

# A “nihilistic dreamboat to negation”?

The cultural study of death metal and the limits  
of political criticism

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# ABSTRACT

Cultural studies analyses have consistently viewed heavy and extreme metal as less culturally significant, less empowering for fans and less worthy of study than other major genres of popular music. Metal has been viewed as a reactionary and unproductive encounter with anger, aggression and alienation: a “nihilistic dreamboat to negation”. Underlying critics’ objections to metal is a discomfort about the genre’s apparent lack of commitment to progressive political values. In the cultural study of popular music, pleasures not easily understood in terms of ‘politics’ have been viewed with suspicion by a discipline seeking wider political agendas in all musical and subcultural practices.

This thesis explores cultural studies’ marginalisation of metal by examining the critical literature on death metal, an ‘extreme’ variant of the genre that is particularly resistant to the kinds of political readings conventionally performed by progressive critics. Death metal bands frequently transgress social taboos, presenting as pleasurable or comedic material that is conventionally considered to be ethically and/or politically problematic. The kinds of listening pleasures that this material may offer independently of conventional ‘political’ concerns remain largely unexplored in the critical literature in the field.

Via an examination and critique of the major critical approaches to heavy and extreme metal, as well as interpretation and analysis of the musical and lyrical conventions of two key death metal bands, this thesis will explore ways of reading death metal that are, in a sense, 'beyond' political criticism. In particular, I suggest that death metal's apparent disengagement from politics need not be seen as a deficiency but as something which invites particular kinds of listening pleasure; in fact, one of the pleasures that death metal offers its listeners is the opportunity to disengage the literal content of musical texts from their 'real' social values, practices and beliefs. As a result, any reluctance to use this music as a platform for political engagement need not be seen as a deficiency or oversight to be changed in the interests of a more politically engaged practice, but an important dimension of the pleasures of death metal to be thought *with*. Analysis of the musical and lyrical specificities of death metal song texts is a productive starting point for expanding the critical vocabulary of death metal scholarship for a more effective theorisation of death metal music.

# DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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23 October 2008

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# INTRODUCTION

Over the course of a history that now spans four decades, metal has been one of popular music's most enduring and commercially successful genres, as well as one of its most obscure and inaccessible variants. Heavy metal first emerged as a distinct genre in the late 1960s, but experienced an “almost complete banishment” from critical discourse until the early 1990s (Breen 1991 p. 193). Given the movement's longevity and sustained popularity over this period, this lack of serious scholarly attention is noteworthy (Bennett 2001, p. 42).

The first known academic discussion of the genre was published in 1983 (reprinted in 1990) by Will Straw, over a decade after the genre's inception. In this article, heavy metal is explained as a product of record industry shifts during the 1960s and 1970s, and in particular, of trends towards centralisation and oligopolisation within the music industry, rather than the result of the agency and initiative of heavy metal audiences or musicians. By the early 1990s, a greater number of studies had begun to emerge within the broad interdisciplinary field of cultural studies.<sup>1</sup> However, the critical literature on metal remained noticeably less than for most other major musical genres, and significantly, it also remained noticeably less favourable. Of all the major genres of

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I have included a diverse collection of studies under the banner of ‘cultural studies’, including some by practitioners who would not otherwise identify with the discipline. However, given the shared agendas, concerns and approaches of much of this work, I consider it to be ‘cultural studies’ in the broader sense of the term.



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popular music, metal has tended to be met with the least approbation. For example, whereas punk is celebrated for critiquing social inequality with “sociological brilliance” (Cashmore 1987, p. 264), metal is dismissed as “neanderthal” and “reactionary” (Breen 1991, p. 195); whereas hip hop is praised for its “cleverly potent vernacular expression of keen insights” (Shusterman 1991, p. 615), metal is criticised as “fatalistic complaint music” (Deyhle 1998, p. 20) with too great a “concentration on the negative” (Harrell 1994, p. 102); whereas dance music is praised for its “inclusive egalitarianism” (Martin 1999, p. 85), metal is lambasted as “masculinist” (Weinstein 2000, p. 104) and “misogynist” (Krenske & McKay 2000, p. 300).

Underpinning each of these objections to metal is a discomfort about its apparent lack of commitment to progressive political values. Whereas punk, hip hop and electronic dance music are each regarded as positive forces for social change, metal is seen as mindless, nihilistic and regressive. Within cultural studies, where a great deal of popular music studies currently occur, this disapprobation is expressed especially sharply. Because critics in this field understand music to be fundamentally political—a site in which hegemony is either contested or confirmed—metal’s reluctance to challenge or critique social inequality, or to channel its energies into more politically engaged activities has contributed to a view of the genre as less empowering, less culturally significant and less worthy of study than more straightforwardly ‘progressive’ alternatives. Considerations of the pleasures and investments that metal offers listeners are often subordinated to an overriding concern with political implications of popular cultural practices.

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In this thesis, it is my argument that the dominance of political criticism within the cultural study of popular music has contributed not only to metal's marginalisation within the field, but to the theorisation of its pleasures within unnecessarily restricted parameters. The focus will be on death metal, an extreme variant of heavy metal which is particularly resistant to the kinds of political readings conventionally performed by progressive critics and which has been negatively evaluated within much of the critical literature on heavy and extreme metal. Via an examination and critique of the major critical approaches to heavy and extreme metal, as well as interpretation and analysis of the musical and lyrical conventions of two key death metal bands, this thesis will explore ways of reading death metal that are, in a sense, 'beyond' political criticism. In particular, I suggest that death metal's apparent disengagement from politics need not be seen as a deficiency but as something which invites particular kinds of listening pleasure—and, importantly, that these are pleasures to be thought *with* when effectively theorising death metal as a genre. Analysis of the musical and lyrical specificities of death metal song texts is a productive starting point for this kind of alternative theorisation.

Much of the extant literature on heavy and extreme metal is concerned primarily with the social conditions to which metal responds rather than with the listening pleasures that the music invites. For instance, most studies tend to situate the genre's varying aesthetic, subcultural and institutional practices principally within a context of deindustrialisation. Critics locate the core audience for metal in the blue-collar, industrial towns and suburbs of the UK and the US where large numbers of working and lower middle class whites are concentrated (Weinstein 2000, p. 118). This tendency

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to demarcate the fanbase along geographic and demographic lines—metalheads are seen to be almost exclusively young, white, blue-collar and male—means that heavy metal has generally been seen to resonate with and articulate a set of socio-economic concerns specific to this group. For example, Berger (1999b) and Gaines (1998) see metal as an expression of the frustration and alienation of blue-collar life in a declining economy of factory closures and chronic unemployment. Walser (1993) and Weinstein (2000) suggest that the music represents a way of articulating and sustaining individual and communal identities in an era where the authority and security of traditional institutions (e.g. employment, education, family) are no longer guaranteed. In this way, metal's appeal is thought to lie in its ability to offer empowering experiences and identities to those who have been disempowered by socio-economic forces.

Studies of metal have tended to place greater importance on musical meanings than has been the case for many other genres of popular music (e.g. Berger 1999a, 1999b; Bogue 2004a, 2004b; Bowman 2002; Covach 1995; Lilja 2002; Millard 2004; Waksman 1999, 2004a, 2004b; Walser 1993), but the musical specificity of metal is often 'explained' by the social position and characteristics of the audience. For instance, Walser (1993) argues that heavy metal symbolically ameliorates listeners' experiences of socio-economic disenfranchisement through the use of musical conventions that sonically connote power and transcendence (such as volume, distortion, power chords and soaring guitar solos). Similarly, Berger (1999a, 1999b) suggests that the sonic codes of death metal (in particular, its forays into chromaticism and atonality) connote a chaos and disruption that helps fans to cope with the frustrations and instabilities of life in a post-industrial economy. While such studies tell us interesting things about the

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connection between the formal properties of musical texts and the social contexts of their production and consumption, they ultimately tell us little about any pleasures and investments that may exist independently of, or disengaged from, political and structural concerns.

The challenges this poses for an effective theorisation of musical pleasure are highlighted by the difficulties that critics face trying to reconcile fans' obvious investment in the music with a barely concealed unease about the genre's questionable politics. For example, in his characterisation of metal as a "nihilistic dreamboat to negation", Breen implies something powerful, even transcendent, about the music (suggested by the choice of the term "dreamboat"), but his tendency to privilege political commitment as the most desired outcome of musical practice means that he ultimately conceptualises the musical experience in negative terms (hence metal is conceived as "nihilistic" and a form of "negation") (1991, p. 192). Breen struggles to capture something of the music's pleasure within analytical frameworks primarily concerned with assessing its socio-political significance. At one point in his article, his attempt to describe fans' enjoyment of the music leads him to make the curious comparison between the experience of a heavy metal concert and life in Stalinist Rumania. He writes: "the best, most recent equivalent image [of the experience of a heavy metal concert] is the tortured passionate faces of the Rumanian people as they spat their hatred of Ceauşescu at our astonished television cameras" (Breen 1991, p. 192). That this analogy serves as an illustration of musical pleasure is certainly puzzling, but it also reflects the difficulties Breen faces in trying to legitimate pleasures disengaged from political concerns. Unable to demonstrate a commitment to

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progressive social change, the pleasures of heavy and extreme metal can only be seen as “troubling” (Breen 1991, p. 191). In many ways, Breen’s work is symptomatic of a wider trend in cultural studies whereby pleasures not easily articulated to ‘politics’ are viewed with suspicion by a discipline seeking political agendas in all musical and subcultural practices.

In this thesis, it is not my intention to challenge the legitimacy of political criticism *per se*, but rather to suggest that, in the current scholarship on heavy and extreme metal, such an approach often serves less as an explanation for metal than an evaluation of it. In many cases, the observation that metal emerges from conditions of socio-economic disenfranchisement also includes an expectation that this experience of disenfranchisement form the basis of a thoroughgoing critique of structures of domination. Any reluctance on the part of adherents to use the music or subculture as a platform from which to address social inequality tends to be viewed as problematic. For progressive critics, metal’s reluctance to substitute political activism for pleasure and escapism is thought to contribute to a “depoliticization” of the scene in which oppressive power relations are tacitly accepted (and sometimes endorsed) (Kahn-Harris 2004a, p. 108). Indeed, metal’s tendency to divert the attention and energies of disaffected youth away from more ‘productive’ political goals is often considered to be one of the scene’s greatest deficiencies (Berger 1999b, p. 290).

In the current scholarship, progressive critics’ overriding commitment to political criticism means that questions of musical pleasure are often subordinated to broader ethico-political concerns. Within more recent extreme metal scholarship, however,

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some attempts have been made to expand the critical vocabulary for discussing death metal. For example, Bogue (2004a, 2004b) offers some productive starting points for exploring how the genre's musical and lyrical departures from conventional rock, pop and heavy metal invites listening practices and experiences that operate outside of expected identificatory and representational frameworks. Kahn-Harris's (né Harris) (2007) study on the extreme metal scene reveals practices within the scene to be governed by what he refers to as a "logic of mundanity" and "reflexive anti-reflexivity". The logic of mundanity, he argues, orients extreme metal fans to disengage the content of musical texts from their 'real' social practices and beliefs in order to make their consumption of otherwise transgressive material banal, routinised and suited to the demands of everyday life. Reflexive anti-reflexivity refers to their deliberate refusal to reflect upon the ethico-political implications of the texts they produce and consume, including—and, in some cases, *especially*—instances where this material would normally be considered highly contentious in ethico-political terms. Such practices enable extreme metal fans to explore transgressive themes textually without the scene, or their own behaviour, ever becoming unequivocally transgressive: "I am not arguing that music can ever be totally 'autonomous' from the social conditions of its production and consumption," Kahn-Harris writes, "but certainly within the Extreme Metal scene members attempt to keep music and practice at arms length from each other" (2003, p. 90).

Kahn-Harris's findings emerge from a fieldwork study of extreme metal fans and musicians in the UK, Sweden and Israel, and focus on the logic of mundanity and reflexive anti-reflexivity as subcultural practices rather than as modes of listening *per se*.

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That is, he is interested primarily in how such practices structure social interactions and institutional hierarchies within the extreme metal scene, rather than how the musical texts themselves may invite mundane or anti-reflexive modes of listening. The work of Bogue and Kahn-Harris are both important starting points for developing a theory of death metal listening in which the specificities of musical pleasure can be better accounted for—especially in cases where these pleasures may not be anchored to, and may in fact disavow, political and structural concerns.

This thesis will adopt a method of textual/musical analysis, rather than of ethnographic or audience study. Ethnographic or audience study may be an important next step in gaining a more complete picture of how death metal ‘works’, but for now I am more interested in the modes and forms of listening offered by the genre’s musical and lyrical conventions. This is because if these conventions invite modes of listening in which the disavowal of ‘politics’ is central to the listening pleasures on offer, then this disavowal can be seen not so much as a deficiency on the part of the fans, but as a crucial element of how this genre works.

I am not suggesting that death metal has no political implications or effects, nor that political questions should not be asked of the music or of the scene. However, the current dominance of political criticism in the field means that it is also crucial to ask what *else* death metal might be about. This in turn opens up greater space within cultural studies for explorations of the specificities of musical pleasure: for death metal in particular, but also potentially for other genres of popular music where key aspects of musical pleasure may also have been missed. Considering the limits of political

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criticism, then, may enable greater exploration of musical genres on their own terms and not according to how well they measure up to an evaluative framework already decided in advance.

### **From heavy to extreme metal**

Heavy metal first emerged in the late 1960s as a ‘harder’ form of hard rock. Bands combined elements of blues rock and psychedelia with soaring vocals and a heavy, distorted, yet virtuosic style of guitar playing. Early heavy metal was exemplified by the work of British groups like Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath. Led Zeppelin’s sound was marked by a speed and complexity that incorporated unusual rhythmic patterns and contrasting terraced dynamics (Walser 1993, p. 10). Black Sabbath’s sound was much heavier and more ominous, featuring fast sections alongside passages of slow, sludgy dissonance. Each band’s songwriting was based around what are now known as ‘power chords’. Power chords are usually produced by playing a root note and a fifth (or occasionally a fourth) on a heavily amplified and distorted electric guitar. This creates “resultant tones” far lower in pitch than the actual range of the instrument (Walser 1993, p. 43). Power chords are commonly used in metal composition to lend an intensity to the songwriting that connotes both transgression and empowerment (Walser 1993, p. 9).

Although in retrospect the importance of both Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin to the formation and development of heavy metal is clear, neither band referred to its music



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as ‘heavy metal’, preferring instead to describe their sound as ‘hard rock’.<sup>2</sup> The first group of bands to unambiguously claim the heavy metal mantle emerged in the 1970s. Judas Priest, Rush, Rainbow, Blue Öyster Cult and Motörhead are some of the best known bands from this era. With little radio airplay and few ‘official’ channels for promotion, these groups attracted a dedicated following almost entirely through live performance. Live performances were often spectacular affairs featuring elaborate stage sets, light shows and pyrotechnics, and were often held in large stadiums and arenas. A number of these groups, however, opted for a more ‘stripped back’ and less ostentatious musical and performance style. For example, in contrast to the twin guitar harmonies, flashy solos and soaring vocals of other 1970s heavy metal bands, Motörhead’s music was far less virtuosic, characterised by simpler riffs and unadorned, often gruff, vocals. Motörhead still played large venues, but the group’s performances were more straightforward and tended to lack the theatricality of many of its contemporaries.

A commitment to relentless touring meant that many of these bands enjoyed considerable popularity, but it was not until the 1980s that heavy metal realised its greatest commercial success. Metal bands in the 1980s combined the technical skill and professionalism of the earlier heavy metal stalwarts with the attitude and energy of punk rock. Known as the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM), these acts created a wider audience for metal with their shorter, catchier and more aggressive songwriting. Several NWOBHM groups, such as Iron Maiden and Def Leppard,

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<sup>2</sup> This is despite the fact that the term “heavy metal” was in wide circulation in both fan communities and the music press from as early as 1971 (Weinstein 2000, p. 20).

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achieved enormous mainstream success, while others, such as Venom, had greater impact in more ‘underground’ circles, including those within the nascent extreme metal scene.

Prior to the mid-1980s, the term ‘heavy metal’ had been used to describe a diverse collection of bands and musical styles. However, by around 1983-4, the growing popularity of heavy metal and the rapid increase in the number and variety of bands led to the fragmentation of the genre into three main subgenres: heavy metal (which included all of the bands from the genre’s inception to the NWOBHM), ‘lite’ metal and ‘thrash’ metal. Each of the two new subgenres emphasised a different feature of traditional heavy metal: lite metal embraced heavy metal’s melodic tendencies, while thrash intensified heavy metal’s speed, percussiveness and complexity (Weinstein 2000, p. 45).<sup>3</sup>

Lite metal, which includes groups from the popular L.A. glam metal movement such as Mötley Crüe, Ratt, Quiet Riot, Dokken and W.A.S.P., is the most ‘mainstream’ of all the metal subgenres. Lite metal conformed most closely to prevailing pop conventions in terms of song structure and lyrical theme (Friesen & Epstein 1994, p. 9), and it introduced an androgynous style of visual appearance that extended metal’s traditional sense of spectacle and theatricality. Bands playing in this style enjoyed complete mainstream acceptance in terms of radio airplay, coverage on music television and

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<sup>3</sup> In scholarly discourse, the term “heavy metal” still tends to be used as a collective designation for the original genre and all of its subgenres. Most fans, however, now use the term “heavy metal” to refer only to traditional heavy metal, and “metal” as an umbrella term for all the heavy metal subgenres and their offshoots, including extreme metal. For the sake of clarity, I will be adopting the latter convention in this thesis.

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features in the mainstream music press. In fact, the style became so popular that it accounted for around half of the top 20 albums on the *Billboard* charts throughout the latter half of the 1980s (Walser 1993, p. 13). In June 1987, for example, the number-one album on the *Billboard* charts was U2's *The Joshua Tree*, but the next five places were held by metal bands: Whitesnake, Bon Jovi, Poison, Mötley Crüe and Ozzy Osbourne/Randy Rhoads (Walser 1993, p. 13).

Thrash metal initially developed as a rejection of the mainstream acceptance of heavy and lite metal. Characterised by fast tempos, rapid meter changes, complex arrangements and gruff vocals (Walser 1993, p. 14), thrash bands shunned mainstream media exposure and theatricality in favour of a do-it-yourself approach to musical production, promotion, distribution and performance (Weinstein 2000, p. 48). Albums were recorded on small budgets and distributed by independent record labels; live performances were held in small clubs rather than large arenas and were promoted informally via photocopied flyers and word-of-mouth. Despite its 'anti-mainstream' stance, however, thrash still enjoyed a degree of commercial popularity following successful major-label releases by the 'Big Four' of thrash metal: Metallica, Megadeth, Anthrax and Slayer. Although in terms of album sales and media coverage, thrash remained significantly less popular than either traditional heavy metal or lite metal, once thrash groups began to appear on the commercial charts and on music television, it became increasingly difficult for fans to see the music as embodying the rebellion or rejection of the 'mainstream' that had been critical to its formation (Weinstein 2000, p.

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277).<sup>4</sup> The result was that metal went even further underground, proliferating a range of subgenres collectively known as ‘extreme metal’.

The term ‘extreme metal’ refers to a diverse collection of musical styles, among them death metal, black metal, doom and grindcore. Extreme metal aims to disrupt the expected conventions of pop and rock in an attempt to remain as inaccessible and unpalatable as possible to ‘mainstream’ audiences. Each of these subgenres has distinctive features and distinct networks of fans, and thus a certain degree of antagonism invariably exists between them (Friesen & Epstein 1994, p. 13), yet fans and musicians also share enough in common that they see themselves as belonging to a wider extreme metal community (Harris 2000, p. 14). The extreme metal scene, like the early thrash scene, is oriented towards independent methods of musical production and distribution, including grassroots methods of promotion such as letter writing and tape trading (Harris 2000, p. 14). Each of the main extreme metal subgenres also shares a similar sense of history, and in particular, a sense of having evolved as a radicalisation and intensification of its parent genre, heavy metal (Berger & Fales 2005, p. 187). Yet each also has key musical differences. There has been an enormous proliferation of extreme metal styles in recent years, but most of these originate from the four main subgenres (death metal, black metal, doom and grindcore). In order to provide a context for my later discussion of death metal, I will briefly consider each in turn.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Metallica’s ...*And Justice for All* (1988) achieved double platinum album sales (Fricke 1991, p. 48), while its follow-up, *Metallica* (1991) sold 650,000 copies in its first week of release, holding the number-one spot on the *Billboard* chart for four weeks (Garcia 1991, p. 85).

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Death metal was arguably the first of the extreme metal styles to emerge. Two of the subgenre's most important precursors include Venom's *Welcome to Hell* (1981) and Slayer's *Reign in Blood* (1986). Venom's music was raw and abrasive, with Chronos's harsh vocals providing "crude blueprints" for death metal (and later also for black metal) (Christe 2004, p. 238). Slayer took the speed and complexity of thrash and incorporated much heavier guitar timbres and disorientating forays into chromaticism and atonality. The band also extended thrash's lyrical themes to include even more extreme and transgressive depictions of death, suffering, violence and the occult. Death metal's emergence as a distinct subgenre around 1987 occurred simultaneously in both the United States and Europe. The American death metal sound, exemplified by bands like Obituary, Morbid Angel, Deicide and Cannibal Corpse, is characterised by technical, highly chromatic songwriting and a guttural, growled vocal style. Death's *Scream Bloody Gore* (1987) is often cited as the first death metal album in this style. On this release, the Floridian death metallers displayed little of the finesse and technicality that was to eventually become characteristic of death metal in general, and of Death in particular, and instead opted for a more straightforwardly 'brutal' and aggressive sound. Vocalist Chuck Schuldiner's lyrics were among the first to feature the graphic representations of horror and gore that were eventually to become integral to some variants of the subgenre.

Meanwhile, groups in Europe and the UK developed an equally influential, but less complex, death metal sound. Bands including Carcass, Entombed and Dismember adopted fuzzier, more distorted guitar timbres and a more relaxed, less 'technical' approach to musicianship (although both Carcass and Dismember later adopted a

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playing style characterised by a more explicitly melodic sensibility and a greater technical exactitude). Major subgenres of death metal today include gore metal (Cannibal Corpse, Carcass, Exhumed, Aborted), 'brutal' death metal (Deicide, Suffocation, Dying Fetus, Cannibal Corpse), technical death metal (Atheist, Cynic, Cryptopsy), and melodic or 'Gothenburg' death metal (At the Gates, Dark Tranquillity, In Flames, Arch Enemy).

The second major subgenre of extreme metal, black metal, rejected much of death metal's emphasis on musical complexity in favour of less 'technical' instrumentation and low-fi production values. In addition to Venom, Sweden's Bathory are often cited as an important early black metal band and their albums *The Return...* (1985), *Under the Sign of the Black Mark* (1987) and *Blood Fire Death* (1988) are thought to lay much of the groundwork for the musical and lyrical development of the style. Not until the early 1990s, however, could black metal be distinguished as a distinct subgenre. Key acts from this era include the Norwegian bands Mayhem, Burzum, Darkthrone and Emperor. Each adopted a sound characterised by raw, trebly guitar timbres, tremolo riffs, high-pitched screamed or shrieked vocals and misanthropic, Satanic and/or anti-Christian lyrics. Live performances were often theatrical and ritualistic affairs, with musicians donning black robes and sinister black-and-white make-up known as 'corpse paint' in order to construct demonic on-stage personae. Today, the most popular black metal bands, such as Dimmu Borgir and Cradle of Filth, play in a more 'symphonic' style, which often includes keyboards, strings and sections of clean singing.

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Like the symphonic black metallers, doom musicians also favour an emphasis on melody. However, they tend to preserve more of death metal's thick, dense guitar sound. Early doom pioneers St. Vitus and Candlemass slowed tempos to a solemn, almost funereal pace on the albums *St. Vitus* (1984) and *Epicus Doomicus Metallicus* (1986), although the subgenre was not firmly established until the early 1990s following influential releases from Paradise Lost, My Dying Bride and Anathema. Today, the main doom sub-genres are 'traditional' doom (Solitude Aeturnus, Reverend Bizarre), funeral doom (Shape of Despair, Mourning Beloveth), gothic doom (The 3rd and the Mortal, Theatre of Tragedy) and stoner doom (Cathedral, Sleep, YOB).

Grindcore, the final of the four main extreme metal subgenres, is a highly energetic style derived from hardcore punk. Songs are typically of short duration and are characterised by fast tempos, extreme dissonance and lyrical themes ranging from socio-political commentary to gruesome and/or humorous depictions of gore and violence. One of the subgenre's key innovators is Napalm Death, a group from Birmingham whose debut album *Scum* (1987) featured 28 tracks in 33 minutes, with one of them ('You suffer') only one-second long. Major styles of grindcore include deathgrind (Carcass, Brutal Truth, Nasum, Leng Tch'e, Pig Destroyer), goregrind (Carcass, Regurgitate, The County Medical Examiners, General Surgery), cybergrind (Godflesh, Pitchshifter, Agoraphobic Nosebleed) and noisegrind (A.C., Seven Minutes of Nausea, Nihilist Commando).

As part of my examination of the major approaches in heavy and extreme metal scholarship, I will be using examples and case studies from the death metal subgenre

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known as “gore metal”. “Gore” bands deliberately transgress social taboos by presenting as comedic or humorous material that is conventionally considered to be ethically and/or politically contentious, such as sexual violence, mutilation, torture and necrophilia. I will focus predominantly on two gore metal bands: the British deathgrind act Carcass and the American ‘brutal’ death metal band Cannibal Corpse. Both are among the best known and most influential groups in the death metal scene, and have already been subject to some scholarly attention, particularly in the work of Kahn-Harris (2003) and Reynolds and Press (1995). The music of Carcass and Cannibal Corpse offers exemplary (although not exhaustive) examples of death metal’s musical and lyrical practice.

