the only things we can find, are constructed elements, like our taste in music.<sup>3</sup> It is a commonly known fact that young adult in particular, identify themselves with the culture (mostly sub-culture) they belong, or want to belong to. Some people describe themselves as Heavy Metal fans, which is to put a label on the self that can be constant, at least for some time. This stability is something people will look for at some time or another, in their lives - a kind of anchor for the self.

The question is now, why music can be seen to be such a central part in this matter. Gracyk gives a reason for this. He claims that there are parallels between listening to music, and introspection for the self. Taken that

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claim to be correct, there are, according to him, three ways in which music can help construct a concept of the self:

- 1) The recognition and predictability we feel by listening to music, is similar to what we seek in the self by introspection. Because we can recognize musical objects and in advance predict the coming parts of a musical object, it can be a way to do the mental practice of integrating different experiences of the same piece of music, into a coherent object, which could be part of what can be called a musical genre. Although a musical genre is not a stable object, as such, it can aid a person in the process of creating a concept of the self, through that persons activities with works within that genre. By listening to Heavy Metal daily, and creating ones self, through the stability of the genre (with many works sounding similar), it is possible to find the stability that we as humans naturally seek (according to Hume), for example by ending with the belief 'I am a Heavy Metal fan'.
- 2) Listening to music works as a memory-stimulus. Often when rehearing music we heard in the past, we recall some past events. The reason for this is that we associate certain songs with specific events in our lives, like the day we graduated or the day a friend died. Since memory can be seen as a large part of the constructed self, and music can help us recall certain memories, it seems clear that music is the aid of the self-creation.
- 3) Music can be seen as the prototype for the kind of thing we seek, when we are trying to establish personal identity. Like musical works the self is an intangible object, and in attempting to locate the self, one must do the same activity when trying to grasp a musical work. The object we seek is a relational object, not a concrete one. When identifying a musical work, we synthesize all the different sounds that seem to be connected, under one name, which in most cases will correspond to the title of the work. Even when identifying what kind of music a person likes, it will mostly be done in the same way, by synthesising the works, styles etc., that the person likes, under a fewer number of styles and genres. When attempting to identify the self we have to do the same thing, namely synthesising all the experiences under one concept, which can be called the self. Hence a relation between a concept and experiences of something other than the concept.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. The True Heavy Metal Fans and the Posers

The terms 'true' and 'poser' are often found used in Heavy Metal (sub)cultures. They are used to distinguish those who are said to be authentic to the culture, from the people who are merely pretending (or trying) to be

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part of the culture, but for one reason or another are unable to live up to the standards. But what are these standards, and why are those, and not other standards, considered to be the standards of the authentic Heavy Metal fan?

The most clear criteria for being authentic, in this sense, seems to be about which relation the subject has to the music - what specific bands or sub-genres are considered good by the individual. I have noticed, throughout my years in the Heavy Metal culture, specifically in Denmark, that it is important to be fans of certain sub-genres, and not others. Death and thrash metal, being the most commonly accepted, while for instance power metal and symphonic black metal are looked down upon. So there is a tendency towards having the extreme, and 'dirty sounding' music as being the 'real thing' within the culture. As exceptions to this rule are the old-school bands, like Metallica and Iron Maiden, which will always stand as core names to the Heavy Metal scene. However, when considering Metallica, there is a tendency to claim that only certain albums from them are good or real in this sense. The reason for this might be, that the other albums got to be quite soft and far from the Heavy Metal tradition, that they themselves was part of creating back in the 1980s. A consequence of this rule is that it might get hard for new, especially younger, fans to earn the label of authenticity, since they to a larger extent will be influenced by the more recent movements in the Heavy Metal scene.

Another term that should be given some attention at this point is 'sell-out'. This term is normally used about bands and musicians who have moved away from their original style, and into the mainstream, and as a consequence are liked more by people outside the (traditional) Heavy Metal culture. So, to a certain extent bands should not become too popular outside of the culture, if they want to avoid the label of sell-outs. If a fan is mainly listening to music of a 'sell-out' band, she is more likely to be considered a poser than a true heavy metal fan. This is a point that may seem strange, since it is hard to see why the popularity of a band should be a bad thing, when it comes to the quality of the music of that band. How can the fact that more people like their music and buy their CDs be in any way be a criteria for bad music or wrong in terms of being true Heavy Metal? The only reasonable answer I can see to this will be that the music changed so much, at a point, so it could no longer be regarded as Heavy Metal, or at least not belonging to the same sub-genre as before. Hence, a change on the level of the mere sound. After all, it is the sound of the music, that determine which style or tradition it belongs to. What else could it be?

What else separates the authentic fans from the posers? One thing that comes to mind at this point is the behaviour. If someone is to live up to the claim of living for the music (without being a musician) they will, in most cases, attempt to show it. This can partly be seen in bars and other environments that are directly marketed towards the Heavy Metal culture,



where the people in attendance most commonly would be debating music. Most Heavy Metal fans will know that if they are among people they do not know, but who seem to be Heavy Metal fans as well, a way to get a conversation going is to start talking about music, since it will be a logical common ground.

A question that comes to mind after all this has been said, is whether it is possible for a so-called poser to become true, or authentic. One thing the true fans will point to is that posers just do not get it. They do not understand the music on the right level. Apparently it seems to be something that cannot be changed, according to some of the true fans. However, on the surface, this contradicts the earlier claims about the self as (completely) constructed. A way to keep it consistent would be to claim that once the self is developed in a certain direction, it is impossible to go back, or change direction. I find that claim to be misguided, since it is obvious that many people are able to change many things about themselves. So it will all come down to person's abilities to change their taste in and understanding of music. If it is impossible to make any changes in these areas, one would not be able to learn the right way in the first place. It would have to be a part of the self from the very start - and this view seems to have too many assumptions that can never be justified. As noted above, I find the whole distinction between true and poser ungrounded, since it seems to be a decision made by certain people in the culture. A kind of self-definition to the extent of saying 'I am authentic, and the others are posers'. What is interesting though, is the self-destructive lifestyle that is associated with the culture, and what can tempt people to live their lives in that fashion. This is where I will claim the distinction between true and poser to be of most use (if any at all).

##### **5. The Will to Destroy the Self**

At the surface it is a contradiction to claim that the self can seek its own destruction (and in the end, elimination). How can something that is, want to end its own existence? So apparently, being self-destructive is absurd by definition. There is more to this matter however, which will become clear when we have realised the necessary distinction between self-destructive behaviour that is directed at the body, and destruction of the mental self. Of course, the complete destruction of one, would lead to the necessary death of the other, but here we are not dealing with suicide, as such. What we are concerned with here, is the self-destructive behaviour that characterise the Heavy Metal culture, which normally does not include suicide in a literal sense. Self-destruction in this sense, will refer to the activities in the moshpit at concerts, the will to listen to music at a volume that can be physically harmful, excessive consuming of alcohol, and in some cases drug-abuse. But how can one justify the will to this type of behaviour? Here I will present one possible answer to that question.

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Normally in modern Western society, we think of the self as being primarily concerned with itself - in other words, egocentric behaviour - which means that what the self wants, is something that is good for it. When we look at the Heavy Metal culture, we see what on the surface looks like absurd behaviour, deliberately leading the self down a self-destructive path. We can try to compare this type of behaviour to that of (extremely) religious people, who are willing to sacrifice themselves for a 'higher cause', than their own well-being. Are the so-called true Heavy Metal fans sacrificing themselves for a cause, or other thing 'larger than life'? Firstly, it is important to know what the subjects themselves say on this matter. Like musicians, who in this case should not be excluded from the so-called true Heavy Metal fans, since they in most cases are fans as well as musicians, fans will often claim that they 'live for the music'. Let us for the moment take this statement to be true - where will that lead us now? The obvious point is, that it will put music as the foundation of the culture, even as the most central thing to the Heavy Metal culture. This does not sound surprising in any way, since we are concerned with a music-culture. But does this mean that the music is the foundation for the self-destructive behaviour that characterises the culture? As far as I can see, there is no real connection between a particular type of music, and certain kinds of behaviour. Some people, who might not be regarded as being true Heavy Metal fans, but who are Heavy Metal fans, nonetheless, will not be regarded as being self-destructive in that way. So to say that the music could be the cause of self-destruction will be wrong.

If we keep our focus of the fans who are thought of as being true or authentic to the Heavy Metal culture, we will at some point come to see how their behaviour, to a large extent is imitation of the famous musicians, from the Heavy Metal scene. When we see the stars performing on stage, we experience a certain kind of behaviour, which typically is a manifestation of the belief 'live hard, die young'. There is no surprise in claiming, that not everything that feels good, is good. When seeing the stars performing on stage we only see a small part of their lives. If we take the live performance to be the main thing, and as the way to be authentic as a fan (by imitating the stars), the lifestyle obviously seems to be self-destructive. Setting music as the foundation of ones life, it can (in a sense) become as important as God is to a Christian: a sort of higher power that one needs to show loyalty towards, by sacrificing one self, by living with the (in some cases) daily hangover. The party on the night before is the ritual where the fan will experience the connection to the higher power so to speak, and this is filled with a lot of things that give immediate pleasure (such as the pleasure of being drunk, forgetting the stressful things of everyday-life, and giving in to what could be said to be the deeper drives of ones existence).

Some questions remain here: Why is it so with Heavy Metal? When people are free to do what they want, and define their lives in unlimited ways,

why would anyone choose this lifestyle? Why choose immediate pleasure with bad consequences, over something that is good long-term? The answer to these questions, I believe, is in the feeling of alienation that most heavy metal fans share on some level. Feeling alienated from the rest of society is common among heavy metal fans. It is a feeling of first being alone, and later finding a community where other people share the same values in life. Most people have a hard time explaining why the self-destructive lifestyle is chosen, other than 'it just feels right'. The pleasure one will get from the activities that characterize Heavy Metal fans, is greater than the pain that follows from it. The reason why may seem irrational, but only to the people who do not share the values of the Heavy Metal culture. This may never be changed, and that could be a good thing for the culture. Heavy Metal lives from the feeling of alienation among the fans. A kind of counter-culture to the mainstream. If Heavy Metal became the mainstream it is likely to change in more areas than just the mere music. The characteristics of the Heavy Metal culture as we know it would either have to be similar to the characteristics of the whole society, or the norms of society would have to adopt the values of Heavy Metal. But in that case, I would expect the people who feel alienated (and are found in the Heavy Metal culture as we know it today) would tend to find or develop more extreme genres of music, and perhaps even more extreme behaviour. To a Heavy Metal fan, it will be a search for a absurd place in life: being special among equals.

The self-destructive behaviour might always be outside of the mainstream, and that is part of what keeps heavy metal alive. But the question about whether people are self-destructive because they listen to Heavy Metal, or they listen to Heavy Metal because they are self-destructive is another matter. However, one thing is clear: Heavy Metal and self-destruction seem to go hand in hand, no matter how the relation between them might be - and to blame peoples self-destructive behaviour on the music they love to hear, still remains unjustified and in my opinion, wrong.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1990, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> T Gracyk, *Listening to Popular Music*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2007, p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 184.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 188 - 190.

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## **The Common Vernacular of Power Relations in Heavy Metal and Christian Fundamentalist Performances**

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### **Abstract**

Wittgenstein's comment that what can be shown cannot be said has a special resonance with visual representations of power in both Heavy Metal and Fundamentalist Christian communities. Performances at metal shows, and performances of 'religious theatre', share an emphasis on violence and destruction. For example, groups like GWAR and Cannibal Corpse feature violent scenes in stage shows and album covers, scenes that depict gory results of unrestrained sexuality that are strikingly like Halloween 'Hell House' show presented by neo-Conservative, Fundamentalist Christian churches in the southeastern United States' 'Bible Belt'. One group may claim to celebrate violence, the other sees violence as a tool to both encourage 'moral' behaviour, and to show that the Christian church is able to 'speak the language' of young people who are fans of metal, gore, and horror. Explicit violence, in each case, signifies power relationships that are in transformation. Historically, medieval morality plays and morality cycles had been used as a pedagogical tool. In the modern-day context of fundamentalist religious education, these Hell House performances seek to exclude outsiders and solidify teen membership in the Christian community. Hell House performances are marketed to the young church members, and are seen as a way to reinvigorate conservative Fundamentalist Christianity. Women and girls routinely take part in, and often organize Hell House events.

In the context of heavy metal, violent performances do not seek to exclude, but provide an outlet for a variety of socially unacceptable or unpopular feelings. In each context there is an apparent, if not actual, empowering of women who are willing to play particular kinds of roles. The use of violence and gore has a value beyond merely shocking the audience, it is arguably a way that some women find their voice, both for fundamentalist Christians and fundamentalist gore metal fans.

**Key Words:** Aesthetics, conservative Christianity, gore metal, politics, power relations, psychoanalysis, religion, religious studies, social theory, violence

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### **1. Religion and Theatre**

Wittgenstein's adage that what can be shown cannot be said has a special relationship to performance, especially performance intended to

invoke images and ideologies. I will illustrate how religious performance, religious theatre, and heavy metal performance share common references to violence. In both contexts, the use of explicit imagery is intended to cement community connections and attract young, new members to the group.<sup>1</sup>

The use of theatre as a pedagogical tool for religion and religious studies is a growth industry. For centuries, mystery cycles and medieval morality plays have been utilized as a pedagogical tool in religious contexts.<sup>2</sup> Interactive, performance-based approaches are also used in a variety of university courses, such as World Religions and Introduction to Religious Studies.<sup>3</sup> In the past five years there have been a growing number of articles in religious studies journals arguing that empathy and somatic experience through religious theatre will heighten our pluralistic cultural understanding. However, there is a double edge: in the case of inter-religious dialogue and religious pluralism, these performances take one shape; in the case of religious education in one particular theology or liturgy they take a very different, less inclusive shape.<sup>4</sup>

Current religious studies pedagogy often involves active performance of prayer and song, and an emphasis on the lived embodied experience of religious practitioners. This is rooted in the idea that physical performance will raise students' consciousness and broaden their appreciation of other religions and other cultures. Historically, dramatic performance has also been used to teach practitioners about their own religion and reinforce their membership in closed religious communities.

Medieval morality plays, for example, were meant to welcome non-believers into the teachings of the Christian faith, whether or not they were able to read. Such plays often involved a character standing as the everyman, struggling with his relationship to God. Other plays involved a retelling of Biblical narratives, featuring actors portraying Cain, Abel, Noah, Abraham, and a variety of other prophetic figures in dialogue with God. This everyman figure provides a way for an audience member to identify with the characters in the play, and in turn to identify with the presented religious ideology.

## **2. Playing for the Everyman, or Localized Interests**

The everyman in mystery cycles and medieval morality plays has continued to be a recurring theme when the plays are restaged and adapted to modern theatre. For example, the Court Theatre group adapted and performed the 1958 edition of the York Cycles mystery plays in 1992. Their staging and costuming included current references, with God dressed as a construction foreman, raised above the crowd on a forklift. All other characters were dressed specifically to provide familiar physical contextualisation of the story of mankind's relationship to God, to welcome the average person into the story, showing the average person's world on stage.<sup>5</sup> In Salzburg, the 'Jedermann' story is performed in the Domplatz square every year.

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Casting the mystery cycle with God and Lucifer as construction workers in Chicago was intended to reach out to the audience, a means of connecting the audience with the story. The staging also sent the message that the events could just as easily happen to a person from modern times as it could happen to someone from the current 90's atmosphere of Chicago.

Similar staging was used in morality plays during the Spanish Civil War, as discussed by James McCarthy in his article 'Drama, Religion and Republicanism' from *Contemporary Theatre Review*.<sup>6</sup> In this context, the everyman stood as an exemplar for young men to follow as they joined the war effort. The performances sent the message that everyone was welcome to join the fight, that everyone would be welcomed into the same brotherhood.

In terms of the question of audience, both the medieval morality plays and their modern day reproductions are meant to welcome both members and non-members of the Christian church. The stories can be understood metaphorically (as the serpent representing evil, the apple representing temptation) or as an open invitation to the everyman - providing examples of human beings engaged in day to day life communicating with God.

The emphasis on the everyman brings about a certain tension in the political motivations of theatre used to teach ideologies and religion. Depending on the specific outcomes of the morality play, the everyman may be welcomed to salvation, usually after an experiential reminder of the unavoidable depravity of human nature, or the dependence on grace for righteousness and redemption.<sup>7</sup>

Arguably, the everyman was a necessary device for illustrating mankind's moral education - an Aristotelian exemplar of virtuous character development, the individual battling with drives and desires that could drag one down into depravity. The tri-partite soul of the ancient Greek philosophers still instantiates in the everyman figures of religious performance. The rational soul seeks to control the emotional, appetitive soul; and in the process the everyman seeks redemption and salvation. This process involving the soul of the everyman on the path to redemption is reflected in the notion of the Trinity. One example of the everyman and the Trinity in current Christian writing is the book *The Shack*, which will soon be made into a film.

In *The Shack*, a man named Mack, grieving over the murder of his daughter, is called by God to the scene of the crime. There he meets—there is no delicate way of putting this—the Trinity. The Father is an African-American woman named Papa who likes to cook. Jesus is a Jewish man wearing a carpenter's belt. The Holy Spirit is an elusive Asian woman named Sarayu. Together, over a long



weekend, these characters force Mack to face his anger and his emptiness. Mack eats delicious feasts; with Jesus, he takes a walk on the water. Finally, God convinces Mack of his deep and everlasting love. 'I don't create institutions,' says Jesus in *The Shack*. 'Never have, never will.'

Some orthodox Christians are calling *The Shack* heresy. On his radio program in April, Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said it was 'subversive' and 'incoherent'. Concerned that *The Shack* might adversely influence readers, LifeWay Christian Stores, the Southern Baptist Convention's bookstore chain, in June pulled *The Shack* off shelves to review its theology. Two weeks later the books were for sale again, this time with a warning label that says READ WITH DISCRETION. A LifeWay spokeswoman says she expects *The Shack* to be high on its best-seller list for August.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. **Like A Brat Out of Hell (House)**

The negative reception of *The Shack* in conservative Christian communities reflects a split between two preferred types of religious performance. In the southeastern United States, the struggle for morality plays out with an extra emphasis on neoconservative political agendas. Instead of medieval morality plays, there are 'Hell House' performances, most notably in the area south of the Mason-Dixon line known as the Bible Belt. Hell House performances tell the stories of individuals who have fallen from grace, using direct terms and explicit visual effects, with no metaphor and no attempt to portray a time and place other than the 'here and now.' The fallen individuals have all made choices that relate to political issues that are central to neoconservative politics. A Hell House performance might feature a teenage girl in an abortion clinic, covered with blood; or a car accident caused by teenagers who drank and drove. Since the Columbine High School shootings, many Hell House performances feature loner high school students engaged in violence in their high schools. Those playing the shooter will usually be costumed in clothing that references media coverage of high school shootings, for example long black trench coats. An innocent victim character might be asked if she believes in God before she is shot.

Central to each performance is the realistic portrayal of blood and violence, and lots of it. The staging looks like it would work for an album cover of a gore metal band, or a scene from a horror movie. Hell Houses are traditionally understood to have a limited audience because they are usually advertised to the young, teenage members of the particular church congregation that arranged the event. The purpose is not to bring new

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Christians into the fold, but to control the behaviour of the young who are already at least nominally members of the congregation.<sup>9</sup>

The Hell House performances are also specifically offered as an entertainment, with a two-fold purpose: the Hell House is meant to show that the church can entertain in a way that is as current and pop-culture savvy as the film and music industries, i.e., that the church is keeping up to date with Hollywood, and to show that the church can compete with other available entertainments, i.e., 'if we can get them out of the concerts we can strengthen their Christian resolve'.

As such, the Hell House is claimed to have a special role in moral education of the young members of a church, providing a visceral experience that allegedly helps teenagers to moderate their behaviour from the beginning, a visual representation of vices. It is also central to the Hell House performance that the participants cannot be saved or achieve grace after they give in to vice - the girl having an abortion, or the drunk driver are lost to the fires of hell by the end of the performance and never find their way back. Thus the Hell House emphasises that one should not do these things in the first place, that moderating one's drives and desires from the beginning can ensure that one does not fall from grace at all.

In the article 'Modern Morality Plays,' Karen Roebuck holds that the current hell house performances involve indoctrinating prejudice and simplistic theology/ideology. The Christian church is bifurcated into communities that can be described as welcoming and liberal; or insular, closed off, and conservative. These two types of communities inform which aspects of Christianity are put forward to the audience. The Old Testament notion of a judgmental and vengeful God fits well with the modern hell house, in which an eye for an eye becomes a damned soul for an abortion. In contrast, the everyman of the medieval morality plays experiences the welcoming messages of the New Testament and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The medieval morality play emphasises the possibility of spiritual uplift and escape from depravity; not hell, damnation and punishment. The essential moment of this 'welcoming Christianity' would include the figure of the thief on the cross next to Christ asking if he would be allowed in to the Kingdom of Heaven also. The response Jesus gives ('...today you will be with me in paradise...') is one of inclusion, even for the fallen. These moments of redemption are not included in hell house performances. The hell house emphasis on damnation and punishment of the wicked would trump any message of possible salvation and redemption.<sup>10</sup>

It seems that conservative Christians are consciously choosing the shift from welcoming inclusive performances of mystery plays to the less welcoming and more violent hell house performances. They make the counterargument that it is a mistake to discuss and emphasize medieval morality plays such as the York cycle mysteries and their modern day re-

adaptations. The community building, they argue, has simply taken a different form of fellowship activity, and that there is no less community building among Christians, it is simply packaged differently. However, this counterargument does not hold for all Christian communities in the United States. There, the community of the faithful may have changed and bifurcated with an increasingly vocal neo-conservative side that wants to see judgment, damnation, and a renewal of what they perceive as Christian values. This conservatism seems to have divested itself from the portrayal of the Church as a welcoming family, and prefers to retain Calvinist conceptions of predestination into the 'elect,' rather than the possibility of moral education through positive exemplars. It appears to be a classic case of all-or-nothing: either one learns not to have an abortion by seeing a vivid and gory hell house depiction of an abortion, or, one learns not to have an abortion through 'abstinence-based sex education' and little discussion of abortion and birth control at all.

The rise of Hell House performance as ideological tool has happened concurrently with neo-conservative fundamentalists self-definition as victims. This particular notion that Christians are victimized in the current US political context rests on the assumption that the 'founding fathers' were Christians who shared their political and ethical views, and that today's Christians have been ignored by the United States emphasis on religious freedom, and that the current Christian must struggle to re-place God as the centre of United States politics. The hell house not only teaches specific fundamentalist Christian beliefs, it also teaches a specific neo-conservative political ideology.

#### **4. Edification and Education vs. Judgment and Warning**

The neo-conservative Christian notion of victimization and its ideological hell house performances can be analyzed through the framework of Bahktin's concept of 'carnival.' Bahktin describes carnival as a context in which individual voices, as well as group ideologies, are heard and interact with each other. But more importantly, carnival implies that the power relationships between voices and ideologies are fluid. This fluidity creates moments of power reversal. A classic example of a power reversal in the carnival setting is Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Louisiana. Residents of the city who are typically categorized as members of lower economic status dress as kings and queens for the Mardi Gras celebrations. In philosophy, these reversals of power can be compared to Hegel's inverted world, and the relationship of master and servant, reversing as the master realizes that he or she is profoundly dependent upon the servant. In the case of Bahktin's carnival, the servant is also highly aware of the dependence of the master, and celebrates or revels in the knowledge that the master would be helpless without the servant.

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A situation similar to the carnival is now apparent among neo-conservative Christians, as they engage in specific types of religious performances. In the postmodern context, Christians often cast themselves as displaced victims - witness rhetoric in the media about the 'founding fathers' of the United States allegedly upholding Judeo-Christian values. The claim is made that America must return to its original Christian values. The neo-conservative Christian thus inscribes their group as the subverting leaders in a Bahktinian carnival, celebrating victory over pluralist religious culture. As a result, they embrace the idea that postmodern drama in the church need not be done for building community; it can be done simply as entertainment for a small group who already think alike. In the case of hell houses, the intention might be to limit specific behaviours of young people while at the same time providing them with entertainment that is commensurate with horror and violence.

The conservative Christian theatre prefers to use direct moral claims as opposed to metaphor. Conservatives feel a distrust of metaphor, while the more 'open' liberal Christian theatre uses metaphor and allegory (akin to the parables of Jesus and the sermon on the mount) rather than specific labelling of individual characters' morality. This narrative of 'straight talk' and 'plain talk' parallels phrases used by conservative political candidates during election season. The concern seems to be that metaphor is a device of the elitists and that 'real' people say what they mean and mean what they say. Rather than be burdened by interpretation and metaphor, it seems that the average person would rather be engaged with explicit stories of bad behaviour, complete with bloody portrayals of evil acts.

##### **5. The Commonality with Heavy Metal Performance**

Performances at metal shows, and performances of 'religious theatre', share an emphasis on violence and destruction. For example, groups like GWAR (God What an Awful Racket) and Cannibal Corpse feature violent scenes in stage shows and album covers, scenes that depict gory results of unrestrained sexuality that are strikingly like Halloween 'Hell House' show presented by neo-Conservative, Fundamentalist Christian churches in the southeastern 'Bible Belt'. One group may claim to celebrate violence, the other sees violence as a tool to both encourage 'moral' behaviour, and to show that the Christian church is able to 'speak the language' of young people who are fans of metal, gore, and horror.

Explicit violence, in each case, signifies power relationships that are in transformation: women and girls routinely take part in, and often organise Hell House events. Teenage girls involved in the pro-life movement often look forward to playing a girl suffering the after effects of an abortion, complete with fake blood and screams worthy of gore metal imagery. The apparent sexism if of little concern: note the female figures in passive

positions, with legs spread. Acting out violent scenes is providing a type of empowerment for the young women who take part in the Hell House, as they take part in and conquer a hyper-reality.

In the context of heavy metal, violent performances do not seek to exclude, but provide an outlet for a variety of socially unacceptable or unpopular feelings. There is a clear emphasis on marketing that which will be popular with teenage and young adult fans - to a certain extent, gore and blood *sells*, explicit violence *sells*. Bands using violence also emphasize the idea that these are rituals that fans are a part of, something special that only those who buy tickets to the show can experience. The irony is that the same ritualized horror experience is also used in conservative Christian circles to cement membership in a religious community during Hell House performances.

