

SONG LYRICS IN CONTEMPORARY METAL MUSIC AS COUNTER-HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE: AN EXPLORATION OF THREE THEMES

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses modern forms of metal music as extensions of the politics of youth culture. Based upon the premise that texts form an 'ideological contract' with their audiences, an extensive examination of the aesthetic and lyrical content of metal music is provided. The authors conclude that the content of metal music exists in a reciprocal relation with its listening base, and provides a lens through which their modern-day subjective experiences may be understood. In illustrating this reciprocity the authors explore the vast literature which casts a condemnatory gaze upon metal music and then demonstrates how a discourse analysis of this musical genre may avoid such condemnation, and posit a political discussion of it. Three of metal music's most predominant themes are discussed at length: 1) psychological chaos; 2) nihilism/violence; and 3) alternative religiosity. Such themes are placed against a cultural backdrop depicting the dominant modes of 'appropriate conduct,' and are articulated as a political reaction against such modes in Western societies.

INTRODUCTION

The discussion of metal music as a political formation of youth culture is a marginalized one. We argue here for the necessity of such a perspective—that the lyrical and aesthetic content of metal music are integral aspects of youth identity and reflect the power struggles young people have with contemporary culture. Moreover, metal music is not just a forum for young people to vent amorphous and undefined aggressions, but instead, speaks *directly* to them. This essay will explore some of the major themes that typify metal music in the American and European scene, and demonstrate how these themes are indicative of some of the cultural problems young people confront. The seemingly dogmatic subscription to messages in metal music—for example, those of violence, insanity, and Satanism—illustrate resistance to societal conditions that are legitimately experienced by young people. We discuss patterns in the narrative structure of popular metal music lyrics as well as some aesthetic aspects of this music genre. Adopting a multi-theoretical approach, we contend that such lyrics constitute valuable texts that may be used to better understand contemporary antagonisms between social trends and the youth who are subjected to such trends.

As disseminators of ideology, texts establish reciprocity with their readership. For example, Martin Barker (1989) contends that the relationship between a text and its audience is "contractual":

A 'contract' involves an agreement that a text will talk to us in ways we recognize. It will enter into a dialogue with us. And that dialogue, with its dependable elements and form, will relate to some aspect of our lives in our society. (Barker 1989 261)

Barker further argues that the popularity of a cultural form is largely contingent upon its perceived authenticity: in "speaking to" an audience it must reflect the experiences of that audience. Text and audience are therefore mutually-obligated; the text provides a reflective capacity for the audience who in turn become its interlocutor.

Barker's and other writings of this ilk illustrate the contractual agreement between text and audience in ways that are very relevant for understanding the politics of contemporary youth and their motives for consuming and contributing to various forms of popular culture. Of particular concern in this study is the cultural form of metal music¹ and the degree to which this musical genre demonstrates a political reciprocity with young people. Two theoretical propositions need mentioning here: first, the scope of a cultural form—including its national and international visibility—is contingent upon the maintenance of a contract that involves a commitment to reflect people's experiences, and second, a cultural form's amount of influence, its "staying power," is contingent upon a degree of fit between audience and its message. From these propositions it can

be argued that the marked international influence of metal music stems from the fact that the genre continues to reflect the vicissitudes of youth culture. Today's metal scene engages in a symbolic interplay with its listening base, where young listeners match its lyrical and aesthetic content to their own subjective experiences. Hence, the narrative structure of popular music is continually changing. Though it is a matter of course that audiences "relate" in some way to the music they appreciate, the *specifics* of this symbolic interplay need further elaboration.

We may begin with lyrics from Roadrunner recording artists and platinum-selling metal band, Slipknot:

Fuck it all. Fuck this world. Fuck everything that you stand for. Don't belong, don't exist, don't give a shit. Don't ever judge me.

An interpretation of these words conjures a discussion of nihilism; not in the haughty, Nietzschean sense, but rather, a shallow, listless nihilism forced upon the listener as an instruction to turn his back on all codes of morality and head down the path of self-destruction. Furthermore, the immense popularity of such lyrics (Slipknot's debut album sold over 3 million copies) may be seen as indicative of many of the problems associated with today's youth: a lack of role models, a lack of attainable goals, a Nintendo-numbed sensibility in which responsibilities are shirked, and so on. However, Slipknot member Shawn Crahan offers a very different perspective on his band's music and the messages it conveys:

We are here to wake you up and kill the part of your brain that tells you that you can't. It's not about me. It's about what I'm doing for kids. When I walk out onstage, there's 15,000 kids that, to me, represent potential. And I'm here to tell you, to tell them that no matter what they say, you can be from nowhere and you can break out and become anything you want. Because the bottom line is that this is your lifetime. This is your time, here, now, on this planet. (Orshoski 2001 16)

To "fuck everything" from this perspective is to demolish what young people have been told to believe in, but not for the sake of demolition. Instead, according to Crahan, and ar-

guably many other metal recording artists, the demolition of established truths begins a process of asserting one's own *personal* truth. The "fuck it" message of metal provides the fertile soil for exploring the possibility of becoming "anything you want."