Carcass formed in Liverpool, England in 1987. One of the first bands to straddle the death/grind divide, Carcass combined the brevity and simplicity of grindcore with the aggressiveness of death metal. The group’s debut album, *Reek of Putrefaction* (1988) consisted of 22 tracks, many of them little more than short blasts of noise. Subsequent releases, *Symphonies of Sickness* (1989) and *Necroticism: Descanting the Insalubrious* (1991), evidenced greater attention to songwriting and musicianship, but preserved much of the aggression and grubbiness of the debut album. On *Heartwork* (1993) and *Swansong* (1996), the group ventured into more explicitly melodic territory, with both albums going on to become important precursors to the Swedish (‘Gothenburg’) melodic metal movement. Prior to this, however, Carcass’s influence on death metal and grindcore had been considerable. On the band’s first two albums, lyrics catalogued the bizarre and repulsive things that can happen to the human body, including disease, dismemberment, mutilation and decomposition. The band’s simultaneously repulsive



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and comedic approach to the subject matter on these albums has inspired more “clone” bands than any other group in the extreme metal scene (McIver 2000, p. 52; Widener 2005, p. 61). Given the importance of *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* in the development and dissemination of the gore metal subgenre, my analysis will focus predominantly on the band’s first two albums.

Cannibal Corpse formed in 1988 in Buffalo, New York, but spent most of its career in Tampa, Florida. One of the more prolific bands in the scene, Cannibal Corpse has released ten studio albums: *Eaten Back to Life* (1990), *Butchered at Birth* (1991), *Tomb of the Mutilated* (1992), *The Bleeding* (1994), *Vile* (1996), *Gallery of Suicide* (1998), *Bloodthirst* (1999), *Gore Obsessed* (2002), *The Wretched Spawn* (2004) and *Kill* (2006). In contrast to Carcass, Cannibal Corpse plays a more ‘straightforward’ style of death metal known as ‘brutal’ death metal, and has maintained a relatively consistent musical approach across its career (even if the songwriting has become more focused and polished on more recent releases). I am most interested in the material from Cannibal Corpse’s first two albums, *Eaten Back to Life* (1990) and *Butchered at Birth* (1991), because these were released during the formative years of the band and of death metal, and during the period of the band’s career in which it was roughly contemporaneous with Carcass. Although the lyrics of many newer bands are now far more outrageous, Cannibal Corpse was initially considered to be one of the most shocking bands in the scene and were renowned for their confronting depictions of murder and mutilation, particularly of women. As one of death metal’s most influential and emulated bands, Cannibal Corpse has also enjoyed some commercial success (Purcell 2003, p. 18). In 1992, the group performed ‘Hammer smashed face’ (from *Tomb of the Mutilated*) in the Jim Carey

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movie, *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, and in 1996 became the first death metal band to debut in the US Billboard Top 200 chart, with the album *Vile* (even though it was a relatively modest entry at number 151) (Mayfield 1996, p. 120). Unlike Carcass, which disbanded in 1997, Cannibal Corpse is still currently active in the death metal scene.

The explicitness and extremity of representations of violence in Carcass and Cannibal Corpse's music mean that ethico-political questions are essential to any analysis of these examples of death metal; at the same time, however, both bands' musical and lyrical conventions seem to offer access to modes of listening that are largely outside of conventional ethico-political frameworks. As a result, it is my argument that an interest in graphic representations of violence need not be viewed as evidence of listeners' 'real' attitudes and beliefs, or of their reactionary politics; rather, death metal's musical and lyrical conventions offer images of violence and gore as opportunities to consume ordinarily contentious material without engagement with, or recourse to, conventional ethical or political precepts. Progressive criticism may still ultimately consider this to be problematic (and I certainly do not seek to entirely overlook the misogyny of Cannibal Corpse's lyrics, in particular), but an exploration of the music of Carcass and Cannibal Corpse offers some productive starting points for interrogating dominant trends in death metal scholarship and for suggesting some additional ways of reading the genre's musical and lyrical conventions.

### **The politics of cultural studies**

Although the pleasures of popular music have always been of concern to cultural studies work on popular music,<sup>5</sup> critics in the field have tended to remain careful not to allow this interest to eclipse more practical political concerns. McRobbie, for instance, has argued that cultural studies' priority should lie not with the development of a theoretical vocabulary sophisticated enough to capture the specificity of sonic experience, but with addressing more "politically relevant" issues of music as a site of employment, skill acquisition, labour relations and cultural capital (1999, p. 134). According to this view, critics should resist the temptation to "disappear entirely into the more intellectually tantalizing but politically less useful project of searching for a theoretical language to measure up to the dizzying brilliance of contemporary music making", and instead adopt a more pragmatic, sociological approach to the politics of music and music-making "based on the question of what academics can say or do which might be useful" (McRobbie 1999, p. 134, 142).

In virtually all traditions of cultural studies, a notion of the discipline as useful has been a persuasive one. Cultural studies is widely regarded as an intellectual and political project marked by a discourse of social involvement (Frow & Morris 1996, p. 354); it was initially conceived as "politics by other means" (Hall 1990, p. 12). The discipline's "clearly articulated, left-wing values" and debt to Marxist-humanist thought mean that questions of class, power and structural inequality are placed at the centre of analysis,

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<sup>5</sup> This is especially evident in more recent work that seeks to theorise music's affective and experiential dimensions (e.g. Gilbert 2004; Hemment 2004; see also Gibbs 2002; Hemmings 2005; Sedgwick 2005 for examples of the 'turn to affect' in cultural studies more broadly).

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and critics seek not only to develop a critique of oppressive cultural and social formations but to work in the interests of those with the least resources (During 1993, pp. 2, 27). Cultural studies is thus conceived as an “interventionist” discourse: critics aim not merely to describe or explain contemporary cultural and social practices, but to change them and transform existing structures of power (Slack & Whitt 1992, p. 572).

As Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg explain:

[I]n virtually all traditions of cultural studies, its practitioners see cultural studies not simply as a chronicle of cultural change but as an intervention in it, and see themselves not simply as scholars providing an account but as politically engaged participants. (1992, p. 5)

This overt declaration of political commitment reveals a fundamentally ethical imperative at the heart of cultural studies. Critics see their role not merely as providing an impartial account of cultural practices, but as also including a responsibility to *act* on behalf of the disempowered. Cultural studies’ obligation to act has been variously conceived as an “ethics of action” (Scott 2005, p. 7), an “ethic of engagement” (Wickham 2005, p. 80) and a “moral commitment” to social justice (Harris 2001, p. 74). Due to the field’s political commitment to, and ethical investment in, interventions directed toward social justice and transformation, critics see “something *at stake* in cultural studies, in a way that...is not exactly true of many other very important intellectual and critical practices” (Hall 1993, p. 99, original emphasis).

Of course, not all studies of popular music have been conducted under the banner of cultural studies, including many of the studies discussed in this thesis. In fact, a critical interest in popular music dates back to the Frankfurt School critiques of mass culture in the 1940s. For example, Adorno’s ‘On popular music’ (1990, originally published 1941), describes popular music as giving rise to a “pseudo-individualization” that

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distracts the listener from the realities of their social subordination (p. 307). Such a view of popular music is now widely rejected by many contemporary scholars both inside and outside cultural studies for its tendency to reduce popular consumers to passive dupes of the culture industries. Cultural studies has made a significant contribution to the way that popular music is currently studied and understood, but significant contributions have also been made by disciplines with different theoretical and methodological foundations, such as sociology, media studies and ethnomusicology. However, over the last four decades, cultural studies has become a key “intellectual ally” for increasing numbers of scholars interested in popular music (Anderson 2006, p. 286). Many have seen in cultural studies’ interdisciplinarity and commitment to social justice a productive theoretical and ideological basis for their own studies.

In their overview of popular music studies as a field, Hesmondhalgh and Negus explain that popular music studies, like cultural studies, sees itself as inevitably bound up with questions of social power and one of its key aims has been to intervene in questions of cultural value and authority: “to argue, for example, that the devaluation of certain forms of music is bound up with the denigration of the social groups identified and associated with these musical forms” (2002, p. 6). A shared commitment to the politicisation of popular music and to ethico-political ‘intervention’ has meant that the boundary between cultural studies and popular music studies has frequently been a fluid one. Cultural and popular music studies’ commitment to social justice has resulted in a great deal of valuable and important work, particularly in their interrogation of the ethico-political implications of popular music practices. At the

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same time, however, the desire to subordinate “endless theoretical argument” to a set of “politically defined” questions and interventions (Grossberg 2001, pp. 134, 136) inevitably limits the ways that popular music can be explored and understood.

Although my argument emerges as a critique of what I see as the dominant critical approaches within cultural and popular music studies, and in particular, the dominance of political criticism, I nonetheless seek to place my own work within cultural studies’ broad disciplinary tradition. After all, present debates within cultural studies concerning its legitimacy, disciplinary boundaries and political commitment suggest that interrogations of the field itself remain an important element of its intellectual and political practice (Zylinska 2005, p. 27). More importantly, early practitioners stressed the importance of allowing work in cultural studies to be open and provisional (Hall et al. 1980, p. 9), of rejecting the application of a theory already decided in advance (Grossberg 1993, p. 89), and of reaching knowledge not prefigured in one’s starting paradigm (Willis 1981, p. 90). For many, cultural studies still remains a question-driven, rather than a doctrine- or answer-driven practice (Morris 1997, p. 44). Despite its potential for theoretical ‘openness’, however, cultural studies’ institutionalisation as an academic discipline has led to the adoption of theoretical and methodological “orthodoxies” (Morley 1997, p. 122), some of which I challenge in this thesis. In particular, I am concerned that studies primarily focused on the political dimensions of musical experience inevitably obscure or subordinate alternative ways of theorising musical pleasure. However, I argue this not in order to decry or disavow cultural studies, but rather to place my own work in the spirit of interrogation and theoretical provisionality that I see as crucial to the discipline.

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The history of cultural studies as a political/intellectual movement and as an academic discipline is now well-rehearsed. Cultural studies is usually thought to begin with the publication of Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961), which formed part of a revival in interest in the nature of working class cultures and communities (Turner 1990, p. 12). Culture was conceived not merely as 'high' culture, but, in Williams' now-famous formulation, as a "whole way of life" (1982, p. 11) that included, but was not limited to, the study of everyday popular culture. Much of the influential early work conducted at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University focused on youth subculture. Hall and Jefferson's *Resistance Through Rituals* (1976) and Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) conceived the social sphere as a site of political struggle and the 'spectacular' youth subcultures of the post-war period—the mods, skins, teds, bikers and punks—were seen as evidence of the inevitably contested nature of bourgeois hegemony. Working class youth were no longer seen as 'deviant', as they were in some earlier sociological traditions, nor was the popular culture they consumed considered inferior to more 'serious' forms of culture as it was in Frankfurt School and Frankfurt School-influenced critiques. Instead, subcultures were theorised as sites of *resistance*. Subcultures were 'collective solutions' to structurally imposed problems (usually those of class) and the subcultural terrain of dress, music, ritual and argot was seen as the sphere in which the political battleground between classes was symbolically played out. The emphasis on class conflict and structural inequality stemmed from the Marxist sympathies of many of its founding critics (although critics at the CCCS rarely embraced 'orthodox' Marxism *per se*), and

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reflected a broader commitment to empowering marginalised groups and transforming oppressive social formations.

For scholars at the CCCS, questions of politics were thus placed at the centre of analysis. In fact, some of the contributors to *Resistance Through Rituals* suggested that an important goal of subcultural analysis should be the transformation of youth “resistance into rebellion”: that is, into an explicitly class-conscious struggle for state power (Corrigan & Frith 1976, p. 238). For the most part, however, the politics of subculture studies were invested in affirming the creativity and political agency of working class youth, rather than in attempting to mobilise them into an organised political movement. This was motivated partly by a desire to positively revalue youth culture in response to a previously negative literature on the subject, but also partly by a desire to envision a new role for the intellectual and for intellectual work.

This attempt to redefine the function and purpose of intellectual work was conceived as a key dimension of cultural studies’ politics. The role of ordinary people was redefined as that of a “dialogic partner” in critical discourse rather than simply an object of study (Felski 1998, p. 163). The value of intellectual work was no longer seen to derive from the “innate wisdom of an academic elite but from the writer’s affiliation with a broader, supra-academic community” (Felski 1998, p. 162). Gramsci’s notion of the “organic intellectual” operated as a model for the kind of work being done in this spirit. According to Gramsci, an organic intellectual arises from his/her class of origin (1971, p. 5). Such intellectuals do not simply describe social life from an impartial ‘outside’, but rather articulate the experiences and concerns of their class group



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through the language of their own culture. As former director of the Centre, Stuart Hall, recalls:

[T]here is no doubt in my mind that we were trying to find an institutional practice in cultural studies that might produce an organic intellectual. We didn't know previously what that would mean, in the context of Britain in the 1970s, and we weren't sure we would recognize him or her if we managed to produce it. The problem about the concept of an organic intellectual is that it appears to align intellectuals with an emerging historic movement and we couldn't tell then, and can hardly tell now, where that emerging historical moment was to be found. We were organic intellectuals without any organic point of reference; organic intellectuals with a nostalgia or will or hope (to use Gramsci's phrase from another context) that at some point we would be prepared in intellectual work for that kind of relationship, if such a conjuncture ever appeared. More truthfully, we were prepared to imagine or model or simulate such a relationship in its absence: 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'. (1993, p. 102)

Not only did this shift signal a sharpened receptivity to the potential wisdom of popular knowledge, it also involved a systematic questioning of the privileged status of the intellectual and of intellectual work (Felski 1998, p. 163). Popular knowledges and practices were redefined as potentially equal or superior to those of the critic, and one of the key aims of cultural studies was to legitimate attempts by working class or otherwise disenfranchised youth to create and sustain their own cultures independent of bourgeois hegemony. As Felski remarks:

The practices of everyday life [were] redefined as semiotically dense, often resistive sites of cultural activity, whose dynamic complexities provide[d] a valuable corrective to the bleak pessimism of the mandarin intellectual excoriating the banality of mass culture. (1998, p. 163)

Studies aimed to empower subordinated groups in the development of their own readings of, and meanings for, cultural products; working class youth were seen not as passive 'dupes' manipulated and immobilised by the culture industries, but active *bricoleurs* creatively appropriating and re-contextualising consumer objects.

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Much of this early cultural studies work has been widely critiqued. CCCS subculture theory, for example, has been criticised for its masculine bias, propensity to dichotomise ‘subcultural’ and ‘mainstream’ youth, and tendency to view the media as wholly anathema to subculture rather than something central to the formation and development of subcultural identity (for a more detailed discussion of these, and other, criticisms see Bennett 2000, pp. 21-5, 46-51; Clarke 1997; McRobbie & Garber 1976; Thornton 1995). Nonetheless, as one of the earliest attempts to explicitly politicise youth culture, invest it with a cultural value previously denied it in academic and popular discourse, and affirm the creativity and ingenuity of working class youth, subcultural theory has remained an influential current within popular music studies, and its concern with the politics of popular culture has contributed much to the ways in which successive musical movements have come to be evaluated and understood. Much of the current work on music-driven youth culture has arisen out of a direct engagement with subcultural theory or its criticisms (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004, p. 1). Indeed, many of the major works on heavy and extreme metal describe the audience using concepts and terminology derived from subcultural theory (e.g. Gross 1990; Krenske & McKay 2000; Purcell 2003; Weinstein 2000), or use metal as a lens through which to explore some of subcultural theory’s enduring questions and problematics (e.g. Kahn-Harris 2004a, 2004b).

Yet the account of heavy metal within subcultural theory itself is, at best, marginal, at worst, simply “invisible” (Brown 2003, p. 209). Despite metal’s obvious affinities with subcultural theory—its cultivation of an audience with shared musical preferences, rituals, style, argot and structural location—metal fans have not been linked to a

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politics of resistance in the way that has been the case for other groups of working class youth. Heavy metal received not a single reference in *Resistance Through Rituals*, or in the many works that sought to revise it (Brown 2003, p. 211). Metal appears only as a “bemused footnote” to Hebdige’s celebrated work and is, in fact, identified as one of a range of cultural options open to youth who are *not* subcultural (Brown 2003, p. 211; see also Hebdige 1979, p. 155, n. 12). Similarly, Straw (1990), whose 1983 study was first published at a time when youth cultures were often identified as ‘resistant’ or ‘political’ virtually by definition of being subcultural, defines metal as a product of record industry shifts, and not as a subcultural phenomenon. Without the protection of subculture’s progressive connotations, metal is characterised as little more than a reactionary machismo, an “expression of violent sexuality” in comparison to more politically engaged forms of subcultural expression (Straw 1990, pp. 107, 109).

In the CCCS and CCCS-influenced work, all working class youth are structurally oppressed, but creative agency and subcultural resistance are attributed only to certain groups. Metal’s prioritising of pleasure over political commitment has contributed much to its exclusion from (or, in Hebdige’s case, its negative characterisation within) the early literature on music subculture. As a result, Brown has described subcultural theory as less a tool for understanding or explaining musical meanings and pleasures than as a “theoretical-political framework for categorizing ‘radical’ cultural activity” (2003, p. 209).

During the 1980s and 1990s, ongoing criticism of subcultural theory, especially its “elitist” hierarchy of subcultural and ordinary youth (Clarke 1997, p. 177), prompted

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critics to consider the agency and creativity involved in the consumption of more mainstream cultural forms. John Fiske's work on popular culture is often regarded as characteristic of this trend in cultural criticism (e.g. Frith 1998a, p. 572; Gitlin 1997, p. 30; McGuigan 1992, pp. 70-4). For Fiske (1989a, 1989b), and for those influenced by him, mainstream popular culture is a site of hegemonic struggle between dominant and popular meanings and perspectives. According to this view, not only subcultural youth but also 'ordinary' people are engaged in an ongoing struggle to develop their own pleasures and meanings from the resources available to them; all consumers possess a capacity for resistance and all popular cultural products offer a potential for opposition. He argues that due to the social subordination of ordinary people, "popular culture is formed always in reaction to, and never as part of, the forces of domination" (Fiske 1989b, p. 43).<sup>6</sup>

This shift towards more positive evaluations of mainstream culture has not been without its critics, with some viewing it as symptomatic of a drift into an "uncritical populism" (McGuigan 1992, p. 70; see also Gitlin 1997; Williamson 1986). Among the other misgivings about the 'populist' approach (such as the inadequate attention to the role of structural and economic factors in popular cultural production), the concern for many is that populist positions ultimately treat all popular cultural products as equal in their capacity to empower. Morris reflects on this trend in some areas of cultural studies:

Sometimes, reading magazines like *New Socialist* or *Marxism Today* from the last couple of years, flipping through *Cultural Studies*, or scanning the pop-theory pile in the bookshop, I get the feeling that somewhere in some English publisher's vault there is a master-disk from which thousands of versions of the same

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<sup>6</sup> For a critique of this position, see McGuigan (1992, pp. 72-4)

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article about pleasure, resistance, and the politics of consumption are being run off under different names with minor variations. (1996, p. 156)

For Morris, cultural studies' project of redefining popular culture as a semiotically dense, resistive site of cultural activity has ultimately served to reduce the cultural experiences of all oppressed groups to a single monolithic 'resistance', leaving critics unable or unwilling to discriminate or differentiate between the various cultural products on offer.

As Frith elaborates:

The populist assumption is that all popular cultural goods and services are somehow the same in their empowering value...; the populist suggestion is that we equate romance reading and *Star Trek* viewing, Madonna and metal fans, shoppers and surfers, each having their own form of 'resistance'. (Frith 1998a, p. 573)

According to Frith, the inability to differentiate between cultural products has resulted from cultural studies' tendency to equate the value of cultural goods with the value of the groups consuming them. So, for example, if subordinated groups (such as the working class, youth, women, etc.) are seen as "good", then the cultural products they enjoy are also considered to be "good" (Frith 1998a, p. 572; see also Williamson 1986, p. 15). As a result, the only exclusions from cultural studies' "canon of popular texts" are those consumed by audiences who are not drawn from "approved" social strata, such as "middlebrow" audiences or the elderly (Frith 1998a, p. 572).

Frith's work makes an important contribution to debates about cultural value, and in particular, to the necessity of distinguishing between different kinds of popular cultural products and different kinds of consumption practices. However, it is not just middlebrow or elderly audiences who are excluded from, or marginalised within,

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cultural studies. In fact, to use Frith's own examples, what is striking about Madonna and metal scholarship is precisely that critics do *not* present the two forms of music as the "same in their empowering value". Not only is there a significantly larger body of scholarship dedicated to Madonna—so much so that there are now studies of Madonna *scholars* (e.g. Jones 1997)—but studies of metal are notable precisely because they do not view fandom as resistant or oppositional. Indeed, the critical literature on metal offers an important corrective to claims of indiscriminate cultural populism. Even given the predominantly working class audience for metal, few studies adopt the discourse of 'resistance' and 'politics' characteristic of analyses of other working class musical styles.

The rare studies that *do* theorise metal as a form of social protest remain ambivalent about the music's political potential. For example, Kelly (2005) argues that metal's corporeality and ambivalent relationship to technology work to decentre audience members' identities and promote new social relations and new forms of community. However, it remains somewhat unclear what these new social and community relations might look like, or how we are to identify them when they occur. Significantly, in the anthology in which the article appears, metal is considered as a "paradox of anti-social protest" and not as social protest proper (Peddie 2005).

As claims of "populism" have re-emerged in recent years (e.g. Blackman 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005), critics' reluctance to consider metal or metal fans as straightforwardly 'resistant' is a reminder not only of the extent to which cultural studies does *not* view all popular culture as equal in its empowering value, but also of

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the degree to which political considerations remain central to critics' selection and evaluation of popular cultural forms. It also highlights some of the limitations of cultural studies' own intellectual politics. It has been suggested that the study of popular music has played such an important role in the development and dissemination of cultural studies in part because cultural studies scholars have been able to recognise much of their own politics of resistance in popular music's ideology of rebellion (During 2005, p. 124). Music frequently crosses the academic/non-academic divide, with many cultural studies academics also fans of genres and subcultures they study, creating a play of identification within the cultural study of popular music between the academic and the consumer of popular cultural products (During 2005, p. 127). Some critics have observed that rather than offering a genuinely new model for intellectual work, cultural studies' notion of the organic intellectual has enabled its practitioners to indulge this play of identification and systematically misrecognise their own cultural and political interests as those of 'the people'.

For instance, in much current cultural studies scholarship, 'the people' are presented as having inordinate capacity to 'negotiate' popular cultural texts, generate new interpretations and remake the materials of popular culture—which are, of course, the same kinds of practices in which cultural studies is itself engaged (Morris 1996, p. 158).

Frith characterises the field in the following terms:

[T]he cultural study of popular music has been, in effect, an anxiety-driven search by radical intellectuals...for a model of consumption—for the perfect consumer, the subcultural idol, the mod, the punk, the cool commodity fetishist, the organic intellectual of the high street who can *stand in for them*. (1992, p. 180, original emphasis)

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In such studies, then, ‘the people’ ultimately become the “textually delegated, allegorical emblem of the *critic’s* own activity” (Morris 1996, p. 158, emphasis added).

The attempt to break down the boundaries between ‘academic’ and ‘everyday’ life is motivated by liberatory impulses, but cultural studies’ fascination and identification with the popular is inevitably a “double-edged enterprise, which may signal both a genuine desire to disinvest oneself of privilege and a strategic masking of the reality of that same privilege” (Felski 1998, p. 166). In questioning the privileged status of the intellectual and of intellectual work, for example, critics may inadvertently elide their own status as possessors of cultural capital, and fail to fully acknowledge the cultural politics of cultural studies as their *own*, and not the politics of the disempowered on whose behalf they claim to intervene (Frow 1995, p. 169). This can be seen in studies of popular music in the way in which critics display clear preferences for genres that confirm cultural studies’ own politics of resistance, or in which consumption practices are seen to emulate or approximate the kind of analytical work performed by progressive critics. A more detailed analysis of critics’ own investment in the various products of popular culture is much-needed (Morris 1996, p. 157). Some studies, including those by Felski (1998), Frith (1992), Frow (1995) and Morris (1996), began to do this in the 1990s as part of the broader debates about the value of cultural studies that were occurring at this time, but few besides Frith have considered these questions specifically in relation to popular music.



### **Towards an understanding of musical pleasure**

Chapters 1 and 2 explore how the scholarly reception of popular music has been influenced by critics' apparent desire to see their own politics reflected in popular cultural forms. Chapter 1 considers the critical reception of punk, hip hop and electronic dance music, three popular genres which have contributed much to the theoretical and methodological development of popular music studies and have enjoyed a critical approbation largely unavailable to metal. Punk's do-it-yourself egalitarianism, hip hop's social protest, and electronic dance music's disruption of conventional structures of subjectivity and signification are each seen to find broad compatibility with cultural studies' commitment to political critique and social transformation. Chapter 2 considers how metal, in contrast, is initially characterised as conservative and reactionary, stemming largely from an inability to assimilate the genre's musical and subcultural conventions into a similar model of political radicalism. Progressive critics who are unable to conceive metal as a motor for positive social change generally understand to be a nihilistic and fatalistic acceptance of the *status quo*. The pleasures that metal may offer independent of political or structural concerns remain largely unexplored in this work.

However, not all metal scholarship evaluates the genre negatively. Chapters 3 and 4 examine two key ways in which critics have attempted to positively evaluate heavy and extreme metal music: the first is what I refer to as the 'reflectionist' account of metal, an approach which views the musical and lyrical conventions of the genre as a direct reflection of, and response to, the realities of fans' lives and experiences; the second is

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the tendency to consider metal in terms of its potential to create ‘moral panic’. In both cases, cultural studies’ desire to be ‘useful’, as well as its overriding belief that a genre’s political potential is key to its cultural value and importance, has meant that metal has been positively evaluated only in cases in which the genre’s hidden politics are thought to be uncovered or revealed. Any other pleasures that metal might offer have been theorised only within restricted parameters.

Chapter 3 considers the limitations of the ‘reflectionist’ account of death metal, particularly the ways in which it inscribes an overly literal understanding of musical and lyrical meanings. Via an analysis of the ways in which the genre’s sonic and structural conventions (including the music’s non-identificatory, non-narrative properties) invite particular modes and practices of listening, I argue that such conventions offer listening pleasures that resist both an identificatory and representational logic. This highlights a disjuncture between the connotations conventionally associated with death metal’s textual content and the kinds of listening pleasures that it invites, suggesting in turn a textual basis for adherents’ practices of reflexive anti-reflexivity.