Perhaps to some extent young adults fulfil a psychological need for an outlet or a catharsis during these performances. Psychologists have expressed a variety of opinions on the issue; with many commentators since the high school shootings at Columbine making an inference that violent music and violent behaviour are connected, especially among teenage males. The theme of music and violence was developed in a play that debuted this autumn at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre in London, entitled 'Punk Rock.'<sup>11</sup> On the other side of the debate, psychologists have argued for the therapeutic value of emotional musical performance for adolescent males experiencing social isolation.<sup>12</sup> This perspective upholds the benefits of catharsis in response to 'safe violence' as part of a scripted performance, such as the live stage shows of gore metal bands like GWAR. For example, some would argue that US high school shooters, such as Kip Kinkel, would benefit from expression through music providing outlets for anger, such as Mahler; an important counter-argument to the common media assumption that the violent music may cause violent acts.

The primary examples in the literature tend to be young men, but the notion of violent performance having potential benefits can also be applied to women. In the book *Qualitative Research and Practice*, the chapter 'Hard and Heavy-Gender and Power in a Heavy Metal Music Subculture' by Leigh Krenske and Jim McKay, provides an ethnographic and autobiographical analysis of a heavy metal club and its denizens. It illustrates how female heavy metal fans negotiate power relationships and define themselves, asserting themselves into an atmosphere of (controlled) male aggression, and symbolic oppression of females.<sup>13</sup> The most challenging situations involve women as performers, and the quest to be taken seriously as a performer. But this may not be specific to the metal context; it may be a part of the ethos of musicianship present among many professional musicians (having the right skill level, 'the chops'.)

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In each context there is an apparent, if not actual, empowering of women who are willing to play particular kinds of roles. The use of violence and gore has a value beyond merely shocking the audience, it is arguably a way that some women find their voice, both for fundamentalist Christians and fundamentalist gore metal fans.

#### 6. Summary and Conclusion

In sum, Christian theatre performance, taken broadly, negotiated the difference between 'everyman' theatre (meant to welcome newcomers) and localized performances meant to reinforce specific religious communities. The reaction of the Christian communities in the United States became bifurcated along political lines, with some communities emphasizing a theory of conservative Christian political issues, and other Christian communities opening to a wider and more diverse population base. The conservative Christian performances emphasized direct, even explicitly violent stories, and cautionary tales. The welcoming Christian communities instead reinvigorated the use of metaphor and allegory, dating back to the New Testament and medieval morality plays.<sup>14</sup> Given the shift in the neo-conservative political atmosphere of modern day Christianity, perhaps it should come as no surprise that the popular vernacular of violent films, video games, and heavy metal/gore metal performance has taken on a new significance in the recruitment strategies of conservative Christian communities. For them, the gore featured in heavy metal performance is used to illustrate what can happen if one strays from the fold and engages in immoral behaviour, while simultaneously welcoming young members to the Christian community. For metal audiences, the violence featured during a performance is also a form of welcoming and uniting fans of the music, while at the same time, mocking conservatives who would be afraid of the performance. The politics of membership in each case are rich with irony.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In using performances to address specific issues of religion, pedagogy and the transmission of ideologies, I take inspiration from the work of Hannah Arendt on irony and comedy and its relation to violence. For example, see H. Arendt, *On Violence*, Harvest Books, New York, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> J McCarthy, 'Drama, Religion and Republicanism, Theatrical Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War'. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 7(2), 1998, pp 47-59.

<sup>3</sup> G Baldwin, 'From Sole Learning to Soul Learning'. *Teaching Theology and Religion*, vol. 9(3), 2006, pp 165-174, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> L Collins-Hughes, 'Articles of Faith: Can Conservative Christianity Find Expression on the Stage?'. *American Theatre*, Sept. 2006.

<sup>5</sup> B Sahlins and N Rudall, *The Mysteries: Creation. A New Adaptation by Bernard Sahlins of the Medieval Mystery Play, The Plays for Performance Series*, Ivan R. Dee Publishers, Chicago, 1992, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Spanish Civil War morality plays also discussed in J McCarthy, 'Drama, Religion and Republicanism, Theatrical Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War'. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 7(2), 1998, pp 47-59.

<sup>7</sup> This is a distinction frequently addressed in terms of Calvinism and Arminianism, which hold very different conceptions of salvation, and its relation to grace and depravity.

<sup>8</sup> L Miller, 'A Close Encounter With God: In 'The Shack', God is an African-American woman who likes to cook. Jesus is a Jewish man with a carpenter's belt'. *Newsweek*, 8 September, 2008, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Pastor Keenan Roberts, co-founder of The New Destiny Christian Center in Colorado, notes 'Hell House' visitors are escorted through a series of graphic scenes which illustrate the agonizing results of such sinful behavior as gay marriage, abortion, and dancing at raves. The intent, according to Pastor Keenan's website, is 'to shake your city with the most in-your-face, high-flyin', no denyin', death-defyin', Satan-be-cryin', keep-ya-from-fryin', theatrical stylin', no holds barred, cutting-edge evangelism tool of the new millennium!'

<[http://gothamist.com/2006/10/02/hell\\_house\\_1.php](http://gothamist.com/2006/10/02/hell_house_1.php)>, accessed 16 June 2009.

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of the modern liberal critique of current morality plays such as hell houses and judgment houses, see K Roebuck, 'Modern Morality Plays'. *US News and World Report*, vol. 125(17), 1998, p55.

<sup>11</sup> K Fricker, 'Punk Rock Review'. *Daily Variety*, 11 September, 2009, pp. 6, 34.

<sup>12</sup> F Lachmann, 'Violations of Expectation in Creativity and Perversion'. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, Vol. 26(3), 2006, pp. 362-385.

<sup>13</sup> L Krenske and J McKay, 'Hard and Heavy-Gender and Power in a Heavy Metal Music Subculture', in *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, S. Meriam (ed), Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Company, San Francisco, CA, 2002, pp. 262-282.

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## **PART II**

### **Nationalities and Warriors**



# **Scandinavian Metal Attack: The Power of Northern Europe in Extreme Metal**

*Imke von Helden*

## **Abstract**

The powerful and globally acknowledged metal scene of Scandinavia - or the North, to include Finland - has been growing steadily ever since the early days of extreme metal in the 1980s. There are numerous examples of Northern influence within the metal scene, ranging from German and Russian bands that write their lyrics in Norwegian and Swedish to whole websites on Nordic metal music<sup>1</sup> and an all-metal-fan-group of Italian students who attend a Norwegian language course because its *the* black metal language. This paper aims to show that national and even local identities play a vital role in the globalised music culture of heavy metal. Exemplarily, it investigates the impact Scandinavian or Nordic metal bands made during the early days of extreme metal, and follows the history of extreme metal subgenres that deal primarily with aspects of Northern identity. The essay leads from Bathory to black and death metal and from there to the smaller subgenres of Viking and pagan metal. It is suggested that the influence does not only exist in terms of music, but also in terms of topics, culture and the extent to which national origin is relevant for Nordic metal regarding music and promotion.

**Key words:** Amorphis, Bathory, Enslaved, globalisation, identity, Northern Europe, pagan metal, Viking metal.

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## **1. Scandinavian Metal Attack**

Worldwide, the heavy metal movement has known groundbreaking and seminal waves. They included the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, the Bay Area thrash metal explosion and the first wave of black metal. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw two subgenre developments in countries that were known musically for producing mainstream bands like Europe or ABBA; welfare states that year after year attract hundreds of thousands of tourists and that are famous for children's literature like *Pippi Longstocking*<sup>2</sup> or *Karius and Bactus*<sup>3</sup>. 'Nordic Metal' today, especially when it comes to Viking and pagan metal, is a trademark and a bestseller.

The ball started rolling in 1984, when Tyfon Grammofon, a Swedish label, released the compilation *Scandinavian Metal Attack*, featuring bands from Sweden and Finland.<sup>4</sup> Among them were Bathory, hitherto completely unheard of. However, *Scandinavian Metal Attack* brought them into the ranks

of highly successful metal bands and marked the start of the Scandinavian metal scene's success all over the world. Bathory, along with the already well-known Venom from the UK, thus became one of the precursors of the Norwegian black metal movement. In their beginnings, Bathory followed their models Venom regarding music, lyrics and cover artwork, especially on their first three albums.<sup>5</sup> However, in 1988, they discovered Scandinavian culture for their lyrics and imagery and with *Blood Fire Death*<sup>6</sup> laid the foundation for various scenic movements that are famous worldwide even today, more than 20 years later. The famous trilogy was completed by the albums *Hammerheart*<sup>7</sup> and *Twilight of the Gods*<sup>8</sup> that, like their predecessor, dealt with the Scandinavian countries' cultural legacy. Apart from still blasphemous contents, the lyrics depict Northern landscapes and battles, creating a dark and tense atmosphere, for example in 'Oden's Ride over Nordland'<sup>9</sup>. The way of living in the Viking Age including fighting, raids and death rituals, and first references to Norse mythology carried the metaler off to long lost times. The imagery on these three albums changed dramatically from satanic elements to romantic oil paintings, often depicting martial scenes of the Viking age as cover artworks. The imagery also included iconography of fascism and National Socialism, like the sun wheel on *Hammerheart*, originally in black, white and red - the Nazi colours.<sup>10</sup> The music changed 'from frenzied cacophony to orchestrated, melodic bombast'<sup>11</sup> and the music arrangements became more epic: the songs were noticeably orchestrated similarly to classical music, and the vocals were understandable, often accompanied by chanted choral backdrops.

While bands like Mayhem, Emperor and Darkthrone further developed the genre of black metal to more extreme and brutal dimensions both sonically and lyrically, they influenced fellow bands, especially in Norway. Elements of classical music in terms of arrangements came into the genre, developing into symphonic black metal. From this point on, the metal scenes in the Nordic countries developed rapidly. Meanwhile, the death metal scene in Sweden that produced internationally highly successful acts like Entombed, Dismember and Hypocrisy came into being. In Finland, bands like Amorphis, Children of Bodom and Sentenced came into being.

It was in these countries that both national and local cultural roots moved into artists' focus. From black metal, Viking metal arose, in the form of its progenitors Enslaved and Einherjer from Norway. Both were among the first metal bands to introduce lyrics in their native language, Norwegian. Enslaved produced an entire album in the language of the Eddas, Old Norse.<sup>12</sup> Though most Viking metal bands have a black metal background, Viking metal is defined by topics rather than music. That is why death metal bands like Amon Amarth and Unleashed are often included in the league of Viking metal bands.

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Thematically as well as in terms of music, pagan metal is more varied than Viking metal. The lyrics cover a variety of subjects from nature to racist ideas. References to the Eddas or mythology, among other elements, play a certain role in pagan metal, too. Highly influenced by bands like Skyklad from the UK, that worked predominantly with elements of folk music in metal, Finnish bands like Korpiklaani, Finntroll or Ensiferum employed elements from their traditional music, such as Yoik or Humpapa, and had a formative role in the Viking metal genre.

## 2. Vikings, Humpapa, Party-Trolls: Aspects of Cultural Identity

How do Nordic musicians deal with their culture in their lyrics? What do they regard as important? What roles do common cultural subjects like history, literature or even the northern European climate zone play? As already indicated, among the main ingredients in Viking and pagan metal lyrics and imagery are the following: untamed nature and the strength needed to survive in it; the Vikings and masculinity; fairytales of trolls and other creatures; alcohol (especially mead and vodka); Pagan/Heathen religions or rituals; and epic music, fitting the landscape. A closer look at some selected examples shows that the topics - still strongly influenced by the sonic dimension of "Satanic" bands - changed from dark and occult lyrics to Vikings and a Heathen past. As Trafford and Pluskowski put it:

[...] and, in the 1990s, many other bands and fans began to turn away from Satan and place their faith in the Vikings, and more specifically in Oðin, as the foremost champions of opposition to Christianity."<sup>13</sup>

Literature from the past is often utilised in pagan and Viking metal in equal measure. In the majority of cases, the Eddas and other material from Old Norse mythology are employed. In Finland, Amorphis employ ideas and images from the national epos *Kalevala*<sup>14</sup> and *Kanteletar*<sup>15</sup> in their lyrics. Finntroll, on the other hand, help themselves to fairytale characters, mostly trolls, and insert sounds from the forest into their music.<sup>16</sup>

Often, the bands' native languages are used, sometimes even Old Norse. One of the earliest Viking metal bands is Enslaved from Haugesund, Norway. Their first album, *Vikingligr Veldi*<sup>17</sup>, concentrates entirely on Old Norse mythology and kick started the Scandinavian Viking metal scene like no other band. The Old Norse lyrics include descriptions of Old Norse gods as well as attributes and stories connected with them; for example the lyrics of 'Heimdallr' that contain the most important characteristics of the homonymous Æsir god. There are also extensive descriptions of nature, such as the characteristic shore and the rough climate. Because of the newly upcoming trend of uncritically applying mythology in Viking and pagan

metal lyrics, the band members dissociate themselves from the term and accuse other bands of using slogans in a stereotypical way or glorifying the past. Enslaved's singer Ivar Bjørnson states that his interest in his ancestral roots was aroused by his seeing himself in the wider context of the world as a whole and helps to understand other cultures instead of fearing or rejecting them.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the albums since *Monument*<sup>19</sup> - after 2001 - are philosophical rather than referencing mythology all over again. Other bands with mythology-linked lyrics are the aforementioned Einherjer and Finland's Moonsorrow.

Among the first things that come to mind when thinking of countries like Norway or Sweden are the Vikings. Connected with the Vikings is their history and especially, since it is heavy metal after all - Viking warfare, strength and freedom. Self-evidently, there are numerous examples of the Viking topic in Viking metal. Einherjer, also from Norway, deal with their cultural heritage in a similar way to Enslaved. They also deal with mythology, but focus more on sagas and Viking history in that they tell what they call 'old stories'<sup>20</sup>. However, their main aim is to sound 'as Norwegian as [they] can'<sup>21</sup>. Some songs are in Norwegian. Moonsorrow from Finland take the same line: their mostly Finnish lyrics deal with Old Norse mythology, but also with traditions and legends and of course the Christians taking over.

There is a certain tendency against Christianity as the destroyer of the Heathen religions in Northern Europe. This attitude might be comprehensible since most bands come from black metal. However, there is a further dimension to that: the Pagan religions - though an umbrella term for various forms of belief - share among them a pronounced reverence for nature, which can also be said of pagan metal. In pagan metal, the term is used quite vaguely in that it does not always have a connection to any religion at all - it might simply mean that the band or fan loves nature and metal or plays with names from mythology like Odin or Thor. It might as well depict a certain affinity towards a solitary existence far away from civilisation or simply show an aversion against the forces of Christianity. After all, it is most certainly utilised as a marketing strategy. Nevertheless, Enslaved, like many of their colleagues, underline that Viking and pagan metal for them does not have any religious connotations and that heathenism is not some kind of substitute for Satanism.<sup>22</sup> All in all, Paganism only seems to provide certain ideas and cannot be viewed as religion-inspiring, like having religious groups. Nature, however, is a very important aspect that unites nearly all Nordic bands.

Within the sonic dimension, there are only few authentic examples of applying traditional melodies. Most bands admit that they do not use authentic folk melodies. Frode of Einherjer states that they create melodies that 'feel' Norwegian for them instead of looking into old song books. He

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explains the feasibility of this procedure with the fact that most people have the melodies of their country in the back of their heads, ready to come out, whether consciously or unconsciously.<sup>23</sup> Týr from the Faroese Islands - who thematically resemble Enslaved or Moonsorrow - on the other hand, are one of the few that actually include traditional music (and texts), in their case Faroese ballads, in their song writing.

There are two recently very popular bands of Finnish origin that add new dimensions to pagan metal: Korpiklaani (Finnish for “Clan of the Forest”) and Finntroll. Shamans and the indigenous Sami people who mainly live in the North of Finland, Norway and Sweden and the Kola peninsula of Russia with their reindeer herds are often the subject to Korpiklaani’s lyrics. The band explains word concepts peculiar to the Sami or the Finnish languages they use in their songs in the album booklets. Another important aspect in their lyrics is celebration in terms of chants and alcohol (mead, vodka).<sup>24</sup> Maybe it is also a little thirst for adventure that motivates them, as in the ‘Hunting Song’. Starting out as a folk band under the name of Shaman, the band added metal to their music and Korpiklaani was born. Striking are Korpiklaani’s and Finntroll’s catchy music styles - Finntroll’s style is dubbed *Trollish metal* - that combines death, black and power metal elements with traditional music components like *Humppa*<sup>25</sup> or *Yoik*<sup>26</sup> of the Sami. Their music combines metal with traditional instruments like the accordion and flutes. The languages used in the lyrics are English and Swedish, since the former’s singer and main songwriter belongs to the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. The lyrics nearly exclusively deal with trolls in various situations and of course their habit of eating good Christians. What certainly unites these bands is love for their country and criticism of contemporary politics and society.

### 3. Conclusion

Today, pagan and Viking metal are extremely popular not only in Europe, but also in the US, producing festivals like the *Paganfest* that is about to take place for the second year. There are also a number of smaller festivals specialising in these subgenres like the *Ragnarök* in Germany (in its sixth year), the *Fimbul Festival* and *Celtic Rock*, all of them in Germany, as well as recording samplers such as *Metalmessage “V”*. Thus, apart from the second wave of black metal and Swedish death metal, the Northern European countries are famous for a third metal wave - that of Viking and pagan metal. Of course, none of these bands invented the folk-metal-combination. There were examples far earlier, like Britain’s Led Zeppelin, the ‘Champions of the furry loincloth’<sup>27</sup>, Brazil’s Sepultura, and the USA’s Manowar, as well as the aforementioned Skyklad. But still, none of them had the same impact that the Nordic bands had. In other words, Viking and pagan metal provide a new space to grapple and identify with one’s own nationality. Playing with



identity and sometimes even constructing hybrid identities (like Finnish Ensiferum who perform in Scottish kilts and war paint, but use Finnish subjects in their lyrics) has become the subject - be it conscious or unconscious - of many bands. Sometimes, bands are even labelled ambassador of their country<sup>28</sup> for bringing national literature to other countries as in the case of bands like Amorphis or Enslaved.

The 'Nordic wave' is being further developed today outside Scandinavia or the North, for example in countries like Germany<sup>29</sup>, Switzerland<sup>30</sup>, Russia<sup>31</sup> and Lithuania<sup>32</sup>. The influence is especially obvious in Germany, where dealing with nationality or national identity is still a difficult subject. Of course, there are still quite a lot of problems, for example with the Antifa or BIFFF, the Berlin centre for fascism research who try to stop concerts by pagan bands and collect hints of racism. They stepped into the consciousness and provoked the protest of the metal scene by publishing an article on a concert of the Paganfest in a leftist venue in Berlin<sup>33</sup> and moving Týr and Moonsorrow to stating they were not politically active or even racist bands. There is still discordance among fans as well as critics on what Viking and pagan metal are all about: both might contribute positively to a cultural examination of one's own or even others' national history and thus play a vital part in identity construction in a globalised world. But they can also reach extremes that both musicians and fans should be aware of.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Metal from Finland, viewed on 29 September 09 <<http://www.metalfromfinland.com>>.

<sup>2</sup> A Lindgren, *Pippi Longstocking*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1945.

<sup>3</sup> T Egner, *Karius and Bactus*, Skandisk Publications, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Apart from Bathory, the compilation featured the following bands: Oz, Trash, Spitfire and Zero Nine.

<sup>5</sup> Bathory, *Bathory* (1984), *The Return* (1985) and *Under the Sign of the Black Mark* (1986).

<sup>6</sup> Bathory, *Blood Fire Death*, Black Mark, Sweden, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Bathory, *Hammerheart*, Noise, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Bathory, *Twilight of the Gods*, Black Mark, Sweden, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Bathory, *Blood Fire Death*, Black Mark, Sweden, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> The colours were later changed in favour of gold because of too much controversy.

<sup>11</sup> cf. M Moynihan & D Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos. The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*, Feral House, Los Angeles, 2003, p.21.

<sup>12</sup> Enslaved, *Vikinglig Veldi*, Moonfog Productions, Norway, 1993.

- <sup>13</sup> S Trafford & A Pluskowski, 'Antichrist Superstars. The Vikings in Hard Rock and Heavy Metal', in D W Marshall (ed), *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, McFarland, London, 2007, p.63.
- <sup>14</sup> The Kalevala contains verses on Finnish mythology collected by Elias Lönnrot during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (from oral tradition).
- <sup>15</sup> *Kanteletar* is a 19<sup>th</sup> century collection of songs and ballads (collected by Elias Lönnrot). The *Kantele* is a Finnish plucked string instrument.
- <sup>16</sup> Finntroll, *Visor om Slutet* (2006) or *Jaktens Tid* (2001).
- <sup>17</sup> Enslaved, *Vikingligr Veldi*, Moonfog Productions, Norway, 1993.
- <sup>18</sup> C Wachter, 'Enslaved. Jenseits von Vergangenheit und Zukunft', *Pagan Fire - The Legacy Chronicles*, A Ertner, P Knittel and M Vojvoda (eds), Devil Inc. Presseverlag, Saarbrücken, 04/2007, pp.58-59.
- <sup>19</sup> Enslaved, *Monumentation*, Osmose, 2001.
- <sup>20</sup> I von Helden, *Interview with Frode Glesnes and Gerhard Storesund at Ragnarök festival*, Germany, 18 April 2008.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> C Wachter, 'Enslaved - Jenseits von Vergangenheit und Zukunft', *Pagan Fire - The Legacy Chronicles*, A Ertner, P Knittel and M Vojvoda (eds), Devil Inc. Presseverlag, Saarbrücken, 04/2007, p.58f.
- <sup>23</sup> von Helden, *op.cit.*
- <sup>24</sup> Korpiklaani dedicated a whole album to party (Finnish *Karkelo*).
- <sup>25</sup> In sonic terms, a Finnish variant on Foxtrot, and a dance.
- <sup>26</sup> A guttural singing method, used to depict animals or phenomena of nature (e.g. wind).
- <sup>27</sup> Trafford & Pluskowski, *op.cit.*, p.61.
- <sup>28</sup> T Wanzek 'Pagan Metal - Neue Musik fuer alte Goetter?', *Pagan Fire - The Legacy Chronicles*, A Ertner, P Knittel and M Vojvoda (eds), Devil Inc. Presseverlag, Saarbrücken, 04/2007, pp.8-9.
- <sup>29</sup> Wolfchant, *Determined Damnation*, Massacre, 2009.
- <sup>30</sup> Eluveitie, *Vên*, Season of Mist, 2008.
- <sup>31</sup> Arkona, *Ot Serdca K Nebu*, Napalm, 2008.
- <sup>32</sup> Obtest, *Gyvybes Medis*, Osmose, 2008.
- <sup>33</sup> Unknown author, 'Rechtes Neuheiden-Festival mit Nazi-Runen im "SO 36"', viewed 4 Oct. 2009 <<http://www.biff-berlin.de/aktuell72.html>>.

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Wolfchant, *Determined Damnation*. Massacre, 2009.

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# **White Power, Black Metal and Me: Reflections on Composing the Nation**

*Caroline Lucas*

## **Abstract**

A visual analysis of English black metal (EBM) reveals a mythologised imagining of the nation. This imagery pervades EBM, and the surrounding narratives of ancient tribal history authenticate and affirm notions of a fixed ethnicity. 'White' is asserted as the naturalised national identity and domination is authenticated by narratives of 'origin' based on the ancient past. The invention and mythologisation of tradition is based upon an essentialist notion of national heritage, which has the potential to legitimise an idealised exclusionary ethnic identity. As such, the political positioning of EBM bands is highly contested, both amongst the musicians and the fans; this has led to the categorisation of some as examples of National Socialist Black Metal. This paper will reflect upon a collaborative project involving EBM musicians, which was undertaken as part of my practise-led research into the construction of English identities in composition. This project reframed EBM within the context of a multi-media performance. It explored the ambiguous elements of EBM (interchangeable notions of English/British/Northern European identities), and the seemingly contradictory influences present in the music (e.g., the assertion of whiteness through a style rooted in black music, and the influence of medieval (church) music alongside pagan elements). This study will examine the idea of power in metal, and the potential for applying Foucauldian theory as a framework for exploring power relations within composition. This will facilitate a discussion of the combination of myth-making and power, which authenticates and empowers an overtly masculine 'white' identity in EBM.

**Key Words:** English black metal, Englishness, ethnicity, identity, mythology, nation, whiteness.

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## **1. Introduction**

'Listening to music is listening to all noise, reali[s]ing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political'.<sup>1</sup> This quote from Jacques Attali's text *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* reminds us of the political implications of cultural production. Popular music has a long history of being used as a platform for

the expression of political views and metal's provocative aesthetic has attracted and fostered some ideas positioned at the extreme end of the scale.

This paper will reflect upon a collaborative project involving English black metal musicians, which grew out of my research into the visual construction and mythologisation of nation in the imagery of English black metal (henceforth EBM). This was undertaken as part of my practise-led doctoral research into the construction of national, specifically English, identities in composition. Markers of national identity are often consciously constructed and employed to signify specific ideologies imposed upon, and asserted within conceptualisations of collective identity. These symbols become shrouded in layers of mythology, which are composed to authenticate and legitimise the objects. These narratives often refer to ancient history and sometimes allude to essentialised concepts of tribe or ethnicity. This paper will attempt to explore the combination of myth-making and power, which authenticates and empowers an overtly 'white' (and also masculine) identity in EBM. This study will examine the myths created by EBM bands and discuss how they could be perceived as encoding or endorsing a nationalist ideology. This will be contextualised with a discussion of the role of power and transgression within black metal, as well as the suggestion that Foucauldian theory could be applied as a framework for exploring power relations within a musical composition.

## 2. 'Pat snapped De wylde'

This collaborative project involved working creatively with the guitarist, bass guitarist and drummer from the EBM band Winterfylleth, this entailed developing music to be included within a larger work. 'Pat snapped De wylde' was written for electric guitar, bass guitar and drum kit (played by members of Winterfylleth) plus 2 voices, tapes, loop pedal and accompanied by visuals from a slide projector. In performance, the ensemble is spatialised and organised into three groups, with the guitars and drums arranged as one element, the voices and loop pedal as another and the tape part as the third.

The piece attempts to explore the power relations within musical performance, internally within each group of musicians and externally in association to each other, as well as ideas of power within black metal. I also hoped to examine the ambiguities present in conceptions of national identity, as opposed to essentialised notions of national origin. For example, the tape parts feature lo-fi recordings from domestic and public situations, exploring the idea of using the everyday to make sense of the present, as opposed to concepts of history used to validate or legitimise the ideologies of the present. One of the starting points for the piece was the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Aside from similarities in the 'hero-warrior' thematic content between *Gawain* and EBM, the poem is of interest due to its depiction of otherness and conceptions of Britishness with regard

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to relations between England and Wales at the time of the poem's writing (circa 1400).