METHOD

The academic literature addressing the metal genre must include the perspectives of those having first-hand experience with it. As an avid listener for many years and drummer in a metal band, the first author writes as a "native" to the metal scene. The second author is also an avid listener to past and contemporary metal music, and has been involved with the punk and rock scene in the US and Europe² for three decades. Together, both of us have seen hundreds of rock and metal shows and have read more librettos (lyric inserts) than one could possibly count. Because of our long-term involvement with metal, we feel that we can avoid the condemnatory stances that characterize previous accounts of the genre and provide a glimpse into some of its political meanings.

Our data selections for this paper are based upon a convenience sample, where we keep in mind some of contemporary metal's most influential domestic and international recording artists. We did an exhaustive content analysis of librettos from over two-hundred metal recordings. Librettos were analyzed according to an interpretive approach, using grounded theory techniques (Glaser 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1990). Analyses of the data began with "open coding," where data were categorized indiscriminately, followed by a "closed coding" procedure in which data were examined for specific themes after preliminary categories had been established.

Following a summary of the condemnatory stances taken toward metal music in academic writing, this paper is organized into three sections which discuss predominant themes in this musical genre. The first of these sections is devoted to the illustration of *psychological chaos* in metal music—a theme that attacks established notions of mental hygiene that define who is emotionally "healthy" and who is not. This narrative questions the pathologizing of chaotic states of mind, and the belief that others should be a source of emotional solace. The second section, *nihilism/violence*, draws from a con-

glomeration of narratives in metal music that advocate multiple forms of anti-social behavior. We argue that the expression of the *possibility* of anti-social behavior, rather than its actual enactment, is highly political. The third section, *alternative religiosity*, explores today's Satanic narratives in metal music, and also those which invoke Nordic religious systems. To illustrate this we focus upon the cultural politics of metal music stemming from Scandinavian countries. Based upon this analysis, we conclude with that the lyrical content of metal music provides a fantasy structure for a generation of youth who struggle in an era of increasing social control.

PREVIOUS ACCOUNTS: METAL MUSIC AS AN ACADEMIC AND LAY PROBLEM

As the literature demonstrates, metal music is often pigeon-holed into discussions that almost exclusively focus on the moral and social savior faire of the genre's audience and artists. It is not surprising that politically-oriented discussions—particularly, discussions that focus on the significance of metal music in reflecting the power asymmetry between youth culture and the dominant culture—remain scarce.

Metal music and its multitude of sub-genres are inextricably linked to youth culture. Hence, numerous studies that address metal discuss this cultural form as an influential variable in the attitudes and behavior of young people. With Robert Walser's *Running with the Devil* (1993) being one of the few notable exceptions, the bulk of this discussion of metal's connection to, or influence upon youth are overwhelmingly evaluative (Richardson 1991; Weinstein 2000). Seemingly out of touch with the audience-centered, "fan-zine" forum exemplified by magazines such as *Hit Parader*, *Metal Maniacs*, and *Metal Edge*, the bulk of academic literature on metal music is inundated with inquiries regarding the extent to which metal harms the listener, the greater culture, or both. Attacked from perspectives as seemingly divergent as feminism and right-wing conservatism, preferences for metal music are repeatedly shown to be connected to juvenile delinquency (Klein, Brown, Childers, Oliveri, Porter & Dykers 1993; Singer, Levine & Jou 1993), wanton sexuality (Arnett 1993), misogyny (Kenske & McKay 2000; Rubin, West & Mitchell 2001), drug abuse (Arnett

1993), Satanism (Trzcinski 1992) and suicidal ideation (Graham 1993; Stack 1998; Scheel & Westerfield 1999). Some of these studies contend that metal is an influential variable in troublesome behaviors and attitudes, while others contend that preferences for metal are "red flags" for concerned parents and child psychologists. Whether implicating metal as a causal variable in the troubles of youth or viewing the popularity of the genre as a warning sign, such perspectives stigmatize the genre and those who listen to it.