Chapter 4 outlines the ways in which critics adopting an approach to heavy metal as ‘moral panic’ seek to define the genre as transgressive, and to argue that its susceptibility to attack from conservative groups reveals its latent counter-hegemonic potential. However, I will problematise this reading in relation to death metal by considering the limits of transgression in the work of Carcass in terms of Kahn-Harris’s work on the logic of mundanity. Death metal’s obscurity and insularity has meant that the genre’s most transgressive material is largely inaccessible to those

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outside the scene; consequently, musical and lyrical ‘transgressions’ are performed primarily for the benefit of other scene members and not for a conservative ‘mainstream’ that seeks to attack the music or the scene. This enables the death metal scene to be read as a space in which transgressive themes are explored textually, but in which listeners also seek to make their experiences of these texts ‘ordinary’ and mundane.

Chapter 5 considers some ways in which arguments introduced in Chapters 3 and 4 might form the basis of an alternative reading of death metal. This final chapter offers readings of the music of Carcass and that of Cannibal Corpse. I suggest that by paralleling lyrics exploring the dissolution of the body with fractured, unpredictable song forms, Carcass offer images of corporeal disintegration not as opportunities for identification, but as sites for imaging new experiences of the body and of the self. This emphasis on musical and lyrical disruption offers listeners fractured, ambivalent listening positions, and invites them to experience corporeal dissolution as a form of pleasure and play. In this way, the music can be seen to offer access to a musical becoming in which listeners can explore alternative responses to, and experiences of, ordinarily contentious subject matter. The music of Cannibal Corpse, in contrast, is more aggressive and ‘brutal’ than the music of Carcass. Rather than a means of imagining and exploring new experiences of the body and subjectivity, Cannibal Corpse invites experiences of listening in which the ‘technicalities’ of musical composition are a central focus. Instead of narratively coherent song texts that invite reflection upon the ethical or political implications of the music and lyrics, songs are offered as a series of pleasurable, but largely discontinuous, musical moments. This can

## INTRODUCTION

be seen as a clear example of a textual invitation to reflexive anti-reflexivity practice, particularly of the ways in which a disengagement from ethico-political concerns can offer access to alternative forms of listening pleasure.

In offering these readings of death metal, it is my aim to open up a cultural studies examination of music to a more effective theorisation of the specificities of musical pleasure. Although my focus here is on critical readings of death metal, some of these arguments about the importance of considering musical pleasure may also be relevant to the study of other genres of popular music, including those also discussed in this thesis. After all, if it is the case that the dominance of political criticism has meant that certain aspects of the pleasure of death metal have been ‘missed’, what other pleasures of popular music might also have been neglected? The question of musical pleasure need not be viewed as a frivolous diversion from the real political work of social transformation; rather, exploring the ways in which musical texts invite particular pleasures and investments is an important first step for expanding the critical vocabulary through which music can be explored and understood.

# CHAPTER 1

## Popular music studies and the search for the “new punk”: punk, hip hop and dance music

This chapter examines how cultural studies’ overriding concern with music’s political implications has influenced the ways in which different musical genres have been approached and evaluated. In their different ways, the critical literatures on punk, hip hop and electronic dance music each demonstrate the continuing importance of political considerations for conferring value on musical genres: punk because it was one of the first genres of popular music to enjoy critical approbation, hip hop because of critics’ willingness to read as ‘progressive’ musical and subcultural conventions normally considered to be politically problematic, and electronic dance music because of critics’ tendency to insist on the fundamental radicalism of conventions that otherwise seem to deny the very possibility of political engagement. In each of these cases, the overriding focus on political concerns limits the critical vocabulary for exploring musical pleasures that may exist independently of political and structural concerns; more nuanced discussions of musical pleasure are often limited by a conceptual framework primarily oriented towards ethico-political evaluation. The dominance of political criticism in popular music scholarship has not only contributed to a tendency to value most highly those musical styles most compatible with the discipline’s own politics, but has limited the critical vocabulary through which music can be explored and understood.

**Punk studies and the persistence of politics**

Within a few months of punk's public emergence in 1977, virtually every radical commentator in Britain agreed that punk was a "Good Thing" (Frith 1980, p. 54). Punk seemed to transform popular music, raising new questions about audience, commodity production and musical meaning; it seemed different from previous mass musics in terms of "how it was made *and* how it was used *and* how it meant" (Frith 1980, p. 55, original emphasis). The music was driving and aggressive, with simple, high energy song structures and sneering, venomous lyrics. The movement's musical amateurism seemed to promote egalitarian, non-hierarchical social relations, its do-it-yourself approach to musical production seemed to challenge the capitalist control of music practice, while its musical sounds and lyrical themes appeared to express a kind of class-based political resistance to the economic decline of 1970s Britain. The apparent compatibility of punk with a Marxist political agenda revived hopes of a radical and liberatory popular culture. Punk was considered such a "watershed" moment in the history of popular music that many subsequent genres and movements have been theorised and evaluated in terms of their relation to punk (Grossberg 1990, p. 116).

According to many of the movement's early supporters, punk reintroduced social protest to rock music (Dancis 1978, p. 80). Punk was thought to have emerged primarily as an expression of the concerns and resentments of white, working class youth in an era of record poverty and unemployment, and its musical sounds and lyrical themes were seen as a backdrop to the anger and disillusionment of life in the

dole queue (Marsh 1982, p. 165). “Locational” arguments were regularly invoked; punk bands, by virtue of their location in the working class at a time when that class’s economic stability was deteriorating, were thought of as inevitably reflecting political frustration and dissent (Tillman 1980, p. 168), and in particular, a proto-socialism (Marsh 1982, p. 162; Thompson 1979, p. 62).

Punk style was seen as a key means by which a neglected constituency of white, working class youth expressed their opposition to dominant values and institutions. According to Hebdige (1979), the movement’s spectacular visual style—its trashy cut-up clothes, mohawks, safety pins and bin liners—were both a real reflection of the material poverty of British working class youth (i.e., they could not afford to buy anything else) and a dramatisation of the social conditions of its historical moment. That is, punks were not only directly *responding* to increasing joblessness, poverty and changing moral standards, they were also *dramatising* it using clothing to symbolise an experience of crisis, apocalypse and anarchy (Hebdige 1979, p. 87). Punks were seen to understand Britain’s changing social conditions with “sociological brilliance”, and visual style was considered one of the means by which they posed their most trenchant critiques (Cashmore 1987, p. 264). According to Hebdige, the “horror circus antics” of punk style were a means by which a “divided and unequal society was being eloquently condemned” (1979, p. 115).

Many of the early punk studies connected the simplicity and amateurism of punk songs to a kind of proto-socialism. Musical amateurism—the idea that anyone could ‘have a go’ regardless of musical experience—was seen to eliminate hierarchies between artists

and audiences (and also, presumably, between artists themselves), and was thus demonstrative of punk's "ideological orientation toward human equality" (Lull 1987, p. 241). Punk was "*access* music" (Marsh 1982, p. 162, original emphasis). Any kind of success, either artistic or commercial, was seen as anathema to the movement's democratic ideology. Skill development—viewed by critics as a musical equivalent of social mobility (Marsh 1982, p. 166)—was seen to inevitably undermine the proto-socialist community believed to be the natural and proper basis of working-class life.

Punk's back-to-basics, 'do-it-yourself' approach to musical production, distribution, promotion and performance was seen as further evidence of the scene's commitment to egalitarianism. Punk rejected the ideologies and institutions of the corporate music industry and instead developed a network of counter-institutions which reflected the scene's adherence to principles of self-determination, collectivism and participation (Hesmondhalgh 1998b, p. 255; Laing 1985, p. 14). In a challenge to the hegemony of the mainstream music industry, punk artists released their material through independently-run record labels and distribution services. Flyers, word-of-mouth and cheaply photocopied, home-made magazines known as 'fanzines' became the main sources through which punk recordings and performances were promoted. Since the fanzines, labels and distribution services were predominantly small-scale, low-cost operations run by individuals closely involved in the punk scene, the values of the commercial market tended to play only a limited role in their formation and operation (Laing 1985, p. 21). The ease with which anyone could form a band, label or 'zine was seen to foster greater participation in the punk scene and to demystify and democratise the production process itself.



## CHAPTER 1

Importantly, punk's ideology of egalitarianism was seen to extend to more equitable and inclusive treatment of socially marginalised groups. For example, punk is generally regarded as a liberating time for women. It was seen to foster a high degree of active female participation, since lack of musical experience—or even prejudicial beliefs about female musical competence—were considered relatively unimportant in the punk scene (Gottlieb & Wald 1994, p. 255). Women were thus able to “escape the *chanteuse* role to which they were generally limited” and serve as lead singers, drummers, bass players and guitarists in punk bands (Reynolds & Press 1995, p. 33). Punk style also enabled women to interrogate restrictive gender ideologies, with some female punks using clothing to mark the body as a site of resistance to oppressive ideals of feminine beauty. For example, by appropriating the garments of pornography (bondage gear, underwear as outerwear, etc), some female punks worked to demystify the female body and give a “voice” to the female sex object (Daugherty 2002, p. 33).

However, punk was never the egalitarian haven for women that such studies imply. Some elements of the punk scene were directly antagonistic towards female involvement. For example, songs by the Stranglers, Dead Boys and Cortinas aggressively targeted women, while other influential figures like Malcolm McLaren and Mark Perry promoted unabashedly sexist views and values. In an issue of his seminal 'zine *Sniffin' Glue*, Perry was explicit in his objection to the participation of women in the punk scene: “Punks are not girls,” he wrote, “if it comes to the crunch we'll have no options but to fight back” (qtd. in Reynolds & Press 1995, p. 323). The marginalisation of women was further amplified during the 1980s, following the evolution of punk into hardcore. Hardcore produced a new generation of bands which

adopted a harder-edged, more aggressively masculinist approach to musical sound and performance that discouraged the active participation of girls and women in the punk scene (Gottlieb & Wald 1994, p. 252; LeBlanc 1999, p. 51).

Despite this, punk scholarship has tended to reabsorb this ideological contradiction—the persistent sexism in a scene supposedly based on egalitarianism—into a framework which assumes that the overall predisposition of punk is at least “vaguely, if not specifically, left” (Ward 1996, p. 161). For example, ‘riot grrrl’, a movement which emerged in the 1990s as a response to sexism within the punk scene, is generally presented by punk scholars to be part of the ongoing tradition of punk rock rather than as a feminist alternative to the genre (e.g. Gottlieb & Wald 1994, p. 250; LeBlanc 1999, p. 59; Leonard 1997, p. 237; Rosenberg & Garofalo 1998, p. 809). And this is despite the fact that many of the riot grrrls themselves explicitly reject the ‘punk’ label, preferring instead to situate the movement within a variety of other musical and non-musical trajectories. Kearney argues that riot grrrl’s separatist stance aligns it more closely with the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture, such as the radical feminist movement, than with the punk movement (1999, p. 164).

Discussions of punk’s racial politics similarly emphasise the movement’s liberatory potential. Most early accounts tend to regard punk’s involvement in Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, as well as its alliance with reggae, as evidence of the scene’s inherent anti-racism (e.g. Cashmore 1987, p. 247; Dancis 1978, p. 79; Hebdige 1979, pp. 66-7; Thompson 1979, p. 53). Hebdige’s account of punk’s radicalism relies

especially heavily on seeing it as an antithetical response to the re-emergence of racism in the mid-1970s. He argues that:

[P]atterns of rejection and assimilation between host and immigrant communities can be mapped along the spectacular lines laid down by white working-class youth cultures. The succession of white subcultural forms can be read as a series of deep-structural adaptations which symbolically accommodate or expunge the black presence from the host community. (Hebdige 1979, p. 44)

According to Hebdige, punk was one of the white youth cultures that embraced most fully the black immigrant culture—even in cases where it appeared as if it were attempting to “expunge” it. Paradoxically, the significant musical differences between punk and reggae are thought to reveal the “concealed identity” of the two styles. That is, punk’s construction of an emphatically ‘white’ musical style is theorised not as a rejection of blackness but as a form of identification with black British and West Indian culture; punk is understood to be a white “translation” of black ethnicity (Hebdige 1979, p. 64).

In a recent revision of these early histories, however, Sabin suggests that punk’s progressivism has been vastly overstated and the widespread tendency to “co-opt punk into a more long-term tradition of counter-cultural—left-wing—dissent” in fact conceals the more ambiguous and heterogeneous elements of punk’s political outlook (1999, p. 199). For instance, it is revealing that punk’s interracial alliances principally involved British Afro-Caribbean communities and not the British Asians who were the main focus of far right racism during the 1970s (Sabin 1999, p. 203). Indeed, the scene’s ongoing fascination with the iconography of Nazism and fascism, as well as its tolerance of the anti-Asian and anti-Semitic attitudes held by key punk figures, such as Siouxsie Sioux of Siouxsie and the Banshees and Rat Scabies of The Damned, suggests

a direct link between the early punk scene and the fascist music scenes of the post-punk era—a connection typically “edited out” in more celebratory histories of the genre (Sabin 1999, p. 210).

Certainly, studies of the punk movement tend to either play down the significance of right-wing or fascist imagery within the scene, or reabsorb it into an explicitly ‘progressive’ framework. Most maintain that the prevalence of Nazi regalia in punk fashions should not be read as a literal endorsement of fascist ideologies. For example, Thompson understands this imagery as merely an “expression of a [social] system in decline” (1979, p. 60). In an influential formulation, Hebdige suggests that insignia like the swastika were wilfully detached from the ideas they conventionally signified and worn only for their capacity to shock, and insists that such imagery functions as part of a strategic play with taboo (1979, p. 117).

More recent work also continues to argue for the essential incompatibility of fascist ideologies and punk values. For instance, despite its suggestive title, Ward’s (1996) article on the “appropriations and constructions of fascism in New York punk/hardcore in the 1980s” actually has very little at all to say about fascism in the punk scene. The “constructions of fascism” refer not to any fascist aesthetic within the music itself, but to the ways in which many punk bands constructed local authorities as “fascist” during skirmishes over housing and the free use of public space in the Lower East Side of New York City during the mid- to late-1980s. His discussion of other, possibly more authentic, uses of fascist imagery remains quite limited. This imagery is either reassimilated into a progressive framework à la Hebdige, or distanced from the

'true' punk movement altogether. For instance, when noting the increasing visibility of Nazi punk bands, he maintains that such groups constitute only a tiny minority of the scene and dismisses them as "spuriously punk at best, [with] whatever creativity they can muster...quickly exhausted in a few racist rants" (Ward 1996, p. 162). LeBlanc (1999) is even more emphatic in her rejection of these bands as genuinely 'punk'. She notes that although most punks are committed to progressive politics, the brief convergence of punks and skins during the 1980s resulted in some factions of the punk scene adopting more reactionary political ideologies. However, she insists, these factions were far outnumbered by radically egalitarian punks, who swiftly "expelled" them from the punk scene back to the skinhead subculture from whence they came (LeBlanc 1999, p. 54).

While studies of punk tend to diminish the importance of racist or fascist elements within the scene, histories of skinhead and Nazi music often highlight the musical, ideological and subcultural links between the two scenes.<sup>1</sup> In a recent overview of the 'Nazi rock' scene, Brown emphasises the interconnections between the skinhead and punk scenes, and describes Oi! (a musical genre often noted for its 'white pride' and 'white power' sentiments) as the "skinhead version of punk rock" (2004, p. 158). Rather than presenting right-wing and fascist ideologies as merely an insignificant aberration within an otherwise left-wing movement, critics for whom the punk movement has been only a peripheral interest have tended to emphasise the

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<sup>1</sup> The exception to this, of course, is Sabin, whose study of punk describes the relationship between the punk and skinhead movements as a "symbiotic" one, arguing that skins tend to see themselves as "hard punks" who have rejected what they see as the middle class influence in the contemporary punk scene (1999, p. 216, n. 17).

continuities between the skinhead and punk movements, as well as the enduring influence of right-wing politics on the contemporary punk scene. In his study of death metal, for example, Berger (1999b) notes the predominance of right-affiliated punk/hardcore bands within the Akron, Ohio scene where he conducted his fieldwork. While more detailed studies of the punk scene strive to distance the movement from any politically ‘unwholesome’ elements, insisting that any right-wing elements were expelled from the scene in the early 1980s, Berger observes the division between left and right-wing bands as one of the most significant structuring elements within the contemporary punk/hardcore scene (1999b, p. 61). For scholars of punk, however, a notion of the genre as definitionally and unambiguously ‘progressive’ has been crucial to the value and importance attributed to the movement.

Early arguments relied predominantly on punk’s origins in the British working class as evidence of the genre’s progressivism. As early as 1980, however, Frith noted that the notion of punk as a straightforward manifestation of working class oppositionality was always a vaguely disingenuous one; after all, punk had never been unambiguously ‘working class’. Many early punks, for example, belonged to the educated middle classes, and the scene included a high proportion of art school students and graduates.

As he elaborates:

The left argument was that punk was a stage in the movement from class consciousness to class political consciousness: this depended on a description of punk as rank and file music, the direct expression of the way things were—a kind of realism. But even in terms of reflection theory, punk as spontaneous expression of lived experience, the argument did not make a lot of sense. The pioneering punk rockers themselves were a self-conscious, artful lot with a good understanding of both rock tradition and populist cliché; the music no more reflected directly back onto conditions in the dole queue than it emerged spontaneously from them. (Frith 1980, p. 55)

Although it rejects the notion of punk as an authentic representation of working class life, this work still reflects a dominant tendency within punk scholarship to link the genre's musical and subcultural practices to progressive values and ideologies. For instance, Frith suggests that the musical developments of the post-punk era—what he refers to as the “punk avant-garde”—offered a radical set of musical possibilities which challenged the apparent “transparency” of earlier punk forms, “mocking the idea of a direct line from social experience to musical form” (Frith 1980, p. 57). In their songwriting and performances, the punk avant-garde, which included acts such as the Gang of Four, juxtaposed a range of different genres (including those conventionally deemed ‘inauthentic’, like disco), in order to highlight the constructedness and artificiality of their own performances and thereby query the apparent ‘naturalness’ of musical language. Hoover and Stokes describe the Gang of Four's musical performance in the following terms:

Instruments entered and exited through the rise and fall of the musical line, changing tempo, dynamics, and timbre, creating in [vocalist] King's words ‘perverted disco’. Onstage [guitarist] Gill, motionless and e-motionless, personified alienation in counterpoint to King's manic whirling-dervish persona. Lyrics were desperately shouted out in a way that established King as a vocal stylist but diminished his presence as a front man for the band; Gill plaintively spoke his lyrics when singing. Coupled to the noise and histrionics were the Gang's messages requiring the audience to listen, think, relisten, and think again. The band nurtured conflict through multiple contradictions and ambiguities and thereby prevented the emergence of a unified, single statement. (1998, p. 27)

In doing so, the Gang of Four is seen to present the audience with a different kind of listening experience than more conventionally ‘realist’ acts, one concerned less with identification and immersion than with disturbance and alienation. Although Hoover and Stokes conclude that without concerted political action and organisation, the full potential of the group's radical aesthetics failed to be realised, they nonetheless suggest

that the Gang of Four's ability to engender distance and contemplation via their unconventional musical sounds, formats and performances helped foster radical political outlooks among the audience and was key to the articulation of the band's left-wing agenda (1998, p. 35).

According to Laing (1985), earlier punk bands also harboured a similar potential for radicalism. Some critics had initially conceived punk's use of 'ordinary' working class accents as a kind of musical 'realism', however, he argues that even apparently realist conventions have paradoxical effects in the context of musical performance. For popular music in the 1970s, the 'ordinary' was actually the mainstream American or 'non-accented' (sometimes called 'mid-Atlantic') accent associated with singers like Abba and Queen's Freddie Mercury. Working class accents which may have signified the ordinary and mundane in everyday life actually took on an exotic and colourful resonance when heard on record or on radio (Laing 1985, p. 58). For Laing, punk's radicalism was not located in the music's ability to represent its audience but in the way it frustrated identification between fan and performer through the use of 'shock effects'. These shock effects, such as "unpleasing" vocal tones, obscene language and unconventional mixing techniques, were thought to destabilise conventional listening practices and inculcate radical listening positions and subjectivities among the punk audience (Laing 1985, p. 81).

Writing over a decade later, Davies (1996) also contends that punk's revolutionary potential lies in its ability to evade conventional models of identification and projection. Davies divides the punk movement into two distinct waves: the first



between 1976 and 1978, and the second post-1978. The first wave, exemplified by bands like the Sex Pistols and the Clash, is characterised not as an authentic expression of working class life, but as nihilistic and shocking: pure, existential revolt devoid of all meaning (Davies 1996, p. 13). However, this is not viewed as evidence of punk's essentially apolitical nature, as it is in Tillman's formulation (1980, p. 173), but as a necessary precondition of the greater politicisation of punk after 1978. First wave punk bands destroyed traditional artist/audience hierarchies of hero-worship and identification, thereby enabling subsequent groups to construct different listening positions for their audience during the post-punk era (Davies 1996, p. 16). Although many second wave bands expressed explicitly political viewpoints in their lyrics, Davies locates punk's radicalism in its refusal to speak with an authoritative voice for or on behalf of its audience. Through an examination of the way that the vocalist addresses—or does not address—the audience, she argues that many of the most 'political' punk bands are those who, like the Stiff Little Fingers, used certain kinds of language (especially pronouns like "I" or "you") to constitute the listener as a discrete individual with whom communication is to be established. Since the singer had no special status, no mandate to be spokesperson, songs could only succeed by an act of agreement, rather than identification, on the part of the listener (Davies 1996, p. 21). For Davies, such a listening position destabilises conventional modes of subjectivity, in turn facilitating the construction of a communality based on communication—the first step in a truly democratic engagement with progressive politics.

A tendency to present punk as politically progressive persists even in work which explicitly distances itself from dominant trends in punk scholarship. Within this work,

assumptions regarding punk's essential radicalism remain virtually unchanged—even if scholars disagree on precisely how this radicalism is manifested. For example, in a direct challenge to much of the existing cultural studies work on punk, Goshert (2000) argues that to focus attention on successful or influential bands such as the Sex Pistols, Gang of Four or Stiff Little Fingers is to fundamentally misrecognise punk's true political potential. As he argues:

To focus a study of punk on such commercially successful supergroups, whether to repeat Hebdige's proclamation of punk's demise in 1978 with the breakup of the Sex Pistols, or to point to the continuing influence of punk on youth culture, consumer culture, or the music industry since that time, is to miss what is perhaps the most crucial point about punk: that its tendency is a resistance to working within the usual terms of commercial success and visibility. In other words, it is precisely when punk becomes popular culture that it ceases to be punk; thus it remains to be argued whether there is anything 'punk' about the way in which it has been defined and described for the last twenty years of academic treatments of the subject. (Goshert 2000, p. 85)

In contrast to most other American accounts of punk, which tend to present opposition to Reaganism as a key motivation for the movement's politicisation during the 1980s (e.g. Mattson 2001), Goshert locates punk's most radical era during the years of the Bush administration in the 1990s. Most accounts tend to view this period as the end of punk's political phase and the point at which it became incorporated into the 'mainstream'. However, Goshert argues that although the process of normalisation that Reagan's social and economic policies underwent during the Bush administration made them increasingly difficult to address in an oppositional manner, this absence of a clear-cut adversary enabled the movement to articulate new social identities and envision new forms of radical politics (2000, p. 97).

During the 1990s, the political focus of the music shifted from the more explicitly oppositional forms that punk had taken in the past towards more diffuse and avant-

garde strategies. Performances became spontaneous and transient, while traditional genre boundaries began to dissolve. Punk was no longer a style of music: it was simply what was performed at ‘punk’ shows, with funk, rap, heavy metal and country groups all heard on various ‘punk’ bills (Goshert 2000, p. 98). In many other cases, individual bands incorporated a range of different musical influences into their songwriting, thereby making them almost impossible to categorise in generic terms (Fairchild 1995, p. 23). It is Goshert’s view that these musical and performance tactics were a response to power’s ability to accommodate opposition; they aimed to promote constant mutation and unrecognisability within the punk scene. If punk could not be defined either in subcultural or generic terms, then the scenes could continue to evade models of production and consumption otherwise omnipresent in the entertainment industry and thereby articulate an oppositionality impossible to incorporate within the existing hegemony (Goshert 2000, p. 101). For Goshert, it is punk’s inability to be defined as a subculture, as a political movement or even as a musical genre that is the source of its true political achievement. This indefinability reveals radical possibilities for the articulation of social identities which cannot be captured by the “standardizing and reductive” terms of much current cultural studies (Goshert 2000, p. 87).

For Goshert, then, punk is not so much a musical style or genre as an *approach* to musical and political practice; it is conceived primarily as a musical/cultural site for the articulation of radical politics. As a result, punk’s inherent radicalism is taken as the starting point of his analysis. In many other current studies, critics identify a self-consciously political band or scene (e.g. Fugazi, the San Francisco Bay Area or Washington, D.C. scene) and then work backwards to determine the relationship

between music and politics: that is, given that we already know that this band/scene/etc is politically inclined, how are these political dispositions expressed in the music? After all, it is only because he assumes the essential radicalism of punk that Goshert can define the performance of punk as simply that which takes place at punk shows; a shared political commitment is the only thing connecting the bands he describes, which suggests that his very definition of what counts as ‘punk’ is determined not by musical genre but by political orientation. For other critics who focus on specific instances of punk’s political intervention, such as moments of organised protest, anarchist practice and/or opposition to the ‘mainstream’ music industry (e.g. Clark 2003; Frank 2001; Mattson 2001; Ward 1996), there is a similar tendency to subordinate musical practices to a function of politics. However, assumptions about punk’s inherent radicalism are preserved only by effacing questions of musical genre: for instance, only by presenting punk as definitionally radical can Ward marginalise all right-wing punk bands, many of whom are musically identical to their left-wing counterparts, as not-punk (1996, p. 162).