'Pat snapped þe wylde' grew out of research into constructions of the nation within the visual imagery of EBM; this involved an examination of the album covers and imagery used by five English bands: Fen; Forefather; Icen; Winterfylleth and Wodensthron. This analysis was informed by notions of the mythologisation of origin, as discussed by Marina Warner in her 1994 Reith Lecture series on contemporary mythology,<sup>2</sup> and the idea suggested in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's edited collection, *The Invention of Tradition*, that many of the traditions generally considered as rooted in history are actually contemporary constructs.<sup>3</sup> These concepts, along with an acknowledgement of the interchangeable nature of the notions of mythology and history, may help reach an understanding of how the nationalist narrative of EBM is constructed and authenticated.

### 3. English Black Metal Imagery

There were three key elements within the imagery of EBM artwork and typography, firstly the depiction of nature, secondly the character of the warrior and the imagery of battle and finally the use of logos, symbols and runes. The imagery found within the text and artwork reference and celebrate Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Norse history, as well as particular literature inspired by these histories (for example J.R.R. Tolkien) and folksongs. The imagery often refers to battles in which *great* warriors fought for England, and emphasise nature and the ancient bond between the people and the land, the ideology of 'blood and soil'. Warner's discussion of contemporary mythology is pertinent to a discussion of EBM as she suggests that myths are grounded in ideas of nature and the supernatural, destiny and origin, and that in conjuring up enemies and aliens these myths actually say who we are.<sup>4</sup>

The depiction of nature is a common trait found across different strains of metal. The artwork of EBM album covers (and often band portraits) often feature cliffs and mountains, forests, lakes and the sea, which appear to be idealised visualisations of an unchanging landscape, promoting a sense of continuity throughout time. This notion is also linked to what could be considered a post-industrial desire for connection to the land, seen through the representation of Arcadian fantasies. This theme is also reflected in some of the lyrical content, which could be interpreted as emphasising the ideology of 'blood and soil' and belief in the 'essential spirit of the land'.

The character of the warrior is highly mythologised and is entangled in concepts of masculinity, heroism, violence and power, all of which resonate within the world of metal. The depiction of ancient warriors and battle are common within EBM and highlight a general thematic interest in the violent narratives of conquest and defence, which is often related to the mythology of the ancient tribes of Northern Europe. I shall return to the idea



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of the warrior later. There appears to be an ambiguity, or even ambivalence, in the definition of Englishness in EBM. On the Myspace.com webpage of Winterfylleth they assert their 'Northern European Identity' and claim the influence of 'traditional Northern European folk'.<sup>5</sup> This appears contradictory to the desire to assert an English national identity, but may evidence the wish for a trans-national identity appealing to all of the ancient tribes of Northern Europe. The influence of folk music on EBM is quite difficult to gauge, however more generally the appeal of the darker ritualistic elements of folklore fits with its aesthetic. I believe that the folk music element is quite ambiguous within the English scene in comparison to some of the black metal from other countries, which tends to utilise more blatant musical markers of national identity.

This ambivalence led me to question the importance of the construction of a concept of Englishness within EBM, with regard to the potential for mythologised national identity legitimising claims of naturalised national ethnicity. I decided to write some music using EBM musicians to explore these ideas, also relating to the role of power within the music and its relationship to concepts of noise.

#### 4. Winterfylleth

Engaging some black metal musicians to collaborate with was straight forward due to the fact that Winterfylleth, one of the bands I had previously analysed, featured my brother on drums. Aside from some of the more predictable practicalities of working with non-professional musicians, there needed to be a careful handling of the ideologies of a band that had previously been labelled (somewhat contentiously) 'National Socialist Black Metal' (henceforth NSBM). I attempted to manage this through an exploration of the dichotomies present in EBM, for example the obscuring or absence of metal's black music roots alongside an assertion of whiteness, and the interplay between paganism, ancient Christian symbolism and the use of old church modes.

Winterfylleth is a four piece black metal band from Manchester, England. The band formed in 2007, and the current line-up contains two of the original musicians on guitar and drums, plus two newer members on bass guitar and guitar. Winterfylleth would assert the genre term 'English Heritage Black Metal,' with the band's MySpace site stating 'Winterfylleth play English black metal, with Northern European [f]olk and ambient overtones. Clearly displaying their proud Northern European identity and heritage'.<sup>6</sup> Influences also listed on the webpage include:

Northern European Heritage, and Folklore; Ancient Northern European, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Viking and Medieval History; the beautiful Mountains, Forests, Caves

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and Lakes of the English Countryside; Ghosts and Haunted places, as well as M.R. James and J.R.R. Tolkien.<sup>7</sup>

Their first album *The Ghost of Heritage*, released in October 2008 on the label Profound Lore, caused some controversy, due to the combined force of conceptions of heritage and interpretations of some of the lyrical content. This situation was exacerbated by the expression of right-wing political views by one (now ex-) band member through online forums. This led to cancelled shows, censorship from some of the mainstream metal media, and even threats of violence against band members from an anti-fascist group. The political positioning of the band as a whole and the label of NSBM were debated by black metal fans on the internet. Despite the negative overall situation, this did seem to enhance their appearance and reputation as an extreme band and led to higher sales of their album. This in turn has led to a better record deal with a major independent label, Candlelight records, all of which highlights the centrality of notions of extremity within the identity of EBM and Heritage Metal. Following this controversy, Winterfylleth are planning to rebrand with the replacement of two musicians and the opportunity to record a second album. They are hoping that their future work will be protected somewhat by a clause in their record contract, which states that the music put out on the Candlelight label must not be defamatory in any way.

In response to the accusations of racism Winterfylleth claimed that their intention was always to draw attention to part of England's history which they feel has been overlooked, and educate people about the 'truth' of ancient symbolism and its link to English heritage. Within the visual elements, it is through the use of symbols and runes that one can most easily imagine potential links to fascism, however, many of these symbols also have links with ancient history, mythology and paganism. I believe that the musicians, despite aspiring to recover these symbols from the realms of white power and skinhead culture, are fully aware of the provocation that they can stimulate.

##### **5. English Ethnicity**

It could be argued that EBM thrives as an underground scene, excluded (and exclusive) from the mainstream, and its identity is centred on feelings of marginalisation due to a perceived loss of national heritage. Warner points out, that ideas of belonging are based on a mythologised notion of origin.<sup>8</sup> It is precisely this concept of the narrative construction of roots and heritage that is central to the way in which EBM bands assert an English ethnic identity. Warner suggests that:

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[r]oots revivalism - the politics of nostalgia - can lead to reinvigorated pride among muffled or neglected peoples or groups: but remembering sufferings like the loss of home can also be made a pretext for vengeance in the presence.<sup>9</sup>

The roots revivalism within English black metal leads to an empowered sense of pride amongst an audience of people who may commonly claim to feel marginalised. As described previously the imagery of warriors forging and fighting for the land enhances the empowering effect of the music, inspiring contemporary battles for this perceived lost heritage. In Robert Walser's *Running with the Devil*, he discusses heavy metal as an opportunity for fans to create communal bonds that can help 'weather the strains of modernity', by relying upon that which is 'other' as a way of making sense of their own situation.<sup>10</sup>

Gerd Bayer notes, in his edited collection *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, that there is a common misconception that racism is part of heavy metal's tradition and national narrative; this is probably related to the predominance of white musicians and fans, as well as the suggestion that there has been a tendency to privilege metal's white roots over the black music influence when narrating the genre's history.<sup>11</sup> Liam Dee, in the same collected edition, describes how a desire to push Satanic nihilism to the extreme in black metal often led to a neo-Nazi politics of white, heterosexual authenticity.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, the political positioning of EBM bands is highly contested, both amongst the musicians and the fans.

In Alexandra Campbell's study *Making White Britishness Online*, she states that in Britain there is a 'primordial belief in the antiquity and naturalness of nation, encompassing a particulari[s]ed ethnic group'.<sup>13</sup> The construction of an English ethnicity based on a narrative of Anglo-Saxon history asserts 'white' as the naturalised national identity. It affirms concepts of fixed identities, with whiteness defined by notions of normalcy and domination authenticated by a mythologised narrative of 'origin' based on the ancient past.

Hobsbawm warns that:

[w]e should not be misled by a curious, but understandable, paradox: modern nations and all their impedimenta generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity, and the opposite of constructed, namely human communities so 'natural' as to require no definition other than self-assertion.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of EBM the invention and mythologisation of tradition is based on an essentialist notion of heritage, which provides a limited and

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exclusionary construction of identity. However there is also a degree of ambiguity in this creation, with mixed references to Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Norse mythology as well as interchangeable use of the terms 'English' and 'British'. I believe that this evidences a general lack of distinction (or confusion) regarding concepts of Englishness and Britishness. One could also argue the case for the conscious construction of a broader Northern European (white) identity, which could then be positioned in opposition to a perceived threat from cultures outside of this.

#### 6. Metal's Provocative Power

Steve Garner's article *The Uses of Whiteness* identifies the need to understand the structure of power relations within which whiteness is constructed and employed.<sup>15</sup> In Foucault's *The Subject and Power* he links power relations to freedom's refusal to submit, saying:

[a]t the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential antagonism, it would be better to speak of an 'agonism' [...] a permanent provocation.<sup>16</sup>

Through metal's provocative construction, via the transgression of norms, EBM embodies and articulates power and extremity. Walser, in a discussion of the song 'Running with the Devil', states that,

the fantasy is one of escape from all social conventions; it is based on a quite bourgeois concept of the individual, who supposedly has some sort of essence that can be freed from social constrictions. In fact [...] the social boundaries that are felt to contain are also the structure within which these very fantasies are produced.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of the normalising judgement is found in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in which he discusses the process of differentiation that occurs through the various apparatus of society, which measures value defined by the limits of difference - abnormality.<sup>18</sup> He suggests that 'the power of normalisation imposes homogeneity; but it individualises by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels'. EBM's empowering effects can be seen in its departure from the constraints of the societal norm, in controversy, excess and extremity. Attali's discussion of noise control is reminiscent of Foucault's ideas about the control of individuals through the microprocesses of power, such as regulation and surveillance:

The repetitive machine has produced silence, the centrali[s]ed political control of speech, and more generally noise. Everywhere, power reduces the noise made by others and adds sound prevention to its arsenal. Listening becomes an essential means of surveillance and social control.<sup>19</sup>

Foucault's reflection on Bataille's writing on transgression links with his ideas about the construction of the boundaries of 'self' and 'other' and stresses the relationship between transgression and the limit. In *A Preface to Transgression* he states that,

[t]he limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows.<sup>20</sup>

Karl Spracklen's paper *True Aryan Black Metal* suggested the need for transgression to be recognised by the outside world,<sup>21</sup> suggesting again the importance of provocation and controversy as a reaction-providing authentication for EBM.

*Extreme Metal*, written by Keith Kahn-Harris, discusses the centrality of transgression to notions of extremity in black metal. He outlined three forms of what he labelled 'scenic transgression' relevant to extreme metal genres: sonic, discursive and bodily transgression.<sup>22</sup> In my music these ideas are explored through a number of means, the different levels of freedom and constraint placed upon the musicians; the extremes of dynamic range within the piece; the use of modes and the creation of new modes; the fragmentation of vocal parts; as well as an exploration of the piece within different performance settings and spatialisations.

## **7. Some Conclusions**

The perception of a band's politics is dependent on particular readings of the many layers of meaning employed in the creation of music and the construction of identity. These narratives can easily become empowering building blocks in the construction of sometimes-radicalised contemporary identities of belonging. It is the combined force of power, the exploration of limits and their transgression within the music, the imagery, the text and the discourse surrounding EBM that constructs such a provocative discourse. It is with these conditions that notions of heritage become positioned at the boundaries of mainstream politics, and attempts to

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construct and assert limits of normalcy - through ideas of belonging and origin - are interpreted as being situated at the limits of the norm.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> J Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p.6.

<sup>2</sup> M Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time*, Vintage, London, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> E Hobsbawm and T Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> M Warner, 1994, p.xii.

<sup>5</sup> C Naughton, Winterfylleth, Myspace.com, <<http://www.myspace.com/winterfylleth>>, (accessed [15/05/09])

<sup>6</sup> C Naughton, Winterfylleth, Myspace.com, <<http://www.myspace.com/winterfylleth>>, (accessed [15/05/09])

<sup>7</sup> C Naughton, Winterfylleth, Myspace.com, <<http://www.myspace.com/winterfylleth>>, (accessed [15/05/09])

<sup>8</sup> M Warner, 1994, pp.81-94.

<sup>9</sup> M Warner, 1994, p.85.

<sup>10</sup> R Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, University Press of New England, Hanover, 1993, p.162.

<sup>11</sup> G Bayer, 'Rocking the Nation: One Global Audience, One Flag?', in *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, G Bayer (ed.), Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Farnham, 2009, p.185.

<sup>12</sup> L Dee, 'The Brutal Truth: Grindcore as the Extreme Realism of Heavy Metal', in *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, G Bayer (ed.), Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Farnham, 2009, p.60.

<sup>13</sup> A Campbell, 'Without 'you' I'm nothing: making white Britishness online', *Social Semiotics*, vol.18iv, December 2008, p.411.

<sup>14</sup> E Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition*, E Hobsbawm and T Ranger (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p.14.

<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Karl Spracklen's paper 'True Aryan Black Metal: the meaning of leisure, belonging and the construction of whiteness in black metal music', presented at the 2008 Heavy Fundamentalisms Conference, which brought the work of Steve Garner to my attention. S Garner, 'The Uses of Whiteness: What Sociologists Working on Europe Can Draw from US Research on Whiteness'. *Sociology*, vol.40, 2006, pp.257-275.

<sup>16</sup> Agonism - implying combat from Greek *Agonisma*. M Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Power*, JD Faubion (ed.), Penguin, London, 2002, p.342.

<sup>17</sup> R Walser, 1994, p.52.

<sup>18</sup> M Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, A Sheridan (tr.), Penguin, London, 1991, p.182-183.

<sup>19</sup> J Attali, 1985, p.122.

<sup>20</sup> M Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression' in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Aesthetics*, JD Faubion, (ed.), Penguin, London, 2000, p.73.

<sup>21</sup> K Spracklen, 'True Aryan Black Metal: the meaning of leisure, belonging and the construction of whiteness in black metal music', Inter-Disciplinary.Net, <<http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/ci/mmp/mmp1/spracklen%20paper.pdf>>, (accessed [23/09/09]).

<sup>22</sup> K Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Berg, Oxford, 2007, pp.27-49.

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## **Machine Guns and Machine Gun Drums: Heavy Metal's Portrayal of War**

*Samir Puri*

### **Abstract**

Warfare ranks high amongst the themes that the metal genre most frequently relies on for lyrical and visual inspiration. This paper inquires into metal's artistic relationship with the phenomenon of war, asking to what extent metal is a unique medium through which to portray different aspects of warfare. It inquires into whether war is simply a conveniently dark theme that the metal genre mines for material, or whether there is a deeper, more fundamental relationship between art and subject. It will do so not merely through discussion of how portrayals of war can vary between metal sub-genres. It will ask whether the detachment or proximity of the metal artist to real war impedes or enhances their ability to convey it. Finally, it will inquire into whether metal musicians have a responsibility to their subject matter.

**Key Words:** Battle, conflict, death, fighting, heavy metal, history, military, thrash, war.

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### **1. Heavy Metal's War Obsession**

Warfare is a perennial source of lyrical and visual inspiration for heavy metal artists. In this they are far from alone - from time immemorial composers have been impassioned to write music by the struggles and conflicts of their day. Few other genres, however, are quite as fascinated by the visceral experience of warfare itself. The song titles, subject matters, dress and iconography of the metal genre are heavily coloured by militaristic themes. Nor, it is fair to say, are other musical genres quite as sonically suited to convey themes of warfare. The sheer intensity and sonic violence of metal - especially in its extreme permutations - arguably constitutes as close a mimicking of the cacophony of battle that modern music can offer. That metal can sound so violent makes it a platform well suited to sing about overtly violent themes, which it does so in abundance. War is one such theme that has been repeatedly revisited throughout metal's history and across its subgenres.

As a starting point it is worth emphasising that there is no lyrical or musical heterogeneity in metal's portrayal of warfare. Lyrical stances can vary between patriotic veneration of military history to outright criticism of war. They can range in taste too, and for every delicate handling of the undeniable horrors of war, other metal artists or songs seemingly rejoice in

the brutal gratuity of battle for nothing more than shock effect. What, therefore, can be said about the relationship between the phenomenon of war and its artistic representation in metal music? This paper inquires into metal as a medium through which to portray aspects of warfare. It will inquire into whether warfare is simply a conveniently dark theme that metal repeatedly - and perhaps self-servingly - mines for material, or whether there is a deeper, more fundamental relationship between the art and its subject. It will do so not merely through the obvious discussion of how portrayals of warfare can vary in musical terms between metal subgenres. It will consider a number of other angles that link the music of metal to the phenomenon of warfare.

One of these angles will be to inquire how real protagonists of war can seek inspiration or solace in metal music, whether they are the soldiers waging war or the civilians surviving it. Another angle will be to consider the proximity of metal artists themselves to the phenomenon about which they are writing. Since this paper is concerned with the varying ways in which metal musicians represent war, it will pose the question as to whether the (usual) physical detachment of the metal artist from their subject matter impedes or enhances their portrayal of war. Finally, this paper will inquire into whether metal musicians have a responsibility to their subject matter, which after all is a real phenomenon that scars and ends lives, and that determines the destinies of peoples.

## **2. Metal's Tactical Palette**

Broadly speaking there are three banners under which metal musicians tackle the subject of warfare. The first is the storytellers approach; the second emphasises the visceral horror of battle; and the third is revulsion at the suffering and exploitation inherent in war. The following discussion of these categories makes no claim to comprehensively classifying all of the different ways in which metal has covered warfare. Instead, it serves to organise subsequent thoughts around how the metal catalogue is broadly divisible in its coverage of war.

### *A. Metallic Bayeux Tapestry*

Metal is a genre that has perfected the art of the musical history lesson. In this category Iron Maiden are undoubtedly masters. Whether it is the march of Alexander's armies, the charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimea, the mud and blood of Third Battle of Ypres, or the clash between RAF and Luftwaffe over southern England's skies, Maiden are sure to have documented the tale. Singer Bruce Dickinson (himself a history graduate) has latterly donned period military garb while holding aloft the British Union Flag during live performances of 'The Trooper'. Many traditional metal artists have followed this storytelling mould, varying in the degree of patriotism attached to their recounting of history. For America's Iced Earth,

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an entire album, *The Glorious Burden*, comprised of songs based on a variety of military historical theatres with a distinctly patriotic overtone (including a 33 minute musical retelling of the Battle of Gettysburg).

For traditional metal artists of this ilk, war is a suitably epic theme that sits comfortably alongside the epic bombast of their frequently long and intricate compositions. Together, music and lyrics stimulate the passions of listeners by provoking excitement at the clash of arms, veneration at the display of heroism, and sorrow at the scale of loss. This is executed in a manner that is quite akin to a cinematic telling of the same historic tales.

Historical tales of war also inspire extreme metal bands. Holland's God Dethroned composed a concept album, *Passiondale*, which documented several defining military themes of the Great War in impressive detail, going as far as to quote historical archives of soldiers' testimonies. However, for many extreme metal bands, it is the myth of the warrior that dominates their accounts. For Sweden's Amon Amarth, Viking and Norse mythology drives their tales of war. Their lyrics lean heavily towards evoking general themes of honour, loss, courage, determination, survival and suffering. These are perennial themes for metal whether war is the subject or not, but are particularly effective when conveyed through a militaristic vernacular.

Regardless of the specific stylistic approach adopted, metal's storytelling function is a valuable one. Few genres of popular music take the trouble to sing their way through a history lesson with such theatrical aplomb as metal so regularly does. In this realm, metal ought to be more widely applauded for the manner in which it serves a quite under-appreciated basic educational function. Metal can provoke and reflect an interest in history amongst its audience. Although no substitute for the studious consideration of history, when a considerable complement of metal's audience comprises of young teenagers, metal's contribution may prove a telling one in shaping formative interests and attitudes to history.

### *B. War Ensemble*

As metal began to sound nastier so did its lyrical treatment of war. In musical terms the thrash metal bands of the 1980s formed the sonic bridge between the traditional metal that predated them and the ever more extreme forms of metal that would follow. In lyrical terms thermonuclear warfare made a particularly heavy imprint on thrash metal artists. This was perhaps for generational reasons since the 1980s saw Ronald Regan escalate America's rhetorical and spending war with the Soviet Union. Coming of age in an atmosphere of renewed superpower tension heavily influenced the work of thrash metal artists. Megadeth, for example, derived their name from a misspelling of the unit of one million deaths coined by RAND strategist Herman Kahn.<sup>1</sup> With nuclear war being humanity's most instantaneously

apocalyptic theme, and metal being the music apocalyptic sounding music, the thematic bond was unsurprising.

Moreover, both metal and nuclear war became bound by an escalatory logic. The Mutually Assured Destruction theorem posited its horrific strategy because a 'limited' nuclear exchange could never be assured. A nuclear attack by one side might have been carefully selected to strike at only a bounded set of targets ('limited' to battlefields only, or to countries allied to the enemy, for example). In the eyes of the victim this attack might not appear so contained, provoking more widespread retribution and thus escalating the exchange towards mutual annihilation.<sup>2</sup> Analogously, metal experienced an escalatory logic of an artistic kind. From the mid 1980s increasingly ferocious subgenres sought to out-do each other in musical heaviness, and in lyrical and visual grotesqueness.

When writing about war, extreme metal has tended to emphasise its horror and bloody reality. Good taste has never bothered extreme metal since much of its *raison d'être* is to provoke listeners. Extreme metal's portrayal of warfare deserves consideration for the sheer gratuity that can grace its lyrics. For death metal artists, the gore obsessed overt violence of their lyrical slant is inseparable from their music. For example, consider these lyrics from the Swedish death metal band, Dismember:

Body split in two, trembling hands / Touch what is left of me / Try to force back, guts where they belong / ... To end it all is the only option / I reach for my weapon so close but so far / I lift up my intestines, examine them closely / What has come of me, where is the rest of me / ... Forgotten soldier left to rot / Among other corpses / A nameless causality / In mankind's bloody history.<sup>3</sup>

There is - quite simply - no other genre in the world that would write such astonishingly graphic lyrics about the dying moments of an eviscerated soldier on the field of battle. The battlefield certainly contains abundant examples suited to the needs of death metal artists who are searching for purposefully shocking themes. However, for all the nastiness of such a lyric, it is difficult to deflect the obvious parallel to the unsettling nastiness inherent in the act of violent conflict. As art reflecting reality, few other musical platforms can convey this horror quite so bluntly.

Not all sonically aggressive attempts to portray war are quite as gratuitous. America's Lamb of God is an aggressive twenty first century metal band with fan appeal far wider than the extreme metal niche. Their track, 'Contractor', specifically addresses the burgeoning industry of private military firms. Its lyrics cleverly name-check a 'black water rising' (referencing the security firm Blackwater, now renamed Xe, after its

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reputation was tarnished by its personnel shooting dead of Iraqi civilians), 'Route Irish' (the road linking Baghdad and its airport, described as the most dangerous stretch of road in the world), and the dreaded IED (Improvised Explosive Device). These lyrics are delivered to a rhythm with enough momentum to create the sensation of a speeding convoy that could at any second end in limb-severing conflagration. Blending thrill with the horror of rolling the dice for your life, such a track manages to correlate the velocity of its music with the severity of its theme. This is not just metal as storytelling - this is metal as a kind of sonic simulator.

### *C. Lambs To The Slaughter*

Injecting a dose of contemporary reality heralds the third permutation of metal's portrayal of war: metal's history as protest music. When metal switches attention from singing about fighting to addressing broader aspects of war, it can be as moral a platform as any.

In the study of conflict, an important definitional distinction is made between 'battle' and 'war'. The former is the violent clash of arms and the bloodletting that ensues from fighting. The latter is the overall confrontation within which the fighting occurs, encompassing a wider range of matters (such as the political, social and economic). In Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz's metaphor, fighting and bloodshed are to war what cash payment is to business - the one event that gives meaning to all other related activities.<sup>4</sup>

Black Sabbath's 'War Pigs' is perhaps metal's original statement on the manipulation of ordinary people in times of war. Released in 1970, when the Vietnam quagmire had energised the passions of a generation, Sabbath's diversion from their usual occult themes was a simple but powerful statement. The iconic cover artwork for Metallica's 1986 *Master Of Puppets* similarly ranks as metal's definitive visual statement on this theme. Inside the album, 'Disposable Heroes' rams home the rage of wasted youth in war in utterly relentless musical fashion. In today's charged post-9/11 environment, the aforementioned Lamb of God has written about government manipulation of people's sentiments in support of war. A track like 'Now You've Got Something To Die For' is fuelled by passions comparable to the punk ethic inspiring System Of A Down or Rage Against the Machine. In expressing revulsion towards war, metal artists are little different to their peers in other genres (albeit ramming the point home with no subtlety needed).

In sum, metal must strike an important balance when using themes of warfare. This is because metal provokes an uneasy juxtaposition of emotions: exhilaration at the exciting musical pyromania exploding in the listener's eardrums, but sobriety at the sombre lyrical themes. This tension is by no means a bad thing. It is a contradiction that mimics the attraction and repulsion of war itself. War is fascinating and potentially exciting to the

human senses, but it is also unsettling and horrible. War does so in stark theatre of actual life and death, containing within it heroism, camaraderie and self-sacrifice, but also cruelty, hatred and the infliction of pain. Although in no way directly comparable, metal is well placed to evoke irreconcilable passions in the benign theatre of entertainment.