The now decades-old stigmatizing discussion of metal is well represented in the lay realm and has repeatedly surfaced in the court system. These include the lawsuits filed in 1985 against Ozzy Osbourne for his song "Suicide Solution," and its apparent influence over the suicide of John McCullen; in 1990 against the band Judas Priest, who were accused of inserting subliminal messages into their music that supposedly contributed to the suicidal demises of Ray Belknap and Jay Vance; and in 2000 against the band Slayer, whose apparently violent messages prompted three of their young male fans to murder 15-year-old Else Pahler.³ Such legal actions are no doubt bolstered by the efforts of censorship-oriented, special interest organizations such as the Parent's Music Resource Center (PMRC), a collective who are best known for lobbying Congress to force music distributors to include warning labels, such as the famous "Tipper Sticker"⁴ that is placed on metal and other music CDs dubbed to contain "explicit content."

Some of the less stigmatizing portrayals of metal music discount many of the connections to metal and anti-sociality. Such accounts often contend that the connection between metal and the listener is a spurious one. For example, Christine and Ronald Hansen (1991) argue that many of the "damaging" messages metal conveys through its lyrical content are not adequately processed by the listener, that the concepts metal provides are not internalized, and finally, that metal fans enjoy the overall aesthetic of metal, rather than any specific kind of message the genre may transmit. Portrayals of metal music also seem wont to place the genre and its listeners underneath the rubric of a "subculture" (Gross 1990), denoting the metal scene as a collection of people following an unrefined ideology, linked to-

gether through shared forms of meaningless personal adornment and "scene identification." The metal subculture, it is argued, represents the rebellious" phase of adolescence (Bleich, Zillman & Weaver 1991) and is merely an extension of youth exploring and breaching the boundaries of social normativity. Metal is something kids eventually "grow out of."

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHAOS

The aesthetics of metal music have been argued to reflect the complexities of contemporary culture. As the world has become conjointly more fractured and psychologically alienating, the song structure of metal bands has mirrored these social changes. As Robert Walser states:

Thrash metal bands like Metallica and Megadeth have developed a musical discourse... Their songs are formally even more complex, filled with abrupt changes of meter and tempo that model a complex, disjointed world and displaying a formidable ensemble precision that enacts collective survival. (1993 157)

According to Walser (1993), both song structure and the precision (or "tightness" in musician's terms) with which today's metal compositions are performed are part of the genre's collective message of modern survival. In abruptly and precisely following changes of meter and removing superfluous⁵ elements from their compositions, metal bands strip down the music's aesthetics to emphasize a cacophonous roughness.

Modern metal's disjointed, yet precise cacophony is further illustrated by the infusion of complex rhythmic techniques that further the earlier aesthetic directions begun by bands like Metallica and Megadeth. As a continuing reflection of metal's modeling of today's psychological anxiety and as sign of the genre's increasing musical sophistication, metal bands since the early 1990s increasingly utilize polyrhythmic techniques in their compositions. The use of polyrhythms, most notably employed in avant-garde jazz circles, involves the performance of two or more time signatures simultaneously (Magadini 1995). A pattern emerges after the listener repeatedly hears the "resolution

point" of these time signatures. The arrival of the resolution point may be long in coming, depending on which meters are played against each other. Anticipation of the time when the meters resolve creates a state of anxiety in the listener.⁶ Such an anxiety typifies the subjective moment of the adrenaline-rush musical tapestry so commonly associated with today's metal bands and their themes of psychological confusion. Some metal bands which employ polyrhythmic techniques are: Meshuggah (Sweden), Dog Faced Gods (Sweden), Anthrax (USA), Helmet (USA), and Pantera (USA). It is also arguable that the implementation of such compositional devices partially refutes previous assumptions which claim metal is a genre based around a "relatively simple song structure" (Epstein & Pratto 1990 68).

The illusion of dark chaos found in the instrumentation of metal music, characterized by distorted low-tuned guitars, and cacophonous time-shifting rhythms, is matched by lyrical content. Such lyrics would be unfitting if they conveyed "sunny" narratives. Instead, they explore dark states of mind rarely addressed in other music genres.

Slayer, an American metal band with international renown, often depict themes with traumatic psychological motifs:

You better learn my name
Cause I'm the one insane
And I'm a constant threat
You run in fear of my dark silhouette
Inside my violent mind
Chaos is all you'll find
Anarchy uncontained
Bear witness to the scorn of my campaign
(From the song, "Perversions of Pain"
{1998}).

There are at least two messages present here. The first concerns the graphic description of a violent mind, characterized by the words "chaos," and "anarchy." The second directs an admonishment toward the listener. One of these found in the first line directs the listener towards a familiarity with the mentality of the speaker. To not learn this person's "name" is to deny the existence of this state of mind and perhaps become victimized by such a facet of the human condition.