Many analyses are limited by a desire to uncover an essential progressivism behind all of punk’s musical and subcultural conventions. In the scholarship of slamdancing and moshing, for example, political criticism predominates. For instance, Willis attempts to politicise moshing as a response to the constraints of safe sex: that is, the physicality of moshing is theorised as a sublimation of the desire for intimate physical contact otherwise impossible in an era of HIV/AIDS (1993, p. 368). Tsitsos (1999) presents slamdancing and moshing as physical embodiments of differing ideological principles. The faster, more chaotic style of slamdancing favoured by apolitical (“drunk”) punks

contrasts with the more controlled and aggressive moshing style preferred by “straight edge” punks which, in turn, symbolise the different “ideologies of rebellion” held by the two groups: the desire for complete freedom and anarchy, on the one hand, and the need for control and strength in maintaining lifestyle choices, on the other (Tsitsos 1999, pp. 398-9). As he elaborates:

While there are drunk punk slamdancers who, like moshers, dance to release aggression, their dancing is not as violent as moshing because the primary object of aggression for drunk punks is the mainstream, an entity not identified with the pit. However, for straight edge moshers, the object of aggression is the disorder and chaos symbolised in part by the pit itself, and this disorder must be purged. (Tsitsos 1999, pp. 412-3)

Tsitsos theorises slamdancing and moshing as a physical ‘acting out’ of differing ideological principles. As such, his argument relies upon a clear demarcation between slamdancing and moshing, and between the different dance moves involved. However, his interview subjects make little distinction between the dance styles, often using the terms “slamdancing” and “moshing” interchangeably. This leads to some uncertainty about the precise nature of the slamdancing/moshing distinction. For example, how can moshing be seen to represent individual strength and control when it is also practised by drunk punks (see Tsitsos 1999, pp. 408-9)? In fact, his interview material suggests that the different meanings attributed to punk dance styles stem not from the presence or absence of specific dance moves, but from differences in interpretation. There is little consensus among Tsitsos’ punk fans regarding which dance moves represent which ideological principles; instead, their understanding of the various dance practices is influenced largely by their own political commitments. This is why, for example, political punks tend to emphasise the communal aspects of slamdancing,

while apolitical punks participating in the *same dance* stress the importance of individual expression and release (see Tsitsos 1999, pp. 408-9).

This is important because it demonstrates that musical, institutional or subcultural conventions in no way deliver participants to particular political positions in the way that punk scholars have traditionally assumed. Certainly, a good deal of punk scholarship has demonstrated how political ideologies inevitably have aesthetic consequences, but the relationships between politics and aesthetics remains a complex one, and musical and subcultural practices are not a reliable determinant of political investment. There is nothing about punk's musical and subcultural conventions that is inherently—or even typically—leftist. Under some conditions, punk's amateurism or the desire to eliminate hierarchies between fans and performers may well facilitate the building of an egalitarian, proto-socialist community, but the same techniques might also be employed equally effectively to non-progressive ends. For example, the rawness of 'amateurish' compositions may also lend intensity and urgency to right-wing political messages, as they do in some Oi! and Nazi punk scenes (Brown 2004, p. 161). Equally so, a do-it-yourself approach to musical production, or the circulation of materials through independent and 'underground' channels, may result less from the desire to subvert the capitalist control of music practice than from a more practical need to keep extremist outlooks hidden from public view.

Punk scholars risk treating musical and subcultural conventions as subordinate to political or ideological concerns. The music is approached primarily as a vehicle for the expression of politics rather than as something embedded in a variety of meanings and

pleasures, and as interplaying with politics in complex ways. Any approach that presents punk as definitionally radical may not only lead to an idealisation of the scene that is both unwarranted and unrealistic, it may be inevitably restricted in the kinds of analyses it can conduct, especially in relation to pleasures and investments that cannot be articulated to ‘politics’ in any straightforward way. This has tended to be a weakness in much cultural studies work on punk and highlights the necessity of developing a vocabulary for talking about music that can theorise its moments of political engagement, but can also explore the music on its own terms and not only in relation to a predetermined framework of political radicalism.

Studies of punk have been significant for the development of the cultural study of popular music, as it has been a genre in which critics have seen reflected most clearly their own politics of resistance (During 2005, p. 125). The importance of punk scholarship in the formative years of popular music studies means that a kind of “nostalgia” now permeates the treatment of many contemporary musical movements (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 22). This has often taken the form of a search for a “new punk”, whereby subsequent musical movements have either been compared to, or been misread as continuations of, earlier punk traditions (Redhead 1999a, p. 3). Evaluative criteria initially developed within studies of punk have had a significant influence on which subsequent musical genres have enjoyed critical approbation and which have been marginalised or ignored within cultural criticism. Since the 1990s, the main beneficiaries of the “new punk” mantle have been rap and hip hop.

**The “new punk”: rap and hip hop<sup>2</sup>**

Of the major musical genres, hip hop currently enjoys the largest and fastest growing critical literature. Much of this work is both incisive and nuanced, capturing much of the movement’s diversity, heterogeneity and complexity. Academic responses vary enormously, from celebrations of hip hop’s potential for political resistance, to criticisms of the music as co-opted and inauthentic; from an approach to rap as straightforward social realism, to purely text-driven work that pays little or no attention to the music’s social context. At the same time, however, much of this work remains connected by a shared concern with hip hop’s political implications and effects. In fact, although analyses are usually anchored to the specificities of urban black experience, much of this work parallels the earlier scholarship on punk, with some scholars even proposing hip hop as a contemporary equivalent of punk rock. Sirc, for example, describes rap as a refraction of “punk negation” through a fresh, more up-to-date lens (1998, p. 104). Both genres, he argues, share a commitment to “using a kind of plainspeak grammar and lexicon, charged with as much poetry as one can muster, to fashion a desperate politics of decency in an indecent world” (Sirc 1998, p. 104). Similarly, Hemmer views hip hop as a continuation of a tradition of social protest not seen since the punk movement in the 1970s (1998, p. 233). Like punk, rap is consistently lauded as progressive and liberating; a “genuine political force” in youth

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<sup>2</sup> In the interests of simplicity and clarity, my main focus in this section will be on the music of hip hop (i.e. rap music), and not the other elements of hip hop culture, such as graffiti and dance. Although these comprise an equally important part of hip hop culture, and have generated considerable scholarly interest, it would be outside the scope of this project to address these other elements with the specificity they require.



culture (Stapleton 1998, p. 232) and a significant form of “cultural resistance” (Yasin 1999, p. 220).

I do not dispute that both punk and hip hop have, at certain times, served as genuine political forces in youth culture. However, critics’ tendency to view the music as primarily a vehicle for radical politics has inadvertently placed limits on the ways in which they have been able to engage with and explore these musical styles. In hip hop scholarship, the propensity to frame the music solely in terms of black cultural politics—however accurate, necessary and important this often may be—means that critics tend also to imply that the music’s conventions are definitionally radical by virtue of fans’ and artists’ social subordination. Not only does this contribute to a reluctance to criticise aspects of the scene ordinarily considered to be politically problematic, it also works to elide a range of potential meanings and pleasures that the music may offer. This is significant because an account of hip hop as black cultural politics tells us little about what the music might mean to the white audience who now comprise the majority of consumers of recorded rap (Best & Kellner 1999; Lusane 1993, p. 44; Rose 1994, p. 4; Samuels 1991, p. 25; Yousman 2003, p. 367). The large white audience for black separatist rap, in particular, highlights the extent to which musical pleasures can exist independently of investment in the music’s explicit political content. If much of this audience is indifferent to, or reluctant to fully invest in, black separatist politics, this suggests that even in cases where popular music’s political orientation is explicitly avowed, this does not necessarily deliver listeners to a particular political position in the way that many studies suggest. This, in turn, highlights the

necessity of broadening the critical vocabulary through which music can be explored and understood.

Most critics agree that hip hop emerged as a response to, and an expression of, black (and, in some cases, Latino) urban experience (Berry 1994; Decker 1994; George 1998; Keyes 2002; Lusane 1993; Rose 1994; Stapleton 1998). Like punk, hip hop's willingness to directly address the 'real' social concerns of its audience means that the music is seen to be a politically empowering force in popular culture. Hip hop's links to earlier African and African-American practices such as "signifying" and "the dozens" is seen to connect to a broader tradition of black creativity, community and protest (Abrams 1995, p. 1; Shusterman 1991, p. 615; Stapleton 1998, p. 220). However, the genre's emergence at a specific historical moment and geographical location (the inner-city ghettos of New York City during the 1970s) led to a theorisation of the music as a response to post-industrial alienation and oppression. Hip hop is seen as a creative means through which ghetto youth negotiate a socio-political terrain fractured by racism, poverty and social dislocation. For example, Rose notes how hip hop emerged in the South Bronx as a soundtrack to the devastating consequences of deindustrialisation, economic restructuring and "urban renewal" (1994, p. 30). The "renewal" project involved massive relocations of economically vulnerable people of colour from different areas in New York City into parts of the South Bronx, as well as the demolition of hundreds of residential and commercial buildings (Rose 1994, p. 31). Within the space of only a few years, the South Bronx had been transformed from a stable working class neighbourhood to an overcrowded urban centre susceptible to slumlords, violent crime, red-lining and inadequate city services and transportation

(Rose 1994, p. 30). From this context of urban devastation, hip hop culture is thought to have emerged as a “source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished” (Rose 1994, p. 34).

For many critics, rap’s emphasis on the spoken word enables hip hop artists to directly address the political and economic disenfranchisement of their communities. Since rap performances require little in the way of specialist equipment or technical expertise (at least in the conventional sense of being able to play a musical instrument), the music has a “hands on” quality that allows large numbers of young people to use the music as a means to speak out against inequality and injustice (Bennett 2001, p. 89). Rap’s lyrics have been described as a “cleverly potent vernacular expression of keen insights” (Shusterman 1991, p. 615), and a source of empowering values and identities for low income black youth (Berry 1994, pp. 181-3). Moreover, just as punk’s egalitarianism and amateurism were seen as a liberating forces for a white British underclass, hip hop’s preference for spontaneous, participatory music-making is seen as similarly liberating for black American communities. Hip hop is now an integral part of urban black culture, and it is “not uncommon to hear young [African-American] men...walking down the street reciting their own raps or those of others... Many, if not most, [African-American] young people are rappers at some moment” (Yasin 1999, p. 213).

Rap’s practice of digital sampling is also thought to foster greater access to musical production, as it does not require skill in playing a musical instrument, only in

manipulating recording technology (Shusterman 1991, p. 615). The appropriation of content from popular songs, classical music, TV theme songs and advertising jingles is thought to turn consumers into producers (Lipsitz 1994, p. 37), and thereby to challenge both the dichotomy of creation/appropriation and the traditional hierarchies between creative artist and appropriative audience (Shusterman 1991, p. 618). As Lipsitz explains, the radicalism of sampling lies in its ability to

call...into question Western notions of cultural production as property through its evocation, quotation, and outright theft of socially shared musical memories. Yet it also illuminates the emancipatory possibilities of new technologies and the readiness of marginalized and oppressed populations to employ them for humane ends—for shedding restricting social identities and embracing new possibilities of a life without hierarchy and exploitation. (1994, p. 37)

Although this would point to the emancipatory potential of all rap, hip hop's ability to strengthen cultural interaction in urban African-American communities is thought to be demonstrated most clearly in 'nation-conscious' rap. A style associated with artists such as Afrika Bambaataa, Queen Latifah and Public Enemy, nation-conscious rap seeks to promote empowerment and ethnic pride within the black community via Afro-centric notions of political, economic and cultural development (Decker 1994; Henderson 1996). The language of nation, drawn from Afro-centric movements and ideologies such as Black Power and the Nation of Islam, is appropriated by nation-conscious rappers as a vehicle for contesting the discursive and institutional structures of racism in America, and as a means to mobilise and energise a radical movement toward black empowerment and independence (Decker 1994, p. 100).

The most commercially successful rap artists performing in this style typically come from impoverished inner-city areas and are noted for retaining strong ties to their

communities of origin through grass-roots events and initiatives (Decker 1994, p. 101). Because the activities of these artists are closely linked to the everyday struggles of their communities and their music critically engages the popular knowledge of which they are a part, nation-conscious rappers are considered one of popular culture's most successful examples of Gramscian "organic intellectuals" (Abrams 1995, p. 1; Decker 1994, p. 101; Lusane 1993, p. 49). According to this view, rap artists "theoriz[e]" (Quinn 2000, p. 198) their experiences of economic deprivation and socio-political marginalisation for African-American and white audiences alike. Some even see hip hop's potential to inform and mobilise potentially radical populations as analogous to the project of cultural studies itself (Quinn 2000, p. 211), highlighting the tendency to value most highly the music cultures which approximate most closely the kinds of practices in which cultural studies critics are themselves engaged.

Much nation-conscious rap explicitly positions itself as a political intervention in popular culture. However, some progressive scholars also read as 'political' hip hop that is less unambiguously radical or progressive. For example, although "gangsta" rap, with its brutal representations of street life, has been criticised as a glorification of a destructive "gangsta" lifestyle over more positive and productive nationalist alternatives (Henderson 1996), others have argued that the subgenre's images of violence, drive-by shootings, drug dealing and prostitution authentically reflect the real experiences of ghetto America. As such, many refer to this style as "reality rap" and suggest that by confronting mainstream America with a truth about ghetto life that it would rather ignore, gangsta rap represents a demand to be heard by the white majority

which otherwise marginalises and silences black communities (Keyes 2002, p. 166; see also Shusterman 1991, p. 619; Stapleton 1998, p. 225).

According to some critics, the realities of life on the margins of post-industrial urban America are also encoded aesthetically in the sonic and stylistic conventions of hip hop (Rose 1994, p. 21). Sounds from the everyday urban context, like police sirens and car horns, are often included on rap recordings (Abrams 1995, p. 8). Moreover, the music's elements of stylistic composition (in particular, its emphasis on flow, layering and rupture) are thought to replicate and reimagine the experiences of urban life. As Rose elaborates:

Let us imagine these hip hop principles as a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish and transform them. However, be also prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, in fact, *plan on* social rupture. When these ruptures occur, use them in creative ways that will prepare you for a future in which survival will demand a sudden shift in ground tactics. (1994, p. 39, original emphasis)

From this perspective, such conventions are seen as inherently political because they represent a positive means by which experiences of social dislocation can be managed and contested.

Rap's politically resistive role is also thought to be located in both the contexts of its public reception and in its institutional policing. During the 1980s and 1990s, rap music was subject to a number of 'moral panics' during which the media sought to portray rap music as harmful and rap fans as violent or potentially violent. In particular, exaggerated reports of violence at rap concerts have contributed much to the difficulties many rappers have faced in securing access to performance space and insurance (Rose 1994, pp. 130-4). Rose argues that the attitudes held by venue

managers, insurance companies and the popular media towards rap and rap-related violence are fundamentally linked to the larger social discourse on the spatial and social control of black people (1994, p. 125). These attitudes are often marked by a thinly-veiled racism: not only is disproportionate emphasis placed on the violent and criminal aspects of hip hop culture, but criticisms of the music are often connected to broader attacks on the black community. For example, whereas public attacks on heavy metal tended to construct its fans as *victims* of the music's harmful influence, attacks on rap have tended to focus on the dangers listeners pose to society at large (Binder 1993, p. 758). Rose has argued that this construction of white youth as potential victims and black youth as potential victimisers reinforces a broader perception of black people as a threat to the social order, and thus concerns over rap-related violence are often raised not simply to diminish violence against or among black youth but in order to restrict black mobility and freedom (Rose 1994, p. 136). For many critics, the racially charged ways in which criticisms of rap and hip hop have been articulated, and in which policies concerning rap and hip hop have been implemented, point to rap's "hidden struggle" that hegemonic forces have attempted to render invisible (Rose 1994, p. 145). Given these broader forces of racial discrimination, including the limited opportunities available to black communities for 'legitimate' political intervention, critics have been optimistic about hip hop's potential to critique and resist oppressive social structures: so much so that they have seen a radical impetus even in aspects of the genre which would ordinarily be considered problematic from a 'progressive' perspective, such as hip hop's attitudes to commercial success and to gender and sexuality.

Due in part to an equation of commercial success with corporate compliance, punk's anti-commercial impulse is considered an important dimension of its political radicalism. However, critics tend not to view the subversion of the capitalist control of music practice as an important or necessary goal for hip hop. Some have expressed unease about hip hop's commercial success, arguing that artists should focus less on financial gain and more on mobilising ghetto communities in an engaged and effective political activism (Henderson 1996, p. 335). For the most part, though, critics generally do not view commercial success as something which compromises hip hop's counter-hegemonic potential. In fact, given the different implications of 'success' for black and white communities, this has often been considered one of the scene's greatest political triumphs.

Critics argue that the commercial success of rap artists is a positive example of socio-economic mobility within ghetto communities and a source of black cultural pride (Keyes 2002, p. 172; Shusterman 1991, p. 621). Because America's black communities are still coming to terms with a history defined by slavery and economic exploitation, rap's commercial success enables members of urban ghetto communities to claim access to economic and corporate structures historically denied them, and thus help combat their social, cultural and economic marginalisation within 'mainstream' America. Even hip hop's celebration of materialism—its fetishisation of ostentatious cars, clothes and jewellery—is understood not as an example of empty consumerism, but as a symbol of economic independence and success. For African-Americans long denied a voice because they were only property, the acquisition of material goods is seen as a form of resistance to this history of silence. According to Shusterman, for



example, the luxury trappings of commercial success do not signify an acquiescence to capitalist exploitation and control, but rather a financial independence that *enables* free artistic and political expression (1991, p. 623).

Indeed, rap's commercial success is often seen as the very essence of the music's political power. For Abrams, the fact that rap's message of counter-hegemonic resistance and critique can be heard within a mainstream commercial context makes its "destabilizing force even more potent" (1995, p. 16). Rap is thought to inject a "large dose of substance" into a commercial music industry otherwise characterised by vacuousness and conformity (Berry 1994, p. 183). Mainstream rap and hip hop are thought to have enormous potential to raise public awareness of the cultural realities faced by urban black communities and to help foster a "liberating transcultural understanding" between white and black Americans (Berry 1994, p. 183). Critics agree that as one of the "very few sites in popular culture where unbridled culture critique of diverse kinds reigns", mainstream rap and hip hop can help challenge social inequalities and white supremacist values within the public arena (Yasin 1999, p. 219).

One of the few aspects of the scene to elicit criticism from progressive critics has been hip hop's gender politics. Some are troubled by sexist depictions of women in gangsta rap (Morgan 1995; Stapleton 1998, p. 225), while others worry about the "unabashedly patriarchal" views expressed in some nation-conscious rap (Decker 1994, p. 107; see also Henderson 1996, p. 319; Lusane 1993, p. 54). Some even suggest that this sexism must be addressed and transformed if hip hop is to deliver on its radical promise (Decker 1994, p. 117). Most agree that these representations are genuinely problematic,

but there is a widespread reluctance to condemn hip hop's gender politics as straightforwardly conservative or reactionary.

As Morgan argues, sexism is only one part of a huge set of problems facing urban black communities and not necessarily the one that should be prioritised in discussions of rap and hip hop. In fact, critics attribute much of rap's hostility toward women to black men's social and economic marginalisation. That is, rap's brutal machismo is seen as symptomatic not so much of black men's attitude toward black women, but of a much broader experience of alienation, powerlessness and despair. As Morgan explains:

[W]hat we've got to realize is that a man who doesn't truly love himself is incapable of loving us in the healthy way we want and need to be loved. It's telling that men who can only see us as bitches and hoes refer to themselves only as niggers. (1995, p. 154)

Since rap is one of the few cultural sites in which black men can articulate their collective pain, it is seen as a valuable tool for examining racial and gendered relations in contemporary America. In particular, it is thought to provide an important opportunity to both acknowledge and understand black men's pain, and to use this understanding to create a "redemptive, healing space" for the black community (Morgan 1995, p. 157).

While "hip hop feminists" like Morgan (1995, p. 151) do not endorse or excuse violent or misogynistic representations of women, they do seek to insulate such representations from broader public criticism. After all, since much of the public criticism of hip hop's gender politics tends to be inflected by racialised overtones, it can easily be used to legitimise broader attacks on the black community, and on black

men in particular (Rose 1994, 125; Stapleton 1998, p. 226). Since most critics are convinced that the music's emergence from a position of racial oppression guarantees its counter-hegemonic status, they tend to defend rap as being inherently progressive. Some argue that the frequency with which women are depicted in sexist and misogynistic ways has been vastly overstated, while non-sexist or pro-woman commentary has been underemphasised (Berry 1994, p. 173; Rose 1994, p. 147). Others suggest that rappers' use of misogynistic themes is merely satirical or parodic: not so much an endorsement of oppressive or violent behaviours as a witty challenge to repressive social mores (Rosen & Marks 1999, p. 922).

A significant body of work also examines the ways in which female artists and fans have successfully negotiated or subverted rap's masculinism in order to assert or reclaim a creative agency within the hip hop scene. The focus of many of these studies has been on women's potential to "usurp" rap for feminist ends (Roberts 1991, p. 150), whether it be by reappropriating male rap's terms of abuse for women (Haugen 2003), repossessing the 'male gaze' to construct women as active subjects rather than as passive objects of masculine desire (Forman 1994, p. 53; Shelton 1997, p. 108), or by articulating woman-centred, feminist and activist agendas (Keyes 2002, pp. 186-209; Phillips, Reddick-Morgan & Stephens 2005; Stapleton 1998, p. 225). In this way, although rap and hip hop tend to be understood as both male-dominated and masculinist, women in rap, like women in punk, are usually not understood as limited or immobilised by this masculinist ideology. In fact, some practices traditionally defined as sexist and oppressive are constructed as subversive and liberating by hip hop scholars. For example, while mainstream white feminism tends to understand the

## CHAPTER 1

explicit sexualisation of women's bodies in terms of sexual objectification and exploitation, feminist hip hop scholars argue that women's sexualisation takes on a different significance within the context of black urban youth culture. This is in part because the kinds of female bodies presented as most sexually desirable within hip hop culture are large-framed women with rounded buttocks and ample thighs—characteristics considered markers of desirability within black culture, yet considered unattractive and unsightly by mainstream American standards of beauty (Keyes 2002, pp. 194-5; Rose 1994, p. 168). Hip hop's celebration of large-framed black women as sexually active and desirable is understood as a challenge to mainstream white definitions of what constitutes a sexually attractive female body.

Critics' propensity to see a resistant potential in hip hop's musical and subcultural conventions, as well as their reluctance to criticise those aspects of the scene traditionally considered to be politically problematic, has contributed much to the current consensus regarding rap's essential radicalism. It is a consensus grounded in a shared belief that the music's emergence as a response to inequality and disenfranchisement somehow guarantees an underlying commitment to counter-hegemonic action. In many cases, however, arguments for hip hop's political radicalism also rely on a notion of a white mainstream challenged or transformed through exposure to the music. This white audience seems essential if hip hop is to deliver on its potential to confront issues of black invisibility and exclusion, raise awareness of the plight of black communities or challenge racist definitions of female beauty. However, although an extant or potential white audience is implicit in many arguments for hip hop's political promise, the fact that hip hop is also theorised as a site in which ghetto

youth can escape or evade white culture and values means that this white audience is often met with some ambivalence.

Of all the aspects of hip hop culture, it is the white audience for black hip hop that is of greatest concern for progressive critics. Although some critics consider legitimate only those hip hop artists who emerge from a black cultural context and offer a clearly articulated black cultural politics (Henderson 1996, p. 323), for the most part, hip hop artists of non-African descent have been met with critical approbation so long as they are seen to preserve the political legacy of their African-American forebears. 'White' hip hop is sanctioned only when it can be seen as a vehicle for protest, and a substantial amount of work is now dedicated to exploring the role of hip hop in activist struggles throughout the world: from left-wing activism in Italy to Maori militancy in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Mitchell, 1996, pp. 148-54, 244-50), from anti-racist causes in Germany (Bennett 2000, pp. 138-45) to protests over poverty and unemployment in Australia (Maxwell 2003).

White consumption of black hip hop, on the other hand, cannot be as easily recuperated into a discourse of protest. The few available studies suggest that while black youth view rap as an affirmation of their own experiences, white adolescents tend to explain their preference for hip hop in aesthetic, rather than political, terms (Sullivan 2003, p. 616). This is the case even for fans of explicitly politicised hip hop acts. For example, the black nationalist group Public Enemy has been unambiguously militant in its lyrical content, appearance, record sleeve designs and public pronouncements, yet a significant proportion of its fanbase is comprised of white

youth who are indifferent to, or at least reluctant to fully invest in, the group's pro-black, anti-racist politics (Gilbert 2004). That these fans enjoy the music without subscribing to its political agendas is seen by most critics as signifying a kind of voyeurism and tolerance of racism: a kind of "cultural tourism" (Samuels 1991, p. 29) that allows whites a "flirtation with the coolness of ghetto composure, the hipness of an oppositional underclass, without having to deal with the actual ghetto" or challenge their own white privilege (Allinson 1994, p. 449). Indeed, many of the most popular forms of rap amongst white youth are those which employ images of black violence, aggression, misogyny and sexism—the very myths and stereotypes about black people invoked by both conservative politicians and white supremacists to justify regressive social policies or violent "reprisals" against black communities (Yousman 2003, p. 379). According to Yousman, the embrace of such superficial and distorted images of 'blackness' ultimately represents a continuation of, rather than an intervention against, white supremacy (2003, p. 389; see also Henderson 1996, p. 335).

Although some critics acknowledge that white youth may hear in black rap a soundtrack to their own experiences of disenfranchisement and alienation, they still tend to consider the pleasures and motivations of white fans to be politically suspect, or at least to be of secondary importance to the experiences of black fans and artists. For example, Rose argues that while white fans should not be denied the pleasures of hip hop, the music's emergence from the specificities of urban ghetto experience means that black culture and black understandings must always be prioritised (1994, p. 4). Some even suggest that the music's subtleties and intricacies are inevitably inaccessible to white audiences; whites are thought to be unable to hear the music in

the same way as their black counterparts. Allinson reflects on his own experiences as a white hip hop fan: “As nothing short of a fanatic,” he writes, “I have become ever more aware of how hip-hop’s real meaning is beyond me, withholding secrets that I, as non-Black, non-ghettoized listener am in no position to hear” (1994, p. 453).