### 3. Music For (Real) Warriors

An alternative lens through which to view the relationship between the art and the phenomenon is that of metal *in* war. A great number of soldiers who are metal fans continue to listen to metal when deployed operationally. In the words of Iron Maiden's Steve Harris:

During the first Gulf War, we found out that one of the Queen's regiments were playing 'Run To The Hills' as they went into battle. I thought that was amazing. Not in a positive way necessarily, and it's kind of scary at the same time, but I was quite proud of that.<sup>5</sup>

For teenage soldiers, do metal's apocalyptic themes resonate more strongly when as listeners they are dodging bullets and shrapnel, as opposed to the years before when they were merely dodging chores at home? In a study by Jonathan Pieslak on American soldiers and their musical choices in the most recent Iraq war, the association between lyrics about war and soldiering was not necessarily a straightforward one. Like other forms of popular music, metal was used as an inspiration for troops preparing to go into combat in a manner much as people might psych themselves up for sport. The aggressive sound and imagery of metal provided a near perfect fit for the testosterone charged environment of warfare:

Soldiers appear to relate these lyrical themes of death, war and violence as reflections of their own combat experiences. They also reinterpret lyrical meanings or phrases within metal songs to suit their specific circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, lyrical specificity about war was not a prerequisite for deriving inspiration for war from metal. In some cases there might be a direct association between lyrics and the military situation, such as mobile patrols listening to Metallica's 'Seek and Destroy'. However, reinterpretation of lyrics was equally as common. Drowning Pool's 'Bodies' was cited by Pieslak as an example of a popular song that was not specifically about war, but by addressing themes of power and suffering had become relevant to soldiers. By this logic gansta rap was similarly suited. Its themes of urban

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gang violence, shootings, petulant defence of honour and survival of the fittest resonated strongly amidst the close quarter urban battles of the Iraq insurgency.

The use of metal as a weapon of psychological warfare cannot pass without mention. In acts reminiscent of *Apocalypse Now*'s helicopter assault conducted to the tune of Wagner, US PSYOPS teams have used loudspeakers attached to military vehicles to blast metal into settlements and compounds such as Falluja (which became nicknamed 'Lalalafallujah') in advance of a major assault in order to irritate the defenders and bolster the morale of the attackers.<sup>7</sup> An unsavoury side to using metal in war was the reported use of metal to torture detainees, a practice that garnered some media notoriety when uncovered around the time of the much wider Abu Gharib torture revelations. However, it should be noted that in both cases, the genre and lyrics were largely immaterial compared to the culturally and sonically disorienting properties of playing aggressive western music to those unaccustomed to hearing it.

#### **4. Metal Forged From Real War**

Despite metal's obsession with war, its leading artists are unlikely to have been in one. Metal's European and North American artists come from continents largely spared from the scourge of war for more decades than metal has existed. This is not to say that war has been absent from their lives. Metal's four-decade long history has been book-ended by the politically and socially divisive conflicts of Vietnam in the later 1960s, and by Iraq and Afghanistan for the new millennium's generation. Yet for these metal musicians theirs is likely to have been a TV war.

As metal becomes more of a global phenomenon more metal musicians will have lived under atrocious security conditions. Metal musicians are already common from societies where conditions of latent conflict are embedded within a repressive socio-political fabric. Brazil's Sepultura are perhaps the most celebrated example, writing about abject poverty and police brutality from experience and making lyrics to albums like *Chaos AD* all the more authentic. Taking this line of inquiry to its logical end, what happens when metal has been forged in conditions of war?

Documentaries such as *Heavy Metal Baghdad* and *Global Metal* have provided rare illumination of countries and metal scenes in which armed conflict and religious slaughter cease being fanciful themes, and instead become part of the tapestry of everyday life. For young musicians growing up in environments such as Iraq wracked by sectarian insurgency, or Israel convulsed by the second Intifada, their environment could not be more different from their European and North American counterparts. Put simply, the possibility of an imminent and violent death is real and not imagined for these artists. For one Israeli interviewee in *Global Metal*:



If you are witness to something and you come to write a song, your song will be more real than somebody who just read about it in a history lesson, because we live in a country where insanity became closer to reality.<sup>8</sup>

In such desperate circumstances there exists the potential for metal's mirroring of the tumult of war to reach a new summit of authenticity of expression.

The role of metal in conflict-afflicted zones is closely related to the cathartic connection felt by metal fans in war zones to their favourite music. One might expect that lyrics about death and suffering would be the last thing on a person's stereo when such events were unfolding for real around them. Yet in the words of one Iron Maiden fan living in Lebanon during the Israeli invasion of 2006:

[Maiden's] *A Matter Of Life And Death* was released directly after the Israeli-Hezbollah war in 2006, where Lebanon was fairly destroyed and more than 1500 were killed, most of whom were innocent children and civilians. The war took place between July 12 and August 15, as I remember, 32-33 days. I was stuck with my family in the country and had to see all the horrible imagery of war, live, and this left me psyched after the war has ended. I suffered from a sort of 'post-war depression' and was asking myself the same questions about the stupidity of man and for what reasons innocent people are killed and why on earth there is war. Well, *A Matter Of Life And Death* came as if the band were reading my mind and wanted to answer, it was amazing how I felt that album, more than anyone could feel it. As a Maiden fan from outside the warzone you're witness. As a Maiden fan in the warzone you're the character in the album, you're acting the lyrics, and living all the dark events and nightmares of war. As metal covers what other music doesn't, like war, death, fantasy and horror... . Someone living in this zone will understand very well what the band is trying to convey.<sup>9</sup>

What is fantasy for some is reality for others. As metal becomes more of a global phenomenon than ever before, the resonance between metal's treatment of war and the terrible reverberations of real war will surely be felt by ever increasing numbers of metal artists and listeners.

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### 5. Metal's Responsibility To Its Subject

The recurrent theme underlying this paper has been that of the relationship of the artist to their subject matter. Although metal might appear cartoonish to its detractors, to its adherents - and there are millions of them globally - it is a serious art form. And when art portrays a facet of reality that is as pivotal to humanity as warfare, the matter of artistic responsibility is liable to rear its head. Artistic responsibility has been a pertinent question for as long as the arts have reflected human life. In a series of lectures, the French thinker Jacques Maritain wrestled with this question and spelled out the terms of the debate:

I have tried to make clear the state of tension, or even of conflict, which naturally exists between Art and Morality, and which proceeds from the basic fact that Art is intent on the good of the work, not on the good of man, whereas Morality is intent on the good of man, not on the good of the work.<sup>10</sup>

Although not necessarily writing about music, Maritain eloquently expresses the dilemma. The possibility must be avoided that art does not become a smokescreen behind which morality can be ridden roughshod over. As with most arguments of morality, the answer resides in striking the most appropriate balance. Maritain ultimately resolves the debate in favour of dispersing such a smokescreen:

In other words it is true that Art and Morality are two autonomous worlds, each sovereign in its own sphere, but they cannot ignore or disregard one another, for man belongs in these two worlds, both as intellectual maker and as moral agent, doer of actions which engage his own destiny. And because an artist is a man before being an artist, the autonomous world of morality is simply superior to (and more inclusive than) the autonomous world of art... In other words Art is indirectly and extrinsically subordinate to morality.<sup>11</sup>

Our common humanity certainly dwarfs the metal fraternity, since for all of its global popularity, metal remains an art form for niche consumption. The bloodlust lyrics of extreme metal in particular reach an even smaller audience, and they listen to it precisely in order to be shocked. Yet when all is said and done, metal musicians ought to carry some awareness that by virtue of the bluntness of the musical instrument that they

wield, they are uniquely equipped to portray war in a manner few others could or perhaps would even dare to.

To take one of metal's most celebrated songs of war, one would be pained to imagine a track more suited to conveying the intensity of the innermost thoughts of a limbless, blind and mute survivor of war in such a bleak, horrific and emotionally wrought manner as Metallica do in 'One'. Thus track is metal in its portrayal of war at its most intense and most laudable.

Art reflects and influences life, and in this symbiosis, the relationship between war and metal is a closely bound one. War provokes, drives, and is driven by humankind's deepest held primeval instincts - the desire to compete, to survive, to uphold honour when affronted, and the propensity towards feeling both intense compassion and intense hatred. Metal music reflects a great many of these passions, albeit in the (usually) bombproof sanctity of the recording studio and the gig venue. Of course, metal - like any form of art - can portray a phenomenon without necessarily addressing it by name. Perhaps herein lies the ultimate bind between the art and the phenomenon. The most common, unifying theme across all metal sub genres is that of power. The essence of metal is sonic power, power over the listener, power over taste, and power over convention. War is the violent projection of power in the real world, and thus, in a quite fundamental fashion, exhibits a vernacular very much familiar to metal.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> H Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1960. Kahn also coined the term 'wargasm' to convey nuclear annihilation, later appropriated by Cradle of Filth for their track 'Lustmord And Wargasm'.

<sup>2</sup> L Freedman, *The Evolution Of Nuclear Strategy*, Macmillan for International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Dismember, 'To End It All', *Dismember*, Regain Records, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> C von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by M Howard and P Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Steve Harris quoted in *A Matter Of Life And Death: World Tour 2006*, European tour programme, 2006, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> J Pieslak, *Sound targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War*, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 2009, p. 148.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Dr Dan Kuehl, retired Air Force Lt. Col., now teaching Information Operations at Fort McNair's National Defense University. J Pieslak, *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War*, <http://www.soundtargets.com/> (accessed September 2009).

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<sup>8</sup> Y Sweartz of Raven Music quoted in *Global Metal*, Banger Films Inc., 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Private correspondence with individual quoted, October 2009, reproduced with kind permission.

<sup>10</sup> J Maritain, 'The Responsibility of the Artist', lectures delivered to Princeton University, 1951. Available at: <http://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/resart.htm> (accessed September 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

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## **PART III**

### **Fans and Communities**



## **‘Den Mothers’ and ‘Band Whores’: Gender, Sex and Power in the Death Metal Scene**

*Sonia Vasan*

### **Abstract**

The heavy metal music scene has traditionally been male territory ever since its inception nearly four decades ago. In particular, death metal - a type of metal characterised by guttural vocals, aggressive, down tuned guitars, and violent or macabre thematic content - is arguably the most andocentric of any metal subgenre. Yet women, though few, are nevertheless a presence in all aspects of the death metal subculture, whether as artists, scene leaders, record label executives, or simply as fans of the music. Many women are even fans of misogynistic death metal acts - bands whose albums feature lyrics and cover art glorifying the sexual and physical assault of women.

Given their minority status within a largely masculine and masculinist scene, how do female death metal fans negotiate boundaries of gender identity within the death metal subculture? Do they participate solely on men’s terms, or do they appropriate masculine power and use it to assert themselves as women? The present study locates these issues within the phenomenon of subgroup formation by women in the scene. Field observations and interviews with female death metal fans reveal two groups of women who actively construct gender in two very different ways: by appropriating masculine norms, and by embodying male fantasy through hypersexualised femininity. These two groups - ‘den mothers’ and ‘band whores’, as one female fan dubbed them - compete for power in the death metal scene by creating gendered identities according to the masculinist codes of the subculture. The study ultimately questions whether women’s construction of gender within an andocentric space can ever occur on its own terms.

**Key Words:** Feminism, gender, identity, masculinity, misogyny, music, performativity, subculture.

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People often ask me what prompted my research into women’s experiences in the death metal scene. I suppose it all began when I saw a mail order catalogue for a death metal record label and noticed two things: first, that many of the featured albums had titles like *Violence Against Feminist Cunts*, and second, that a female staff member had included one such album in her personal favourites list. Shocked, I wondered how on earth a woman could possibly be a fan of a band that promotes violence against her own sex.



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I also wondered about the cover art for one album in particular from that catalogue - Fornicator's self-titled debut - which featured a photo of a woman lying in a dark alley with her underwear pulled down and blood on her thighs. Why would a woman pose for such a photo? Surely no one put a gun to her head - she must have done it of her own free will. That image made me ponder why women are drawn to death metal in general: why women choose to associate themselves with a male-dominated and overtly misogynistic subculture, and, once they become part of such a subculture, how they negotiate its slippery gendered terrain.

Any discussion of women's status in a male-dominated subculture must begin with a glance at women's position in mainstream society. Though women have recently gained admittance to social groups and environments that previously had been the exclusive domain of men, they are often treated as outsiders or are disrespected as subordinates. The marginalisation of women in mainstream society is reflected in the struggles of women to participate in music-related subcultures on equal footing with men. Although the relegation of women to second-class status is perhaps most apparent in the often overtly misogynistic death metal scene, similar patterns of gender interaction may be observed in a wide range of other male-dominated music subcultures.

The past few decades have witnessed the emergence of a variety of music genres associated with youth subcultures, such as rap, hardcore, and electronic dance music, in addition to heavy metal. While all of the above genres have traditionally been the domain of men, some women have gained entrance to them as well. Adams and Fuller describe the misogynistic lyrics and images often found in rap music, and assert that exposure to such music desensitises individuals to violence against women and undermines women's current struggle for equality.<sup>1</sup> Since death metal music is also overtly misogynistic, it may be inferred that the position of women in the death metal scene is equally undermined by such lyrics and imagery. Haugen, however, notes resistance within the rap scene on the part of well-known female artists, whose explicit female-centred (and at times overtly misandric) lyrics challenge the misogyny in the scene.<sup>2</sup> Though such artists may be present in the rap world, they are not in the world of death metal: only a handful of female death metal performers achieve prominence in the scene, and all do so by conforming to masculinist codes rather than challenging them.

Similarly, Mullaney discusses the gender inequalities present in the straight edge hardcore scene, and notes that women in the scene who garner the most respect from their male peers are those whose actions are considered 'hard' or masculine, such as slam dancing at concerts or having tattoos proclaiming their allegiance to the subculture.<sup>3</sup> In the death metal scene, women are also judged according to a masculine standard: for example, one extreme metal vocalist praised a female vocalist by saying that 'she is the

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equal of any man'.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the ethnographic work of Groce and Cooper on women in local rock bands reveals that female performers consciously compare their abilities to those of male performers, striving to be as good as or better than their male peers.<sup>5</sup> The work of Farrugia on female DJ's in the electronic dance music scene also reflects this finding.<sup>6</sup>

While not modern youth subcultures, the subcultures surrounding Mexican-American conjunto music and traditional jazz music are also male-dominated and thus are similar to the aforementioned music scenes. Valdez and Halley discuss the barriers to women's involvement in the conjunto scene as musicians, many of which are rooted in traditional Mexican patriarchy.<sup>7</sup> Some female conjunto performers conform to conventional gender roles; however, the more successful female performers engage in masculine behaviour, echoing the behaviour of traditional male performers.<sup>8</sup> This pattern is also seen among female death metal artists, as well as in other music genres, such as jazz. Dahl researched women artists in the jazz subculture from the nineteenth century to the 1980s, and found a pattern of marginalisation that mirrors the position of women in the death metal scene.<sup>9</sup> According to Dahl, jazz was traditionally considered unseemly music for women to perform, not only because of the 'masculine' nature of the instruments involved (trumpet, saxophone, drums, etc.), but also because jazz was performed in brothels and nightclubs, where respectable women seldom ventured.<sup>10</sup> While death metal is not performed in brothels, the nightclubs that host death metal shows are sometimes dilapidated venues located in low-income areas that may be perceived as dangerous for women. Furthermore, the instruments used in death metal (electric guitars and drums) and the requisite deep, growled vocals are perceived as masculine; and, as Dahl notes regarding the jazz scene, women are not perceived by male artists as being capable of playing masculine instruments or singing with masculine prowess.<sup>11</sup> Thus it seems that the marginalisation of women that occurs in the death metal subculture is a phenomenon that may be observed in any male-dominated music arena infiltrated by women.

Few scholarly explorations of gender in the broader metal subculture exist. Walser discusses the representations of gender in metal songs and videos, and notes that some female fans adopt a masculine persona and style of dress similar to the males.<sup>12</sup> Weinstein also notes the andocentric nature of the metal subculture and the ways in which masculinised and sexualised women are judged by members of the scene.<sup>13</sup> Krenske and McKay did ethnographic work on women in a metal music club in Queensland, Australia, and examined the gendered nature of interactions in the metal subculture.<sup>14</sup> They found that women participated in the metal subculture on men's terms: their style of dress and behaviour were dictated by the unwritten andocentric rules of the subculture, and many women experienced overt verbal and

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physical harassment unless they were 'protected' by boyfriends or other males.<sup>15</sup>

An examination of the death metal subculture reveals several bands whose songs include lyrics about raping and torturing women and whose albums feature cover art to that effect. Outright misogyny may also be observed at shows: for example, I attended a concert at which the lead singer instructed the audience, '... if you want to hurt a girl, fuck her in the ass!' Still more sentiments of this kind may be found online, such as the following fan comment from the band Whore's MySpace page: '... if you fuck a girl in the ass, and you get shit on your dick. Make her lick it off'.<sup>16</sup> At the concert mentioned above, none of the women in the audience reacted negatively to the lead singer's words - they simply acted as if he had said nothing at all. (There were, however, cheers from several male audience members.) It is ironic that although the metal subculture purports to challenge the ideologies of mainstream society, it ultimately replicates and intensifies the andocentric codes of the very society against which it rebels.

I gathered my data from participant observation at death metal concerts, interviews with women in the scene and male band members, and archival information culled from online resources for death metal. Participant observation data reveals that women who are involved in the death metal subculture fall into certain 'types': women who 'masculinise' themselves, or dress and behave like men, and women who exploit their sex appeal by dressing and behaving provocatively. The former type dress in t-shirts and jeans and adopt masculine styles of speech (such as 'Aw, man' or 'Dude, that sucks') and behaviour (such as slapping hands as a greeting). The latter type dress in low-cut tops and short skirts, wear makeup, and behave in a traditionally feminine manner (holding hands with/being led by men, being waited on by men, having drinks bought for and brought to them by men). Data from interviews indicates that female fans who consider themselves 'true fans', i.e., women who are there because they sincerely enjoy the music and/or subculture, make a distinction between themselves and women whom they perceive as 'groupies', who are only after sex with band members or other men in the scene. One woman in particular was quick to pinpoint a dichotomy between 'den mothers', or true fans, and 'band whores', or groupies.<sup>17</sup> She identified herself as a true fan and 'tomboy', describing the masculine attire she typically wears to concerts, and explained how her masculinisation earned her respect: 'by dressing up like one of the guys, I was treated like one of the guys'.<sup>18</sup> She expressed disdain for the suggestive attire of 'band whores': 'if you dress like a slut, you're gonna get treated like a slut'.<sup>19</sup> (It is worth noting that she also lamented the problems that arose if she chose to dress in a less masculine manner: 'sometimes if I wear a shirt that's even just a little bit fitted, there'll be guys who reach out and grab my ass, or poke my chest'.<sup>20</sup> She thus was forced to sacrifice some of her

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femininity as the price for participating in the scene, or else risk being sexually harassed.) Sentiments such as these, describing the dress and behaviour of masculinised and sexualised women, were expressed by many other female interviewees.

Gender identity and subcultural activity are too complex phenomena for questions about women's attitudes and motivations to be answered simply or decisively; however, a close examination of women in death metal does reveal certain consistencies in their modes of participation. The research presented in this study indicates that women, like men, do derive an enhanced sense of self from death metal; and, like men, their participation is governed by subcultural codes. The difference for women is that men created those codes and are androcentric; thus, women who seek acceptance into the death metal subculture are forced, by its very nature, to exist on men's terms.<sup>21</sup> This is perhaps not surprising, since men created and continue to govern the scene; however, even women who attain leadership positions within the scene and gain clout and the respect of men do so by conforming to the androcentric codes of the subculture. Neither men nor women violate those codes.

This submission to the androcentric ideology of the subculture permits women to enter male territory, and to participate in empowering masculine activities. It may be that the promise of such power is the allure of the scene: so rewarding is the power gained by participation that women are willing to submit to the androcentric practices of the scene. One woman claimed that she gravitated toward metal because she 'wanted to be able to feel invincible when I needed it - when I didn't have an outlet, when my mother made it very clear that it was not OK for me [as a woman] to be upset about something',<sup>22</sup> while another commented that she 'really liked the fact that [metal is] a masculine type of thing, and I was always very - kind of had a masculine side to me... not wanting to be feminine... not wanting to be the woman, that's, you know, that's disrespected'.<sup>23</sup> Such sentiments reinforce the notion that women are not adequately empowered in mainstream society.

The bitter awareness of death metal's masculinist ideology expressed by female fans in this study contrasts with existing research on the subject. Krenske and McKay point out that female participants in the metal subculture construct gender on men's terms, and therefore ignore or deny sexist practices within the scene - even to the point of claiming they are not offended by violent, misogynistic lyrics.<sup>24</sup> Kahn-Harris notes that a hallmark of the scene is the active refusal on the part of members to analyse its ideologies and power structures; he also points out the refusal of a female fan to acknowledge the misogyny in the lyrics of a death metal band.<sup>25</sup> Contrary to the findings of the above researchers, the women who participated in my study were very aware of the sexism and misogyny present in the scene - in fact, many of them went out of their way to relate to me one sexist incident after another that had occurred within the context of the subculture. What is

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even more interesting is that many of them were also conscious that their preference for metal was born of a distinctly female desire to be empowered - because, as women, they were acutely aware of feeling disempowered on a daily basis. Thus, they co-opted the masculine power of metal and made it their own. In mainstream society, power is a quality that is generally considered more masculine than feminine; and even in the arena of pop music, female artists often appropriate the masculine swagger of rock. In Michael and Janet Jackson's 'Scream' music video, for example, Janet underscores her tough, fierce attitude by exaggeratedly zipping up her trousers while standing in front of a toilet with its seat up.<sup>26</sup> All-female urban dance crews also allude to male genitalia by grabbing and manipulating their crotches as male dancers have done before them. Whether in pop music or in death metal, the message is clear: power has a penis.

The results of this study indicate that androcentric codes dominate the death metal scene, and govern the behaviour of both men and women who choose to participate in it. Transgression of subcultural boundaries is taboo, and women must submit to masculinist restrictions in order to occupy places within the subculture; they are willing to do this because they value the power they stand to gain from such a barter. It is the promise of such power that attracts women to the subculture. If their gender roles are consistent with the subculture's androcentric codes - i.e., either 'tomboy' or feminine sex object - they may be accepted into the scene.

Since many females occupy leadership positions within the death metal scene, it may be that, with time, they can effect a change in the gendered power structures of the subculture. In recent years, more women have begun to enter the scene; whether their presence will shift the gendered balance of power remains to be seen. What is certain is that the androcentric restrictions of both metal and mainstream society imprison men as well as women: homophobic and heteronormative attitudes are also products of the masculinist codes of the (sub)culture. If a 'safe space' is created for women in the scene, such as 'Ladies Only' nights at local clubs, or all-female festivals, female fans might have the opportunity to be empowered in a way that is not dependent on androcentric codes, and might even bring this newfound freedom back to mixed-gender settings. For now, it seems that the death metal subculture - like the mainstream society from which it arose - is a man's world.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> T Adams & D Fuller, 'The Words Have Changed But the Ideology Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music', *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 36, no. 6, 2006, pp. 938-957.

<sup>2</sup> J Haugen, 'Unladylike Divas': Language, Gender, and Female Gangsta Rappers', *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2003, pp. 429-444.

<sup>3</sup> J Mullaney, 'Unity Admirable But Not Necessarily Heeded': Going Rates and Gender Boundaries in the Straight Edge Hardcore Music Scene', *Gender and Society*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2007, pp. 397-404.

<sup>4</sup> Nergal, personal communication, 1 May 2006.

<sup>5</sup> S Groce & M Cooper, 'Just Me and the Boys? Women in Local-Level Rock and Roll', *Gender and Society*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1990, p. 225.

<sup>6</sup> R Farrugia, 'Sisterdjs in the House: Electronic/Dance Music and Women-Centered Spaces on the Net', *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2004, pp. 246-247.

<sup>7</sup> A Valdez & J Halley, 'Gender in the Culture of Mexican American Conjunto Music', *Gender and Society*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1996, pp. 148-167.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> L Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen*, Pantheon, New York, 1984, pp. 14-20.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> R Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, NH, 1993, pp.108-136.

<sup>13</sup> D Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture*, Da Capo Press, New York, 2000, pp. 102-105.

<sup>14</sup> L Krenke & J McKay, 'Hard and Heavy': Gender and Power in a Heavy Metal Music Subculture', *Gender, Place and Culture*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2000, pp. 287-304.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Whore, *Whore on MySpace Music*, MySpace, 2004, retrieved 5 December 2009, <<http://www.myspace.com/whore>>.

<sup>17</sup> K Malella, personal communication, 11 November 2006.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Krenke & McKay, loc. cit.

<sup>22</sup> L Valencia, personal communication, 31 August 2009.

<sup>23</sup> L Collery, personal communication, 5 October 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Krenke & McKay, loc. cit.

<sup>25</sup> K Kahn-Harris, 'Death Metal and the Limits of Musical Expression', in *Policing Pop*, M.Cloonan and R. Garofalo (eds), Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2003, pp. 81-99.

<sup>26</sup> *Michael Jackson: HIStory on Film, Volume II*, video recording, Epic Music Video, New York, 1997.

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# **‘I’m a Metalhead’: The Representation of Women Letter Writers in *Kerrang!* Magazine**

*Rosemary Hill*

## **Abstract**

This paper examines how *Kerrang!* Magazine represents women metal fans in its letters pages. Since the turn of the century an increasing number of women have been reading *Kerrang!*, a situation predicted by Jonathan Gruzelier to have a profound effect upon the genre’s culture. To understand the culture of metal I ask two questions: what myths can be read from the letters pages?, and how are women letter writers represented as interacting with those myths? I examine letters pages from June 2000-8 (the month of Download music festival) and, using a methodology drawn from Barthes’ *Mythologies*, I analyse the changing design to identify *Kerrang!*’s ‘myths’, and read the letters to ascertain how they support or belie those myths. I argue that a powerful myth can be read in *Kerrang!*’s design - the myth of the warrior - and I consider the ways in which women are represented as ‘using’ this myth. I conclude that the power of the warrior myth is so strong, and so essential to the culture of the genre, that women letter writers are frequently represented as interacting with it, whether to challenge it and elicit new behaviours within the metal community, or to use it strategically to strengthen their position in a highly masculine culture. Furthermore, whilst some aspects of the warrior trope may be unworkable for some women letter writers, the myth’s potency allows women letter writers to assert themselves with confidence in their everyday lives. In terms of *Kerrang!*’s representation of the culture of the genre, the increased presence of women does have an impact upon the less ‘sociable’ aspects of metal culture, but the ways in which women are represented as gaining strength from the myth of the warrior ultimately reinforce it.

**Key Words:** Barthes, community, fandom, gender, *Kerrang!*, letters, magazines, masculinity, metal, mythology, visual analysis.