Another prominent metal band, who completed a 1999 North American tour with Slayer, and were the second stage headlin-

ers at the 2002 *Ozzfest* tour, is Sweden's Meshuggah. A similar message to the above excerpt from Slayer comes from their song "Beneath" (1995):

It's time to go into the me below
My morbid self beneath
A peril trip the last way out
I spin as I let go.

Resonating with the song's title, this excerpt depicts a part of self that is unseen or unacknowledged in conventional social life: the self of morbid fascination that has been shunned and pathologized. Another Meshuggah song, "Inside What's Within Behind" (1995) describes the ravages of emotional pain:

Life neglected infected by strain
I fall into the smothering the even
Flow of ravaging pain
This my temple of self-caged contempt
A body slowly pierced by
Inevitable me.

Expressed through barking lyrics which are unintelligible to the ear (thank goodness for lyric inserts), this song conveys the aesthetic experience of confused hopelessness. The "even flow of ravaging pain" is a symbol (described as a "temple") of a condition caused by oneself. This is a fatalistic portrayal of self-centeredness in which the process of self-torture appears "inevitable." There is a larger commentary implied in this passage, but it is unclear until the song shifts focus and expresses the possibility of redemption:

Turn your eyes toward the inside
Dig deep within I'm sure you'll find
A different self a different soul
To put you in peace with mind.

This thematic shift in the song, accompanied by an ambient and markedly more intelligible change in vocal style, advocates an individual solution to the aforementioned turmoil. Through a self-empowering suggestion, the song asks the listener to overcome the condition of pain-ravaged self-centeredness and find a greater self somewhere "deep within." The speaker asks the listener to trust the human capacity for self-reflection and discover a higher self. This requires the listener to no longer be "self-caged" as the

first part of the song describes, and reach a state of self-awareness which reveals the arbitrary nature of such a cage. Such themes of redemption repeatedly portray psychological pain as an individual problem with an individual solution—an assertion that inherently questions the validity of seeking solace in others.

The metal genre, in this sense, represents a discourse opposed to the actions of the obsequious "confessing animal" described in Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978 59).⁷ Examining the modalities of psychotherapy through his account of sexuality, Foucault argues that one of the functions of modern psychiatric practice was not only to find out what someone hides in the psyche, but also discover what the individual was hiding from him/herself (Foucault 1978 66). This was part of the bifurcated duty of modern psychotherapy in which the patient must be made aware of his/her mechanisms for avoiding the deeper roots of his/her pathology then be given the symbolic tools to combat such mechanisms. It can be argued that this role of modern psychiatry was conducive to creating a relationship between confessing subject and therapist which was based on subservience and the dissolution of emotional self-sufficiency.

However socially abhorrent, the individualized, self-empowered discourse of metal music is an extension of the politics implied in Foucault's work. It is a counter-discourse to that which has grown to dominate Western notions of mental health both in clinical and popular realms. Metal music represents a rebellion against assumptions that psychological problems must be resolved through the establishment of a relationship between self and something external, whether that is another person or an organized therapeutic apparatus.

Nihilism/Violence

Nihilistic themes in metal music are those that portray a denial of culturally-constructed codes of conduct and their concomitant systems of morality. Such a theme may be transmitted through a substantial demystification of humans. Take for example, these lyrics from the German metal band Rammstein:

Was macht ein Mann
(What does a man)
Was macht ein Mann

(What does a man)
 der zwischen Mensch and Tier nicht
 unterscheiden kann
 (who cannot distinguish between man and
 animal)
 Was
 (what)
 Er wird zu seiner Tochter gehen
 (He will go to his daughter)
 sie ist schön und jung an Jahren
 (she is beautiful and young in years)
 und dann wird er wie ein Hund mit eigen
 Fleisch und Blut sich paaren
 (and then, like a dog, he will mate with his
 own flesh and blood)

From an anthropological stance, this excerpt explores the possibility of human behavior when animalism reigns supreme. Taboos, especially those that concern incest, may be broken when the essential basis of these taboos—our culture and its consequent humanity—are removed. In exploring the possibilities of enacting behaviors that are largely unacknowledged, stigmatized, and repressed, metal offers a critique against the moral codes that prohibit such behavior. These behaviors often involve the sexual and/or physical degradation of another, and are commonly regulated through formal means of social control.