The ways in which white fans might come to find pleasure in a genre that otherwise seems to exclude them as listeners remains unexplored by an approach to hip hop which considers white experience primarily in terms of the ‘correctness’ of listeners’ responses to the music’s political messages. Sullivan, for example, assesses fans’ commitment to the music according to their ability to name rap artists, their preference for wearing clothing and using words or phrases similar to rappers, and their propensity to see rap as a truthful reflection of society (2003, p. 620, n. 11). Other measures of commitment, such as number of hours spent listening to rap music or the degree of enjoyment experienced tend to be undervalued or trivialised in her study. For instance, discussions of musical pleasure in which the music is not explicitly politicised as a reflection of ‘real life’ are dismissed as merely an attraction to rap’s “nice beat”, rather than a legitimate response to and engagement with the music (Sullivan 2003, p. 614). By locating rap’s ‘meaning’ and politics principally in the overt messages it transmits, Sullivan essentially marginalises an aesthetic interest in rap as definitionally inauthentic.

However, if the ability to transform mainstream white values is considered one of hip hop’s most significant political achievements, and the majority of hip hop’s white audience experiences the music in apolitical terms, an understanding of this aesthetic

interest may be necessary for any complete understanding of the music's political effects. Critics' assumption that radical textual content means that the music is definitionally radical is untenable given the disjuncture between white fans' musical preferences, their politics and their listening pleasures. To dismiss white fandom as appropriative and voyeuristic (e.g. Allinson 1994; Samuels 1991) or as merely aesthetic (e.g. Sullivan 2003) ignores more difficult questions about the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the hip hop scene. To understand this relationship more fully, it may be necessary to consider not just what hip hop represents at the level of political 'message', but also what it represents at the level of *affect*.

For example, although Public Enemy's political message of black nationalism was clear and unambiguous, several critics have noted that it was experienced in much the same way as heavy rock (George 1998; Gilbert 2004). In particular, Public Enemy's vision of "rap as rock" has been understood as key to the group's success, particularly among white audiences (George 1998, p. 65). As Gilbert (2004) explains:

The affective qualities of Public Enemy's music were never that different from those of the heavy rock which was the most popular form with this [white, suburban] audience: loud, fast, aggressive, offering the male participant an experience of exciting empowerment and battle-ready determination, at the level of affect this simply *was* rock music. Although the popularity of Public Enemy, like that of black male artists before and since their heyday, was no doubt also subtended by traditional fantasies about the erotic power and autonomous aggression of black men, it's clearly missing the point to see that as the main issue. It was the speed and power—the affective specificity—of the music that was the support for such fantasies, at least as much as they have offered access to it. (n.p., original emphasis)

Critics' reservations about white participation in and consumption of black rap are legitimate and warrant serious consideration. However, examples like Public Enemy



demonstrate the difficulty of approaching rap only in terms of ‘politics’, without reference to the other pleasures and experiences that the music may offer. If Public Enemy’s audience responded to the music as if it was rock (which, in the terms of Gilbert’s argument, essentially equates to an experience “exciting empowerment” disengaged from a commitment to black cultural politics), then a more complete understanding of hip hop may be impossible without a more detailed exploration of the complexities of musical pleasure. If everything about the music and self-presentation of Public Enemy was explicit in its advocacy of revolutionary politics, yet the group’s music offered other kinds of listening pleasure to its primary audience, any approach concerned only with the politics of hip hop may limit not only the kinds of questions we can ask of hip hop, but also the extent of our understanding of how this music might ‘work’ for its fans. As was the case with punk, critics’ overriding concern with the political dimensions of hip hop’s musical and subcultural practices inevitably serves to determine a particular kind of research agenda in which evidence of political activism and oppositionality function as markers of the genre’s cultural value and importance. However, while specific instances of music production and consumption may indeed be invested with political significance, any approach which takes ‘politics’ as the starting point of analysis may be poorly equipped to explore other aspects of musical pleasure.

## **Electronic dance music and the politicisation of pleasure**

The prevailing concern with the socio-political implications and effects of popular cultural practices has even benefited genres which, outwardly at least, appear to deny the very possibility of political engagement, such as electronic dance music. Because it privileges ecstatic experience over resistance or oppositionality, electronic dance music culture (EDMC) appears to be organised around the pursuit of leisure and pleasure disengaged from political precepts. EDMC scholarship has been responsive to the need for alternative approaches to, and additional vocabularies for, studying popular music. Conscious of the limitations of any approach which cannot provide an account of the pleasures of popular music, many of these critics have sought to theorise dance music's potential for *jouissance* as central to its meaning and significance. This is in part because electronic dance music is considered to be significantly different from other major genres of popular music in both sonic and subcultural terms. EDMC lacks many of the easily distinguishable markers of subcultural identity central to earlier accounts of music as politics/resistance as it requires little in the way of commitment; participation is often fleeting and temporary, with transient parties (or 'raves') the culture's primary, and often sole, manifestation. Unlike punk and hip hop, electronic dance music tends to be concerned more with the immediacy of corporeal experience than with the clear articulation of political protest. The music itself lacks an identifiable 'message' and does not 'represent' the social conditions of its participants in any identifiable way (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 166). When lyrics are present, they are largely converted into "musical elements which carry no epistemological content"; their role is to help create a pleasurable moment rather than to tell a story or articulate

a politics (Hemment 1996, p. 29). For these reasons, Tagg suggests that electronic dance music differs so fundamentally from other popular musical forms that “old models for explaining how popular music interacts with society may need radical revision” (1994, pp. 209-10).

Prior to the emergence of EDMC, cultural studies’ tendency to view political engagement as the most desirable outcome of popular music practice provided limited resources for examining a culture invested in ‘mere’ pleasure. In fact, EDMC was initially marginalised within the cultural study of popular music for this very reason (Redhead 1999a, p. 3). During the 1990s, however, a growing number of critics began to explore how the practices of raving (including dance and the consumption of illicit drugs) and the generic conventions of dance music work to produce radically new forms of musical and subjectival experience. In particular, scholars sought to develop additional vocabularies for articulating the pleasures of electronic dance music culture, many of them using concepts and terminology derived from the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Rave has been variously theorised as rhizomatic (Stanley 1997), as an assemblage (Fitzgerald 1998), a site of becoming and affect (Hemment 1996, 2004), and as a means to create a body without organs (Jordan 1995; Landau 2004; Reynolds 1997; Rietveld 2004). In each of these cases, critics’ Deleuzo-Guattarian framework is used to affirm rave’s multiplicity, plurality and provisionality. Critics’ emphasis on the fluidity and heterogeneity of the dance music experience was initially intended as a corrective to cultural studies’ dominant approaches (St John 2006, p. 12). However, as I have mentioned, this account of the music remains, at its heart, a ‘political’ reading,

albeit one characterised by both an expanded definition of politics and a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between music's politics and its listening pleasures.

Several studies have considered the role of dance music's sonic structures in reorienting conventional listening practices. Whereas rock and pop traditionally prioritise a clear vocal line and cohesive melodic figures, electronic dance music tends to eschew the melodic foregrounding of the singing voice in favour of the hypnotic repetition of small, monothematic motifs (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 72; Tagg 1994, p. 215). The music's tendency toward insistent and prolonged repetition is thought to produce sensory overload, promoting an ecstatic, immersive engagement with the music that evades rational understanding. As Hemment argues:

[T]he metronomic pulse is transformed into a force of rupture when it is pushed to a limit of sheer, intensive repetition, the mechanistic grid of digital clock time is punctured by an intensity, the succession of abstract instants postponed by the arrival of the present as a non-identical moment that is productive of difference. The impure pleasures of beats based music offer a euphoria of measurement, but in a way that subverts the punctual system and its own precision. Any sense of linear succession or sequence is undone by the insistence of a now that we might compare to the Bergsonian *eternal present*. (2004, p. 85, original emphasis)

As a result, the music's flow of desire is not directed towards climax or resolution, but is conceived instead as a constant, pulsing surface of intensity (Hement 2004, p. 87).

In this way, the intense, ecstatic pleasures of electronic dance music are seen as a pursuit of *jouissance* that, in its wordlessness and unrepresentability, prompts a decentring of signification and unitary subjectivity. According to Melechi, for example, the music's intense corporeality signifies fans' rejection of political engagement in favour of the "ecstasy of disappearance" (1999, p. 32). He describes the ecstatic

experience of music-dance-drugs as an “escape from identity” that provides access to a “space of oblivion” in which the “dancer implodes and disappears into a technological dreamscape of sound” (Melechi 1999, pp. 34, 37). Rietveld reads EDMC as a kind of implosion of the self and a disappearance from signification, whereby ravers “abandon...themselves to a ritual of disappearance” in which the “established ‘self’ [is] undone” (1999, pp. 41, 58). She argues that one of the primary pleasures of EDMC is the opportunity it provides to escape from the pressures and obligations of the symbolic order, including any commitment to political critique (Rietveld 1999, p. 43). Similarly, Malbon presents rave culture as less about rebellion or resistance than about an investment in forms of pleasure oriented towards creating ecstatic and oceanic experiences, including “transitory euphoria, joy and empathy” (1999, p. 105).

In some accounts, rave’s pleasure is conceived as an experience of pre-Oedipal subjectivity. Herzogenrath argues that electronic dance music “sets the polymorphous drive of pre-oedipal childhood against repressive, phallic desire” (2000, para. 16). Rave fashions, including comfortable shoes with bouncy soles, oversized shirts and baggy trousers, are thought make the wearer look like a “full-grown toddler” and symbolise the scene’s fetishisation of pre-pubescent childhood and pre-Oedipal infancy (Herzogenrath 2000, para. 17; see also Reynolds 1997, p. 106). Rietveld describes the rave experience as a kind of Lacanian Real in which ravers enjoy a comforting ‘return to the womb’. As she explains:

[I]n enclosed environments, such as clubs, the warm, moist bodies of the crowd within a dark space or distorted visual field produce an environment akin to the womb, while the amplified pulse of the bass drum, inescapably entering and embracing the body in a tactile manner, acts like a mother’s heartbeat. (Rietveld 2004, pp. 54-5)

In other accounts, rave's *jouissance* is conceived as a subjectival loss which provides access to communal forms of subjectivity (Jordan 1995, p. 125; Ott & Herman 2003, p. 257) or radical forms of becoming (Fitzgerald 1998, p. 53; Hemment 1996, p. 28). These two possibilities are often understood as fundamentally interconnected, with rave's subjectival experiences understood as a communal becoming-other. As Hemment explains:

The disappearance into a singular field of the music is articulated within a general becoming-unlimited, by which the identities and hierarchies of the ego are abandoned as the dancer confronts the limits of pure possibility. At this point both self and others disappear together. Indeed, the categorical distinction between Self and Other itself disappears, releasing a profound sense of unity. (1996, p. 28)

Some scholars have criticised theories of subjectival loss and transformation as unacceptably “postmodernist”, since their tendency to conceive electronic dance music as pure affect fails to consider the meaningful personal experiences gained at raves (Hutson 1999, p. 60; St John 2006, p. 1). For those seeking an alternative conception of rave's immersive, ecstatic experiences, a notion of EDMC as a religious phenomenon is becoming increasingly popular. According to this view, EDMC represents a site for broader cosmological understanding, consciousness expansion, self-empowerment, self-realisation and religious “conversion” (Sylvan 2002, p. 137). Hutson, for example, argues that rave provides a source of “socially produced spiritual healing” in an increasingly atomised society (1999, p. 53). Others have considered rave as a site of alternative spirituality (St John 2004), as an “instituant” religion that complicates and challenges institutionalised religious forms (Gauthier 2004), and as an exploration of New Age spiritualism, neo-paganism, tribalism and modern primitivism (Herzogenrath 2000; Hutson 1999; Rietveld 2004; St John 2004).

Discussions of both the religious dimensions of rave culture and rave's potential for becoming and subjectival loss offer alternative conceptions of, and vocabularies for, musical pleasures and meanings in EDMC. However, both positions have been criticised for their inability to address more conventional political concerns. For example, Gilbert and Pearson (1999) worry that an uncritical acceptance of EDMC's turn to New Age spiritualism and neo-primitivism amounts to a tacit endorsement of the individualist logic upon which such discourses are based. They express concern that by individualising all problems and all solutions, New Age and neo-primitivistic belief systems offer "salvation without the difficulty of social action" and thereby stymie any radical, activist potential of electronic dance music culture (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 173).

Similarly, although the foregrounding of pleasure has contributed to the development of new ways of conceptualising identity, subjectivity and community within the electronic dance music scene, critics have tended to recuperate rave culture's *jouissance* into more conventional models of political resistance. For instance, although it may appear to disavow the possibility of political engagement, even the account of EDMC as a culture of disengagement, disappearance and subjectival loss is one ultimately concerned with the political implications of musical and subcultural practice. The "ecstasy of disappearance", for instance, remains at its heart a 'political' reading, presenting EDMC's potential for evading traditional sites of surveillance and disciplinarity as a form of resistance to hegemonic social forces (Melechi 1999, pp. 34-5). Likewise, whilst Rietveld (1999) declines to attribute a conscious politics or resistance to EDMC, her analysis is nonetheless animated by a politicised rhetoric of

rave as subversion, destabilisation and insubordination. For instance, she describes EDMC's "surrender to a void" as a kind of "offensive" against the disciplinary impulses of dominant forms of subjectivity and sociality (Rietveld 1999, p. 58). In fact, she argues that rave culture poses a far greater threat to the established order than more overtly oppositional forms of popular culture because its logic of "disappearance" means that it cannot be assimilated or rendered knowable within the terms of hegemonic discourse (Rietveld 1999, p. 65).

In this sense, the practices of raving are viewed as a liberation from the strictures of modern subjectivity and the "chains of the rationalist ego" (Hemment 1996, p. 27). As Hemment argues:

If the self is a sedimentation of a certain stable alignment of forces, the ecstatic body sets those forces loose. To lose the self, then, is not just an abandonment of rational thought, but a positive freeing of the forces that traverse the body. (1996, p. 25)

According to Martin, this radically undermines the construction of the modern 'subject' as described by Foucault. Accordingly, the deindividuation and desubjectification prompted by the practices of raving are politicised as forms of resistance to forces of governmentality (Martin 1999, p. 95) and as forms of protest against the regulatory demands of modern society (Hill 2002, p. 100; Stanley 1997, p. 36).

Gilbert and Pearson describe *jouissance* as a threat to the "bourgeois discourse of possessive individualism", including the "phallogocentric" model of subjectivity that this discourse implies (1999, p. 146; see also Tagg 1994, pp. 216-7). Yet even as they seek to distance themselves from what they see as the anti-pleasure 'Puritanism' of



contemporary culture, Gilbert and Pearson remain suspicious of pleasures disconnected from political action. As they write:

What if the ecstasy, the liberatory *jouissance* to which rave grants us access, is nothing but an empty space from which no political position as such can possibly be articulated? Ecstatic dancing...can be a tremendously liberating experience. Liberation is not the same thing as transformation, however. Escape—especially if only temporary—is not the same thing as political change. The experience of rave may offer a temporary escape route from the strictures of bourgeois Puritanism, of phallogocentric subjectivity, of rationalist modernity. But when we get back from the party, have we just left all those structures as intact as they were before? (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 162)

This expectation that structural and political change should be a primary motivation of EDMC has been a pervasive one in rave scholarship. For instance, the assumption that rave's new experiences of subjectivity, *jouissance* and community are significant only insofar as they provide a motor for social or political transformation has led to a large body of work celebrating intersections between EDMC and direct-action politics. It has been suggested, for example, that in its ability to open up “new spaces for joyous and non-oppressive experiences of both self and community”, dance culture provides radical new models of progressive political action that have inspired a series of proactive socio-political movements, including Anti-Road protest and Reclaim the Streets (RTS) (Luckman 2001, p. 49; see also Jordan 2002; Rietveld 1998; St John 2001). Anti-Road and RTS are “guerrilla” street festivals designed to draw attention to the ways in which the individuating privatised space of the car and the prioritising of roads over other forms of public amenity has impacted negatively on local communities (Luckman 2001, p. 54). In these festivals, participants strategically employ dance and dance music as a means of reclaiming space for an oppositional activism. This focus on the ready compatibility of EDMC and activist struggles has led to a

recuperation of much of the music's 'escapist' pleasures into a theoretical model primarily concerned with political protest and social change.

As a result, although much of this work positions itself as a departure from previous approaches to popular music, an overriding concern with EDMC's political implications and effects has resulted in a theoretical focus that closely resembles that of more conventional studies. For example, critics argue that, like punk, electronic dance music works to subvert the capitalist control of music practice. They note how the increasing affordability of home-studio technology, coupled with dance culture's preference for inexpensive and often outdated equipment, has placed considerable resources into the hands of musicians operating outside the major record industry, allowing them not only to produce high-quality dance recordings on limited budgets, but also to maintain complete creative control over the final product (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 118). Dance culture's preference for issuing releases through independent record labels and distribution networks has also been viewed as a democratisation of music production—even if the dance labels and distribution services are seen to exhibit a more provisional and less politicised anti-corporatism than the punk companies which preceded them (Hemment 1996, p. 38; Hesmondhalgh 1998a, p. 249). As in the case of hip hop, dance music's use of sampling, mixing and editing is seen as indicative of the radically disruptive possibilities of adapting, appropriating or 'stealing' copyrighted materials from multinational recording companies (Stanley 1997, p. 50).

Moreover, because raves were initially held illegally in abandoned warehouses, aeroplane hangers and fields, critics have argued that EDMC can be located outside of regulatory demands and controls, and hence poses a direct challenge to authority and governmentality. Some have argued that the commercial success of these and subsequent raves undermines the radical impulse of the early movement (Ott & Herman 2003, pp. 259-64; Russell 1999, p. 131). It has been suggested, for example, that the profitability of dance parties and the entrepreneurialism of party organisers represents an ideological complicity with the logic of Thatcherism (Hill 2002, p. 91). However, in what appears to be an unwitting echo of earlier hip hop scholarship, others have sought to emphasise the disruptive possibilities of electronic dance music despite (and, in some cases, due to) its enormous profitability. For Rietveld, the commercial success of these illegal and unregulated dance parties took free market ideology to its “ultimate limit”, exceeding the “conservative moral ‘common sense’ that is supposed to keep the work-force in its place” and revealing the inherent limits and contradictions of the capitalist logic (1999, p. 64). Martin has argued that in instances where raves are thrown primarily to enjoy a good party, rather than to make a profit, rave culture can be seen to deny the very basis of exploitation upon which capitalism is built, since its hedonism disrupts the work ethic and deferred gratification central to the capitalist logic (1999, p. 85).

It has also been argued that EDMC’s political radicalism can be found in its inclusive and egalitarian forms of social organisation. Like punk and hip hop, electronic dance music is seen to deconstruct traditional artist-audience and production-consumption hierarchies. For example, dance culture places a relative lack of emphasis on

authorship. DJs and producers often adopt pseudonyms to create confusion over their identities (Hesmondhalgh 1998a, pp. 238-9). Indeed, the dance recordings with the most subcultural cachet (“white label” recordings) are those issued without information about the performers (Hesmondhalgh 1998a, p. 238). This bestows the genre with a “facelessness” (Hemment 1996, p. 37) that refuses the logic of the pop star as “glorified subject” (Martin 1999, p. 93).

Some critics caution that this deconstruction of artist-audience hierarchies is illusory, since most adherents are still highly aware of the musician as icon and simply transfer the locus of virtuosic individuality from the pop star to the DJ or producer (Hesmondhalgh 1995, p. 261). However, a dominant position within the critical literature maintains that EDMC is inherently more participatory than conventional rock and pop. Because dance is considered essential to the experience of electronic dance music, the rave scene is conceived as a “participatory social space” committed to the “spirit of freedom, equality, and communion” (Ott & Herman 2003, p. 255). As Ott and Herman explain: “whereas rock or pop enthusiasts attend concerts, in part, to witness (i.e., behold) a musician or band, ravers attend raves to create and participate in an experience that *cannot exist apart from their participation*” (2003, p. 255, emphasis added). Similarly, Malbon suggests that because dance is an active, embodied form of participation in which participants respond to and express the music via bodily movement, dance music should be seen as co-produced by both DJ and audience (1999, p. 83).

This emphasis on communal, ecstatic dance is thought to foster an “inclusive egalitarianism” that transcends social differences based on class, ethnicity, race, gender and sexual orientation (Martin 1999, p. 85; see also Wright 1998, p. 233). Rave’s “pluralistic and libertarian communitarianism” means that groups who have traditionally been marginal in youth cultures, or even previous victims of subcultural violence, have been able to become active and central participants in EDMC (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 184, original emphasis removed). Like punk and hip hop, EDMC’s progressivism in relation to gender and sexuality is seen as one of the scene’s “most concrete sites of political potential” (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 107). For example, fashion and dance conventions in the early British rave scene have been thought to signal a liberating desexualisation of the dance floor and a disruption of the male gaze. Scene members’ initial predilection for baggy, shapeless clothing is seen as instrumental in eroding gendered and sexual differences within the rave scene (Pini 1997, p. 161; Rietveld 1999, p. 52).

Raves construct the dance floor as a site of desire and eroticism, but it is one that is understood as fundamentally “non-phallic” (Pini 1997, p. 167). Ecstatic dance is thought to grant access to a *jouissance* that destabilises genital-centred sexuality in favour of a polymorphous sensuality that engages the entire body (Martin 1999, p. 94; Rietveld 1999, p. 54). Indeed, the consumption of Ecstasy (or “E”) is thought to have a dephallicising effect on the body that helps to further efface gendered relations within the rave scene (Ott & Herman 2003, p. 259). “E may be the ‘love drug,’” writes Reynolds,

but this refers more to *agapē* [*sic*] than to *eros*, cuddles rather than copulation, sentimentality rather than sticky secretions. E is notorious for making erection

difficult and male orgasm virtually impossible. A real dick-shriveller, it also gets rid of the thinks-with-his-dick mentality, turning rave into space where girls can feel free to be friendly with strange men, even snog them, without fear of sexual consequences. (1997, p. 106)

The “anti-phallogentrism” (Rietveld 1999, p. 55) of electronic dance music culture is also thought to be encoded in the very structures of dance music itself, particularly in the repetitive, linear song forms that disavow any “phallogentrically climactic conclusion” (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 106). Rave culture thus becomes a site in which patriarchal ideologies of sexuality and eroticism are seen to be challenged and transformed. For Gilbert and Pearson, the deconstructive *jouissance* of the dancefloor represents a site in which conventional gendered and sexual identities are suspended, dissolved and potentially reworked. They argue that if the young white men who “still dominate British dancefloors” can come to experience the dissolution of their masculinity not as a source of terror but as a source of pleasure, then EDMC represents a step towards a more democratic and egalitarian culture (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 181).

In Gilbert and Pearson’s account, EDMC’s progressive sexual politics prevail despite (or even perhaps because of) the numerical dominance of men in the scene. For a minority of critics, however, the overwhelming predominance of men demonstrates the persistence and intractability of traditional gender hierarchies. For example, Reynolds notes that for all the rhetorical egalitarianism and inclusiveness of dance culture, a “homosocial aura” still predominates in many scenes (1997, p. 107). Similarly, Thornton (1995) argues that rather than signalling the dissolution of conventional gender hierarchies in a communal *jouissance*, dance culture is primarily concerned with internal hierarchies of status and capital which have fundamentally gendered

implications. In EDMC, subcultural capital is seen to operate as a kind of alternative currency which correlates with, naturalises and legitimises unequal statuses, and in particular, unequal statuses between men and women (Thornton 1995, p. 104). Indeed, scene members' tendency to play off an (implicitly masculine) 'underground' against an (implicitly feminine) 'mainstream' is seen to betray the masculine bias of subcultural capital and to directly contribute to the numerical dominance of men in the scene (Thornton 1995, pp. 104-5). For the most part, however, critics acknowledge the presence of patriarchal values and hierarchies, particularly in relation to increased glamorisation of women's clothing and the greater sexualisation of women's bodies, but tend to maintain that any reactionary consequences of the recolonisation of rave by men and the male gaze are at least partially ameliorated by the initial construction of the dancefloor as a space of "non-spectacle" (Melechi 1999, p. 34; see also Hemment 1996, p. 29).

One final aspect that has been interpreted as a sign of EDMC's counter-hegemonic potential has been the conservative backlash against rave culture. Much like the attacks on hip hop, tabloid-driven 'moral panics' condemned electronic dance music and its attendant culture, attempting to galvanise public fear and outrage by exaggerating the dangers posed by raves. During the 1990s, newspaper headlines in Britain included "Evil of Ecstasy", "Ban this Killer Music", "Acid House Horror", "Drug Crazed Acid House Fans", "Girl 21 Drops Dead At Acid Disco" (qtd. in Rietveld 1999, p. 45). Such events have been invoked by critics as evidence of the music's incendiary potential. For example, Hill has argued that the moral panic surrounding EDMC was one means by which supporters of Thatcherism sought to assert control over aspects of popular

culture seen as a threat to neoconservative hegemony (2002, p. 90). The media panic was also used to spearhead and justify a series of legal interventions and government actions aimed at limiting and criminalising raves. In the growing backlash against rave culture in Britain during the 1990s, three existing pieces of legislation, the Private Places of Entertainment Act (1967), the Licensing Act (1988) and the Entertainments (Increased Penalties) Acts (1990), were invoked to provide police with increased powers to impose restrictions and penalties on organisers of private and public raves (Martin 1999, p. 79; Redhead 1999b, pp. 20-1). An additional piece of legislation, the Criminal Justice Act (1994), was introduced to expand police powers to prosecute organisers of unlicensed 'free parties', including those suspected of *planning* to organise a rave as well as those holding parties for small groups in private homes (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, pp. 150-2; Martin 1999, p. 79). For many critics, these developments are seen as evidence of the "increasing state moral authoritarianism" and growing social conservatism of British culture and hence of the radically disruptive potential of EDMC (Redhead 1999b, p. 23).