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## **1. Introduction**

*Kerrang!* is a British metal and hard rock magazine, published weekly. It began in 1981 as a supplement in *Sounds* music magazine to cater for fans of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, but such was its popularity that it quickly became a magazine in its own right. It has been the only weekly magazine for British metal fans ever since, and as such it has held great importance to fans of the genre. Today it also caters for fans of punk

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and hard rock. Whilst there has long been a stereotype of the metal fan as a young, working class, white, male, as Deena Weinstein elaborates<sup>1</sup>, British women had become so enamoured of metal that by 2006 *Kerrang!*'s readership had a greater proportion of women than men.<sup>2</sup> This is reflected in the letters pages: in 2000 published letters to *Kerrang!* Magazine from women readers were few and far between. By 2008, however, the majority of published letters came from women. How has this change affected the way that women are represented on the letters pages?

## 2. Methodology

The methodology I employ is to scrutinise the letters pages of *Kerrang!* issues published in the months of June each year from 2000 to 2008. Ozzy Osbourne's Ozzfest occurred in June in the earlier years of my study, and Download festival, the successor to Donington's Monsters of Rock festival, occurred in June during the later years. These two big events in the metal calendar are discussion topics in the letters and create a sense of continuity over the years.

To deeply analyse the letters pages I need to understand the visual aspects as well as the content of the letters themselves. I find Roland Barthes' conception of myth really useful here. In *Mythologies* Barthes shows how ideas about our society become common sense or universally accepted, even if deeper consideration reveals these ideas to be flawed or wrong. Reading Barthes' *Mythologies* in tandem with the letters pages I am struck by the ways in which the letters pages convey a sense of unity amongst readers whilst also allowing a strong spirit of independence between them. They achieve this through their choice of letters to print and also in the designs and the photographs. Letter writers themselves are represented as believing in two or three particular ideas about the nature of the metal community. Yet the writers are simultaneously portrayed as revealing that the metal community does not live up to these ideals. After Barthes I label these ideas myths: these ideas give an impression of the state of the metal community that on deeper investigation turns out to be misleading. The implausibility of the myths does not lessen their power, however. One myth is deeply embedded in exclusive notions of masculinity, whilst a second myth would appear to contradict this exclusivity. I am, therefore, intrigued as to how women letter writers are represented as interacting with the myths.

## 3. Establishing The Myths

Three particular myths are presented in the magazine: the myth that all members of the metal community are equal; the myth that members of the community are rebellious under the constraints of authority; and the myth that metal community members are akin to medieval warriors. In this paper I

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talk about the last of those myths: the myth of the warrior. I will show how *Kerrang!* reinforces it through the letters pages, discuss how women letter writers are represented as interacting with the myth, and finally consider what they achieve or lose by doing so.

So what is the myth of the warrior? Trafford and Pluskowski discuss how the popular cultural representation of the Viking has been prevalent in heavy metal since its inception and forms an important motif in both lyrics and artwork.<sup>3</sup> Trafford and Pluskowski attribute the following qualities to Vikings:

1. 'bloodthirsty and rapacious attackers';
2. 'barbarian disrupters of civilized life';
3. 'hyper-masculine';
- 4.

But it's not all bad as they are also:

1. energetic and dynamic;
2. physically (and militarily) strong;
3. unlikely to 'submit[...] easily to any acknowledged authority'.<sup>4</sup>

The Viking imagery therefore creates a strong vision of a warrior and is a significant cultural reference point for metal fans. Without entirely covering its pages with horned helmets and bloody axes, *Kerrang!* adopts this imagery, giving itself an appearance of metal authenticity. How does it achieve this?

Two factors in the promulgation of the warrior myth are the design of the letters pages, and the printing of photographs of stars and fans. In the earlier years of my study (2000-2003) there is less evidence of the design of the letters pages engaging with the myth of the warrior. However in Design A (see figure 1) the title of the page, with the clever pun 'Feedback,' appears in white lettering on a black background. The background is shot through with white to give the impression that the title has been written on black paper, crunched up in a fit of rage and smoothed out again. The crumpled paper effect conveys passion and disrespect for neatness. Underneath the headline the text 'Your say on the issues that matter' appears in white on a red box. In 2001 Design B renders the title as appearing on a ticket stub, referring to the importance of gig attendance to metal fans. Red is gone, but the black background is retained and the letter headers now have black backgrounds too. In 2002 and 2003 (Design C) the red was reinstated, although in a minor way. It contributes a shock of colour amongst the harsh black and white. Design D shows that in 2004 the letters page was given a design overhaul in which the interplay of red and black became the dominant motif in the design scheme and continued with some changes throughout 2006 and 2007. By

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2008 (Design F) the red and black theme had been dropped in favour of a distinctive yellow and black scheme marking a significant departure.

Why is the red and black scheme so important? Black and red have powerful associations in the West: red is associated with blood, sex and danger. Black is associated with funerals, war and threat.<sup>5</sup> Together the two have strong connotations of warning and give a message of bloody battle, violence and death. The colour use strongly signifies the myth of the warrior. The yellow and black design loses much of the dynamism of the red and black scheme, however the connotation of warning remains in the use of the yellow with black: the two colours together are often used as warning signs such as in the biohazard symbol.<sup>6</sup> The use of yellow replacing red in some ways distances *Kerrang!* from its metal roots as the force of the warrior myth is lessened.

Photographs that are printed on the letters pages tend to reinforce the myth: amongst the men both musicians and fans wear black, hair is often long, and beards and tattoos are in evidence. The look is reminiscent of the common cultural representation of the Viking and strikingly different from the neater, shorthaired and clean-shaven ideal of contemporary masculinity. Amongst the women fans and musicians hair is again frequently long, and it is often obviously dyed, challenging the feminine pretence of hair subtly coloured to be seen as a 'natural' blond or brunette. Not all photographs show metal stars and fans looking like warriors; different fashions can be seen over the nine years of my study. In the early years of the century many images show very short cropped haired men as nu-metal aimed to redefine its masculinity and distance itself from the memories of overblown hair metal. In the later years of my study fashions associated with emo are frequently pictured: women and men's hair now falls in straightened 'floppy' fringes, often black with streaks of blond: the look is softer with eyeliner giving a 'feminine' look. The aggression remains in the challenging and threatening looks cast at the camera, and of course, the black clothes are as prominent as ever. Photographs showing nu-metal and emo fashion fall amongst those of more 'old skool' metal fans or musicians in which the long hair and angry looks uphold the warrior imagery.

#### **4. Women Letter Writers and the Myth of the Warrior**

What Trafford and Pluskowski do not say explicitly is that the Viking warrior is a man and that the hyper-masculinity requires the negation of femininity. The presence of women on the letters pages, then, is in itself a challenge to the myth of the warrior, unless the women can exhibit their masculinity and show themselves to be fearless warriors. So there are two main ways in which women letter writers are represented as interacting with the myth: (one) directly challenging aggressive behaviour (such as throwing bottles at gigs) that disrupts the civilized veneer of the community (i.e. by

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confronting the warrior myth head on); and (two) using the flying and sounding techniques of Vikings in Norse sagas, i.e. using the myth to gain access to the community.

The first of these, the representation of women directly challenging other metal fans' gig behaviour, occurs frequently. The throwing of bottles is a very direct way in which fans can reveal their opinions and exhibit warrior-like qualities in the disruption of a more civilized gig-going atmosphere, whilst also revealing that the bottlers do not submit to the authority of the festival organisers. Most of all it is a gesture reminiscent of the throwing of grenades. An example of a letter condemning bottling was printed in the issue of 22 June 2002 (issue 909). Laura writes about the presence of Welsh band Lostprophets at the Deconstruction gig:

There were people there who seemed to think that a nu-metal band had no place there because it was a 'punk' event. I think it's dumb that people fall victim to genre classifications and can't just enjoy the music. There were some real wankers in the crowd who kept throwing stuff at the 'Prophets [...]. There are bands I don't like, but that doesn't mean I throw stuff at them. If you don't like a band just stay away.<sup>7</sup>

A further example occurs in the 23 June 2007 issue (issue 1164): Emz via MySpace criticises the bottling of My Chemical Romance at Download festival. Emz accepts that different people like and dislike different bands, exhibiting the respect for others' opinions that she believes the bottlers ought to show:

if you don't like them, don't go bloody see them! [...] I'm a metalhead and I love Trivium, Slayer and Iron Maiden but I don't go bottling bands I hate. Live with your hate, don't share it with everyone else using violence.<sup>8</sup>

Both women assert their participation in the community: Laura attempts to establish her inclusion by saying that Deconstruction 'kicked arse'<sup>9</sup>, conveying that she is no 'party pooper' and implying that her enjoyment of the festival validates her complaint. Emz names the bands she likes to reveal her identification with the heavier side of metal, and so to a certain extent with those bottlers who objected to the rockier My Chemical Romance's presence. In their criticism of the bottling, both women verbally abuse the bottlers: Laura uses the term 'victim' to imply that the bottling punk fans have been duped by the 'industry' into believing it is important to keep genres distinct; she then names them 'dumb' and 'wankers'.<sup>10</sup> Emz

implies that the bottlers have emotional problems of self-hatred, calling for them to 'live with your hate'.<sup>11</sup> Laura's and Emz's critique of the bottlers, as they call for a change in behaviour, to a more peaceful, tolerant and accepting attitude, is a challenge to the myth of the warrior, in its guise of barbarous disruption of civilisation. However, despite their eloquent language and attempt to show their inclusion in the community, neither letter really rings true as being from members of the metal community: by challenging the behaviour and so the masculinity of the myth behind it, the women are represented as being on the outside looking in.

I turn now to the second way that women are represented as using the myth, that of flyting and sounding to contradict the magazine itself. Bethan Benwell's analysis of letters published by 'lads mag' *Loaded* reveals that the letters exhibit a kind of masculine exchange called 'flyting' and 'sounding'. This is a form of discourse in which speakers duel to outdo each other with the most outrageous and inventive invective. It is a safe way of expressing affection between friends without compromising masculinity, and it reduces tension without warriors doing one another any physical damage.<sup>12</sup> In letters only one side of this 'duel-logue' can be seen, but it reveals itself through direct contradiction and creative insults. As with any magazine letters page, *Kerrang!*'s 'Feedback' also features letters that take issue with articles and, more frequently, with reviews in the magazine.

In the 29 June 2002 issue (issue 910) Micha responds to comments made by the magazine in a previous issue about a website called Concert Flashing, upon which photographs of women baring their breasts at concerts are posted:

I was very offended when you [...] made the comment 'Girls with boobs like spaniel's ears have even had a go.' What's wrong with boobs like spaniel's ears? My girlfriend has them, and for your information she has great tits. So there. You're just jealous cos all you (unwillingly) celibate men at *Kerrang!* don't have any boobs yourselves! Good luck in the lonely hearts column by the way.<sup>13</sup>

*Kerrang!*'s comment, which represents some women's breasts as dogs' ears, has the effect of policing women's bodies and objectifying them. Micha takes issue, not with the objectification *per se*, but with the hierarchy of breasts that *Kerrang!* has established. Whilst Micha's signature, 'yes I'm a girl, get over it'<sup>14</sup> confronts *Kerrang!*'s heterosexism, she then uses her homosexuality to justify that she is in a position to make a judgement about what constitutes 'great tits'. In suggesting that *Kerrang!*'s staff are jealous of women's breasts, and unable to get a sexual partner, Micha's insults are inventive and crushing, but her tone is playful. She neatly exhibits the flyting

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and sounding technique as she criticises *Kerrang!*'s objectifying body hierarchy whilst still showing affection for the magazine. Furthermore it is clear she cares not a jot what *Kerrang!*'s editors think of her. Like Trafford and Pluskowski's Vikings, she is independent as she denies *Kerrang!*'s authority over which bodies are worth exposing. Micha's is a difficult balance: whilst she argues against *Kerrang!*'s heterosexist hierarchy, she remains complicit in the magazine's objectification of women. To get her point about the hierarchy across she must perform masculinity by using warrior-like techniques.

In the issue of 16 June 2007 (issue 1163) Emily writes a response to an article about Paramore, an American rock band fronted by a woman called Hayley Williams. Emily criticises the article for its unkind treatment of Hayley's gender rather than the music of the band:

Kerrang! You little bastards! Your feature on Paramore was about as valid as your mother's chest hair. Around.. oh.. one measly paragraph was actually about Paramore's music... the rest focussed on Hayley's 'bossy' and 'snooty' attitude. Give the girl a break! In an industry that claims to be about equality, the article tends to focus on Hayley being a FEMALE asserting some kind of leadership! Shock freaking horror!<sup>15</sup>

In this letter Emily's style contains many of the elements of the flyting and sounding style: she swears, 'you little bastards!', she is creative with her insults, 'as valid as your mother's chest hair'<sup>16</sup>, and she confronts her opponent directly. Furthermore Emily's letter is full of dynamic energy as she uses a very brief first sentence that sounds like an enraged signal to charge ('You little bastards!'<sup>17</sup>), and many exclamation marks. She is certain she is right and will not bow to the authority of the magazine. Emily defends the right of Hayley Williams to be treated with the same respect as accorded male musicians, but to do so she uses the myth of the warrior, like Micha, performing its masculinity.

By using the strength of the warrior myth, by imbibing its spirit of independence from authority (as *Kerrang!*, an established and successful magazine, is), via their energetic and caustic tones, the two women letter writers are able to successfully contest the authority of *Kerrang!* as they enact masculinity. Thus they are represented as strong participants in the community.



## 5. To Conclude

The myth of the warrior is very powerful in the metal community's self-construction. It cannot be avoided by women letter writers whether they are writing to challenge it and elicit new, less warrior-like behaviours in the metal community, or whether they are able to use the associated flyting and sounding techniques to strengthen their position as insiders whilst simultaneously making feminist-sounding arguments against metal's exclusionary practices. Ultimately whichever of the techniques (to fight the behaviour directly or to employ the myth for feminist ends) women letter writers are represented as using, the myth is the stronger for it. The women who fight the warrior-like behaviour directly ignore the behaviour's deeply embedded roots in the warrior myth and the structural disadvantage that this places women at. As these letter writers are women, challenging the myth of the warrior only places them more firmly outside the metal community and limits their chances of successfully changing aggressive gig behaviour. The women who use the myth for their own ends, even overtly feminist ends, do so by performing masculinity and, whilst gender is ever fluid, in putting their femininity to one side the women letter writers are complicit in the myth's gender-blindness and its exclusive masculinity is reinforced.

In *Kerrang!*'s representation of women letter writers women must enact masculinity to be successful members of the metal community. This raises the question how can women who are unable or unwilling to perform the myth of the warrior, yet love metal, attain strong participation in the metal community?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> D Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture*, Da Capo Press, New York, 2000, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> Campaign, 'Magazine ABCs Jan-Jun 2006: Film and music' *Campaign*. 25.08.2006, accessed 16 September 2008 at the web-site <<http://www.brandrepublic.com/Campaign/News/589406/Magazine>>.

<sup>3</sup> S Trafford and A Pluskowski, 'Antichrist Superstars: The vikings in hard rock and heavy metal' in D W Marshall (ed), *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in popular culture*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2007, p.59-60.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

<sup>5</sup> D Dabner, *Graphic Design School: the principles and practices of graphic design*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2004, p.35.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

<sup>7</sup> Laura, Hampshire, 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 22.06.2002, p.58.

<sup>8</sup> Emz via MySpace, 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 23.06.2007, p.4.

- <sup>9</sup> Laura, Hampshire, 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 22.06.2002, p.58.  
<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.58  
<sup>11</sup> Emz via MySpace, 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 23.06.2007, p.4.  
<sup>12</sup> B Benwell, 'Male Gossip and Language Play in the Letters Pages of Men's Lifestyle Magazines', *The Journal of Popular Culture* vol. 34 (4), 2001.  
<sup>13</sup> Micha (yes I'm a girl, get over it), 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 29.06.2002, p.66.  
<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 66.  
<sup>15</sup> Emily via Email, 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 16.06.2007, p. 4.  
<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.4.  
<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.4.

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Laura, Hampshire, 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*. 22.06.2002.

Micha (yes I'm a girl, get over it), 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*. 29.06.2002.

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# **Gorgoroth's Gaahl's Gay! Power, Gender and the Communicative Discourse of the Black Metal Scene**

*Karl Spracklen*

## **Abstract**

Hegemony theory, which owes its popularity to the work of Gramsci - who elaborated at length on the difference between the dominance of a ruling class and complete cultural hegemony of the ruling culture throughout the ruling and the ruled - is crucial to understand the role of leisure in the construction of class and gender status. Carrington and McDonald, for example, say that the concept of hegemony, when applied to the structures in sport, emphasises class, gendered constructions and cultural practices. As Carton claims, leisure does not necessarily have to be a medium for the hegemony of the values of the ruling class. It can be a medium for counter-hegemonic resistance, where the ruled react against hegemony and try to overcome imposed cultural values. At the same time, researchers of popular music have theorised the development of neo-tribes as the effect of postmodernity on practices of consumption and identity formation. Black metal is a form of heavy metal music taken to extremes of image, content and ideology, exemplified by the church burnings and murders in Norway at the start of black metal's recent history. Previous work on black metal has linked the discourses of identity in the scene to a Habermasian framework of communicative and instrumental rationalities at the end of modernity. This paper will use new research analysing publicly available comments on fan forums to explore discussions about gender and sexuality in black metal, and in particular the decision by the singer of the band Gorgoroth to announce his homosexuality. It will be argued that such discussions are expressions of communicative discourse, in a Habermasian sense, which offers a counter-hegemonic position on some aspects (but not all aspects) of gender and identity.

**Key Words:** Black metal, communicative discourse, Gorgoroth, hegemonic masculinity, leisure, power, sexuality.

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## **1. Introduction**

Hegemony theory, which owes its popularity to the work of Gramsci who elaborated at length on the difference between the dominance of a ruling class and complete cultural hegemony of the ruling culture throughout the ruling and the ruled<sup>1</sup> - is crucial to understand the role of leisure in the construction of class and gender status<sup>2</sup>. Carrington and McDonald, for

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example, say that the concept of hegemony, when applied to the structures in sport, emphasises class, gendered constructions and cultural practices<sup>3</sup>. As Carton claims, leisure does not necessarily have to be a medium for the hegemony of the values of the ruling class. It can be a medium for counter-hegemonic resistance, where the ruled react against hegemony and try to overcome imposed cultural values<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, researchers of popular music have theorised the development of neo-tribes as the effect of postmodernity on practices of consumption and identity formation<sup>5</sup>. Black metal is a form of heavy metal music taken to extremes of image, content and ideology, exemplified by the church burnings and murders in Norway at the start of black metal's recent history<sup>6</sup>. Previous work on black metal has linked the discourses of identity in the scene to a Habermasian framework of communicative and instrumental rationalities at the end of modernity<sup>7</sup>. This paper will use new research analysing publicly available comments on fan forums to explore discussions about gender and sexuality in black metal, and in particular the decision by the singer of the band Gorgoroth to announce his homosexuality. It will be argued that such discussions are expressions of communicative discourse, in a Habermasian sense, which offers a counter-hegemonic position on some aspects (but not all aspects) of gender and identity.

## 2. Methodology

This paper maps and analyses the instances of Gaahl's sexuality being mentioned over a 12-month period on one black metal internet forum (blackmetal.co.uk). This forum has been used before by this researcher in exploring ideologies of black metal and reactions to National Socialist Black Metal in the black metal scene<sup>8</sup>. There is an epistemological and methodological debate about the truth-value and utility for researchers of debates on internet forums<sup>9</sup>. There is no doubt that users of on-line forums do not necessarily represent the views of a wider population: users of forums are more likely to be passionate, opinion-setters. There is no doubt also that users of on-line forums do not necessarily post what they actually feel about a particular topic. These problems, however, should not concern us. On the matter of representation, this paper does not claim to provide a definitive scene 'response' to Gaahl's sexuality. Rather, this paper explores responses made by those fans who care enough about black metal to post on the forum - these fans are not representative of all fans, but they are *de facto* serious and passionate about what constitutes true or 'kult' black metal. On the matter of the truth-value of their comments, it is indeed true that we do not know whether the fans actually mean what they write. They could be lying, or unclear, about their private thoughts; and it is impossible for us to be confident about the mapping of their actual thoughts onto these public opinions. This problem is especially true where fans post under pseudonyms.

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That said, truth-value is only a problem if we are concerned with truth. In this paper, I am not concerned about whether the fans actually mean what they say - but I am interested in what they think they have to say to be a part of black metal's insider scene, and what they think is acceptable to post on the forum.

### 3. Gaahl and Gorgoroth

Gorgoroth are a Norwegian second-wave black metal band. Formed in 1992 in Bergen, the band gained a record contract on the back of the wider interest in the Norwegian black metal scene. Their orthodox sound, commitment to live gigs, and the Satanism in their imagery and lyrics, saw them gain key support slots for bands such as Enslaved and, in England, Cradle of Filth. A string of successful records and a headlining tour in 1997 led to the band signing for Nuclear Blast, one of the largest independent record labels in Europe. It was at this moment in their career that Gaahl joined as lead singer. Gaahl was another Bergen black metallor - his band Trelldom had been formed in 1993, one year after Gorgoroth. Gaahl brought an intensity and intellectual darkness to Gorgoroth's lyrics, recordings and stage shows. With bassist King ov Hell, Gaahl began to take control of Gorgoroth's musical and ideological direction. He was imprisoned for assault on two occasions (the last when it was claimed he drank the blood of his victim), he was involved in planning the infamous Krakow gig of 2004 (which featured naked actors on stage hung from crosses, which led to Polish politicians banning them and threatening them with legal action, and which led to Gorgoroth tearing up their contract with Nuclear Blast after the label dropped them from a tour).

In 2007, Gaahl tried to sack Infernus, the founding member of Gorgoroth, from the band. Infernus responded by taking legal action over who owned the intellectual rights to Gorgoroth. Infernus won his case in 2009 and Gaahl and King ov Hell said they would continue to play under the name Godseed. The argument over the Gorgoroth name, however, was soon overshadowed, in the summer of 2008, by rumours that Gaahl was homosexual. These rumours were quickly confirmed by Gaahl himself to a Bergen-based website<sup>10</sup>. The story was picked up by Blabbermouth and other websites in the autumn of 2008, and Gaahl confirmed the story in a number of metal magazine interviews in the final months of 2008. As he explained in Terrorizer 178:

[Attitudes like homophobia are] exactly what we fight against actually. Narrow mindedness has never been what black metal is about, or represents. When black metal first started it was a group of young people who had strong opinions. But these things turn inevitably into organisations

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and societies with their own laws, and sadly people don't hold up this individuality, which is how I see what black metal is, and what I've been standing for. It is very easy to become what you hate. Personally I am not worried [about being gay affecting Gorgoroth's popularity]. I would rather have pure-hearted fans than narrow-minded ones. If we lose fans over this, then those fans were not important in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

For Gaahl, and indeed the journalist who interviewed him in *Terrorizer*, homosexuality was just another way of expressing the libertarian, individualist ideology of the Norwegian black metal scene, a reaction against the orthodoxy of Christian morality. In the next section of this paper, I will outline the response from black metal fans on the [blackmetal.co.uk](http://blackmetal.co.uk) forum, before a final section discussing the ontological tension between gender, power and sexuality, and its resolution through a Habermasian discourse of communicative action.

#### 4. Fan Response on the Forum

Interestingly, the initial announcement of Gaahl's sexuality made little impact on the forum. For some time it was ignored, as if the 'true' and cult fans posting on the forum were too elite and underground to name check a professional band like Gorgoroth. The earliest reaction to Gaahl's homosexuality appeared in a mundane thread asking each of the forum users what black metal t-shirt they were currently wearing. A poster called [Deathcult1205](#) responded to this thread on 15 September 2008 (20:14) with: 'Gorgoroth-Pentagram girlie tee.... the one that says, 'The sin of Satan is the sign of Gorgoroth' on the back. This shirt is a good boob shirt, there's no way Gaahl's gay'. The final sentence is meant to be a joke, of course, arguing that the garment is so well shaped for women that Gaahl (the shirt's supposed creator) must have an appreciation of the female form. This post, however, was soon followed by another, more serious one, from the poster [Penrith](#):

Gaahl is a MASSIVE bummer. Not only is it obvious, but sources confirmed him hand in hand with his pillow biting mattress muncher partner at wacken, back stage. The place where people get fondled.<sup>12</sup>

[Deathcult1205](#) responded to [Penrith](#)'s serious homophobia by arguing: 'I was joking. And, I say, good for him!'. In this short exchange, there are two clearly contrasting attitudes: one that allows Gaahl's sexuality to be part of the scene, embracing the announcement of his homosexuality as a statement of personal (individualised) taste; and another that sees in

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homosexuality a liberal step too far, an acceptance of something inferior, something articulated as less hegemonically heterosexual, less manly, less pure.

These tensions between the freedom of black metal, its rejection of convention and the heterosexism of its elitist ideologies, was seen in three other threads in 2009 where Gaahl's sexuality was eventually discussed (albeit with differences in emphasis). In the first of these threads<sup>13</sup>, Penrith copied some text from an unspecified website reporting the outcome of the court case mentioned in the previous section, then asked others to suggest the name of the new band Gaahl would be setting up with King ov Hell instead of Gorgoroth. Six minutes after this first posting, Radian Born replied with the unsubtle (and not particularly funny) answer: 'Gaahl and King's Magical Bumland Adventure'. Myrddin then followed with a list of possible names, including 'Norwegian Artistic Metallars' Black Luciferian Association (NAMBLA for short)<sup>14</sup>, which is a reference to the fictional paedophilic North American Man Boy Love Association of the cartoon series South Park (as if homosexuality and paedophilia are the same thing, a popular Christian fundamentalist argument). In the next few days the majority of the posts were supportive of Infernus and dismissive of Gaahl and King ov Hell. Gaygoroth was mentioned by four other posters in response to Penrith's question. Then Serafima argued, over two separate posts, that 'with Gaahl this band became way too popular'<sup>15</sup>, and 'Gaahl's voice is weak and gay like'<sup>16</sup>. This view of Gaahl was backed up by other posters - Gaahl was wrong to claim ownership of Gorgoroth because he was a weak performer, his voice mocked as gay, as if he screamed his lyrics in the style of Graham Norton<sup>17</sup>. Only towards the end of the thread did some Gorgoroth fans come to his and King ov Hell's defence - those who did so concentrated on Gaahl's impact on the band's music, and said nothing about his homosexuality. The gay jokes and the ridiculously phrased claim by Serafima were left unchallenged.