Given the often anti-social content of metal lyrics, it is not surprising that studies have explored the connection between such lyrical themes and outward violence (Ballard & Coates 1995; Epstein, Pratto & Skipper 1990). This includes studies which explore metal's misogynistic overtones and the propensity for male violence towards women (Kenske & McKay 2000; Weinstein 2000). However, a close look at contemporary metal lyrics reveals violent themes which are rarely gender-specific, and more rarely directed at women. This is not to say that there is no misogyny present in the current culture of the metal scene—a scene invariably dominated by young males—but rather, that the explicit anti-female themes so readily visible in 1970s and 1980s rock music are not retained in today's metal music. The violent themes in contemporary metal lyrics speak more to issues of emotional catharsis than to a blatant maintenance of the patriarchal order.⁸

Such cathartic themes often allude to ultimate forms of self-empowerment, including

the ability to wreak havoc upon the world. Take, for example, this song from the slow-tempo, dark American metal band, Crowbar:

Looking at me smothering you
 Destroying all
 Looking at me punishing you
 Destroying it
 Pushing you down and pulling you down
 I'm crushing all
 Pushing you down pulling you down
 I'm dragging you under
 (From the song, "Wrath of Time be Judgment" [1996]).

Another example comes from the American band Machine Head, and their song, "Ten Ton Hammer" (1997):

I can feel this pain is real
 I hate deep down inside
 And like broke glass you'll shatter
 With bloody fists I'll batter
 Like a ten ton hammer

I'll be the trembling in your breath
 Trickle of blood upon your flesh
 You'd love to watch me take the fall
 I'll be the thing that you despise
 'Cause I'm the path to your demise
 And I'm a be there standing tall.

Both of the previous passages depict a pronounced power asymmetry between the speaker and the outside world. The speaker dominates this world with such ease s/he appears superhuman. The other in this abrasive relation remains unnamed and general; the violence can be directed toward anyone or anything. "You" denotes a person, institution, emotional state—any number of entities perceived to be worthy of a violent onslaught. The passage constructs a shared subjectivity between the speaker and the listener, where they both need not share the same "you" to mutually explore the finitudes of violent fantasy. The function of metal music in this regard may be likened to the enjoyment audiences derived from watching films like *Fight Club*, in which fantasies of physical violence were a way of breaking up the monotonous life of the mall-trotting, IKEA-shopping, modern human. Such metal lyrics appear antagonistic, if not blatantly cruel. However, the description of physical violence may be better interpreted euphemistically. In

a world perceived by cynical metal fans to be tainted by a rationalistic Weberian sluggishness, violence symbolizes the beauty of rapid change. In conveying the human capacity for violence, metal bands symbolize one's ability to effect immediate and visible alterations in the course of events in the world.

In a political sense, the individualistic and violent motifs in metal lyrics resonate with those portraying psychological chaos. During a time when 5-10 percent of school-age boys are taking Ritalin for behavioral problems (Breggin 1998), and when the propensity for violence and anti-institutional behavior is categorized under mental disorder labels such as Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (American Psychiatric Association 1994 85-94), the appeal to the virtues of violence is counter-hegemonic.

ALTERNATIVE RELIGIOSITY

The metal genre is probably most famous for its consistent undermining of Christianity. This is notably the case with Scandinavian "black metal" artists purporting Satanic motifs, characterized by bands like Emperor (Norway), Dimmu Borgir (Norway), and Dissection (Sweden), and also motifs rooted in traditional Nordic mythology, characterized by bands like Enslaved (Norway), Burzum (Norway), Borknagar (Norway), and Einherjer (Norway).

The term "black" has multiple meanings for those who would interpret this sub-genre of metal music. It is frequently argued that the term "black" represents a negative relation to Christian notions of purity. Hence, black metal artists commonly invoke images of black magic, "dark angels," and activities which occur during nighttime. One band, Dissection, states on the credits of their album, *Storm of the Light's Bane* (1995), that the entire project was written during hours of darkness; sort of a statement of authenticity. The term "black" also has political interpretations, representing the color for right-wing politics (opposite of left-wing "red" political positions) in most of Europe. In an introduction to Kevin Coogan's article, "How Black is Black Metal?" Jeff Bale states:

It (the term "black") poses the question of whether today's fascinating black metal counterculture is intrinsically associated with far right political attitudes. (Coogan 1999 33)

Political analyses of anti-Christian themes in music have been previously posited, and are typified in Elizabeth Jane Hinds's 1992 article, "The Devil Sings the Blues," which focuses on the classic rock band, Led Zeppelin. In examining the subversive aspects of Zeppelin, the article compares the band's anti-Christian occult motifs to the rise of late 18th century Gothic literature. From Hinds's perspective, the dominant moral order, instilled in the European populace through the advent of Christianity, is a specific focus of disdain for hard rock listeners. Such disdain is directed at two loci of Christian control, including the control held over bodily pleasure, subverted through the lyrical expression of sexual gratification, and the control over sources of spiritual contact, subverted through sympathetic portrayals of Satan. For Hinds, discourses of bodily pleasure and narratives of underworld connection comprise a postmodern politics. This perspective resonates strongly with Robert Walser's discussion of the postmodern politics of heavy metal, in which he describes Satan as a "transgressive icon" (Walser 1993 151).