In a departure from the dominant tendency to view moral panic as evidence of political radicalism, Thornton (1995) views moral panic not as proof of rave's potential for resistance, but as a source of subcultural cachet or 'capital'. She argues that although negative reporting is derided, it is also subject to anticipation, even aspiration, by scene members who use controversy as a marketing strategy and a means to authenticate their own claims for rave culture's oppositional status (Thornton 1995, p. 135). Thornton situates her work as part of a shift away from "stale celebrations" of EDMC's political radicalism to more critical, nuanced accounts of the subculture's



internal ideologies and hierarchies (1995, p. 14). In doing so, she problematises more straightforwardly celebratory accounts of the music and subculture. Despite the potential of her work to raise new questions and open up new avenues of enquiry in relation to electronic dance music culture, Thornton's work has been met with resistance by other EDMC scholars. For instance, critics argue that her claim that rave culture developed symbiotically with, rather than simply in opposition to, moral panic fails to take into account the full implications and effects of negative media coverage. Some suggest that she underestimates the real, material consequences of moral panic for many rave adherents, and in particular, the extent to which the institutional policing of raves (including arrests, fines and raids on venues) effectively put an end to the 'underground' party scene altogether (Hill 2002, p. 99). Gilbert and Pearson criticise what they see as the glibness of Thornton's argument, especially her tendency to imply that no matter how radical a group may consider its practices to be, it is merely trying to "accumulate subcultural capital at the expense of the unhip" (1999, p. 160). They argue that attempts by the police and government to "criminalize an entire culture" make any notion of rave culture as apolitical seem "ridiculous" (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 179).

Others dispute Thornton's observations of internal hierarchies and inequalities within the rave scene. Some critics argue that internal hierarchies exist only in relation to raves held in nightclubs where tickets are sold at the door and bouncers can be selective about who they let into the club (Martin 1999, p. 86). However, Hutson argues that even after these distinctions have been made, remaining differences are slowly eliminated through dance, drugs and other rituals that "transform structures of

subcultural capital into antistructure” (Hutson 1999, p. 70). Alternatively, Martin suggests that although internal hierarchies may exist within the dance scene, the status-markers of EDMC are “qualitatively different from those of the dominant culture, as they are based largely on the extent to which one participates in the culture, rather than on gender or skin color” (Martin 1999, p. 87). As a result, he considers the hierarchies within electronic dance culture to be less harmful than those found in other subcultures and in the dominant social order.

A number of scholars cite Thornton sympathetically and adopt similar perspectives on both rave culture’s relationship to the media and the scene’s internal relations of subcultural capital (e.g. Hesmondhalgh 1998a; Malbon 1999). For the most part, however, critics’ implicit fear of musical and subcultural practice disengaged from progressive politics has led them to foreground EDMC’s moments of political radicalism as evidence of the movement’s value and significance. Thornton’s critique of dance culture potentially offers an alternative approach to electronic dance music, yet her work has been adopted only unevenly within the scholarship of EDMC. Similarly, work exploring dance music’s potential for *jouissance* and becoming also offers productive means of theorising in more detail the role of sonic and subcultural conventions in producing certain kinds of musical and subjectival experience. However, since these insights have been primarily used as support for claims of dance music’s essential radicalism, their potential to develop new approaches to popular music has also been limited. At the same time, rave scholars’ interest in dimensions of musical pleasure and experience traditionally marginalised within the cultural study of popular music contributes to a greater awareness of the different kinds of engagements

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and investments music can generate, and these offer suggestive insight for the study of other popular music genres, including heavy and extreme metal. However, much of this potential to provide new approaches or understandings is stymied by scholars' insistent prioritisation of political questions and concerns in analyses of music and subculture. The impact of this on the study of heavy and extreme metal will be examined in more detail in Chapter 2.

# CHAPTER 2

## “A promise unfulfilled”: critics evaluate heavy and extreme metal

With political radicalism installed as the primary criteria by which the value of popular music is assessed and conferred, heavy and extreme metal have failed to elicit the degree of critical approbation enjoyed by punk, hip hop and electronic dance music. Instead, metal has been framed as both conservative and reactionary by progressive critics apparently troubled by the genre’s substitution of pleasure and escapism for political commitment. Punk, hip hop and metal are each theorised as expressions of post-industrial alienation and despair, but whereas critics consistently view punk and hip hop’s aesthetic and subcultural conventions as politically progressive, they are reluctant to do so with metal. Metal and electronic dance music are each theorised as sites of pleasure, but whereas critics seek to recuperate dance music’s hedonism as a politically radical restructuring of subjectivity, critics struggle to characterise metal as anything other than troublingly nihilistic. The premium placed on political commitment has not only led critics to devalue and repudiate musical pleasures disengaged from political outlooks and agendas, it has also helped shape the dominant stereotype of metal as “brutishly simple, debilitatingly negative and violent” (Walser 1993, p. 24).

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Detailed criticisms of the genre focus on four main issues. The first, and most substantial, argues that while metal is a subcultural response to post-industrial inequality and disenfranchisement, when compared to the responses of more ‘progressive’ genres like punk and hip hop, it is essentially an unproductive and reactionary one. In particular, metal’s nihilism and fatalism is thought to divert the attention and energies of disaffected youth away from more productive political goals. Extending this complaint, a second criticism implies that several of metal’s musical and performance conventions like technical complexity and visual spectacle, as well as the scene’s attitude towards commercial success, legitimate hierarchical and inequitable forms of social organisation within the scene. A third area of concern involves metal’s ideologies of gender, particularly the ways in which the genre is thought to construct and promote an oppressive, patriarchal masculinity. Finally, critics worry that the audience’s overwhelming racial homogeneity represents, at best, a reluctance to challenge structures of inequality within the metal scene and, at worst, an implicit white supremacism.

So widespread is the commitment to political engagement as the most desirable outcome of musical practice that critics who seek to offer an alternative to the prevailing negative characterisation of the genre largely do so by attempting to claim for metal a kind of proto-protest or nascent critique. Yet doubts about metal’s political and artistic worth resurface even in ostensibly sympathetic studies, with these critics ultimately viewing metal as inferior to more obviously progressive forms of musical and subcultural expression. As I have suggested in Chapter 1, a theoretical orientation towards political evaluation may be ill-equipped to provide an account of other aspects

of listening pleasure. This is especially pertinent to the study of metal because the overly literal readings of the music, lyrics and fan discourse that have dominated studies to date have limited the theorisation of the genre with sufficient specificity or nuance. The limitations identified in punk, hip hop and electronic dance music scholarship are amplified in the case of metal, where little can be found to redeem the music for its cultural studies analysts.

### **Metal and deindustrialisation**

The frustrations of blue-collar life in a declining economy are considered a crucial context for metal and the most substantial analyses of the genre have concentrated on this issue. Emerging from the deindustrialised English Midlands in the 1970s and finding its most loyal American audiences in the dying industrial towns and cities of the Midwest and Northeast, the core audience for heavy and extreme metal has been comprised largely of white working class young men (Berger 1999b, p. 284; Breen 1991, p. 194; Gaines 1998; Walser 1993, p. 3; Weinstein 2000, p. 118). Despite Straw's (1990) initial refusal to grant metal subcultural status, many subsequent critics have sought to theorise metal as a subcultural response to structural inequality, much like the other working class subcultures of the post-war period.

As such, metal has been understood as a subcultural 'solution' to the socio-economic disenfranchisement of working class youth in the post-industrial era. Although deindustrialisation has been a feature of the West's economic landscape since at least

the 1960s, American youth were particularly hard-hit during the 1980s, the same period as metal's peak popularity (Walser 1993, p. 161). During this decade, the decline in unionised manufacturing jobs and the rise in low-pay service jobs served to sharply circumscribe the opportunities for secure employment and economic independence available to many working- and lower-middle-class youth (Gaines 1998, pp. 153-4). The average earnings of blue-collar young men plummeted to a record low, ensuring the heavy metal audience's place as part of the first American generation to be worse off economically than its parents (Walser 1993, p. 161). Metal's strong anti-bourgeois values, iconography of power, technical complexity and the strong sense of communal bonding forged between dedicated fans has been seen as a means by which blue-collar youth articulate, and symbolically ameliorate, their experiences of disenfranchisement and disadvantage (Gaines 1998, p. 254; Walser 1993, p. 159; Weinstein 2000, p. 102).

Within a discipline where evidence of political dissent is so often seen as a measure of cultural value, this understanding of metal as a subcultural response to structural inequality has often been one invoked by sympathetic critics seeking to defend and legitimate the genre. But even the most supportive scholars are somewhat ambivalent about metal's worth as a cultural resource for disadvantaged young people compared to more straightforwardly politicised alternatives like punk and hip hop. Several argue, for example, that while metal may ventilate working class frustrations, its emphasis on hedonism, fantasy and personal responsibility diverts attention away from the social and economic causes of those frustrations and stymies any potential for collective social change (Berger 1999b, p. 287; see also Weinstein 2000, p. 242).

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In fact, in acknowledging that metal tends not to channel its energies into clearly defined political goals, others struggle to characterise metal's ventilation of working class frustrations as anything other than worryingly reactionary. For instance, Weinstein's (2000) study is nothing if not an impassioned defence of heavy metal music and its audience. She views the music and subculture primarily as a site of youthful rebellion, power, pleasure and fantasy, a space where youth seek to *escape* politics, not one where extremist or regressive views are mobilised. At the same time, however, her analysis is animated by misgivings about metal's political limitations. She views metal partly as a response to deindustrialisation, but also partly as a response to the emergence of the women's, gay and civil rights movements in the 1960s (Weinstein 2000, p. 101). That is, with its "boisterous, beer-swilling, male camaraderie" and enduring sexism, homophobia and ethnocentrism, metal functions as a kind of "nostalgia for centrality" for white, heterosexual young men who feel threatened and disempowered by their experiences of socio-economic and socio-cultural decentring (Weinstein 2000, pp. 101, 114-5). Metal may ameliorate experiences of powerlessness and marginalisation, then, but without a commitment to progressive politics, its practices and conventions are seen largely as conservative and "preservationist" (Weinstein 2000, p. 101). The enduring impression she leaves us with is one of political failure; with its overwhelming emphasis on the enactment of masculine power, metal is seen to represent, at best, a politically apathetic hedonism, at worst, a regressive bigotry.

In two earlier studies of heavy metal, Cashmore (1984, 1987) compares metal's politics unfavourably to the radicalism of punk. Both metal and punk are theorised as



responses to the deteriorating material conditions of the post-war climate, but whereas punk's oppositionality is seen as a source of positive political resistance, heavy metal's is presented as nihilistic and unproductive. As he writes:

Heavy metals didn't want to change society; and, for that matter they didn't particularly want it to remain the same. They just wanted a little corner of it where they could introvert to their own sphere, escaping to a fantasy world in which they played imaginary guitars and shook their heads into states of concussion. (Cashmore 1984, p. 37)

Metal is understood here not so much as politically conservative but as simply "inert" (1984, p. 37). Described as a "great force of political indifference", metal, in contrast to more progressive musical genres, is thought to be concerned more with individual pleasure and escapism than with wider social change (Cashmore 1987, p. 263). Cashmore's tone of reproach is a clear one: "It was as if they could all foresee a nuclear holocaust," he observes of metal and punk fans, "but while some outraged groups began marching in protest, others busied themselves building their own fragile and ultimately wasteful fall-out shelter" (1987, p. 264).

Even Gaines (1998), whose study of metal fans is otherwise sensitive and sympathetic, expresses strong reservations about metal's politics. Like Cashmore, she expresses these reservations about metal mostly through unfavourable comparisons with punk. In her discussion of the two genres, Gaines presents metal as politically regressive, concerned more with "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" than with positive social change (1998, p. 202). As she elaborates:

Metal and hardcore [punk] music were both strong on death-and-destruction themes, but hardcore offered solutions. If the world was going to hell, hardcore music was angry and active, fighting for a better world before it was too late. Metal, on the other hand, was romantic, lamenting, sadly resigned to its fate. (Gaines 1998, p. 202)

Heavy metal's "dick-oriented" lyrics, as well as the apparent "marketplace compliance" of suburban metalheads further adds to her perception of metal's "bad politics" (Gaines 1998, p. 201).

Gaines suggests that the crossover between metal and hardcore that occurred during the 1980s served to partially mitigate heavy metal's conservative impetus. Under the influence of punk, fans of the resultant subgenre—thrash metal—were encouraged to reject what she sees as the mindless hedonism of traditional heavy metal and channel their frustrations into a more clearly-articulated politics (Gaines 1998, p. 203). No longer concerned only with the ecstatic pleasures of loud music and partying, thrash addressed the "real" issues facing young people: drug pushers, Army recruiters, spiritual isolation, nuclear holocaust, child sexual abuse and mental hospitals (Gaines 1998, p. 203). By arguing that thrash acts "took the best guitar leads from metal but left the trivial ideological pursuits behind" (1998, p. 203), Gaines implies that the punk influence was crucial to creating a music of greater substance and value.

Thrash's apparent commitment to "political radicalism" (Weinstein 2000, p. 50; see also Friesen & Helfrich 1999, p. 272) has meant that it has been met with far greater approbation than other metal styles. For example, Breen, conflicted by a desire to reconcile fans' deep investment and passion for the music with a barely-concealed discomfort about its questionable politics, maintains a sharp contrast between heavy metal, which he describes as "neanderthal" and "embarrassingly reactionary", and thrash metal, which he sees as more progressive and authentic (1991, p. 195). In this account, thrash's value is conferred partly by its 'underground' or 'non-mainstream'

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status, but also partly by its links to hardcore punk music. For Breen, thrash is not merely a metal subgenre influenced by punk, nor is it a combination of metal and punk styles: within the terms of his analysis, thrash essentially *is* punk. Thrash is described as the “closest direct descendant of punk still living”, and the terms “thrash” and “hardcore” are frequently used interchangeably (Breen 1991, p. 199).

With its fast tempos, frenetic aggressiveness and shouted vocals, thrash indeed demonstrates a clear indebtedness to punk rock (Walser 1993, p. 14). Many of the pioneering thrash musicians were influenced equally by heavy metal and punk rock, and the metal and punk scenes were closely connected throughout much of the 1980s (Christe 2004, p. 177). The thrash metal groups Slayer, Anthrax and Metal Church, for example, were founded by guitarists who had begun their performance careers in hardcore bands and who continued to retain strong connections to the hardcore scene (Pillsbury 2006, p. 5). However, thrash was never simply an outpost of punk. In both musical and subcultural terms, it retains its strongest connection to heavy metal (Christe 2004, p. 137; Moore 1993, p. 132). Whereas most thrash fans tend to consider the style to be a subgenre of heavy metal, progressive critics tend to overemphasise its punk lineage in order to restate their broader critique of heavy metal whilst co-opting any of its progressive elements as manifestations of punk radicalism.

While some critics bolster their critique of metal with unfavourable comparisons to punk, others utilise unfavourable comparisons to hip hop. For example, in her study of the popular music preferences of Navajo youth, Deyhle argues that while both heavy metal and hip hop function as forms of counter-hegemonic resistance, hip hop

represents an assertive response to subordination, while heavy metal signifies political apathy and fatalism (Deyhle 1998, p. 29). Hip hop is seen as empowering because it expresses hope that an unequal and unjust system may eventually be changed. Metal, on the other hand, is viewed as troublingly nihilistic, a genre “that screams with anger, distrust, sadness, powerlessness, and alienation” (Deyhle 1998, p. 6). Indeed, Deyhle is openly disappointed that some Navajo youth prefer the “fatalistic complaint music” of heavy metal to the “optimistic rebellious” music of hip hop (1998, p. 20).

Heavy metal, hip hop and punk are each understood by critics as responses to structural inequality, but metal fans’ reluctance to channel their disaffections towards more ‘productive’ political goals has been met with much chagrin. Studies of death metal typically praise the creativity, ingenuity and skill of death metal musicians and the do-it-yourself autonomy of the death metal scene, but the scene’s lack of political engagement remains an ongoing concern. Berger worries that scene members’ lack of political commitment signals a dissipation of their potentially progressive energies into politically disengaged activity. Although he acknowledges that all music need not bring about social justice and that a more politically engaged death metal scene would be unlikely to effect a “liberatory Marxist revolution”, he maintains that it would be equally wrong to assume that a vibrant minority of politically engaged blue-collar youth would be inconsequential in American society (Berger 1999b, p. 292). Berger is disheartened by death metal fans’ lack of reflexive engagement with the politics of their music or scene, and concludes his book with a lament:

All of the elements of social change are present—rage, community, skills, and talent—yet things remain the same. Death metal is neither an example of false consciousness nor a coping mechanism for the stresses of an unequal world. It is a promise unfulfilled. (1999b, p. 294)

Harrell's (1994) study echoes many of Berger's concerns. He sees death metal as an expression of post-industrial anomie, but is concerned that it rarely goes beyond describing the ills of modern society (Harrell 1994, p. 93). Implicit in this criticism is a notion that death metal bands and fans should be channelling their energies more constructively, and that their failure to do so somehow undermines the value of the genre and subculture itself. He is particularly worried by what he sees as death metal's "concentration on the negative" (Harrell 1994, p. 102):

I'm sure thousands of pop psychology paperbacks and talk shows have dealt with the belief that negative energy is not constructive; I won't belabor it any more than to say that almost all of the energy in death metal is negative energy. (Harrell 1994, p. 102)

In his emphasis on, and disapproval of, death metal's "negative" themes, Harrell's argument essentially parallels Deyhle's (1998): death metal is viewed as fatalistic complaint music lacking any optimistic or altruistic notions of social change.

Since they tend to see the music as a direct expression of fans' values, attitudes and politics, critics who theorise metal as a response to structural inequality have few tools for apprehending the other listening pleasures that the genre might offer. This is not to deny that post-industrial alienation and socio-economic marginalisation are key contexts for heavy and extreme metal, but rather to suggest that structural conditions are only ever a partial explanation of what music might 'mean'. After all, it remains unclear why the same structurally imposed problems so often result in divergent forms of subcultural expression (Clarke 1997, p. 176). Why do some disenfranchised youth become metalheads and others punks, or ravers, or goths? Political or structural explanations are often poorly equipped to consider pleasures that may be disconnected from such 'real', material concerns in anything other than negative terms.

On the whole, political criticism tends to include an implicit evaluative component concerned more with assessing the effectiveness of a genre's response to inequality than with considering different ways in which musical pleasures can be explored and understood. Within a context where political commitment is considered the most desirable outcome of musical practice, and the development of a theoretical vocabulary attuned to the specificity of sonic experience an unnecessary distraction from more politically useful ventures, it is almost inevitable that a genre like metal would be viewed with some dissatisfaction and disappointment. More detailed explorations of the kinds of listening pleasures and positions offered by the music will be the focus of my readings of Carcass and Cannibal Corpse in Chapter 5.

### **Spectacles of “heroic individualism”? Rethinking virtuosity**

A more nuanced understanding of listening pleasure may also help challenge conventional assumptions about metal's commercial success, theatrical live performance and instrumental virtuosity. Critics often view these aspects of the genre as symptomatic of metal's tendency to substitute escapist entertainment and personal pleasure for engaged socio-political commentary. Metal was initially excluded from subculture studies as the CCCS believed that its mainstream successes automatically removed its potential for counter-hegemonic action (Bennett 1999, p. 604). However, similar attitudes have prevailed in discussions of heavy metal well into the 1980s and 1990s. Post-CCCS, cultural studies has increasingly explored the radical and resistant possibilities of mainstream cultural forms, and has even viewed commercial success as

one of the key political triumphs of certain musical genres, but the commercial profitability of heavy metal still tends to be presented as an exemplary instance of artistic and political compromise within popular music.

According to Breen, heavy metal's vast album sales prove that the genre could not be "redeemed" by punk, but was instead shown to be a "highly formularized, tightly constructed and marketed item, not fit for salvation" (1991, p. 193). With the notable exception of thrash, he describes metal primarily in terms of shallow spectacle: "showbusiness theatrics" devoid of "moral uplift" (Breen 1991, p. 194). He also refers to heavy metal fans as "senseless" and the music as overwhelmingly "dumb" (Breen 1991, p. 194). Gross (1990) considers heavy metal to be equally vacuous. The only "message behind the metal" he is able to identify is that the music and the adjoining subculture are financially lucrative (Gross 1990, p. 127). In a move which essentially delegitimises the entire genre, Gross implies that the music's popularity is driven primarily by "clever marketing strategies" and not by any genuine emotional investment on the part of its fans (1990, p. 128).

Similarly, Weinstein acknowledges that the expression of "emotionality" (2000, p. 26) is a key marker of musical authenticity within heavy metal live performance, but she is reluctant to attribute to performers an emotional sincerity. In contrast to Gross, Weinstein is less concerned with metal's commercial profitability than with its preference for extravagant arena rock spectacle. She notes how during the 1980s, heavy metal concerts featured elaborate stage sets, including theatrical lighting, pyrotechnics and special effects. During one Mötley Crüe tour, for example, drummer Tommy Lee

travelled around on a monorail-cum-drumkit constructed high above the audience (Weinstein 2000, p. 217). This spectacularity leads her to view metal's "emotionality" as inauthentic. As she writes:

[T]he heavy metal musician must be skilled at projecting the emotions required by the performance code. He must look as if he were as highly touched by a song sung for the three-hundredth time as he was on the first singing, be able to simulate being engrossed in and challenged by a fretboard maneuver that has now become habitual, and smile and embrace with fraternal love band mates whom he may loathe and despise off stage. (Weinstein 2000, p. 63)

Rather than a genuine expression of emotional truth, heavy metal's emotionality is seen primarily as a dramatic convention learned and contrived for the purposes of performance.

As well as revealing the empty spectacle at the heart of the genre, heavy metal's performance conventions have also been criticised as fundamentally hierarchical. The genre's emphasis on technical skill, for example, is often viewed as celebration of musical mastery that upholds a staunch division between fans and their favourite icons (Waksman 2001, p. 119). The technical skill required of heavy metal means that the artist is seen as "not merely a member of the heavy metal culture on a par with the audience, but someone who is different from the audience, a culture hero who stands *above* it" (Weinstein 2000, p. 227, emphasis added). For many progressive critics, music that inscribes distance between artists and audiences, either through technical skill (which precludes the majority of fans from participating in music-making) or through theatrical performance (which emphasises artists' difference from fans), is considered to be problematically hierarchical, and hence politically undesirable. Whereas punk rock's rejection of virtuosic display is thought to reveal its underlying populist or proto-socialist sympathies, the musical trappings of heavy metal are viewed as



inherently distancing and elitist (Waksman 2001, p. 121). Millard notes the ideology of “heroic individualism” that circulates within the scene and refers to fans’ allegiance to heavy metal artists as a form of “worship” (2004, p. 169), while Weinstein describes fans’ tendency to receive heavy metal musicians as if they are “god[s]” (2000, p. 88).

Metal’s apparently hierarchical musical and performance conventions have also prompted a number of unfavourable comparisons with electronic dance music. For example, Tagg argues that whereas rave’s sonic and structural conventions promote an inclusive communitarianism, the music of heavy metal fosters a reactionary individualism analogous to the “vulgar entrepreneurial egoism of the Thatcher and Reagan era” (1994, p. 218). Others fear that metal and dance music are so diametrically opposed that any cross-over between the two styles would thoroughly undermine the progressive potential of EDMC (Sylvan 2002, p. 177). For example, Huq laments the tendency of acts like the Prodigy to “rockify” dance events, thereby turning the inclusiveness of the dance music experience into a “traditional rock spectacle” (2002, p. 97). Critics view the intrusion of guitar-based music in EDMC as a displacement of the collective experience of dancing in favour of a hierarchical worship of performers.

Several metal scholars have countered that the strain of intimacy running through heavy metal’s virtuosic performance complicates any rigid understanding of the boundary between artist and audience. For example, Waksman argues that:

If many of the trappings of hard rock guitar heroism reinforce an image of individualist power and hierarchical devotion, those trappings are framed by a cultural fantasy of genuine, almost utopian connectedness between the guitar hero and his fans. (2001, p. 131)

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Even Weinstein, who otherwise describes the heavy metal musician as a “charismatic figure, not a comrade”, insists that “few forms of music create as deep a bond between artist and fan as heavy metal does”, and describes how metal musicians are moved by the loyalty of their fans and invest considerable effort into fostering and maintaining a connection with their audiences (2000, p. 91). Given this, Hesmondhalgh is understandably puzzled why immersion in music is so readily considered a collective act when it occurs in a rave or dance club, but is automatically dismissed as an act of worship when it occurs at a metal or rock concert (1995, p. 263).

In the extreme metal scene, questions about the relationship between technical skill and hierarchical forms of social organisation are clearly highlighted. The use of small venues and back-to-basics approaches to performance is thought to diminish divisions between extreme metal performers and audience members, giving rise to the “same expression of community and solidarity noted by Laing (1985) in relation to punk” (Bennett 2001, p. 47), yet musicians and fans continue to place great value on technical proficiency. In the death metal scene, technical complexity is often prized as a virtue in and of itself, with fans and musicians often claiming a level of prestige for the music based predominantly on its technical difficulty (Purcell 2003, p. 12). When this privileging of technicality and complexity is considered in relation to the relative absence of artist/audience hierarchies within the death metal scene, an argument can be made that technical skill is often utilised within the scene less in the interests of an oppressive social hierarchy than as a means to promote certain kinds of listening pleasure.

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Rather than representing evidence of inequities within the scene, death metal's complexity and precision, in particular its experiments with speed, timbre, tonality and song structure, can be seen to promote new experiences of listening. According to Bogue, death metal's musical conventions foster an experience of disequilibrium and disorientation through which listeners gain access to musical becoming, an affective realm of "flows and fluxes, topological spaces and floating durations" (2004b, p. 98). In fact, Tagg argues that extreme metal's unconventional structural organisation and limited melodic sensibility promotes experiences of immersion and subjectival dissolution similar to that of electronic dance music (1994, p. 221, n. 33). Tagg's argument relies, in part, on a sharp distinction between extreme metal, which he presents as potentially progressive, and heavy metal, which he sees as fundamentally reactionary. In contrast, Weinstein suggests that even heavy metal can promote ecstatic experiences designed to lift listeners out of the "calculative rationality and circumspective concern" of everyday life (2000, p. 213). Of course, ecstatic experience is not unique to metal and can be achieved through a variety of musical means, but if technical control is one means through which it is achieved within the metal scene, then a notion of musical skill as merely a gateway to an oppressive musical mastery needs to be reconsidered. Indeed, the ways in which virtuosity and technical skill in metal music can be used to construct particular listening positions—and offer particular listening pleasures—will be explored in more detail in Chapters 3 and 5.