The second thread was started on 2 April 2009, by Tom-Aus-Nord. Entitled 'Homosexuality & Metal', his opening post included the following passage:

Some of you who follow Black Metal will know that not too long ago Gaahl came out as Gay. His boyfriend (at the time) understandably got death threats from some of the more moronic twats of the black metal community. I personally think its cool if he's gay and fuck what people think. I am pretty sure this will be most peoples view on the matter on this forum, although its cool if its not i don't particularly care... Its good to finally have a gay person in the metal community who can be respected as a musician and not a gimmick.<sup>18</sup>



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This set a different tone to this discussion, compared to the one over the Gorgoroth court case. Although there were a large number of negative posts, including links to crude websites, one poster who argued 'fags who flaunt their sexuality about annoy me'<sup>19</sup>, and one who thought Gaahl's homosexuality 'was some kind of BMUK joke'<sup>20</sup> the majority of the posters seemed to allow a space in black metal for Gaahl and homosexuality. For some, Gaahl was an exception, okay because he had proven himself as a heteronormative black metallor and did not act camp: 'Gaahl is a proper homo and doesn't need to act like one'<sup>21</sup>. For others, homosexuality offered a way of continuing to transgress against the norms and orthodoxies of late capitalism. As one poster suggested: 'as a thought, wouldn't you say that is Black Metal is anti-Christian, and there's no tolerance of homosexuals in Christianity, then wouldn't being gay be totally black metal?'<sup>22</sup>.

The third thread related to Gaahl's decision in August 2009 to abandon his new project with King ov Hell and to quit extreme metal to concentrate on fashion. The news was posted to the forum by a fan called brittlebones<sup>23</sup>. This initial post said nothing about Gaahl's sexuality, but respondents in the thread were quick to bring the matter to the discussion - of the first ten people to respond, six were crudely homophobic in nature, such as 'touring across Europe in filthy vans surrounded by people you secretly want to shag but you never get the chance OR make dresses'<sup>24</sup>. Two of the others expressed disinterest in Gaahl - a tacit acknowledgement that they considered Gorgoroth too mainstream. However, some fans did come to his defence. One person claimed that 'Gaahl was one of the last more or less 'true' men of the scene. Or at least he had some kind of presence'<sup>25</sup>. When the homophobic jokes continued, with links to obscene images, Requiem replied:

While this is mildly funny... this sort of homophobia (haha, I wrote homo) is unwarranted. Gaahl has kept mainstream black metal interesting for the last few years and for that I stand erect and salute him.<sup>26</sup>

As the debate petered out, one fan tried to move the discussion away from Gaahl's sexuality by claiming Gaahl quit 'because he failed at black metal, not because of some mythical bad reaction to his official notification of cock-lusting homosexuality'<sup>27</sup>. This may have been some attempt to be funny, ironic even - one can imagine an older fan writing that and being pleased with its own contradiction. Any humour, though, was absent from the fan who responded to that post, who said, in an ungrammatical but just about understandable style: 'he was a shit vocalist and cock sucker unlucky good riddance'<sup>28</sup>.

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## 5. Gender and Power in Leisure

The theoretical study of discrimination through gender is often related in discourse to issues of race and class. Yet while class has influenced the development of sociology throughout the 20th Century, both race and gender have been seen as less important or ignored altogether by the metatheorists such as Marx, Weber and Parsons. Engels derived male dominance as a consequence of male ownership of property, assigning gender inequality to the economic sphere, while Miliband - although exploring these issues - feels it necessary to subsume them under the banner of class discrimination<sup>29</sup>. Masculine studies have arisen from this imbalance, and from the feminist reassessment of the lack of gender directed social theory<sup>30</sup>. Critical feminists have pointed to a more complex relationship between gender, power, patriarchy and leisure that calls for changes in the social structure<sup>31</sup>. Connell introduces the idea of the gender order, which describes gender as a process rather than a thing. Thus we are asked to study 'a historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of femininity and masculinity'<sup>32</sup>. This gender order can be expressed through forms of cultural activity, which either maintain the gender order, or are sites of resistance to the gender order: black metal clearly maintains the gender order, but some resistance to it is also seen in the way some fans supported Gaahl.

The Gramscian solution to the paradox of leisure, exemplified by the theoretical work of Peter Bramham, is to argue that although some people - the well-off, the middle and upper classes, white people, men - may have some power, hence agency and freedom to choose their leisure, the working classes and other marginalised and disempowered social groups are denied that freedom<sup>33</sup>. Furthermore, the hegemonic status of power at the end of modernity suggests that leisure, in its commodified state, is a way in which the ruling classes keep the working classes ignorant of their oppression<sup>34</sup>. This view of leisure as the diversion of the masses is, of course, an old one. Juvenal, the Roman satirist, wrote that the people of Rome in his day were happy to be given dole (bread) and entertainment (circuses) as diversions from engaging in political debate:

... iam pridem, ex quo suffragia nulli  
uendimus, effudit curas; nam qui dabat olim  
imperium, fascēs, legiones, omnia, nunc se  
continet atque duas tantum res anxius optat,  
panem et circenses. ...<sup>35</sup>

Berger has outlined how the language of advertising works to create images of masculine power and feminine desirability, while Easthope describes how the 'masculine myth' present in popular culture naturalises,

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normalises and universalises the dominant masculinity<sup>36</sup>. As popular culture, sport and the culture around sport and leisure reveal similar discourses - heavy metal, like sport, is one site of the social construction of hegemonic masculinity. By masculinity it is taken to mean the processes and ideas that go towards the construction of male identity. However, the concept of masculinity is sometimes overused without any clear definition of what it is. It becomes self evident if we talk about the social construction of masculinity that there can be a number of masculinities: dominant heterosexual, homosexual, marginalised and so on<sup>37</sup>. That said, there is a hegemonic masculine identity that has been imposed so thoroughly on western culture that most observers take it as a norm: that of the dominant heterosexual male identified by Gilmore, the impregnator-protector-provider<sup>38</sup>, or the warrior Viking of so much heavy metal iconography. Gilmore argues that this cultural role of man, historically, has contributed to the aggressive, dominating acts of bravado that identify what Mangan calls the Ubiquitous Male in contemporary society<sup>39</sup>. This idea of a masculine archetype is challenged by work done in both psychology and sociology on the fragility of male identity<sup>40</sup>. That man was created and instinctively became the Ubiquitous Male is contested by Goldberg, who explored the socialisation of boys into tough manhood, and the emotional trouble and identity crisis this engendered<sup>41</sup>. Hearn suggests that the concept of masculinity is weak, and that instead we should look at how maleness is theorised, and what types of masculinity are produced<sup>42</sup>. The struggle of males to define themselves has also been observed by Middleton and Horrocks, for example, who see a crisis in man over what it is to be one, what types of masculinity are acceptable<sup>43</sup>. Horrocks also explores the psychology of masculinity, taking as his starting point the importance of the individual in defining his own identity from 'male myths and icons'<sup>44</sup>.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper shows how the hegemonic masculinity prevalent in western culture is expressed in black metal: through a rejection of homosexuality and an adherence to heteronormativity, even though such acts betray the freedom of the black metal scene. The key word is expression. What the story of Gaahl reveals is how masculinity is expressed in black metal, how it is shaped and supported and understood through correct behaviour - and how the scene's attitudes to individuality can make some space for the expression of alternative masculinities and sexualities. Through this one can then see how differing expressions are in tension with each other, reflecting tensions within the imaginary community of black metal over who and what defines the boundaries: in this case male identity. Hence the conceptual problem over the use of masculinity and the realisation of differing masculinities is sidestepped. As Connell suggests, there can be

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competing expressions of masculinity, and the cultural setting of the masculine construction must be taken into account<sup>45</sup>.

The epistemological framework of Jurgen Habermas can help us understand the relationship between different notions of sexuality and power in the black metal imaginary community. Despite its homoerotic nature, exemplified by the tragicomical iconography of bands like Immortal, black metal is not an obviously welcoming scene for gay men. Gaahl's decision to make his homosexuality known to the world was a Habermasian communicative action, a decision made freely and with the intention of making a powerful point: Gaahl had the confidence of status, and self-assurance, to make his own meaning out of the identities permissible in black metal. That some fans chose to dismiss this with homophobic remarks demonstrates the hegemonic status of what Butler calls heteronormativity: even in the transgressive community of black metal, there are Habermasian instrumental rationalities at work restricting experiments with alternative masculinities.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See A Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1971.

<sup>2</sup> See J Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> B Carrington and I McDonald, *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport*, Routledge, London, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> E Carton, 'Labour, leisure and liminality: disciplinary work at play', *Leisure Studies*, vol. 27(4), 2008, pp. 375-378.

<sup>5</sup> A Bennett, 'Punk's not dead: the continuing significance of punk rock for an older generation of fans', *Sociology*, vol. 40 (2), 2006, pp. 219-235.

<sup>6</sup> K Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, Berg, Oxford, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> For black metal see K Spracklen, 'Leisure, consumption and a blaze in the northern sky', *World Leisure Journal*, vol. 48(3), 2006, pp. 33-55. Habermas' framework can be found in J Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Polity, Cambridge, 1981:1984.

<sup>8</sup> For ideologies see K Spracklen, 'Leisure, consumption and a blaze in the northern sky', *World Leisure Journal*, vol. 48(3), 2006, pp. 33-55. For NSBM see K Spracklen, 'True Aryan Black Metal: The Meaning of Leisure, Belonging and the Construction of Whiteness in Black Metal Music', paper presented at the Inter-Disciplinary.Net Music, Metal and Politics conference, Salzburg, November 2008. A wider discussion can be found in K Spracklen, *The Meaning and Purpose of Leisure*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> See J Fernback, 'Beyond the diluted community concept: a symbolic interactionist perspective on online social relations', *New Media and Society*, vol. 9(1), 2007, pp. 49-69.

<sup>10</sup> iBergen.no, 'Jeg var gal etter Dan', *iBergen.no*, 24 July 2008, accessed 28 September 2009, <[www.nettavisen.no/innenriks/ibergen/article2086056.ece](http://www.nettavisen.no/innenriks/ibergen/article2086056.ece)>.

<sup>11</sup> Gaahl quoted in S Pambalis, 'A Decade of Aggression', *Terrorizer*, 178, 2008, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Penrith, response to thread 'What Metal Shirt Are You Wearing Right Now?', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 16 September 2009, 13:28.

<sup>13</sup> Penrith, response to thread 'Infernus wins over Gorgoroth name rights', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, started 10 March 2009, 07:29.

<sup>14</sup> Myrddin, response to thread 'Infernus wins over Gorgoroth name rights', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 10 March 2009, 07:50.

<sup>15</sup> Serafima, response to thread 'Infernus wins over Gorgoroth name rights', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 10 March 2009, 09:39.

<sup>16</sup> Serafima, response to thread 'Infernus wins over Gorgoroth name rights', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 10 March 2009, 09:42.

<sup>17</sup> A TV presenter in Great Britain, famed for his outrageously camp manner.

<sup>18</sup> Tom-Aus-Nord, initial posting in thread 'Homosexuality & Metal', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 2 April 2009, 09:02.

<sup>19</sup> Kveldulf, response to thread 'Homosexuality & Metal', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 3 April 2009, 06:44.

<sup>20</sup> Dying Willow, response to thread 'Homosexuality & Metal', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 3 April 2009, 18:51.

<sup>21</sup> EnglishKnight, response to thread 'Homosexuality & Metal', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 5 April 2009, 16:00.

<sup>22</sup> scale, response to thread 'Homosexuality & Metal', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 3 April 2009, 23:04.

<sup>23</sup> brittlebones, initial posting in thread 'Gaahl quits metal', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 16 August 2009, 22:49.

<sup>24</sup> blackmetalisgoodforyou, response to thread 'Gaahl quits metal', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 17 August, 18:39.

<sup>25</sup> Requiem, response to thread 'Gaahl quits metal', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 17 August 2009, 09:29.

<sup>26</sup> Requiem, response to thread 'Gaahl quits metal,' blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 21 August 2009, 11:33.

<sup>27</sup> Conservationist, response to thread 'Gaahl quits metal,' blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 30 August 2009, 22:21.

<sup>28</sup> Morte Malefica, response to thread 'Gaahl quits metal,' blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 30 August 2009, 23:48.

<sup>29</sup> See F Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1972; R Miliband, *Divided Societies: Class Struggle in Contemporary Capitalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989.

<sup>30</sup> M Kimmel, *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, Sage, Newbury Park, 1987; A Brittan, *Masculinity and Power*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1989.

<sup>31</sup> R Watson and S Scraton, 'Confronting Whiteness? Researching the Leisure Lives of South Asian Mothers', *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 10(3), 2001, pp. 265-277.

<sup>32</sup> R Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1987, pp. 98-99.

<sup>33</sup> P Bramham, 'Hard and Disappearing Work: Making Sense of the Leisure Project'. *Leisure Studies*, 25(4), 2006, pp. 379-390. For the paradox of leisure see also K Spracklen, *The Meaning and Purpose of Leisure*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> B Carrington and I McDonald, *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport*, Routledge, London, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Juvenal, Satire 10.77-81, in S Braund, *Juvenal and Perseus*, Loeb, Harvard, 2004. Translated as follows: 'already long ago, from when we sold our vote to no man, the people have abdicated our duties; for the people who once upon a time handed out military command, high civil office, legions... everything, now restrains itself and anxiously hopes for just two things: bread and circuses'.

<sup>36</sup> J Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972; A Easthope, *What a man's gotta do: the masculine myth in popular culture*, Paladin, London, 1986.

<sup>37</sup> R Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1987. Also his later work *Masculinities*, Polity, Cambridge, 1995. See also M Messner, *Power at Play*, Beacon, Boston, 1992; and the edited collection by M Messner and D Sabo, *Sport, Men and the Gender Order*, Human Kinetics, Champaign, 1990.

<sup>38</sup> D Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making*, Yale University Press, New York, 1990.

<sup>39</sup> J Mangan, 'Duty unto death: English masculinity and militarism in the age of the New Imperialism,' in *Tribal Identities: Nationalism, Europe, Sport*, J Mangan (ed), Cass, London, 1995, pp. 10-38.

<sup>40</sup> H Brod and M Kaufman, *Theorizing Masculinities*, Sage, London, 1994.

<sup>41</sup> S Goldberg, *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, Morrow, New York, 1974.

<sup>42</sup> J Hearn, 'Reviewing men and masculinities - or mostly boys' own papers', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 6(4), 1989, pp. 665-689.

<sup>43</sup> R Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1994; P Middleton, *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture*, Routledge, London, 1992.

<sup>44</sup> R Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1995.

<sup>45</sup> R Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1987.

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# Communication Function in the Estonian Metal Subculture

*Lii Araste*

## **Abstract**

In the 1980s the metal subculture arrived in Estonia. This, next to the punk-culture, is considered one of the oldest youth subcultures in the country. In the rest of the world the scenes are divided by styles (black metal scene, heavy scene etc) but due to Estonia's small population there is only one subculture connecting all metal music fans. This changes the whole nature of the collective identity. The objective of this paper is to find out what are the characteristics of the Estonian metal subculture and how it has developed over time. In exploring this, the role of communication in the development of the subculture will be examined. In this paper, the grounded theory methodology has been used to develop the theoretical lens. Ten interviews with metal subculture members were carried out: as the objective of the paper was to investigate subcultural change, the principle of the sample forming was the connectedness with the subculture. The primary results show that in Estonian metal subculture the importance of looks and metal have been tied to various channels of communication throughout different periods. As such, communication holds key importance in the creation and existence of a cultural identity.

**Key Words:** Communication, heavy metal, identity, subculture.

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## **1. Introduction**

In the 1980s the metal subculture arrived in Estonia. Next to the punk culture, it is considered one of the oldest youth subcultures in the country. In the rest of the world the scenes are divided by styles (the black metal scene, the heavy scene, death metal, etc.) but due to Estonia's small population there is one subculture connecting all metal music fans. In the Estonian metal subculture there have been four basic periods, with different musical styles, values and norms, but what differs between them are how many members are in the subculture and which communication channels they use. The objective of this paper is to find out how the Estonian metal subculture has developed over time and the role of communication within it.

## **2. Method**

In this paper, grounded theory methodology has been used to develop the theoretical lens<sup>1</sup>. Ten interviews with metal subculture members have been carried out. As the objective of the study was to investigate

subcultural change, the principle of the sample forming was the connectedness with the subculture. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, the transcribed information was encoded and the main keywords were found. The conclusions were formed in modules, helping to create references and to bring out the most important mentalities and values of the interviewees.

### **3. Theoretical Background**

Fiske argues that the main or most important streams in communication theory are the process school and the semiotic school.<sup>2</sup> I concentrate on the last one, which defines communication in general as creating semantics and sharing, which makes an individual member of a society or culture. The semiotic school is important when we speak about communication in a subcultural context because the culture is considered as important as signs and codes. If by communication theory it is important to link a communication category with a cultural category then in cultural research it is important to link culture with communication. One of the most important semioticians, Juri Lotman, developed a semiotic approach to the study of culture and established a communication model for the study of text semiotics.<sup>3</sup>

However, culture is constructivistic. As Ehala further develops, collective identity is created by making empirically sensed characteristics relevant in the communication process.<sup>4</sup> The creation of collective identity at a cultural level takes place by the communication of cultural agents at the micro level. The fact of having empirically sensed characteristics does not make collective identity. Culture can be created only when the characteristics are shared and valued. Metal culture is basically an agreement between head bangers that listening to that kind of music is important. Metal culture is sustainable if the agreement is reconstructed constantly. Through communication new values are created and old ones are revised, but listening to the metal music has to remain the most important value. Communication has an important role in producing and reproducing culture. Cultural sustainability can be measured by the amount of communicators and by channels of communication.

### **4. Periods**

In the Estonian metal subculture there have been four periods: heavy age; first high point; low point; and new age. The heavy age was the first period in the metal scene and began in 1980. The first high point, like metal subculture agents ran from the end of the 1980s until the middle of the 1990s. The low point was in the middle in the 1990s, and the new age started at the end of the 1990s and continues today.

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The weakening of the Soviet Regime in the middle of 1980s created the possibility to start alternative subcultures in Estonia. The first alternative subculture was punk subculture. As the availability of rock music was limited, youngsters listened to different rock styles, like punk and heavy. Therefore young metallers interacted closely with punk and other different rock style representatives. In that period a new and alternative heavy style became almost mainstream. Metal music and related information was shared in schools. People who were really interested in metal and wanted to get more of it created a subculture. The separation was empowered by the practical need to find others with the same interest and to acquire underground music and other fan items. At the same time the first local metal bands were founded. Besides exchanging music, the first characteristics of collective identity occurred. First, external symbols. Commitment to style was very important. In one point it was the overtaking of new and cool western lifestyle. On the other hand there was a practical need for face-to-face communication as there were no alternatives: there was a need to find others metal music fans. The most important place to communicate was said to be Plaadimägi (Disc Hill) - a hill in the middle of the old town, officially called Harjumägi. On Plaadimägi every Sunday there was an unofficial market place where the exchanging, selling and buying of music and related fan items took place. It was an important place for communication and chilling. Different rock music style representatives used Plaadimägi for the same purposes. This meant that it was adopted by other subcultures as the communication field it as well. This kind of communication field produced a need to interact between other alternative music scenes.

Media coverage for metal music was non-existent at that period of time and obviously there was no niche media. As music related information (band names, musicians, LP record names, track names etc.) is important subcultural capital, there was a need for written sources. A specific phenomenon, which can be considered as real underground niche media, emerged - the heavy writing book. Every book owner took notes about band names, musicians, LP record names, track names etc. Pictures and logos were drawn in heavy writing books and, if the author was extremely lucky, cut outs from foreign magazines. Sometimes photos were taken from pictures in magazines. These heavy writing books were lent out to other fans for rewriting. Books were compared - owners who had most information were the coolest. Constant rewriting and lack of English skills caused many mistakes in the books

The first high point is said to be the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. This was the period when extreme metal started to dominate the metal subculture. If in the last period we faced the separation from punk music, whilst developing side by side with it, then now metal and punk separated totally. Specific communication channels and places were

taken in to use for metal subculture members only. Most importantly, concerts for metal music only were organised. From the perspective of concert organisers it was related to a sufficient amount of metal fans existing. From the bands' point of view they got the opportunity to perform: before there were only mixed concerts with different rock styles, therefore the chances to get on the stage were limited (only the best groups were selected for concerts). This situation increased motivation for young metal groups.

Secondly there were possibilities to communicate with western metal bands, producers and fans of course. These reasons motivated all the metal musicians to take band making seriously because of the sensible result (contract and opportunity to perform). At the same time new bands created new fans therefore the metal scene was growing.

Specific metal clubs were founded; concerts were organised every weekend over many years and often youngsters booked their whole weekends for club activities. The rest of their spare time was spent in bands' practice rooms. Besides the band members, friends and girlfriends spent their time in practice rooms as well. It has been said that during these kinds of gatherings a significant amount of alcohol was consumed. Because of the big changes in the whole society at that time there was a lack of parental guidance, which made drinking and hanging out in practice rooms easier. Spending all this time together brought them closer to each other and strengthened their collective identity.

One important reason why metal fans consider this age as a high point is that there is a clear contrast with the previous period. In that period they did not have to take into account the normatives of other subcultures in common communication field, which strengthened their collective identity. They had feelings of, 'we are so many and we are so powerful': this feeling might have been created by the strong collective identity rather than by the actual number of headbangers. In spite of the fact that many metal fans claim that in this period there was a large number of new subculture members, it has been said that all of them knew each other at least by face and not only in Tallinn, but all over Estonia.

The subculture fell in the middle of the 1990s to a low point. Some of the metal music fans associate this period with the wave of radical black metal, at the same time some think that black metal gave a push for the development of new trends. Attitudes towards this period and towards black metal are rather emotional. The most important reason for the low point lay with changes in the communication field. At the same time a strong invasion of new subcultures occurred in Estonia. New and interesting lifestyles were taken from Western culture, through opened media channels and opportunities to travel (hip-hop, club culture etc.). If, so far, youngsters had participated in only punk or metal subcultures, then now they went with the

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new opportunities. Basically the old subculture was abandoned and a new was found.

The second important reason for the decreasing number of cultural agents was age. The generation of the high point reached the age of graduating high schools; they formed families, went to the universities or got a job. The circle of communication changed and metal communication was no longer primary. The communication field was influenced also by economical changes in society. If until now people met in bands' practice rooms and at concerts then now these possibilities disappeared. The end of regularly organised concerts was related to the reasons mentioned already: there were fewer subculture members. It was also related to the fact that the cost of living was increasing: organising concerts was far more expensive than before. Also the bands' practice rooms started to disappear, because the owners of the premises started to ask for the rent money.

'Plaadimägi' had lost its importance as a communication place because of the possibility to buy music and fan items in shops: there was no reason to go there. From that period only people outside Tallinn have mentioned the 'Plaadimägi'. The reduction in the number of metal fans and the domination of black metal from the Nordic countries brought into the scene the ideology of isolation. Metal was kept artificially underground. Insincere young wannabes were kept away from the scene. It can be considered as myth creation with the protest against metal being an ordinary pop music style. In that period pubs became the new place of gathering, but young and moneyless people could not go there. In previous periods the core of the metal scene was located in Tallinn, now the important centres of metal culture became provincial cities like Rakvere and Pärnu.

An important role in turning from the low point to the new age was played by black metal bands from Rakvere and a few metal activists from Tallinn and Pärnu. The most important role in reconstructing the metal scene was taken by activists who had increased their subcultural capital.

In the end of the 1990s the organisation of concerts began again. Organisers were the leaders of the bands who wanted to create possibilities to perform for their own bands. Although the first concerts turned out negative profit it was no obstacle to continuing - profit was not the primary goal. Similarly to the first high point these first concerts led to the growth of an audience and the formation of new bands. Even people who had abandoned the metal subculture in the last period returned to it. Since 1999 regular concerts have been organised again. The hard rock club was founded and has a leading role in promoting Estonian metal today. In 2001 the first open air metal festival 'Hard Rock Laager' was started. It is today considered as the most important carrier of collective identity. All this brought media coverage and involved new youngsters.

Massive use of the Internet helped with the new developments and values in the metal subculture. Currently the most important part of communication takes place in the Internet, which has different specific databases, forums and portals. All this has expanded the access to the subculture and enables everyday communication. Face to face communication happens mainly in special metal pubs, and during the weekend there are also small live concerts. A significant part of the aforementioned communication happens in places owned by HRC. Due to this, the subculture has faced hierarchy. Although the subculture consists of smaller groups, the construction of identity and communication takes place in the situation where leaders have much to say.

In this period many metal bands have reached the mainstream audience. Some of the bands have reached top radio playlists and have been nominated for music awards. One of the bestselling records in Estonia in 2006 was by a metal band. So at the moment metal has again become one of the most popular alternative music styles. If we are watching different periods and the communication field in this subculture, we can see that change and development over time are occurring in the metal subculture, but most importantly it survives. And I think that will be same in future.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> B Glaser and A Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Aldine, Chicago, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> J Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, Routledge, London, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> J Lotman, *Semiosfäärist*, Vagabun, Tallinn, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> M Ehala, 'The Bronze Soldier: Identity threat and maintenance in Estonia'. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, vol. 40(1), 2009, pp. 139 – 158

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## **PART IV**

### **Technologies and Musicologies**



# **Louder Than Hell: Power, Volume and the Brain**

*Colin A. McKinnon*

## **Abstract**

The sheer loudness of metal is one of its defining characteristics and, unlike some other aspects, is also one of the most recognisable both to metalheads and to those outside the metal scene. In addition to the quest for bands to have 'everything louder than everything else,' the call extends to the listener, with songs that act as paeans to loudness, exhortations on albums to 'play it loud' and incitement at concerts to exceed recommended sound levels, all of which celebrates rebellion and camaraderie and feeds into a sense of self-identity and belonging. Loudness is inextricably associated with power, particularly with masculine power, expressed both implicitly and explicitly (e.g., Manowar's anthem 'All Men Play on 10'); in this context, lack of volume equates to a lack of power and treatment with disrespect and disdain, while revelling in loudness is akin to a badge of honour. Changes in the way we listen to music have also resulted in competition and controversy in the music industry in the form of loudness wars. However, the pursuit of loudness can also be viewed as ultimately self-destructive - prolonged exposure to high volumes can cause tinnitus, permanent hearing damage and even total hearing loss.

The power of metal may also be strongly linked to the listener's emotions, particularly when the music is very loud - besides the powerful psychological effects of metal on the emotions, high volume can have remarkable effects on the neural transmitters in the brain, causing overstimulation and possibly even permanent alterations to the brain's neural network over prolonged periods; loudness may change the listener's state of consciousness and perception in both the short- and long-term. Notable effects can be found on an area of the brain closely associated with pleasure and addiction. These themes will therefore be discussed and the connections and associations explored.