Academic explorations of Satanism and its effect upon the metal listener are as prolific as studies that rigorously scrutinize the connection between metal music and highly anti-social behavior (see Trzcinski 1992). Most studies which address Satanic content discuss bands which weakly allude to Satanism, rather than bands which explicitly invoke Satanic nomenclature. Artists such as Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, and Ozzy Osbourne, fall under this rubric. Through mixing a variety of themes into their music, including those as unrelated as drug and alcohol abuse (i.e. Ozzy's "Suicide Solution"), and Greek mythology (i.e. Iron Maiden's "Flight of Icarus"), such bands' messages are amorphous. They have been attributed "Satanic" status by unwitting parents and other concerned authorities by default.

The fact that the music under scrutiny remains thematically ambiguous partially explains why studies tend to discount the connection between metal music and any serious involvement with Satanism. For example, in "The Role of Suggestion in the Perception of Satanic Messages in Rock and Roll Recordings," Thorne and Himmelstein (1984) contend that listeners tend to hear a back-masked Satanic message in a song when

they are told the message is there, rather than through the message's "subliminal" power. In addition, Jonathan S. Epstein and David Pratto's "Heavy Metal Rock Music: Juvenile Delinquency and Satanic Identification" contends that the

Satanic element exists more for its shock value than for any kind of real identification on the part of the vast majority of Metal listeners. (1990 72)

Such studies are important, but overlook the fact that Satanism is a very real narrative in today's metal music that is dogmatically adhered to by black metal artists and their fan base. For example, Satanic lyrics often conjure images that distort or mock Christianity. Emperor's song "the Oath" (1997), stands as an example:

Hark, O' Night Spirit
 Father of my dark self
 From within this realm, wherein thou
 dwelleth
 By this lake of blood, from which we feed
 to breed
 I call silently for Thy presence, as I lay this
 oath.

Perverting the Christian ritual of communion, in which a person may symbolically drink the blood and eat the body of Christ, the speaker derives spiritual sustenance from an entire reservoir filled with blood. Through the appropriation of Old English this excerpt further perverts Christian rites, and attempts to raise the validity of Emperor's dark oath to that of Christian prayers with similar invocations.

In addition to the perversion of Christian rites, Satanic black metal bands also attack Christian symbolism:

In the dawn an angel was dancing
 Surrounded by an aura of light
 But in the shadows something was watch-
 ing
 And with patience awaiting the night
 Angel whispers: "Mournful night,
 Attractive night your dark beauty obsesses
 me"
 An angel bewitched by the shadows
 Seduced by the whispering lies

A spell was cast and the sky turned red

The angels heart froze to ice
 The blackness that falls is coming to stay
 Under the snow lies angels so cold
 (Dissection, "Where Dead Angels Lie"
 [1995]).

This excerpt typifies Satanic black metal, conveying the temptation of the ultimate symbol of Christian purity by the taboo qualities of the night. Believing "the whispering lies" of the shadows, the angel meets its demise. Curiously, the angel does not become a part of the dark side through the realization that darkness is better than light. This is not a narrative about the conversion of an angel into a being of the dark. In an outright dismissal of anything Christian, the angel is frozen under the snow and left to be forgotten.

A prevalent and more recent black metal theme involves the subscription to Nordic Mythology. Norway's Einherjer, for example, is a band whose name refers to slain Viking warriors sent to the hall Valhalla, who feast the night away and return to fight and be slain the next day (Grant 1990 26). Bands like Einherjer have gone to great lengths to transmit traditional Nordic messages, both symbolically and textually. Their CD, *Odin Owns Ye All*, has the image of a bearded man missing an eye—a symbol for the Norse god Odin, who surrendered his eye to the god of wisdom, Mimir (Grant 1990 13).

Einherjer's song "Out of Ginnungagap" (1998) tells the story of Nordic creation:

Out of emptiness
 Out of Ginnungagap
 Came Yggdrasil
 Came Life
 Out of emptiness
 Out of Ginnungagap
 Came all of what is today.

Very similar to the Greek notion of Chaos, as described in Hesiod's tale of creation, *Theogyny* (Morford & Lenardon 1985 29-30), Ginnungagap is the eternal void from which all existence comes. From Ginnungagap came Yggdrasil, Nordic mythology's "world tree," which links the nine worlds of the universe and connects all of the Viking gods (Grant 1990 41).