**Masculine domination and the problem of gender**

A dominant position within metal scholarship maintains that the primacy placed on technical skill not only strengthens artist/audience hierarchies, but also normalises and legitimates patriarchal relations and values within the heavy and extreme metal scenes. While cultural studies now includes many nuanced accounts of the diverse ways in which musical masculinities can be performed and how the meaning of ‘masculinity’ is always mediated through consumption practices, and while it has increasingly explored the ways in which women are able to negotiate traditionally male-dominated musical forms in empowering ways, the notion of heavy metal as unequivocally oppressive to women has gone largely uncontested. Whereas punk, hip hop and electronic dance music have each been understood as offering liberating possibilities for women, metal is cited as the “most straightforwardly coded example of masculine, macho posing” in rock (Denski & Sholle 1992, p. 44), not only “masculinist” (Weinstein 2000, p. 104) but “aggressively heterosexist” and “manifestly misogynist” (Krenske & McKay 2000, pp. 290, 300).

According to Chambers, heavy metal makes manifest a misogyny merely implicit in other rock styles (1985, p. 123). The promotion of violent, masculine sexuality and equation of masculinity with physical violence and power has been understood as so central to heavy metal’s musical and social values that the genre has been discussed as an “archetypal” example of “cock rock” (Shepherd 1987, p. 165; see also Frith 1990, p. 422; Frith & McRobbie 1978, p. 5). In Frith and McRobbie’s initial formulation, cock rock is conceived literally as male sexual performance: “mikes and guitars are phallic

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symbols; the music is loud, rhythmically insistent, built round [*siz*] techniques of arousal and climax” (1978, p. 6). Taylor and Laing remark on the “masturbatory imagery” inherent in heavy metal guitar performance (1979, p. 45) and Millard comments on its “phallic powers” (2004, p. 179). For Walser, heavy metal guitar performance is seen as a demonstration of a “physical and rhetorical potency”, understood in masculine terms as a “metaphorical ejaculation” (1993, p. 76). In each of these cases, heavy metal is viewed as an enactment of male sexual performance, a narcissistic celebration of male power which structurally excludes the female spectator (and performer) in order to produce the ecstatic male response (Taylor & Laing 1979, p. 45; see also Shepherd 1987, pp. 167-8; Walser 1993, pp. 114-7). Some of the concerns raised by scholars have been valid ones, but any approach which seeks to theorise the genre as essentially or entirely about masculinity is inevitably limited in the kinds of questions it can consider.

For example, few attempts have been made to understand the appeal of metal for its female fans and performers. According to Weinstein, there is a bias against women “rooted in the delineated meanings of heavy metal music” (2000, p. 67). The music is thought to adopt an oppressive and exploitative attitude toward women, thus firmly circumscribing all options for female participation. Women, either on stage or in the audience, are restricted to only two options: they are either “sex objects to be used or abused” or they must “renounce their gender and pretend to be one of the boys” (Weinstein 2000, p. 221). Metal’s masculinism is thought to be so oppressive that women can never participate in the scene as subjects in their own right. Weinstein is very clear on this point: “heavy metal...is masculine, and women who want to become members of the metal subculture must do so on male terms” (2000, p. 134).

Krenske and McKay's ethnographic study of a Brisbane metal venue describes the metal scene in similar terms. Employing R.W. Connell's concepts of "hegemonic masculinity" and "emphasised femininity", they describe the metal scene as manifestly misogynistic and oppressive to women. They argue that female fans and musicians are thoroughly immobilised by a masculinist ideology that condemns them to perpetually 'do' gender only on men's terms (Krenske & McKay 2000, p. 301). However, the specificities of women's oppression remain largely undefined in their study. For example, although they state that one of the "general modes of participation" for male metalheads is the intimidation of women (Krenske & McKay 2000, p. 294), they fail to specify how or in what form this actually occurs.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps even more problematically, in condemning women's marginalisation in the metal scene, the authors ultimately reinscribe it within their own work. Indeed, their application of Connell's theories of masculinity and femininity is such that it is almost impossible to determine under what conditions women would *not* be incontrovertibly oppressed in the metal scene—or in any other culture shaped by patriarchy for that matter.

The few critics who do not consider metal to be entirely disempowering for women tend to acknowledge their presence only in more 'mainstream' and 'feminised' styles like glam metal. Walser (1993), for instance, suggests that glam metal's aural and visual androgyny provides a site of identification for female audiences otherwise lacking in

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<sup>1</sup> The two examples provided—the female researcher being "habitually harassed" whilst walking to and from the venue (but not at the venue itself) and an indecent, but highly unusual, incident involving a male metal fan and his pet rat (Krenske & McKay 2000, pp. 294, 297-8)—are not conducive to broader generalisation. Although Krenske and McKay would like to claim otherwise, this second incident is far too anomalous and bizarre to be accepted as representative of the kinds of harassment to which women are generally subjected.

other metal subgenres.<sup>2</sup> By fusing visual signs specific to current notions of femininity—colourful make-up, ostentatious clothes, carefully styled hair—with a musically and theatrically produced power that is conventionally coded as masculine, glam metal performers bestow a prestige and value to components of many women’s sense of gendered identity (Walser 1993, p. 131). However, while he acknowledges that many women may feel empowered by glam androgyny, and that these more flexible forms of gender performance may enable, and possibly even encourage, greater female involvement in the metal scene, he ultimately concludes that any liberating potential of glam androgyny is firmly circumscribed by the fundamentally sexist and masculinist culture from which it emerges. As he explains:

[W]e might understand androgyny as...[a] tactic for dealing with the anxieties of masculinity. Androgynous musicians and fans appropriate the visual signs of feminine identity in order to claim the powers of spectacularity for themselves. (Walser 1993, pp. 128-9)

Rather than a potentially radical dismantling of binary notions of sex and gender, then, androgyny is seen as an attempt to *control* the feminine by incorporating it (and thus disavowing the need for women).

Similar sentiments are reiterated by Denski and Sholle, who argue that glam metal’s experiments with gendered signification ultimately do little to disrupt dominant sexual hierarchies. As they explain:

For all its elaborate posturing and outrageous theatrics, heavy metal’s appropriation of feminine gender signs fails to offer a meaningful challenge to the socially constructed core identity of binary sex, offering instead a thinly disguised reproduction of traditional masculine roles of power and domination presented in the context of an aggressive heterosexuality. (Denski & Sholle 1992, p. 59)

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<sup>2</sup> Because he reads instrumental virtuosity as a symbol of masculine power, glam metal’s lack of technical complexity is understood in this context as an aural contributor to the subgenre’s androgynous aesthetic (Walser 1993, p. 128).

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This may be due to the fact that male androgyny tends to rely on stable, essentialised notions of femininity and womanhood as conditions of its intelligibility (Gottlieb & Wald 1994, p. 259), or simply because fans continue to identify glam performers as unambiguously “macho” despite the feminine signifiers (Denski & Sholle 1992, p. 45). Either way, the frequency with which glam metal lyrics depict women as obsessive, evil and dangerous to men would seem to problematise any celebratory view of the subgenre’s gender politics (Sloat 1999, pp. 286-7). Still, there may be something about glam metal’s “insistent presentation of men as sex objects” that is inconsistent with an otherwise straightforwardly coded sexism (Frith & McRobbie 1978, p. 12). Indeed, in one of the few departures from this dominant reading of metal’s gender politics (for heterosexual women, at least), Fast argues that the male body on display in heavy metal performance is both a symbol of masculine strength and power to female audiences, *and* a source of erotic pleasure (2001, p. 186).

Alternatively, Denski and Sholle note elsewhere in their article that when taken to extremes in heavy metal performance by bands like Kiss and Twisted Sister, masculine and feminine signifiers can become denaturalised: androgynous visual style reaches an “extreme of masquerade” where its signifiers lose their gendered coding and become a means for the “creation of another species”, tied in this case to the codes of comic books and science fiction (1992, p. 51). Unfortunately, however, the authors do not pursue this idea further, preferring instead to reduce the complexities of heavy metal style to a simple maxim: heavy metal culture is masculinist, therefore all texts produced by this culture must equally reflect this oppressive masculinity. While Walser is somewhat more generous to female participants, his analysis still rests on similar



assumptions about metal's essential masculinity. For Walser, metal is "overwhelmingly concerned with presenting images and confronting anxieties that have been traditionally understood as peculiar to men, through musical means that have been conventionally coded as masculine" (1993, p. 110). Much metal scholarship begins with the question: given that we already know that the heavy metal subculture is masculinist, how do its musical texts and performance conventions work to convey this gendered meaning? Of course, some of metal's ideologies of gender are genuinely problematic, but any approach which takes the 'problem' of gender as the starting point of analysis is limited in the kinds of questions it can consider.

This may be especially true of extreme metal, which raises some different issues with respect to gender than its more mainstream parent genre. The audience for heavy metal has always been predominantly male, but extreme metal is male-dominated almost to the point of exclusivity (Bogue 2004a, p. 83). At the same time, bands have tended to abandon the gendered lyrical themes of earlier metal styles and to focus instead on more gender 'neutral' issues such as alienation and isolation (Bennett 2001, p. 57).<sup>3</sup> Sonically, extreme metal also replaces many of cock rock's aural signifiers with sounds and styles characterised less readily as a masculine mastery of a female Other. Although it is difficult to classify the music as anything other than 'masculine', the masculinity produced is less straightforwardly 'phallic' than it is in the styles of heavy metal discussed in terms of cock rock (Bogue 2004a, p. 106). For example, death metal compositions frequently disrupt conventional patterns of harmonic, melodic and

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<sup>3</sup> While Bennett's observation is generally accurate, it is less applicable to some subgenres of death metal and grindcore, which produce some sexist and misogynistic material.

structural development, and in particular, reject the drive towards climax and resolution viewed by some critics as an expression of the masculine impulse of western music (e.g. McClary 1991). In death metal, many of the musical elements that might be considered masculine are denaturalised, although it is often through exaggeration, rather than elimination, that such effects are achieved (Bogue 2004a, p. 106). For instance, death metal vocal style deepens, and hence hypermasculinises, the voice, but to the point where it ceases to sound human, resembling instead some “unspecifiable animal or machine” (Bogue 2004a, p. 107).

Bogue conceives death metal’s musical becoming, achieved through its radical restructuration of the song form, as a liberating, libidinal dissolution of the organism as an integrated system. Within the terms of his Deleuzo-Guattarian framework, becomings necessarily commence with and pass through becoming-woman (Bogue 2004a, p. 83). Given the male-dominated context in which the music is produced and consumed, Bogue is somewhat concerned that there appears to be little possibility of any kind of becoming-woman in the death metal scene. Nevertheless, he maintains that the becoming is a genuine one, even if it remains unclear from his analysis whether death metal produces a musical becoming *despite* the absence of becoming-woman, or whether it seeks to create a musical becoming *without the need for* becoming-woman. With its innovative approach to extreme metal music, Bogue’s work opens up new possibilities for considering how the music ‘works’ in both musical and political terms, some of which will be explored in more detail in the following chapters.

## The “politics of depoliticization”

The final criticism of metal concerns the genre’s racial politics. Like punk, metal has traditionally been enjoyed by predominantly white audiences, but while punk has been seen to involve itself in anti-racist causes and to forge alliances with ‘black’ musical genres like reggae, scholars have been critical of what they perceive to be the scene’s failure to acknowledge its own debt to black music-making.<sup>4</sup> According to Walser, an accurate genealogy of heavy metal ought to trace the music back to African-American blues, but this is seldom done (1993, p. 8).<sup>5</sup> Some have argued that extreme metal takes heavy metal’s ‘whiteness’ to a further extreme. Extreme metal has been described as the “apotheosis of a process through which the pivotal influence of black musics (particularly the blues) on the development of metal has progressively been erased” (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 137). Indeed, Kahn-Harris suggests that the hostility of many extreme metal scene members to the so-called nu-metal subgenre is due largely to its incorporation of ‘black’ musical influences (2007, p. 137).<sup>6</sup> A number of critics view extreme metal’s sonic departure from the blues as part of an attempt to construct an idealised “detached white subjectivity” (Pillsbury 2006, p. 97), although the

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<sup>4</sup> Even in cases where bands acknowledge their use of non-white musical resources, critics tend to understand this in terms of appropriation, rather than alliance. For example, Waksman describes Led Zeppelin’s incorporation of African-American, Indian and Arabic musical elements as an appropriative “fantasy of exploration rooted in colonialist desires” rather than a legitimate musical exchange (1999, p. 240).

<sup>5</sup> As he writes: “[H]istories of...heavy metal commonly begin at the point of white dominance. But to emphasize Black Sabbath’s contribution of occult concerns to rock is to forget Robert Johnson’s struggles with the Devil and Howlin’ Wolf’s meditations on the problem of evil. To trace heavy metal vocal style to Led Zeppelin’s Robert Plant is to forget James Brown’s ‘Cold sweat’. To deify white rock guitarists like Eric Clapton or Jimmy Page is to forget the black American musicians they were trying to copy; to dwell on the prowess of these guitarists is to relegate Jimi Hendrix, the most virtuosic guitarist of the 1960s, to the fringes of music history” (Walser 1993, pp. 8-9).

<sup>6</sup> Nu-metal is a subgenre that combines heavy and extreme metal with elements of hip hop and funk. During the 1990s, it was metal’s most commercially popular variant (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 135).

implications of this for the music and scene's racial politics currently remain largely unelaborated.

For the most part, the traditional predominance of whites in the heavy and extreme metal scenes is viewed as a product of historical circumstance, rather than the result of any explicit exclusion or rejection of black musical styles, musicians or fans. As Walser argues:

[H]eavy metal began as a white remake of urban blues that often ripped off black artists and their songs shamelessly. If the motive for much white music making has been the imperative of reproducing black culture without the black people in it, no comparable reason exists to draw black musicians and fans into traditionally white genres. Heavy metal has remained a white-dominated discourse, apparently offering little to those who have been comfortable with African-American musical traditions. (1993, p. 17)

Walser is careful to state that neither metal's lyrics nor its fans are any more racist than is common in the United States (1993, p. 17). A number of critics also note the racial diversity of the global metal scene, particularly due to the burgeoning scenes in South-East Asia and South America (Kahn-Harris 2007, pp. 116-7), and the growing non-white fanbase in the Anglo-American context (Purcell 2003, pp. 105-6).

Weinstein describes the racial composition of the audience as a "historical accident", explaining that the scene is neither pro-white nor anti-black in principle (2000, pp. 67, 112). As she explains

[T]he metal subculture tends to be tolerant of those outside its core demographic base who follow its codes of dress, appearance, and behavior, and who show devotion to the music. Neither sexist, ageist, nor racist on principle, the metal subculture is exclusivist, insistent upon upholding the codes of its core membership. (Weinstein 2000, p. 112)

At the same time, however, she worries that the metal scene's commitment to "exclusivist" principles can sometimes result in a "strong ethnocentrism bordering on

xenophobia” (Weinstein 2000, p. 113). She describes the emergence of heavy metal as fuelled partly by the resentments of marginal whites anxious about the African-American civil rights movement in the United States and the increased intake of migrants from the Indian subcontinent and Caribbean Islands in Britain (Weinstein 2000, p. 112). Metal’s reliance on symbols derived from medieval northern European, ancient Anglo-Saxon and Nordic cultures is interpreted both as a valorisation of ‘whiteness’ and an attempt to cultivate a sense of ethnic identity amongst a group otherwise perceived as non-ethnics in the Anglo-American context (Weinstein 2000, p. 113). For Weinstein, metal’s ‘whiteness’ may betray the genre’s conservative convictions, but because she views the audience’s racial composition as essentially ‘accidental’, she stops short of claims of outright extremism.

Beckwith (2002), however, views the deployment of Nordic and other northern European imagery as evidence of a much more coherent and sinister ideology of white supremacy. Talking specifically about the Norwegian black metal scene, he argues that Nordic iconography, along with musicians’ practice of wearing theatrical black-and-white make-up known as ‘corpse paint’, function as an expression of the scene’s far-right and neo-fascistic sympathies. Some prominent black metal musicians have indeed used such conventions as a vehicle for neo-Nazi politics, particularly in Norway,<sup>7</sup> but the precise relationship between black metal’s aesthetic practices and the ideology of white supremacy remains largely unelaborated in Beckwith’s work. For instance, his insistence that the “emphasis on ‘whiteness’ that corpsepaint [*sic*] gives

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<sup>7</sup> See Moynihan & Söderlind (1998) and Goodrick-Clarke (2002, pp. 203-12) for detailed accounts of black metal’s links to the far-right.

cannot be overlooked” is difficult to reconcile with his earlier observation that the practice was initially adopted to create a macabre and gruesome appearance (Beckwith 2002, para. 9). By assuming an automatic and natural connection between conventions like corpse paint and oppressive racial ideologies, Beckwith fails to consider the variety of interpretations that circulate within the black metal scene. Some practitioners indeed understand corpse paint in racial terms, especially within the National Socialist Black Metal (NSBM) scene (Kadmon 1998), but others use it to signify an anti-Christian, Satanic or demonic identity (Baddeley 1999), or a simulacrum of death and disease (Griffiths 2003).

Fascistic and white supremacist perspectives do circulate within the extreme metal scene, but they have only ever been adopted by a minority of scene members (Griffiths 2003). Overt and unambiguous statements of racism are relatively rare, but when they do occur, they tend to go largely unchallenged and uncontested. For example, racist comments made in interviews are usually published with little (if any) comment from the interviewer (Kahn-Harris 2004a, p. 101). This is, in part, due to scene members’ orientation toward a disposition of reflexive anti-reflexivity.

‘Reflexive anti-reflexivity’ refers to scene members’ deliberate refusal to reflect upon the ethico-political implications of the music they produce and consume. As Kahn-Harris explains, if *unreflexivity* is “not knowing better”, and *anti-reflexivity* is “not wanting to know”, *reflexive anti-reflexivity* is “knowing better but deciding not to know” (2007, p. 145). Reflexive anti-reflexivity is thus defined as anti-reflexivity practised by scene members who are capable of producing reflexive practice within the

space of the extreme metal scene, but who nonetheless choose not to. This practice of reflexive anti-reflexivity is an important lens through which death metal music is experienced and understood, but it is also a practice that is thought to make it difficult for participants to interrogate racialised power relations (among others), and so even occasional flirtations with the far-right are believed to contribute to the popularisation and normalisation of oppressive ideas of racial difference within the extreme metal scene. Indeed, the experiences of racism and anti-Semitism reported by some Israeli scene members suggest that this is sometimes the case (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 77).

While reflexive anti-reflexivity prevents scene members from challenging oppressive or offensive practices within the scene, it also thwarts most attempts at forming a committed racist praxis. Scene members' unwillingness to reflexively engage with questions of 'politics' means that even explicitly white supremacist bands are forced to contextualise their racist or fascist sympathies in contradictory ways. For instance, in an interview with *Morrigan Rising* magazine, Arawn from Australian black metal band Anwariad declares his band's support for "any scene that propagates the learning and strengthening of the Aryan races", including the NSBM scene and other pro-Aryan music scenes, yet insists that Anwariad has absolutely "no interest in politics".<sup>8</sup> According to Kahn-Harris, denial of political intent is a common defence used by scene members employing racist and fascist discourse: reflexive anti-reflexivity allows

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<sup>8</sup> A transcript of this (untitled) interview is published online at <<http://www.rac-usa.org/wau/anwariad.html>>, viewed January 2007.

them to exploit the transgressive potential of shocking discourses, whilst ensuring they never become enmeshed in outright fascist activity (Kahn-Harris 2007, pp. 152-3).

However, reflexive anti-reflexivity means that attempts to *combat* racism must also be couched in politically neutral terms. For example, the activist organisation Metalheads Against Racism takes care not to present itself as overtly politicised, stating on its website that “Metalheads Against Racism isn’t political” because “being against racism is not a matter of politics. It’s a matter of common sense”.<sup>9</sup> Racism is thus framed only as an affront to “common sense” and not to a particular political or ideological position. As a result, the reluctance to address, or even identify, causes of racial prejudice and inequality may inadvertently contribute to a regressive normalisation of racism and hate within the metal scene.

Reflexive anti-reflexivity is not only a feature of the ways in which the scene’s racial politics are approached, but also of the ways in which relations within the scene are conducted more broadly, making it an important lens through which the practices and pleasures of death metal are to be understood. Reflexive anti-reflexive practice makes scene members reluctant to interrogate *any* of the ethical or political implications of the texts that they produce and consume. According to Kahn-Harris, the “failure” on the part of scene members to turn metal’s “transgressive aesthetics and underground structures towards a thoroughgoing critique of large-scale structures of domination” contributes to a “politics of depoliticization” in which the structuration of the scene

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<sup>9</sup> The Metalheads Against Racism website is located at <http://www.metalheadsagainstracism.org/indexe.html>, viewed January 2007.



and the ethico-political consequences of scene practices are wilfully ignored (Kahn-Harris 2004a, pp. 106, 108). In the end, he laments, “much of scenic practice is ultimately nihilistic” (Kahn-Harris 2004a, p. 108).

As a result, he argues, the scene should be exposed to the kind of reflexive inquiry it has so far resisted. He suggests that “the scene should be ‘opened’ to dialogue, in order that...[unacceptable] forms of power can be challenged... The scene has to be opened up to the processes of reflexiv[ity]...from which, at present, it is insulated” (Harris 2001, p. 210). It is his view that this should be achieved not via the endeavours of ‘outsiders’ (including scholarly critics) but through the efforts of critical insiders coming to the scene from different musical or political spaces—people, like former *Terrorizer* editor Nick Terry, whose background in rock journalism, leftist politics and poststructuralist criticism has motivated him to subtly use his magazine as a forum for interrogating and challenging inequalities within the scene (Harris 2001, p. 211).

Metal’s reluctance to channel its energies into a clearly defined politics has remained an ongoing frustration for progressive critics. Of course, some of the views expressed within the metal scene are genuinely problematic and their circulation is secured, in part, by scene members’ reluctance to interrogate or criticise attitudes with which they disagree. However, Kahn-Harris’s analysis of reflexive anti-reflexivity also convincingly shows that reflexive anti-reflexive practice is central to the pleasures of the music and of the scene; consequently, reflexive anti-reflexivity offers modes of listening to and experiencing extreme metal music that are worth exploring in more detail.

For Kahn-Harris, reflexive anti-reflexivity essentially operates as a subcultural practice: that is, it is a means of orienting and organising individual and institutional interactions within the scene. In Chapter 3, I explore the possibilities of reading reflexive anti-reflexivity as a textual practice, and in particular, the ways in which the non-identificatory logic of death metal song texts can be read as an invitation to reflexive anti-reflexive forms of engagement with death metal music. I suggest that one of the pleasures that reflexive anti-reflexive practice offers is the opportunity to disengage otherwise transgressive material from any 'real' values, attitudes and experiences. In Chapter 5, I consider how this practice of reflexive anti-reflexivity might form the basis of more detailed readings of the pleasures of Carcass and Cannibal Corpse.

### **Rethinking heavy and extreme metal**

On the whole, critics have been far less generous to heavy and extreme metal than to other popular music styles. Whereas styles like punk and hip hop revived hopes of a radical and liberatory popular culture, metal has been lambasted as politically conservative and anti-egalitarian. Punk, with its confronting and provocative lyrical and visual style, musical amateurism and do-it-yourself approach to musical production and distribution, is seen as a form of proto-socialist protest that offers a voice of dissent for a disenfranchised white underclass. Hip hop is seen to provide a similarly radical activist culture for poor, urban blacks. Nation-conscious rap is thought to offer the most clearly articulated politics, but even gangsta rap, with its depictions of violence,

misogyny, drug dealing and prostitution, tends to be viewed as a political statement, since it is thought to reflect the real experiences of ghetto America.

A notion of punk and hip hop as definitionally progressive has been so crucial to the value that critics have attributed to these genres that even aspects normally considered politically problematic—punk's persistent sexism and occasional flirtations with the far-right, or hip hop's sexual objectification of women and complicity with corporate capitalism—are either overlooked or reabsorbed as expressions of the cultures' essential radicalism. Critics have tended to be far less forgiving of heavy and extreme metal. Because metal fails to channel its energies into recognisable forms of political activism and resistance, it is thought to foster a political apathy un conducive to positive social change. The emphasis on technical skill is criticised for inscribing hierarchical and anti-egalitarian social relations, including oppressive forms of masculinity. Meanwhile, the tendency toward reflexive anti-reflexivity is thought to leave adherents unwilling to interrogate, or even identify, structures of power and inequality within the scene.

An overriding assumption that music should in some way address and resist social inequality means that genres which cannot be readily connected to progressive politics tend to be viewed less favourably. Both heavy and extreme metal have indeed shown evidence of some conservative and reactionary tendencies, and some of the criticisms levelled at the genres are legitimate ones, but any approach which takes 'politics' as the starting point of analysis inevitably limits the kinds of questions it can ask of the genre. In studies of punk, such an approach risks treating musical and subcultural

conventions as merely subsidiary to broader political or ideological concerns. In hip hop scholarship, reference to rap principally in terms of ‘politics’, rather than in terms of musical pleasure, prevents a more complete understanding of the genre’s political implications and effects. In heavy and extreme metal scholarship, a more complete understanding of musical pleasure is particularly crucial. Political questions are important, but any approach which views musical and subcultural conventions only, or primarily, as a measure of political radicalism leaves few tools for considering the other kinds of pleasures offered by the genre.

The insights of electronic dance music scholarship have been valuable to the study of popular music precisely because they prioritise such questions of pleasure. The importance attributed to *jouissance* in rave culture necessitates a more explicit consideration of musical pleasure as a central dimension of the music’s meaning and significance. The pleasures of dance music are still conceived primarily in political terms, but this focus on questions of pleasure has contributed to both an expanded definition of politics and a more nuanced understanding of how political concerns and emotional investments may intersect. If extreme metal has experiential similarities to electronic dance music (see Tagg 1994), then a productive approach to death metal demands a more detailed engagement with questions of musical pleasure. Such questions are usually subordinated in studies concerned with the ethico-political implications of cultural forms, but they are essential to any adequate understanding of popular music—particularly to an understanding of heavy and extreme metal.