**Key Words:** Cerebellum, dopamine, loudness, neural transmitters, nucleus accumbens, power, volume.

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## **1. Loudness and Power**

The power inherent in metal is well known to aficionados of the music and has been well documented in academic studies by sociologists, musicologists, anthropologists and others. In Robert Walser's masterly academic study of metal, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and*

*Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, he hits the nail squarely on the head by stating that the organisation of diverse elements that characterise metal (which Deena Weinstein in *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture* referred to as a 'bricolage'<sup>1</sup> 'revolve around concepts, images and experiences of power'.<sup>2</sup> The transforming element is central to these concepts of power; as Prof. Walser notes:

The loudness and intensity of heavy metal music visibly empower fans, whose shouting and headbanging testify to the creation of energy at concerts. Metal energizes the body, transforming space and social relations.<sup>3</sup>

This concept of power lies at the heart of metal and links together all of metal's different and disparate sub-genres, fan factions and elements that comprise metal as a whole. Although acknowledged, it is often difficult to define exactly where this power resides, and may be interpreted differently by different fans - a fan of AC/DC may interpret and internalise this concept of power in a very different way to fans of Darkthrone or Cannibal Corpse, for example. However, I contend that the sheer volume at which metal is played and listened to is central to the various concepts of power, although perhaps not always overtly, and at least partly responsible for its transformational nature. Indeed, the loudness of metal music is arguably one of its strongest defining characteristics, recognisable both to metalheads and those outside the metal scene. The recognition of loudness is apparent in the way that it is parodied, prime examples being the famous Spinal Tap amps that go up to 11, Pickles the drummer in the fictional band Dethklok, who has liquid concrete poured in his ears before every show to prevent permanent hearing damage, and the heavy rock band Disaster Area in *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* series, a band so loud that their concerts can only be safely enjoyed from within a concrete bunker 37 miles away from the actual stage.

High volume is one of the aspects of metal that is openly celebrated, obvious examples being the Kiss anthems 'Shout it out Loud' and 'I Love it Loud', Saxon's 'Play it Loud', and Manowar's 'All Men Play on 10', 'Blow Your Speakers', and in many specific instances within songs, for example: 'I'm on top as long as the music's loud' ('You've Got Another Thing Coming', Judas Priest), 'When we're in town, speakers explode' ('Kings of Metal', Manowar) or 'If it's too loud, you're too old' ('Hot and Cold', Kiss). Like many aspects of metal, I contend that loudness is one characteristic that sets it apart from other forms of music. Although other forms of music may also be regularly played or experienced at high volume, for example punk and some forms of dance and rap/hip hop, metal appears to be the only form that openly celebrates and actively encourages loudness in this manner;

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indeed, the evolution of metal and concurrent advances in amplification have shown that metal is created with the specific intention of being played at high volume. According to Prof. Walser, 'the nature of metal and the needs and pleasures it addresses demand that it always be heard loud'.<sup>4</sup> One of the main reasons for this, as noted by Daniel Frandsen in the First Global Conference on Heavy Metal, for example, is that it is often necessary for metal to be played loud due to the speed and technicality of the music.<sup>5</sup> Lower volumes do not allow an appreciation of all the contributing elements that make up the music; the bottom end of the sound may be consequently become lost or marginalised.

Another reason is that high volume is one of the key ways in which the power inherent in metal is transformed both by the context and the form and transferred to the listener, especially so in a concert scenario. As Deena Weinstein states,

Loudness is meant to overwhelm, to sweep the listener into the sound, and then to lend the listener the sense of power that the sound provides.<sup>6</sup>

This can be thought of as essentially a catalytic process; by absorbing the power through the loudness, the listener's own energy is activated through an intense emotional response and activation of primal areas in the brain. Besides being played extremely loudly in a concert setting, metal is frequently recorded in such a way as to re-create the loudness and intensity of the music, enabling this catalytic process to take place whenever the listener plays a favourite CD and cranks up the volume.

## **2. Loudness and Aural Space**

Although other aspects of music, such as pitch, timbre, melody, lyrical content, etc., have all been studied in various forms by academic researchers, comparatively little research into the relevance and effects of loudness has been performed. It has been suggested that the concept of aural architecture or aural space has direct relevance to loud music; the boundaries of an aural space are determined by the acoustic horizon, which is in turn determined by the loudest sounds.<sup>7</sup>

Loud music transports listeners into another aural space, moving them from the social space of people to the musical space of the performers. Loud music also suppresses the internal space of daydreams, overpowering the inner space of self-generated sounds and pictures, and listeners are only in the space of the musicians. Everything else is gone.

Loudness is a space transporter because you become functionally deaf to the immediate environment.<sup>8</sup>

Loudness also represents intense energy, because loud sounds are associated with dynamic events that require such energy. In evolutionary terms, we respond to loudness as 'exciting' because of the implied physicality - without amplification, it takes some physical effort to produce loud sounds, and we still respond to loudness as if it were actual physical energy.

The transforming power of high volume in metal is especially notable in a concert setting, where loudness levels can reach 120 dB (or more) in some instances. Consider that 110 dB is equivalent to standing about 1 meter away from someone using a road drill, 120 dB is equivalent to standing approximately 300 meters from a jet during take-off, and that the pain threshold for the human auditory system is in the region of 120-125 dB. Manowar reputedly achieved 129.5 dB, from which they cite a claim as 'the loudest band in the world'.<sup>9</sup> Earlier this year, Kiss apparently reached 136 dB during a concert in Canada, despite a decibel limit of 90 dB for the event; unsurprisingly, the sound engineer was forced to turn the volume down after complaints from local residents.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. Neurobiological Effects**

It has been noted that there is a 'special state of consciousness, a sense of thrills and excitement, when the music is really loud'.<sup>11</sup> Such loudness over-stimulates the neural transmitters in the brain, so that they are figuratively firing on all cylinders. Each nerve cell involved in hearing connects to several cilia (hair cells) in the auditory canal and possibly other nerve cells. Some of these nerve cells work on normal input, i.e., the firing of several hair cells in order to generate a signal, while some (nervous cells) require only a few hair cells and some (lazy cells) require the firing of nearly all of the hair cells to generate a signal. The third category - the 'lazy' nerve cells - therefore only generate signals in response to very loud sounds, which means that the number of nerve cells responding to a particular sound is not just proportional to the intensity.

This over-stimulation of the neural transmitters may induce a state in the listener that is qualitatively different from the normal situation.<sup>12</sup> Some have likened this experience to an almost spiritual transcendence. There is also some evidence that repeated over-stimulation of this type may even lead to even permanent alterations to the brain's neural network over prolonged periods; loudness may therefore change the listener's state of consciousness and perception in both the short- and long-term. Although the phrase 'altered state of consciousness' has negative connotations for many people due to associations with mind-altering substances, including alcohol, the main

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difficulty with this phrase is the implication that there is some kind of 'normal' state that can therefore be altered by such things; however, this may not be true, since our mind states (emotional, cognitive, perceptual, biochemical etc.) are constantly altered depending on the surrounding environment and stimuli. Loud music, however, acts as an incredibly complex stimulus (and, indeed, stimulant) that can alter the mind-body state dramatically.

#### **4. Loudness, Emotions and Pleasure Centres**

The concept of power in metal is also inextricably linked with the effect that the music has on the emotions of the listener. Neuroscientists have noted that intense musical emotion is 'associated with brain regions thought to be involved in reward, motivation and arousal' and particularly with areas concerned with pleasure and addiction, i.e., the nucleus accumbens and closely involved with the transmission of opioids and the production of dopamine.<sup>13,14,15</sup> The question of whether the interaction with areas associated with addiction may have something to do with the intense loyalty that metal inspires in its fans, although purely speculative, is an interesting one.

The activation of the nucleus accumbens is also closely associated with activation of the cerebellum and the basal ganglia, which comprise the so-called 'reptilian brain', the oldest part of the brain in evolutionary terms. This part controls functions such as breathing, heart rate, temperature, balance and movement. The involvement of this primitive part of the brain in the emotions we feel on hearing music is, of course, common to all forms of music. One of the key features of the cerebellum, though, is that it seems to be associated with musical preference - it appears to be particularly activated when we listen to music that we like, and not so much when we hear music that we do not like. The intensity of the pleasurable experience obtained from one's preferred form of music is increased even more when the volume is increased, since neurological attentiveness (arousal) is substantially enhanced.

Interestingly there is evidence that some of the neural connections to these areas in the brain that are responsive to pleasure are stimulated only by high volumes. There is a component of the inner ear called the sacculus, which has direct neural connections to these 'pleasure centres' and which is stimulated by low frequency, high volume sounds (above 90 dB) and responds particularly to loud music with a strong beat.<sup>16,17,18</sup> The sacculus does not appear to have any direct relation to functional hearing in humans, and may be part of a primitive hearing mechanism that has slowly disappeared during human evolution. Again, we see connections between loudness and the 'primal' areas of the brain. In fact, the relative contribution of the sacculus connections to the brain may be increased in relation to the contribution from the inner ears' auditory mechanism since loud noise



triggers the stapedius reflex, a mechanism that attenuates the sound entering the inner ear.<sup>19</sup> Music that is very loud therefore enhances these neural responses and triggers additional connections that are previously dormant. In addition, since the sacculus is part of the vestibular/balancing system of the inner ear, one can only speculate whether headbanging might have any additional effects.

It would be simplistic to simply state that loud music stimulates what we think of as the 'pleasure centres' in the brain for those with a preference for the type of music in question, since there are some very complex neurological pathways involved. However, it gets more interesting when we consider another key characteristic of metal concerts - audience participation. The music probably has some effect on the serotonergic system of the brain, although this is not well understood and is still under debate; if so, however, this contributes to a feeling of well-being and unity with those around you. Secondly, add in the effects of the volume of the music, with its influence on opioids and dopamine. On top of that, add in the group singing, which, besides raising the overall volume even further, releases endorphins, another 'feel good' hormone (and a painkiller three times more potent than morphine) and also contributes substantially to group bonding. Some of the factors that may play a part in the sense of community in metal that has been previously noted and discussed therefore become apparent.

##### **5. Intimidation and the 'Loudness War'**

Interestingly, the same loudness that fans find so empowering is often cited as one of the aspects of metal that non-fans find most unpleasant, irritating or even scary. Adverse reaction to metal is often on a visceral level, dismissing the music as offensively noisy, deafening or painful.<sup>20,21</sup> In this sense, we can see the intimidatory aspect of metal, that fact that it can be specifically designed to create fear, shock, even revulsion. Loudness has long been used to intimidate in this way; as an example, one of the reasons the Scots were most feared on the battlefields of the late nineteenth century was because of the use of bagpipes and drums, two of the loudest non-amplified instruments, as they advanced (although perhaps the sight of several thousand red-haired, bearded men in tartan skirts marching towards the enemy might also have been an important factor). Loud music can be associated with fear because the brain also associates loudness with violent impacts and, simplistically, with things that are very big and very close; the instinct, generally, is to try to put some distance between you and whatever is causing the noise.

It has also become obvious in recent years that the way people listen to music has changed. The advent of MP3 players and before that, CDs, increased the portability of music; consequently, listening to music in some ways became a more solitary pastime as people began to use headphones and

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earphones rather than speakers to enjoy their music. Inevitably, this has led to changes in the way the music industry produces, mixes and masters popular music: songs are deliberately made louder by compression of the dynamic range, which reduces the differences between the loudest and softest parts of the music. The effect grabs the attention of the listener in a very forceful way and has resulted in what has become known as 'the loudness war'. Although certain levels of compression have always been a factor in popular music, often to balance the sounds of different instruments for example, the digital compression employed in recent years has been geared more towards getting the listeners' attention in noisier environments, particularly when using portable music players. This loudness war, although not specifically associated with traditionally loud music, has brought loudness to the forefront and exposes people to it in a very direct, even aggressive way. This, combined with the prevalence of the use of in-ear headphones to listen to music, means that many people regularly listen to music at levels over 90 or 100 dB, well in excess of the 85 dB minimum level for the risk of hearing damage. Hearing loss is risked by exposure to 2 hours per day at 91 dB, for example, while at 99 dB only around 15 minutes per day can be tolerated before the risk of hearing loss ensues. Is there any connection between the resurgence in the popularity of metal in the last 10 years and the fact that people are exposed to, and indeed actively seek out louder music? Again, the question is purely speculative and there is no evidence, but it is a potentially interesting point to consider.

#### **6. Unexpected Benefits of Loudness**

One of the reasons that loudness has not received the same attention as other musical factors is because it is so difficult to study, not least because of the ethicality of deliberately exposing subjects to noise levels that can cause damage to the auditory mechanism. This also raises the question of self-destructive behaviour - permanent damage to the hair cells of the auditory mechanism has been proven in numerous scientific studies, and there is little doubt years of exposure to very loud music, particularly where low frequencies are employed can directly result in tinnitus, irrevocable hearing damage and, in extreme cases, total hearing loss.<sup>22</sup> A recent report by the US Centres for Disease Control, for example, indicated that nearly 13% of children show some level of noise-induced hearing loss.<sup>23</sup> Although this figure may be an over-estimate, there is evidence that hearing damage as a result of consistent exposure to loud music is increasing. Besides the physical consequence of being unable to enjoy music in the same way, hearing loss also has social, emotional and psychological consequences. Since the input to the brain is permanently altered in people with hearing loss, this may also lead to qualitative changes in brain activation characteristics.<sup>24</sup> Undiagnosed hearing loss has been identified as a cause of mental illness, and symptoms of

paranoia have been observed as a result of simulated deafness.<sup>25,26</sup> Why, then, do so many people ignore the warnings, and even the first danger signs, and continue to expose themselves to high volumes on a regular basis? There may, of course, be a multitude of factors that contribute to what may be thought of as self-destructive behaviour, as demonstrated in many psychological studies. However, there may also be two relatively simple explanations: 1) the consequences are not immediately apparent because it takes such a long time for permanent damage to manifest, and 2) loud music is associated with positive emotions and pleasurable experiences.

Recent evidence suggests a potential third reason - despite what we know about hearing damage from loud music, it may actually be good for our brains. We have seen how loud music can have remarkable effects on the neural transmitters in the brain, and how some of this stimulation only occurs above a certain volume. The intense stimulation as a result of high volume may actually help the brain to function more effectively through the phenomenon of stochastic resonance. This is where the performance of a system is improved in some way by the addition of noise (noise in this context meaning some kind of input signal rather than sound) - a weaker regular signal can be amplified by the addition of a random, disordered one. There is evidence that the brain creates its own background noise to produce a stochastic resonance effect.<sup>27,28</sup> For example, modelling studies with artificial brain systems have indicated that the addition of noise to original signals can increase sensitivity to the signals ten-fold.<sup>29,30</sup> Further evidence suggests that in the human brain this additional input may come from the auditory mechanism itself, specifically from the electrical impulses created by the cilia of the inner ear,<sup>31</sup> one study has demonstrated that these cells produce approximately ten times more noise (i.e., input) than would be expected. The inner noise of stochastic resonance may therefore be influenced by intense auditory stimuli. In other words, loud volumes might help your brain to function better - perhaps this is one reason why there are so many metalheads in universities.

What are we to make of the occasional emphasis on the masculine elements of loudness, as we see in lyrics such as 'We don't attract wimps 'cause we're too loud' ('Kings of Metal', Manowar) or 'All Men Play on 10'. Sentiments such as these, although they may seem reflect a politically incorrect stereotype, in fact give a fairly accurate reflection of what we know about the influence of loud music on male and female brains. Gender does indeed moderate the influence of loudness - females respond more positively to music at lower volumes, and males are significantly more likely to listen to music at a very loud volume and for longer periods;<sup>32,33</sup> in addition, the threshold at which music is considered to be 'very loud' is significantly higher in men than in women.<sup>34</sup> However, it should also be made clear that musical preference plays an important role in both sexes - it has been shown

that people asked to assign numerical values to different intensity levels of samples of rock may have similar judgments about loudness, but ratings for annoyance are very different depending on whether they have a preference for rock music.<sup>35,36</sup> This might seem obvious, but it does dispel the myth that those of us who like loud music do not perceive it as being as loud as other people do. In fact, judgments about loudness are closely related to the strength of the physical signal, but judgments about annoyance are more context-dependent. Other studies show that, when asked to adjust the intensity of the music from random written instructions, those who have a preference for loud music adjust the intensity to much higher levels than those who don't.<sup>37,38</sup> Interestingly, there also seems to be a difference in loudness perception between musicians and non-musicians; musicians can more accurately match the loudness of a neutral stimulus to a given selection of music.<sup>39</sup>

Excessive loudness is, of course, not unique to metal - it is a feature of other forms of music, notably punk and certain forms of dance music. However, when you combine the effects of loud volumes in metal with what other researchers confirm about its influence, e.g., the powerful emotions that it stirs, the sense of community belonging and self-identity that it conveys, one can begin to get a sense of just how unique and powerful a force metal can be.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> D Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture*, Da Capo Press, Cambridge, MA, USA, 2000, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> R Walser. *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT, USA, 1993, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> D Frandsen, 'Suicide, booze and loud guitars: The ethical problem of heavy metal', paper presented at Heavy Fundametalisms: Music, Metal and Politics 1st Global Conference, Salzburg, Austria, 3-5 Nov 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Weinstein, 2000, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> B Blesser. 'The seductive (yet destructive) appeal of loud music.' eContact! 9.4: *Hearing Loss and Related Issues, Canadian Electroacoustic Community*, Montreal, Canada, June 2007.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loudest\\_band\\_in\\_the\\_world](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loudest_band_in_the_world)>, accessed 10 October 2009.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, accessed 10 October 2009.

<sup>11</sup> DJ Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*, Plume Books, New York, NY, USA, 2007, p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>14</sup> A Blood and RJ Zatorre, 'Intensely pleasurable responses to music correlate with activity in brain regions implicated in reward and emotion'. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, Vol. 98(20), 2001, pp. 11818-11823.

<sup>15</sup> Blesser, 2007.

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<sup>23</sup> <<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/noise/index.htm>>, accessed 11 October 2009.

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## **Dissonance and Dissidents: The Flattened Supertonic Within and Without of Heavy Metal Music**

*Sarha Moore*

### **Abstract**

Tension and dissonance are vital elements in metal music and musical tension is frequently created by the use of the flattened supertonic (referred to below as the flat second), that is a note a semitone higher than the tonic (keynote). The instability and discord of the flat second is the 'other' to the norm of the keynote, hovering above it in a claustrophobic fashion. The musical background of Western rock and classical music from which heavy metal arose in the 1960s barely contained this note although its tense dissonance has much potential for expressing complex emotions. This paper, through interviews with performers and engaging with the music and the literature suggests how the flat second may have become such a favoured note in metal music and what relevance this has within the genre and in the wider musical world. I will discuss the dissonant and powerful potential of the flat second, and argue that metal has developed a unique voice for this note. Unlike in its rare use in Western pop and classical music it has positive and empowering associations that have much in common with the flat second's wide usage in other musical genres, particularly in the Middle East and Asia. The flat second is emblematic of the metalhead's resistance to the Western status quo.

**Key Words:** flat second, heavy metal, leading note, power, musical mode, power.

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### **1. Introduction**

My research explores a range of world music genres that use a scale note in their music that is slightly higher (the interval of a semitone) than the keynote or tonic of any particular piece of music. In this paper I investigate the use and meaning of this flat second note in heavy metal music, where it has a prominent presence:

Heavy metal music without the minor second? It would be unspeakable, it wouldn't be allowed. I don't think it would be metal, it would be a sham. You must have a minor second, it's the mainstay, it's the seal of approval for metal.<sup>1</sup>

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Within all musical cultures that have a concept of musical keynote, or tonic, the flat second carries tension due to its closeness of pitch to that keynote. Tension and its release are essential parts of musical structure yet in Western music generally the flat second seldom appears, and when it does it is specifically used for portraying doom, anguish, or exotica.<sup>2</sup> These very associations can make it powerful as a tool for heavy metal music. The movement from keynote to flat second is regularly used in metal bass lines and it is contained within the Phrygian and Locrian modes (see glossary) that are used in virtuosic guitar solos.

I will argue that the flat second is an important and meaningful part of heavy metal music, that it is emphasized in a unique way where its dissonance is used to evoke ominous and powerful emotions in a manner that empower individual and communal identity. I suggest how the flat second has arisen in metal despite its absence in the other Western music from which it emerged; how it adapted little used musical associations and re-worked the medieval modes to create innovative interpretations. I describe how these interpretations exploit the flat second to represent not only violent and dissident emotions but also positive representations of empowerment and 'searching for more', touching on Eastern imagery in an Orientalist fashion. The extensive use of the flat second in some otherworld music genres is discussed, and comparisons made to the mix of positive and complex representations within those. Finally I question the near absence of the flat second in Western music generally and suggest that there is a connection with a bourgeois 'pursuit of happiness' where the falling cadence is more feared than valued. I argue that the flat second's falling cadence is ideal for the varied and complex interests of metal subgenres that embrace the dissonance to aid the expression of a myriad of violent and empowering emotions.

## 2. Tension, the Flat Second in Metal, and the Riff

In any tonal musical tradition the scale notes used have a relationship with the tonic of greater or lesser dissonance. Arguably there can be no greater dissonance than the frequencies surrounding the tonic, e.g. the semitone above or below. The semitone below is referred to as the 'leading note' and is exploited a great deal to create tension and subsequent release as it leads back to the tonic. The semitone above, the flat second, carries an equal tension and can also be considered a leading note, the 'other leading note,' falling instead of rising. One musical mode (scale) that contains this flat second is the Phrygian mode as discussed by Robert Walser in *Running with the Devil*:

Affectively, the Phrygian mode is distinctive: ... this mode has a second degree only a half step away from the tonic

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instead of a whole step. Phenomenologically, this closeness means that the second degree hangs precariously over the tonic, making the mode seem claustrophobic and unstable. Hedged in by its upper neighbour, even the tonic, normally the point of rest, acquires an uncomfortable inflection in this mode.<sup>3</sup>

Walser is indicating that the flat second can be so powerful that it even saps power from the 'home' tonic. An early example of its use in heavy metal is Black Sabbath's 'Hand of Doom', three minutes into the track.<sup>4</sup>

Within Western Classical music the flat second is rarely used, although tension and release are fundamental to Classical tonal harmony. When it is used in Western music it is used in two ways. It can be used to evoke emotions of doom, despair or anguish, and has been described by classical music theorist Deryck Cooke as representing 'hopeless anguish'.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively it is used to evoke Spain and/or the 'East' in recognition of its frequent use in the music of Arabia.<sup>6</sup> Many other musical traditions across the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Asia make extensive use of the flat second, where, as in Turkish Art music, it can appear in up to 80% of a genre's output. The Western associations of despair, death and exotica partly explain why the flat second has become such a vital ingredient within metal music. Metal is a shocking and often subversive genre within Western musical hegemony, and would therefore gravitate towards musical sounds that have a history of association with the 'dark' and the 'other'.<sup>7</sup>

The presence of the flat second in metal music is due to three factors: an awareness of its affective use in 'death' music or evoking an other; the manipulation of the classical harmonic minor scale to emphasise its semitone intervals; and the exploitation of the medieval modes. Within the popular music of the 1960s there was occasional use of the flat second, for instance in heavy rock guitarist Dick Dale's recordings such as 'Misirlou'<sup>8</sup> which uses the Turkish *hicazkar makam* (known to metal players as the Byzantine scale - see glossary). The distinctive sound of this collection of notes where the second is flat and the third is raised appears to create particularly strong associations. This is the cliché of 'The East' used by Western composers and uses similar intervals to the Phrygian Dominant scale, Indian *Bhairav* raga and the Eastern European Jewish *Freygish* mode.

The Phrygian Dominant scale crops up in heavy metal due to one of the characteristic elements within heavy metal, which is borrowings from classical music, with virtuosic solos based on Baroque musical works.<sup>9</sup> Deep Purple's Jon Lord and Ritchie Blackmore, amongst others, brought classical scales into hard rock music including the harmonic minor scale. In interview with heavy metal guitarist Luke Rayner I was told:

The solos were more classically inspired. Harmonic minor sounds quite good and clever when you play it fast with a lot of distortion on your guitar. It's also intense and memorable with the harmonic minor scale and the flattened second. It's instantly recognisable. With heavy metal you want that intensity, everything's harsh. The solo needs to be intense. Playing bluesy pentatonic doesn't tend to work in that context over a sinister riff.<sup>10</sup>

Rayner explained how if you play the harmonic minor centred on its fifth note you are playing flamenco's Phrygian Dominant scale with its flat second note: 'When I do my flamenco bit, it's my favourite way of using it. It really works in terms of a dark, heavy metal sounding scale'. The virtuosity, volume and distortion used in metal guitar solos have established a new character for this scale.

Further to the above influences on early metal music were Gothic associations. Black Sabbath were early pioneers in lyrics associated with Gothic horror, anti-Christian sentiments and medieval imagery.<sup>11</sup> The set of musical scales known as the medieval modes, used in jazz music since the 1950s, drew attention. Two of these modes, the Phrygian and the Locrian contain the flat second and Keith Kahn-Harris' comments:

Certain modes have long had particular associations and connotations, with the Phrygian and Locrian seen to have the 'darkest' sounds. Both Phrygian and Locrian are used sparingly in Western music. The Phrygian is associated with oriental music such as flamenco.... Extreme heavy metal represents a sustained and austere exploration of 'darker' modes that have long been associated with danger and evil.<sup>12</sup>

Ever since the advent of the subgenre of speed metal these modes have featured highly in metal soloing and 'continue to produce powerful and specific affective charges'.<sup>13</sup> The tension of the flat second in its relation to the tonic is exploited, then, to help create Satanic and horrific illusions as in Metallica's 'Enter the Sandman'.<sup>14</sup> The dissonant associations, originating in Western Classical music, are rebelliously used and produce new meanings within the metal genre.<sup>15</sup>

The flat second is heard most strongly in metal music in the bass riff, the movement from tonic to flat second being used in repeated ostinatos at high volume. Led Zeppelin was instrumental in the introduction of these guitar and bass riffs, giving heavy metal an aggressive and industrial sound.<sup>16</sup>

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Musician Pete Herbert says:

As a bass player you can play a simple E minor to F bass riff while the guitarist paints a Locrian-based image, a Hieronymus Bosch solo, images of Hell, over the locked in semitone bass.... You can jump around to the minor second riff, without playing a wrong note. Unison guitar and bass locked in for the riff. It's tribal, all knocking your heads.... In heavy metal the flat second makes it really doomy. That's what's wanted, to make a discord, let's be doomy.<sup>17</sup>

Herbert is suggesting that the ease of playing the flat second contributes to its usefulness in the bass riff. The virtuosic guitar solos then evoke intensity, danger and excitement, liberating and empowering over the oppressive power of the rhythm section.<sup>18</sup> For an example of how this typical heavy metal structure continues into the twenty first century listen to Arch Enemy's 'Dead Eyes See No Future'.<sup>19</sup> Having now established the prevalence of the flat second in metal music, where the flat second bass riff is one of the backbones of the sound, I will now expand on its associations within and without the genre.