Black metal is wrought with Viking narrative and symbolism. Burzum's CD, *Hlidskialf* (1999), for example, is titled after the highest throne of the gods, in which Odin oversees

the nine worlds. The CD narrates present-day Viking battle scenes in which sacred traditions are reasserted, threatening those who defy the resurgence of traditional Nordic beliefs with the crushing hooves of Sleipnir, the 8-legged horse of Odin. Songs like Enslaved's "In Chains Until Ragnarok" (1998) retell the Nordic story of the day of reckoning in which evil will inherit the Earth (Grant 1990 36). In addition, bands like Enslaved and Borknagar have the Mjollnir (the hammer of the Nordic god, Thor) woven into their CD cover art and often brandish this symbol around their necks. The focused and coherent use of Nordic symbols debunks earlier speculation that metal's use of symbols is a "signature of identification with heavy metal, not...a religious or philosophical statement of faith" (Gross 1990 125).

It is increasingly argued that black metal is an extension of a larger religious and cultural movement with the youth of Scandinavia, and more recently, greater Europe and North America. Citing the editor of *Aorta* magazine, Keving Coogan states:

Norwegian black metalists are modern day examples of an ancient martial/mystical band of Werewolf-like "berserker" warriors known as the Oskorei. (Coogan 1999 44)

Coogan (1999 44) also mentions the connection between black metal and the traditional Nordic religious movement known as the Ásatrú Alliance in Europe and in the United States.

The berserker mentality reflected in modern metal can be seen through religious ideology, where Nordic symbolism and narrative are vehicles for anti-Christian sentiment. Tales of Ginnungagap and Ragnarok are antithetical to the dominant Christian mythology. The former places creation outside the control of a sentient being, counter to the famous six day process as described in the Bible's Book of Genesis. The latter claims that the world will not end in the control of good as described by the Book of Revelation, but instead will succumb to the forces of evil.

Such a discourse is heavily counter-hegemonic in Norway, an 88 percent Protestant country. As Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind (1998) point out in their history of black metal, *Lords of Chaos*, the populace of Norway inherited the cultural legacy of cen-

turies of Christian missionary work, including the inclination towards censorship (Moynihan & Söderlind 1998 40). Moynihan and Söderlind see the appeal to a different religiosity, more particularly, the appeal to the native Viking religion, as indicative of a battle against this legacy, spearheaded by Scandinavian youth. The early 1990s, for example, saw numerous Christian churches torched in Norway and other parts of Scandinavia. Taking credit for the burnings were a new sect of Odinists inextricably linked to the black metal scene. As Moynihan and Söderlind state:

Black metal would provide the foot soldiers ready to plunge headlong into battle, fire-brands in hand to brazenly set alight the cathedrals and churches of Europe. (1998 xi)

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF FANTASY

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973), Russian linguist and political philosopher, Valentin Volosinov, asserts that shifts in the language of modern media represent changes in social relations, primarily those between an art form and its interlocutors. The change in social relations in the contemporary metal scene is one in which the genre has an implicit message of advocacy for the conditions of youth. In the case of metal's exploration of the darker parts of self, the politics of the dialogue is apparent. We live in an era in which psychiatric discourses have systematized humanity to such an extent that only the most drastic modes of expression are politically visible. Indulgence in the pathologized states of humanity dubbed most abhorrent represents a politics against current psychiatric modalities. This politics is largely the same when addressing the multiple forms of nihilistic behavior, including wanton violence and taboo breaking. Metal's counter-Christian sentiment also expresses this dialogue: the youth of today are not increasingly secular, as much as they are trying to find a new foundation for what is sacred. Within the moral order of Christianity, the invocation of other myths and modes of behavior (including Odinistic rituals and acts of outright violence) are starkly marginalized. Today's metal scene, it can be argued, offers a vehicle to express the subjective condition of cultural repression.

Similar to earlier types of rock music, metal is an expression of protest against greater cultural practices. Some may argue that because metal artists are adored, if not made into icons, the current youth generation is at the peak of its freedoms. However, one has to consider the increases in regulations, the explosion of surveillance, and the enforcement of rules that have consistently intensified in formal and informal contexts over the decades. While overt political protest in the 1960s and 1970s was controlled by a police force largely untrained to face civil disobedience, today's institutions of social control are so sophisticated that an open fight appears fruitless at best, suicidal at worst. The 1999 World Trade Organization protests, now known as the "Battle for Seattle" remains an historic case in point. In addition to thwarting efforts aimed at the open fight, social control is now exercised through an increasing number of legal regulations, their strict enforcement, the focus on discipline and control in educational institutions, and through the pharmaceutical treatment of unwanted behaviors. It has been previously argued that violence occurs more often in keeping social order (i.e.-through police and military action), than in the predatory, victimizer-on-victim manner (Black 1993, 2002). The sources of "legitimate violence," those of the established mechanisms of discipline, such as the military, the police, and those who run state mental hospitals may be construed as more predatory than individuals who advocate or enact harming another or themselves.

As it calls attention to the social conditions of its time, metal music functions similarly to earlier rock music, but not in its advocacy of overt political upheaval. Instead today's metal music invites its audience to partake in fantasies that reflect experiences of oppression. Fantasies are counter-hegemonic, in this sense. They are a resource left to a "straight-jacketed" generation. Metal confronts psychological chaos, allows one to explore the possibilities of nihilism, and provides Antichristian sentiments that challenge religious domination. Whether or not one subscribes to the notion that metal music is a "phase" of youth development, it remains that the dialogue between this widely popular genre and its audience is fueled by the asymmetry in power between established cultural practices and the young people who feel coerced into following them.

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ENDNOTES

- As metal music is constituted by a wide array of sub-genres, including heavy metal, dark metal, black metal, speed metal, metalcore, grindcore, gothic metal, satanic metal, industrial metal and many others, and because the lines of demarcation between these different sub-genres are often blurred, it is clear that a unified term for this type of music is excessively problematic. For this reason, we use the terms "metal music" or "metal" as generic nomenclature referring to any number of different sub-genres, or combinations of them. We differentiate this generic concept of metal music from punk and skinhead music, as well as classic rock music. Punk and skinhead genres influenced metal, creating subgenres with a specific following in Northern Europe. Skinhead and punk-oriented sub-genres of metal in Germany and Scandinavia are more likely to be expressed through a national language which reflects national culture. This is part of the reason why such sub-genres are largely absent from the international metal scene that, with a few notable exceptions, is dominated by English—a medium of international communication and marketing.
- As described in Andy Bennett's (2002) methodological critique, research concerning youth culture and popular music often lack methodological precision and/or substantial means of empirical investigation. While this study does by no means employ rigid empirical sampling, we employ our specific cultural knowledge to systematize the investigation through domestic and cross-national comparisons. Such a perspective helps to identify sub-genres and tendencies of metal music whose dynamics are not only explainable in terms of historical developments and linkage to other genres, but by the genre's own international cross-fertilization. This dynamic is demonstrated by metal bands' international touring and the increasing internationalization of the marketing of bands that are signed by smaller music labels. Part of this marketing certainly involves the international exchange of MP3 files via newsgroups or shared distribution providers. With the advent of internet technologies and the consequent high availability of all types of music, including metal, we may conclude that a recommended analysis of metal would involve a discussion of the genre on an international scale.
- All of the above court cases either ended with dismissal of the charges or acquittal of the defendants.
- This term, of course, refers to the role of Tipper Gore in beginning the PMRC and in lobbying congress to have warning labels placed on explicit content CDs. The term "Tipper Sticker" is often invoked by ex-Dead Kennedys frontman, Jello Biafra, during his spoken word en-

gagements, in which he discusses censorship of today's music, and how the messages transmitted through heavy music are widely misunderstood by adult authorities.

- ⁵ We are reminded here of the stark distinction between metal bands and the so-called "hair bands" of the mid-eighties. With most of these bands such as Winger, Warrant, Poison, and the like, the song structure rarely deviated from a predictable 4:4 time signature. Most of these compositions featured rather simplistic guitar riff structures oriented around melodic vocals. Hence, the "hook" of most of the hair bands' songs stemmed from the vocal lines and not the collective participation of the entire band.
- ⁶ Due to its emphasis on rhythm, rather than melody, it may be argued that the psychological tension engendered by polyrhythmic song structure in metal is much more intense than that created in jazz music. In metal, polyrhythms are based upon sudden bursts of mono-tonal, noise-gated, highly distorted, and low-tuned guitar noise that is often juxtaposed with drums played in a dif-

ferent meter. Played in such a manner, this type of rhythmic structure emphasizes the gaps between notes and makes for a disturbing machine-like aesthetic. Polyrhythms in jazz are based upon the same rhythmic principle, but usually employ multi-tonal melodic devices in different meters, rather than strictly rhythmic devices. The melodic emphasis of jazz largely covers gaps in the rhythmic structure. In some ways, this makes the polyrhythms in jazz more difficult to feel. Hence, jazz is considered more "cerebral" and metal more "aggressive."

- ⁷ Christopher Lasch's *the Culture of Narcissism* (1979 16-21) also addresses the phenomenon of modern day confessing, albeit differently than Foucault. From Lasch's perspective, the tendency to confess ourselves to others is an extension of a narcissistic sensibility in which we continuously need others for external validation.
- ⁸ For a concise and compelling discussion of metal music as a vehicle for the expression of young male pain and rage, see Ian (1997).