### 3. Connections with Orientalism

As well as evoking death, doom and anguish the flat second supports metal lyrics of fantasy, empowerment and nomadic adventure in the manner of Orientalism. The Palestinian scholar Edward Said defined his concept Orientalism as 'the European idea of the Orient' and explained: 'The Orient as such became less important than what the Orientalist made of it.... Each Orientalist created his own Orient'.<sup>20</sup> Other writers have discussed this phenomenon and Miriam Whaples wrote that between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries 'for most Europeans the entire non-European world was seen as no more than theatre, an endless Arabian Nights entertainment, imaginary creatures whose deeds and words could be edifying or farcical, as one chose'.<sup>21</sup> There has been a long tradition of Orientalism in Western Classical music and this has frequently involved the flat second,<sup>23</sup> described by Derek Scott in *Orientalism and Musical Style*: Orientalist music is not poor imitation of another cultural practice:

its purpose is not to imitate but to represent....Orientalist devices, many of which can be applied indiscriminately as markers of cultural difference: Aeolian, Dorian, but especially the Phrygian mode, augmented seconds and fourths.<sup>24</sup>

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Heavy metal music has continued the tradition of using the flat second as an Oriental and/or 'other' identifier. Iron Maiden's track 'Powerslave' widely uses the flat second to emphasise Egyptian imagery evident in lyrics that suggest a reincarnation theme.<sup>25</sup> Led Zeppelin's 'Kashmir' is a positive 'finding oneself' tale written while Robert Plant travelled across Morocco, using the flat second in support of lyrics that touch on, as well as Kashmir, the desert and Shangri-La.<sup>26</sup> Metallica's 'Wherever I may Roam' is a track about empowerment and nomadic travel, which starts with an electric sitar playing the flat second.<sup>27</sup> Pete Herbert says: 'The flattened second would be the note that I'd rely on to create a Middle Eastern feeling. You can really ham it up, that minor second'.<sup>28</sup> Different from the classical tradition this music is all about the self in that the musicians are personally identifying with the other.

#### 4. Eastern genres Using the Flat Second, Versus the West

There are commonalities between these associations and the connotations of the flat second's actual use within musical genres of the East. I shall introduce three Eastern genres: Klezmer, Turkish and Indian Classical music in order to compare the use of the flat second within these to its use in metal. Klezmer, Eastern European Jewish dance music, has a central mode known as *Freygish* (identical to the Phrygian Dominant).<sup>29</sup> Alexander Knapp, professor of Jewish studies, comments:

It has often been said that in Eastern Ashkenazi Jewish music the pain is never far away, not far below the surface....This may have a lot to do with social, cultural, political religious circumstances. Over the centuries, life has been tough. This may have found expression in these modes as they're more expressive of that sort of thing, not the same as modalities of nations where there has been relatively little conflict. Nations with their own homelands, where they haven't been moved from one place to another....they [the exiles in the East] heard an intensity in the flat second, augmented second, minor second combination that spoke to them.<sup>30</sup>

Here Knapp is speaking of the use of the *Freygish* mode in Jewish music, illustrated by, for example, Budowitz's 'Bughichis Freylakhs'.<sup>31</sup> The intensity of the flat second used in Klezmer music has an unspecific tension without particular attached meanings, full of potential to express the sometimes complex and intense emotions of Jewish diasporic communities.<sup>32</sup>

A similar association with painful experiences comes from Hakan Ozugurel, guitar player of Turkish Art and folk music, who described the

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repertoire of his Turkish wedding band where at least half the songs are on very sad subjects:

People dying of starvation, bullets in the head or of lost love.... It could be history. People must have suffered from wars, going to other countries for work, or just another village.... In industrialised countries like the UK with better transportation services these issues may not have continued into the 20th century.<sup>33</sup>

A substantial proportion of the sad tunes that Hakan Ozugurel plays use the flat second: ‘putting these notes one after another it makes people sad, like A to Bb. That’s what I believe and many people think the same way in Turkey’. Turkish violinist Cahit Bahlav stressed however, that the sadness of the music does not come from the flat second:

The flattened second can be used in a very lively and uplifting manner. For the West the flattened second is an exotic thing but for us it’s a normal thing, we just think of it as another *makam*, we don’t attribute feelings to them.<sup>34</sup>

Bahlav agreed that it was interesting that Turkish culture embraced the flat second so much, and, when pushed, agreed that there might be a connection with the emotion of melancholy, which is sometimes seen as a national characteristic. The arabesque track ‘Kaç Kadeh Kirildi’ by Muslim Gurses is a clear example.<sup>35</sup> Within Indian classical music there are also common interpretations of the flat second with longing, sadness and poignancy and yet there are a myriad of other associations.<sup>36</sup> There is a subgroup of ragas (scales with musical motifs) all written for twilight, all containing the flat second: the *Sandhi Prakesh* ragas. As the day progresses the second is raised. There is a visual imagery here depicting the flat second rising at sunrise out of, and subsequently falling back at sunset to the tonic. Sitar player Baluji Shrivastav explained to me how special the flat second was in creating a relaxing feeling at the end of the day. The day here also represents the infinite cycle of life and, when asked what he thought about the flat second being used a lot in Western ‘death’ music, Shrivastav quickly replied that if you don’t believe in reincarnation then the flat second would indeed be sad. He draws on Hindu philosophy where Re (the second) represents the Bull:

The Bull [the second] is the chariot of Lord Shiva, the god of destruction, and god of death. But death is part of the creativity; it’s not the destruction only. The destruction of



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ignorance that is also death.... Death is not a sinister thing in Indian philosophy. If you don't believe in reincarnation then death is the end of the line, that's very sad, you have nothing left. Hindus believe if you don't do something in this life that's ok, next life is there, so relax, there is nothing lost. And yes komal Re [flat second] is more expressive than the shuddha Re because it's closer to Sa [the tonic]. Anything that is closer, you can feel more expression, it's very physical. If you play different notes, the closer you get the vibrato gets faster and stronger. ...Komal Re is very, very powerful. The Bull is associated with power; philosophically it is very powerful. And as it [the flat second] has got more vibrato and faster frequencies it is powerful...In relation to the octave the komal Re is the most powerful semitone, the one from Sa itself.<sup>37</sup>

So the tonic is being identified with nighttime and God and death and there is a beauty identified in the concepts of night and death related to Hindu and Sufi beliefs in reincarnation. Many of the ragas that contain the flat second also allude by name or lyric to Lord Shiva and there is a conscious connection between the dissonance and these philosophies.<sup>38</sup>

The three genres described above display a much wider range of interpretations for the flat second and, in common with metal, these interpretations are often positive: melancholia, nostalgia, relaxation and the expression of complex and intense emotions. These are also aspects of the interpretation of the flat second in metal music, exploiting the tense suspended associations of the dissonance, particularly in the areas of mysticism and exotica. Leonard Meyer describes expectation and its resolution as being the essential ingredient of meaning and emotion in music:

Musical suspense seems to have direct analogies in experience in general; it makes us feel something of the insignificance and powerlessness of man in the face of the inscrutable workings of destiny in the face of the unknown.<sup>39</sup>

There can be a mixture of sad and empowering sentiments in the exploitation of this musical suspense in metal music. In the case of Indian Classical music there are powerful and positive associations with death. In metal music I would also suggest that there is a positive connection in meaning between this closeness of frequency, dissonance and death, yet the heavy metal artist embraces death in a very different way to the Hindi. The

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downward pull that Shrivastav described as relaxing or beautiful to the metalhead is down to Hell.

It could be argued that the Western pop and classical aversion to the flat second, the falling 'other leading note', may be partly due to its association with cultures not changed by the Renaissance and Enlightenment<sup>40</sup>, with their upward and striving sentiments. Philip Tagg suggests:

The increasing popularity of major modes in Europe accompanies the age of enlightenment, the rise of the bourgeoisie and colonial expansion.... Can the potential of rising directionality provided by the major and harmonic minor modes ascending leading notes be linked to bourgeois European and North American notions of the pursuit of happiness? Linked to bourgeois attempts at emancipation from medieval ecclesiastical dogma and from the irrational hierarchies of feudal society? Did minor modes remind the new merchant class too much of their oppressed origins of rural misery? Was the upward melodic thrust and modulatory potential of the Ionian mode [major scale] linked in the eighteenth and nineteenth century bourgeois unconscious to feelings of never-ending 'progress' or to the apparently endless expansion of trade and frontiers?<sup>41</sup>

The descending leading note to tonic resolution could easily become depressed, backward and 'un-American' by association. Humanism and the Enlightenment in Europe attempted to throw off the religious ways, became secular and rational, introduced the major scale and thought happy thoughts. Out of this culture arose heavy metal music, which literally harkens back to the pre-Renaissance period and embraces the falling/shadowy stance. Metal music is not religious, but it has a spiritual dimension: all the complexities of shadowy thinking without the religious dogma, the 'outsider inside' of countercultural music.

## 5. Conclusion

The tonic is home, God, earth, death, hell, stability, and all normality. The flat second is the ultimate other, the dissonant feeling that everyone who doesn't fit in has, the tension of being powerless and out of kilter with the norm. It is also the most gloriously alive pitch: unstable, driving, dissonant and full of un-ease, a tension that can only be released by falling to death, Hell, depression? The evocations of death and doom are empowering and positive within the genre. Death can be a release from

placidity and boredom, a Gothic and romantic image. Playing the flat second you can play with the tension, the dangerous possibilities, do you resolve or not? Metal genres are embracing the shadowy, anti-Establishment character of the flat second and are continuing to exploit it within music of protest and, increasingly, in conscious collaboration with 'local' music of the Middle East and Asia. Megadeth took on Satanism in association with the evils of international capitalism and threats of nuclear war, using violent music to mirror a very real world situation. Today there is a growing metal scene in the Islamic world and in his book *Heavy Metal Islam* Mark LeVine describes how metal music grows in countries that are in conflict and can be deeply empowering to musicians and fans.<sup>42</sup> Oriental heavy metal has developed where associations between the music of the Orient and metal have become explicit, and the flat second is everywhere in this sub-genre: groups like Al Qaynah that specifically aim to mix Arabic, Indian and Eastern European music into the heavy metal genre as part of a political message.<sup>43</sup>

The metal tradition stands out in its deliberate and extensive use of the flat second to help create subversive, anti-establishment emotions, whether railing against society or parents. The 'other' flat second is ideal for indicating the 'other within' and this is the status of heavy metal musicians, *the* defining aspect of the counterculture, and the dissonance is full of potential for expressing intensity, particularly for those who by inclination or compulsion are drawn to the shadows.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pete Herbert - Interview with Author.

<sup>2</sup> *Theme from Jaws*, audio recording, Sony Classical, 1991, <<http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/horror-movie-madness-halloween/id259937536>>.

<sup>3</sup> R Walser, *Running With the Devil: power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, 1993, p 47.

<sup>4</sup> *Paranoid*, audio recording, Warner Bros, 1970, <<http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/hell-rules-vol-2-a-tribute-to-black/id263626707>>.

<sup>5</sup> D Cooke, *The Language of Music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1959.

<sup>6</sup> *Estampes: La soiree dans Grenade*, audio recording, Naxos, 2004, <<http://www.amazon.com/Estampes-La-soiree-dans-Grenade/dp/B000QVERCK>>.

<sup>7</sup> *The Real Thing*, audio recording, Warner Bros, 1989, <<http://www.amazon.com/Woodpecker-From-Mars/dp/B00122IVWE>>.

<sup>8</sup> *Surfers Choice*, Del-tone Records, 1962, <<http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/surfers-choice/id192461787>>.

<sup>9</sup> Walser, op. cit., p104.

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- <sup>10</sup> Luke Rayner - Interview with Author.
- <sup>11</sup> Walser, op. cit., p10.
- <sup>12</sup> K Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Heavy Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Berg Publishers, Oxford, 2007, p31.
- <sup>13</sup> Walser, op. cit., p 46.
- <sup>14</sup> *Metallica*, audio recording, 1991, WEA, <<http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/metallica/id278116714>>.
- <sup>15</sup> Walser, op. cit., p 104.
- <sup>16</sup> S Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the power of rock music*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, p 42.
- <sup>17</sup> Pete Herbert - Interview with Author.
- <sup>18</sup> Walser, op. cit., pp15, 54.
- <sup>19</sup> *Anthems of Rebellion*, audio recording, Century Media Records, 2003, <<http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/anthems-of-rebellion/id304534355>>.
- <sup>20</sup> E Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London, Penguin, 1978, pp 16, 127-130.
- <sup>21</sup> M K Whaples, *Exoticism in Dramatic Music, 1600-1800*, Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1958, p 3.
- <sup>22</sup> J Passler, 'Race, Orientalism. And Distinction in the Wake of the Yellow Peril', in *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music*. G. Born and D. Hesmondhalgh (eds), University of California Press, London, 2000, pp 86-119.
- <sup>23</sup> P Tagg, 'From Refrain to Rave: The Decline of Figure and the Rise of Ground', *Popular Music*, Vol. 13(2), 1994, p 215.
- <sup>24</sup> D Scott, 'Orientalism and Musical Style' in *Critical Musicology Journal* [online], 1997, p 11, available from: <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/music/info/critmus>>, viewed on 11 November 2006.
- <sup>25</sup> *Powerslave*, audio recording, 1984, EMI, <<http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/powerslave/id283663216>>.
- <sup>26</sup> *Physical Graffiti*, audio recording, 1975, Atlantic records, <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Kashmir/dp/B001EYQLMC>>.
- <sup>27</sup> *Metallica*, audio recording, 1991, WEA, <<http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/metallica/id278116714>>.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with Author.
- <sup>29</sup> I Cravitz, *Klezmer Fiddle: A how-to guide*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with Author.
- <sup>31</sup> *Bughicis Freylakhs*, Buda Musique 92759-2, 1999, <<http://www.artistdirect.com/nad/window/media/page/0,1057972-889500,00.html>>.
- <sup>32</sup> H Sapoznik, *The Compleat Klezmer*, New York, Tara Publications, 1987.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Author.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Author. See also K Signell, *Makam: modal practice in Turkish art music*, Seattle, Asian Music Publications, 1977.

<sup>35</sup> M Stokes, 'Music, Fate and State: Turkey's Arabesk Debate', in *Middle East Report* 1989, 19:5, pp 27-30. For discography see: *Klasikleri*, audio recording, Elenor Müzik B000VKXTTI, 2000, <<http://www.general-search.com/fileinfo/7925854>>.

<sup>36</sup> J Bor, *The Raga Guide: A survey of 74 Hindustani Ragas*, Rotterdam Conservatoire of Music, Rotterdam, 1999. Also: A Mahajan, *Ragas in Hindustani Music: Conceptual Aspects*, Gyan publications, New Delhi, 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Author.

<sup>38</sup> 'Raga Bhairav' in *The Raga Guide: A survey of 74 Hindustani Ragas*, audio recording, Rotterdam Conservatoire of Music, 1999.

<sup>39</sup> L Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, University of Chicago Press. Chicago, 1956, p28.

<sup>40</sup> D Rudhyar, *The Magic of Tone and the Art of Music*, Shambhala, London, 1982.

<sup>41</sup> P Tagg, B Clarida, *Ten Little Title Tunes: Towards a musicology of the mass media*, Mass Media Music Scholar's Press, New York and Montreal, 2003, p 312.

<sup>42</sup> M LeVine, Heavy metal Islam, <<http://heavymetalislam.net>> viewed on 7 October 2009.

<sup>43</sup> *Ground Zero Pilgrims*, audio recording, 2006, <<http://www.alqaynah.com/downloads.html>>.

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#### Glossary: Modes, Makam, Maqam, Raga

Actual notes may vary by microtones	Heavy metal	Jewish	Turkish makam	Arabic maqam	Indian raga
A Bb C# D Eb F# G	'Byzantine'		<i>Hicazkar</i>	<i>Hijazkar</i>	<i>Purvi</i>
A Bb C# D E F G	Phrygian Dominant	<i>Freygish</i>	<i>Hicaz</i>	<i>Hijaz</i>	<i>Bhairav</i>
A Bb C D E F G	Phrygian	<i>Yeshtebach descending</i>	<i>Kürdi</i>	<i>Kurdi</i>	<i>Bhairavi</i>
A Bb C D Eb F G	Locrian				
A Bb C# D# F# G#					<i>Marva</i>

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# **Intelligent Equalisation Principles and Techniques for Minimising Masking when Mixing the Extreme Modern Metal Genre**

*Mark Mynett, Jonathan Wakefield and Rupert Till*

## **Abstract**

The intensity, complexity and energy of performance, combined with the power and density of the tones involved are characteristics of the extreme metal genre. These characteristics present numerous problems when striving to achieve the clarity, definition and hyper-realism of performance required for this genres production. Avoiding masking in a mix is a fundamental aspect of clarity, definition, intelligibility and perceived loudness and due to the fact that masking especially occurs in a dense mix, and is more pronounced in low frequencies, is particularly applicable to mixing the down-tuned extreme metal genre. Masking in simple terms is the ability of frequencies of one sound to obscure or inhibit (i.e. mask) the frequencies of another sound. This paper will draw upon the first author's eight years of experience producing within the metal genre, including releases through Sony and Universal and working with the likes of Colin Richardson and Andy Sneap.

**Key Words:** Heavy metal, masking, performance, power, production.

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## **1. Introduction**

The way music is balanced, equalised, processed and effected has an overwhelming impact on the way it is perceived and in its own right, mixing is a form of art.<sup>1</sup> Mixing extreme metal can be considered as very self-indulgent, and will usually display a different design ethos than for other genres. Here, hyperrealism of production is required, and this is characterised by a particular emphasis on definition, clarity and intelligibility. To achieve this, separation between the instruments is essential, and with this in mind, avoiding masking should be a primary concern when making equalisation decisions. This ability to clearly able to distinguish all the parts so that your interest is maintained over repeated listens is often referred to as Multi Stream Perceptual Ability.<sup>2</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, extreme metal is a generic term for a number of related heavy metal subgenres. Joel McIver says 'extreme metal is, by definition, music which is faster, harsher, heavier or more aggressive than...mainstream heavy metal.'<sup>3</sup> However, according to Keith Kahn-Harris,



who is an ethnographer specialising in the area, the defining characteristics of extreme metal can all be regarded as clearly transgressive as the ‘extreme’ traits noted above are all intended to violate or transgress given cultural, artistic, social or aesthetic boundaries.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Equalisation and Extreme Metal**

Although equalisation was primarily invented as a technical sonic correction device to overcome the poor frequency response exhibited by early microphones and telephone cables<sup>5</sup>, arguably, the greatest single challenge that the art of mixing presents is the perception, understanding and manipulation of frequencies through equalisation.

Achieving a strong balance between the frequency ranges is a central and essential element for all styles of production. However with the intensity, density and down-tuned nature of the tones and performances involved with extreme modern metal, getting a heavy, yet tight low end which retains note definition and clarity is a particular challenge of mixing for the genre; as is achieving a clean high end which embodies the necessary attack and energy without sounding brittle and abrasive.

According to our interview with Andy Sneap, one of the biggest challenges to modern metal production is getting the low end of the mix right. In striving for a ‘heavy’ production, many mixers will excessively amplify the wrong low-end frequencies, resulting in an uncontrolled, boomy and flabby mix. Alternatively, a production with a deficiency of the right bass frequencies will lack impact and sound thin. One of the keys to getting this aspect of the mix right, is by creating a very specific space and a place for each instrument to sit and breathe. This will partly be achieved by avoiding masking.

## **3. Masking**

Masking, in simple terms, is the ability of frequencies of one sound to obscure, or inhibit, (i.e. mask) the frequencies of another sound. From a mixing perspective, this equates to combining two or more instruments containing similar frequencies which fight for the same sonic space, with the quieter or weaker of these sounds having this range of frequencies obscured or made inaudible by the louder or more dominant one.<sup>6</sup>

Avoiding masking in a mix is a fundamental aspect of separation, definition and perceived loudness, and due to the fact that this especially occurs in a dense mix, and is more pronounced in low frequencies; avoiding masking is essential to getting the low-end right for a modern metal production. Before looking at specific intelligent equalisation principles and techniques for minimising masking, two errors that many mixers who are

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novices to the metal genre, make with their EQ decisions will be presented. These errors can directly increase the likelihood of masking.

A frequent mistake that many beginners make, when trying to achieve the necessary ‘weight’ for a modern metal production, is the tendency to focus on only boosting, rather than attenuating frequencies. This will, of course, increase the overall level of the audio, and therefore, rather than assessing the way that the audio has actually been shaped, can misguide our overall evaluation; in other words the ‘louder-perceived-better’ principle. This focus will usually result in instruments fighting for room, with the weaker of these sounds becoming masked and thereby lacking clarity and definition in the mix.

By also opting for the corrective EQ/attenuation route, frequency choices will usually be that much more effective. When attenuating, it is appropriate to use a tight (higher) ‘Q’ setting, as you will often be seeking to remove, or significantly reduce, what is usually a narrow bandwidth of resonant or undesired frequencies. But because our ears tend to find the attenuation, rather than the amplification, of frequencies less appealing, then beware that it may take longer to realise the benefits of these changes.

Another tendency of novice mixers is to spend too much time manipulating and fine tuning their EQ choices while assessing the individual instruments or audio track in isolation. Although this can initially be useful (particularly when finding unwanted resonant frequencies), audio is hugely impacted by its context, and this is never more so than when dealing with the heavy, dense tonalities of extreme metal. By giving priority to the overall impact of EQ decisions as they sound within the rest of the mix, it is much more likely that these will be appropriate to addressing masking issues, resulting in stronger overall separation to the mix.

#### **4. Anti-Masking and Filters**

As a basic principle to avoid frequencies of one sound obscuring another, it is not so much a case of dialling in frequencies, as it is firstly removing the non-essential or wrong frequencies, so that instruments that *do* have essential elements of their sound in this range then have space to ‘breathe’ in. This would then be combined with emphasising the correct areas within the remaining frequency range.

With this in mind, the importance of firstly integrating high pass filters (HPFs) into your equalisation decisions needs to be emphasised. When used correctly, the treated instrument will be perceived as being louder and more defined, with better clarity to the overall mix.

Other than notable exceptions such as perhaps sub bass boom samples, HPFs will often be required on every single instrument and the busier the mix, the higher the frequency selected for each filter. For a particularly dense production with fast double kicks, blast beats, string

sections, keyboards etc (e.g., the ‘symphonic’ black metal band Dimmu Borgir) then mixing will require extensive and aggressive use of HPFs to help retain intelligibility for all these instruments.

As a general guide for mixing extreme modern metal, it will often be appropriate to use a HPF to remove anything below 60Hz right across the audio, and in many instances a HPF will need to be used to remove frequencies right up to the area of the low-end that is getting amplified. Clearly any boosts in the 20-60Hz sub-bass range should be avoided, as this will invariably wreck a mix for this genre.

Although used nowhere near as frequently as a HPF, Low Pass Filters can be implemented to remove high end noise or hiss, and can also be used to mark the highest usable frequency. For example, rolling the bass off above 6/7Khz, where there is little or no frequency content required for bass, can in turn remove or minimise the way in which these non essential frequencies might mask, perhaps the cymbals, and therefore increase the cymbals separation and definition within the mix.

Having removed these unwanted frequencies, the remaining essential areas can now be correctly emphasised.

##### **5. Conclusions: Intelligent EQ Principles to Avoid Masking**

To gain a louder, tighter and more powerful mix, the simultaneous amplification or attenuation of the same frequency on different instruments should be avoided. Boosts at the same frequency on multiple instruments have the tendency to accumulate, and sound unnatural and displeasing, with an unpredictable overall mix level due to the resulting ‘loud’ section created in the frequency spectrum. Conversely, making the same frequency cuts on multiple instruments can effectively create an artificial sounding ‘gap’ in the production’s frequency range, making the mix unstable on different systems. Therefore, amplifying or attenuating both your kick drum and bass groups at the same frequency should be avoided, as should repeatedly boosting or attenuating the same frequency across the composite tracks within these groups (e.g. Kick mic hole/Kick mic beater/Kick sample). By varying the frequencies being amplified and attenuated, a more balanced tonal distribution and a louder, heavier mix will be achieved as a result.

To gain a strong balance between the frequency ranges when mixing this genre, there is a strong possibility that there are going to be some significant frequency boosts and cuts. Although 8dB of frequency gain could be seen as over the top for some genres, this is not the case when mixing modern metal. However, aggressively boosting a certain frequency range can be quite obtrusive (particularly if done so to a narrow range) and this additionally increases the likelihood of masking and frequency accumulation.

A technique to minimise the need to do this, is to opt for the attenuation of frequencies on masking instruments, rather than amplification

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of the same to the instrument/audio being equalised. For instance, a snare may lack impact because it is being masked by other instruments around the 200Hz region where, generally speaking, the body and weight of a snare is. Rather than simply amplifying the snare at 200Hz to fight the other instruments for this range, and in the process cause an unnatural accumulation of frequencies here, you should experiment with attenuating the 200Hz region on the instrumentation that is masking the snare. Continuing with this anti-masking principle, experimentation with mirrored EQ choices can be highly effective. Here, the amplification of a certain frequency on one instrument is mirrored with the attenuation of the same frequency on another relevant instrument. By doing so, less gain can be used whilst achieving the same impact of a much greater boost, and generally speaking, the audio will sound less processed and much more natural as a result. To use an example, whether you are dealing with the growls of a death-metal vocalist or a performance with high-pitched screams, the vocals are predominantly going to be in the mid-range. In the battle to get as big a guitar tone as possible, you may then have problems gaining vocal clarity and intelligibility due to not having left enough room in the mid-range for the vocals to sit. If this is an issue, then the mirrored EQ principle will often provide the appropriate solution. Find a frequency range in the vocal sound that contains pleasing tonal characteristics, and combine boosts to accentuate this, with attenuation of the same range on the rhythm guitar group.

### Notes

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<sup>3</sup> J. McIver, *Extreme Metal II*, Barnes and Noble, New York, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> K Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Berg Publishers, Oxford, 2006.

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