# CHAPTER 3

## Rethinking the ‘reflectionist’ account: death metal and the reorientation of listening

In the previous chapters, I have been arguing that heavy and extreme metal have been excluded from the ‘canon’ of popular genres that have enjoyed critical approbation. However, not all critics have approached metal in entirely unsympathetic terms. According to some scholars, metal may not be, in itself, politically progressive, but neither does it represent the pure nihilism or political quietism suggested by some of its critics. As a result, the following two chapters will explore and critique two of the key means by which metal has been positively re-evaluated. In this current chapter, I consider what I refer to as the ‘reflectionist’ account of metal, an account in which the genre is conceived not as mere escapism, but as a direct engagement with, or ‘reflection’ of, the material realities of fans’ lives. Chapter 4 will explore the attempt to read metal in terms of ‘moral panic’, and consider the ways in which the music has been viewed as a form of resistance to neoconservative hegemony.

Both ways of reading the genre can be seen as concessions to cultural studies’ prioritisation of political concerns; both are attempts to attribute to metal a kind of political progressivism typically denied it in other scholarship. In the first part of this chapter, I will discuss some of the main attempts to recuperate metal as social critique, particularly by critics who interpret the genre as a metaphoric exploration of current

social issues and tensions. In the sections that follow, I will begin to problematise this approach by arguing that such accounts tend to ascribe an identificatory and narrative logic to music listening that death metal essentially rejects. Via an interrogation of the main theories of musical narrative and identification commonly used by metal scholars and other popular music researchers, including theories adapted from work on horror cinema, I will consider how death metal's non-identificatory logic can be seen as an invitation to reflexive anti-reflexive modes of engagement which prompt a reorientation of listening that undermines attempts to 'read off' adherents' beliefs, politics or experiences from the content of the music and lyrics.

**“An honest reflection and critique of a brutal world”: the ‘reflectionist’ account**

The tendency to read metal as a reflection of, or response to, fans' values or experiences is an influential one in metal scholarship, and a key means through which critics have attempted to recuperate the genre as social critique. In his study of heavy metal, for example, Walser suggests that metal's fantastical imagery provides fans a means to “comprehend and critique” the realities of modern life (1993, p. 170). In Megadeth's song ‘Rust in peace...Polaris’, for instance, the lines “Satan rears his ugly head, to spit into the wind; I spread disease like a dog” are thought to invoke the supernatural figure of Satan in order to convey the very real horrors of nuclear war (qtd. in Walser 1993, p. 158). Megadeth's imagery may be “horrible,” Walser argues, but “it is intended—and understood by fans—as an honest reflection and critique of a brutal world” (1993, p. 158). ‘Rust in peace...Polaris’ responds directly to a major

social and political issue, but Walser also includes within this framework songs which do not appear to address ‘reality’ or ‘real’ social concerns in any kind of straightforward way. In such cases, he suggests that social tensions are explored and allayed in more indirect or metaphorical ways. For example, thrash metal’s formal complexity and abrupt changes of meter and tempo are thought to operate as metaphors for a turbulent and disjointed world, while musicians’ accuracy and technical precision are thought to offer listeners a sense of security and reassurance that such difficulties can be successfully overcome (Walser 1993, p. 157). As he explains:

[I]n their material enactments of control, of hanging on in the face of frightening complexity, such heavy metal bands suggest to many that survival in the modern world is possible, that disruptions, no matter how unsettling, can be ridden out and endured. (Walser 1993, p. 159)

According to Brown, thrash metal’s emphasis on supernatural, apocalyptic and social themes enables alienated individuals to “feel that they can make sense of an irrational world” (although he largely neglects to elaborate why these individuals are alienated, how thrash ameliorates this sense of alienation, or why the world is perceived as irrational) (1995, p. 451). Purcell describes death metal as a response to the “major issues of its time”, and theorises the music’s violent and gruesome imagery as symbolic or metaphoric representations of current social anxieties (2003, p. 183). She views the music as a reaction to “social phenomena, and to the socio-political atmosphere”: a confrontation of “terrifying real issues in a fantastic realm” (Purcell 2003, pp. 181, 184). For example, she describes gore metal’s lyrical fascination with “torn-open” and mutilated bodies as a response to, and examination of, the effects of new medical technologies on changing conceptions of the human body (Purcell 2003, p. 181). From

this perspective, death metal's preoccupation with themes of destruction is seen not as an endorsement of the actions depicted, but a reflection of the realities of modern life.

However, most death metal lyrics are so far-fetched that few, if any, listeners would have witnessed or experienced anything like the scenarios depicted. In such cases, according to Chidester, this imagery speaks not to listeners' *actual* life experiences, but to their emotional *evaluations* of them (2004, p. 29). He argues that death metal fans perceive their lives to be "rooted in chaos and pain", and that the music and lyrics provide them with a coherent worldview through which to interpret these emotions (Chidester 2004, p. 29). Bands like Cannibal Corpse, for example, are thought to literally exhort their fans to interpret their everyday experiences through the lens of group's outlandish lyrics. His primary evidence for this is an online poll on the band's website, which reads:

What Cannibal Corpse songs best describes [*sic*] your state of mind?  
 The Spinesplitter  
 Hammer Smashed Face  
 Pit of Zombies  
 Stripped, Raped and Strangled  
 Absolute Hatred  
 Addicted to Vaginal Skin  
 Covered With Sores. (qtd. in Chidester 2004, pp. 29-30)

Chidester's argument that fans look to death metal as a means of understanding and interpreting 'real life' emotions and experiences is at least partially supported by comments made by Cannibal Corpse frontman Chris Barnes. When called upon to defend the explicitness of the group's lyrics, he claimed that the preoccupation with themes of mayhem and destruction merely represents a reflection of and commentary



on the mayhem and destruction inherent in the real world. As he argued in a 1994 interview with *Buffalo News*:

It's the same as if a newspaper or television did a story about a serial killer and someone saw it and then went out and killed people. Does that make the newspaper or television responsible? It's the same with music. You can't blame us. I'm just a person who writes what I see and what I feel. (qtd. in Bogue 2004a, p. 168, n. 15)

But while Barnes may employ a 'reflectionist' logic or a notion of 'reportage' in order to legitimate depictions of extreme violence, this does not necessarily mean that the scenarios depicted are emotionally analogous to experiences in the lives of the group's fans. After all, Chidester's claim that the lives of death metal fans are defined by an experience of "chaos and pain" remains unsubstantiated by almost all existing fieldwork data on extreme metal audiences. According to Purcell's survey of death metal fans, for example, listeners received higher-than-average scores on measures of contentment and optimism, suggesting that fans do not view the world or their own lives in overly negative terms (2003, p. 120). Similarly, Kahn-Harris found extreme metal fans to be generally cheerful and well adjusted, and to have nurturing family relationships (2007, p. 61). The possibility that Cannibal Corpse's online poll might have functioned as a source of light-hearted amusement for fans, rather than as a serious attempt to inculcate a particular worldview, goes largely unacknowledged by Chidester.

Critics who understand the relationship between death metal listeners and their music to be an identificatory one tend to adopt a very literal interpretation of both the music's themes and its effects on fans. Sylvan, for example, argues that death metal "provides a worldview, philosophy, and code for living which its adherents follow in a

disturbingly literal manner” (2002, p. 179). Taken to its “horrifying extreme”, she argues, death metal has served as an inspiration for violent crimes, including arson and murder (Sylvan 2002, p. 179). Sylvan provides few details of these crimes or of death metal’s role in them, and her claims for death metal’s pernicious influence are solely based on comments made by a single interview subject who alludes to the “violent aspect...of death metal and black metal” and to incidents of violence that occurred in “Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Denmark” (Steve Rice qtd. in Sylvan 2002, p. 179). The violent incidents to which Rice refers are most likely those which occurred in Norway (not in Sweden or Denmark) in the early 1990s, and which are the subject of Moynihan & Søderlind’s (1998) book *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*. In this book, Moynihan & Søderlind describe a series of arson attacks on Norway’s medieval stave churches and several murders (including a random attack on a stranger and a pre-meditated murder of a rival musician) perpetrated by members of the Norwegian black metal scene.<sup>1</sup> These crimes were certainly “extreme”, but they cannot be characterised as typical of the actions of death metal (or even black metal) fans.

Accounts like Sylvan’s demonstrate how ‘reflectionist’ accounts, rather than offering a genuine alternative to the negative characterisation of metal described in Chapter 2, often serve as a refracted version of it. In some cases, ‘reflectionist’ accounts directly echo political criticisms of the genre. For example, Chidester worries that death metal’s preoccupation with images of suffering and violence encourages an acceptance of the *status quo* rather than a commitment to positive social change (2004, p. 139). Brown

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 4 for additional discussion of these crimes.

expresses concern that the musical structures, visual presentations and social themes of thrash encourage fans to view the world as hostile and alienating, and that without a commitment to radical political change, fans risk “succumb[ing] to hopelessness” (1995, p. 451). Other critics, while defending death metal’s representations of violence, inadvertently confirm its reputation for conservatism. For instance, Purcell repeatedly describes death metal’s violent lyrics as “pornographic” and defends them as a legitimate expression of “man’s repressed bestial nature” and his “innate desires for violence and sex” (Purcell 2003, pp. 172, 175, 179). This conflation of sex and violence not only prevents more nuanced distinctions between the different ways that sex and violence are (and are not) deployed in death metal, but it also implies that all violence depicted in death metal is both sexualised and inexorably male-centred. However, even Cannibal Corpse, who, according to Purcell, exemplify death metal’s misogynistic impulse (2003, p. 44), has never traded exclusively in representations of sexualised violence and in fact only featured such material during the early phases of their career (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 36). Even in this early work, not all the perpetrators of violence are male, nor are all the victims female. For example, the song ‘Split wide open’ from *Tomb of the Mutilated* (1992) deals with infanticide by a woman, while the band’s most well known song ‘Hammer smashed face’ (also from *Tomb of the Mutilated*) depicts the bludgeoning death of a victim of indeterminate gender.

However, Purcell’s view of death metal as an unmediated expression of men’s ‘natural’, biological urges is deeply troubling given the extremity of the sexual violence in some of the band’s lyrics. What “innate” desires are satisfied by fantasies of becoming a ‘Necropedophile’ (from *Tomb of the Mutilated* 1992), or of being a rapist suffering from

an infectious and disfiguring disease, as in ‘Covered with sores’ (from *Butchered at Birth* 1991)? Moreover, her view of death metal as a reflection of listeners’ repressed desires contrasts with the ways in which fans themselves discuss the meaning and significance of death metal lyrics. In fact, most of her interviewees explicitly distance themselves from death metal’s most extreme lyrical content, insisting that graphic images of horror and carnage are used only for purposes of light-hearted entertainment, are not meant to be interpreted literally, and do not reflect their own beliefs or desires. As one fan remarked:

While [gore bands like] Cannibal Corpse are amongst my favorite bands, I feel their lyrical content is strictly ornamental and does not necessarily reflect anything I would believe or do. It is also the case that the members of the bands do not believe or would not do any of the things depicted in their songs. (Matt Medeiros qtd. in Purcell 2003, p. 129)

Implicit in Purcell’s and other ‘reflectionist’ accounts, however, is an identificatory model of music listening that assumes such content must be read as a reflection of listeners’ life attitudes and values.

Within popular music studies in general, music is understood as a way of making sense of the world; the pleasure of music is often understood as a pleasure of identification (Frith 1998b, p. 272). A number of influential analyses understand identification as the intended and most desired outcome of popular music practice. As I will argue below, such analyses often assume that popular music interpellates listeners as listening subjects via identification with the singing voice and with musical structures oriented towards harmonic resolution and narrative closure. If the argument that metal reflects or illuminates a dimension of listeners’ lives assumes that listeners directly identify with the music and lyrics, then this is a relationship of identification that some death metal

fans, at least, clearly resist. Instead, I would argue that death metal represents such a radical departure from conventional practices of popular composition and from customary expectations of listening that existing attempts to assimilate the genre into a traditional identificatory framework warrant reconsideration.

### **The rejection of identification**

Death metal initially emerged as part of a sustained attempt to extend and heighten heavy metal's most sonically transgressive elements (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 30). Motivated by the pursuit of increasingly heavy and extreme sounds, death metal musicians explore sonic conventions typically heard by non-fans as "noise" (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 6; McIver 2000, p. 14). Death metal's "sheer difficulty as a musical form" (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 5) means that adherents are typically introduced to the genre via 'mainstream' styles of heavy music, before gradually developing an appreciation for death metal's more intense and inaccessible sounds (York 2004). Death metal appreciation thus involves a gradual process of acclimatisation during which fans learn to reinterpret and revalue sounds initially heard as "repellent" as both pleasurable and highly nuanced (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 5).

Much of the initial "difficulty" of death metal can be seen to arise from listeners' reluctance to forgo many of the customary pleasures of popular music. Death metal's deep, growled vocals deny listeners many of the expected pleasures of the singing voice. Its disruption of conventional tonal expectations lends the music a jagged,

dissonant sensibility that disturbs conventional patterns of harmony and melody, while its tendency to structure songs as a series of discrete, loosely-related units works to inhibit cohesion and defer the possibility of harmonic resolution. These sonic and structural conventions undercut and denaturalise the literal meanings of the lyrics, making it difficult for listeners to recognise something of their own lives, values or ideologies expressed or reflected in this music. Rather than providing fans with a cohesive worldview or a commentary on their own experiences, death metal can be seen to offer anti-reflexive experiences of listening that enable fans to disengage highly contentious material from their own experiences, attitudes and beliefs. The disconnection between the connotations conventionally associated with this material (including its ethical and political connotations) and the kinds of listening pleasures provided problematises political criticisms which claim to know in advance the politics of the music.

Death metal's displacement of the singing voice as an identificatory locus of listening represents a significant departure from conventional notions of pleasure and identification within popular music. Middleton has argued that popular music is overwhelmingly a "voice music"; the voice is typically foregrounded on popular recordings and the aural and emotional focus of most popular songs remains fixed on the story, character, feeling, personality and melody conveyed by the vocal performance (1990, p. 261). According to Cubitt, the melodic foregrounding of the singing voice is a necessary precondition for identification, with the voice typically providing the "level of the song which engages our desire most directly" (1984, p. 211). He argues that identification with the singing voice allows us to participate in the song

even more closely than the participation of dancing to the beat (conceived as a difference between dancing *to* and singing *with*). For Cubitt, vocal identification allows us to “become the singer and produce the song as our own” (1984, p. 212). Importantly, identification is thought to ascribe a narrative logic to vocal performance.

As Middleton explains:

The continuity and diegetic [*sic*] function of almost all vocal melody draw us along the linear thread of the song’s syntagmatic structure, producing a ‘point of perspective’ from which the otherwise disparate parts of the musical texture can be placed within a coherent ‘image’. (1990, p. 264)

Because vocal melody is seen primarily as an expression of personality and emotion, Middleton considers it difficult for the singing voice to subvert the “tyranny of meaning” (1990, p. 264). Similarly, Cubitt refers to music’s “storytell[ing]” function and suggests that the melodic foregrounding of the singing voice performs a diegetic role in propelling the “story” of a song (1984, p. 208).

Such accounts are indebted to a dominant ideology of popular singing in which audiences’ “connection” with the singing voice is seen as key to the pleasure and meaning they derive from the music (Frith 1987, p. 145). In rock and other guitar-based music, the emotional authenticity of the voice is considered especially crucial, with vocal performances judged according to the listener’s idea of how far a singer “really feels” what is being communicated (Laing 1985, p. 64). Gilbert and Pearson refer to this as an ideology of “phonologocentrism”, a notion of the singing voice as a site of unmediated truth, sincerity and authenticity (1999, p. 165). Our emotional connection to the music is thought to offer us a sense of identity, while an identificatory relationship to the singing voice is thought to make available to us our own feelings: it is “as if we get to know ourselves via the music” (Frith 1987, p. 142).

According to Cubitt, this identificatory connection to the voice is essential to our comprehension of a song's meaning; only through identification do songs make sense.

Using Chuck Berry's song 'Maybelline' as an example, he argues:

Without identification, the narrative dissolves into noise, as sometimes occurs with radio plays when the voices of two or more characters are too similar. That kind of confusion debars us from the truth of the narrative: we need to identify with the detective to get to the truth, or with the hero to discover the emotional authenticity of an action story. [Likewise] we have to identify with Chuck Berry in order to grasp the power of 'Maybelline'. (Cubitt 1984, pp. 210-1)

In Cubitt's formulation, identification is essential to the phonologocentric functioning of the singing voice: without identification, there can be no truth or emotional authenticity, only noise.

Although metal fans may identify to some degree with the performers themselves (Arnett 1996, p. 86), an understanding of the singing voice which emphasises the vocalist's capacity for storytelling, emotional 'truth' and identification is one largely unavailable to death metal's anti-melodic, non-natural treatment of the voice. In traditional heavy metal, vocalists project brightness and power by overdriving their voices to create a singing style that features long, sustained notes and heavy vibrato (Walser 1993, p. 45). In doing so, heavy metal vocalists cultivate a broad emotional vocabulary that ranges from pain and defiance to anger and excitement (Weinstein 2000, p. 26). In contrast to the soaring, almost operatic, vocal style of heavy metal, death metal vocalists produce deep, guttural growls by using the membranous folds above the vocal chords to exert pressure on the larynx. Bogue refers to death vocals as a form of "non-singing" that non-fans consider to be "beyond the limits of the musical" (2004b, p. 107). York (2004) describes the sound as a "repellent against listeners who aren't committed to approaching the music on its own terms", and



implies that more than any other aspect of the genre, the vocals serve as an initial barrier to enjoyment of the music. Ian has attempted to re-assimilate the style into a phonocentric model of music listening, arguing that the sound is a deeply anguished expression of the pain of father-son rape (1997, p. 155). However, she provides no evidence to substantiate her claim that death vocalists are victims of incest and even misinterprets one band's attempt at black comedy as a serious discussion of child sexual abuse (Ian 1997, pp. 157-8).<sup>2</sup> The explicit display of emotionality may be a necessary requirement for heavy metal singing, but the excessive distortion and limited modulation of death vocals make them difficult to interpret with respect to recognisable signifiers of 'emotion'. In fact, increasing numbers of death metal vocalists now experiment with 'clean' singing styles due to their dissatisfaction with the limited emotional expressiveness of growled vocals (Fusilli 2006).

On death metal recordings, the vocals tend sonically towards anonymity, subordinating individual differences to the creation of a single ensemble sound (Bogue 2004a, p. 95). Rather than providing the expected foreground identification that they do in rock, pop and heavy metal, death vocals typically appear 'lower' in the mix, with the sound balance weighted towards the instrumentation. On Carcass's debut album *Reek of Putrefaction* (1988), for example, the vocals are so heavily distorted and poorly recorded that the voice frequently 'disappears' into the mix. This kind of muffled sound was relatively common on early death metal albums, in part because at the time few sound engineers had sufficient familiarity either with the music of death metal or with the

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<sup>2</sup> In this discussion, Ian mistakenly refers to the death metal band Blood Duster as "Yeast". Although noting the "oddly comic" tenor of the band's lyrics, Ian views the song 'Albert' as an example of the "singer's rage...turned back against the Cannibal Father", and not as an attempt at comedy (Ian 1997, pp. 157, 158). For a discussion of humour in Blood Duster's music, see Thow (2004).

requisite studio techniques to record the music with clarity and precision (Mudrian 2004, p. 128). Carcass was initially disappointed with the sound quality on *Reek of Putrefaction*, but in retrospect now view it more favourably. As vocalist Jeff Walker recalls:

We did the album in a day, and the guy who was engineering it really messed it up... But I like the way it sounds now, in retrospect. At the time, we were pretty upset to where we walked out [*sic*]. It just sounded shitty to us. But that's part of the attraction [now]—because it just sounds so raw. (qtd. in Mudrian 2004, p. 128)

Unlike Carcass, Cannibal Corpse was fortunate enough to record its debut album with one of the few specialist death metal engineers active at the time: Scott Burns from Morrisound Studios in Florida. During the late 1980s, Morrisound pioneered the 'Florida death metal' sound, a sound characterised by heavily distorted, yet crisp and compressed production (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 32). On *Eaten Back to Life* (1990), Cannibal Corpse's vocal sound occupies an intermediary position between thrash and death metal: Chris Barnes' staccato roars and barks are recorded with clarity and are relatively foregrounded in the mix. Its follow-up, *Butchered at Birth* (1991), however, features a more conventionally 'Floridian' style of production. The vocals are placed lower in the mix and Barnes experiments more with the deep, undulating growls that were to eventually become a hallmark of his vocal style. In this case, the structural subordination of the voice is utilised as a deliberate aesthetic choice.

Death metal's style of vocal delivery means that lyrics are almost completely indecipherable without the aid of a lyric sheet. Even when lyrics are provided, the vocal line can be difficult to follow. For example, due to the speed of the music and the

### CHAPTER 3

frequent use of technical medical jargon, vocalists Walker and Bill Steer frequently approximate the sounds of the words rather than enunciate them clearly. This often results in a tendency to vocalise the lyrics faster than they can be read. Barnes' style of vocal delivery is characterised by greater accuracy and precision, but the clear articulation of words and phrases remains limited. Although Barnes' voice tends to be more dominant in the mix and his lyrics delivered with more care than Walker and Steer's, the non-melodious quality of his voice confers upon his vocals an essentially percussive role. This is an observation Bogue makes of death metal more generally: "though...vocalists enunciate words, their primary function is as percussionists" (2004a, p. 95). Bogue sees death vocals less as a means of expression or communication than as a means of providing a "broadly affective, percussive reinforcement of accents and phrases, to fuse vocal noises with the instrumental sounds and create semi-human, semi-machine, blocks of sound" (2004b, p. 107).

Both bands' lyrics present dramatic scenes of gore and violence, but frequently lack any identifiable 'story' or 'message' through which to make sense of the material. Consider, for example, the lyrics to Carcass's song 'Carbonized eyesockets' (1988):

The pungent aroma of hot, bubbling, molten gristle  
Blends with the stench of hot, singeing flesh soldered to liquid muscle.  
As the cornea is pierced and fried sizzling retina  
Burning and spitting on the now blackened, charred fovea  
Holes of crumbling carbon are all that are left  
Charred eye-sockets of hot scorched flesh  
Fusing symblepharon, your flesh turns into coke  
Extravasative gunge now black, pungent smoke.  
Charred eye-sockets—horrifically pernicious  
Your sight irreparable by your optician  
Once flowing blood is now dried, resembling black pudding  
Now all that bleeds is a slow trickle of hot, sticky muscle.  
The sclera is a lump of carbon burning on smouldering membrane  
Your eyeballs are blistering, your optic nerves now aflame.

Or those to Cannibal Corpse's song 'Buried in the backyard' (1990):

To kill is why I live  
 My God, gives eternal life  
 Slice you, I watch your blood flow  
 Rotten brains, I feed 'till I'm full  
 Pressure building, the body starts to swell  
 The souls of my victims brings me great power  
 Feasting on flesh by the hour  
 Lungs explode as I cave in your chest  
 Probing through your organs—searching for meat  
 Chewing the heart of my kill builds by evil will  
 Bodies emptied of blood to fill my sacrificial chalice  
 I stalk my prey at night, I need to kill tonight  
 To strengthen my evil soul, those that I kill worship me below  
 I am your worst reality, pain and torture of humanity  
 Violent ways of insanity, there is no end to this cruelty.

'Carbonized eyesockets', like most Carcass songs, combines specialised medical terminology (e.g. "symblepharon", "charred fovea") with more light-hearted moments of gross-out comedy (e.g. "black pudding") to provide an abstract snapshot of a horrific injury. The song offers a vivid description of physical disfigurement, but lacks a clear context for action. For instance, the lyrics never reveal who or what is causing the destruction of the victim's eyes, nor do they mention anything of the pain and suffering this would inevitably involve. It is not even clear whether the "you" referred to in the lyrics is a live body or a corpse. Carcass's predilection for absurd second-person scenarios contrasts with Cannibal Corpse's preference for first-person expressions of sadistic pleasure. Like much of the band's other work, 'Buried in the backyard' recounts a sadistic act of violence, but is largely devoid of the contextual information necessary to determine its meaning and significance. The identities of both killer and victim, as well as the motives for and consequences of the killer's actions are largely unspecified (other than the vague notion that the murder is motivated by the killer's "evil will", and that it "strengthen[s] [his] evil soul"). Even the precise method

by which the murder is conducted remains unclear. Both Carcass and Cannibal Corpse transgress taboos of propriety and taste, but in the absence of a clear contextual framework through which to make sense of this material, it is difficult to ascertain what these songs are ‘about’ simply from their lyrical content. What ‘message’ do these songs convey? How do such depictions of gruesome bodily trauma help us to “get to know ourselves” via music? (Frith 1987, p. 142). By presenting this imagery in a way that is so context-free, Carcass and Cannibal Corpse fail to link their conceptual material to the external reality and external social values necessary to see metal as a way to “make sense of an irrational world” (Brown 1995, p. 451).

Laing (1985) has argued that listeners’ access to the customary pleasures of identification is inevitably disrupted by genres which adopt an oppositional stance to dominant musical discourses. In the early punk scene, for example, the desire to produce “shock-effects” at the level of lyrical theme, word choice, rhythm and vocal sound deprived listeners of both the conventional beauties of the singing voice and an emotional connection to the lyrics (Laing 1985, p. 78). Unable to identify with the content of the lyrics nor with the voice itself, punk listeners aligned themselves instead with the genre’s wider strategy of sonic provocation (Laing 1985, p. 81). As I have already discussed in Chapter 1, Laing views punk’s disavowal of identification as key to the genre’s political radicalism. It is not my intention to claim a similar politics for death metal, but his work nonetheless highlights the ways in which unconventional vocal techniques can be used to emotionally disconnect listeners from musical texts. The presence of shock-effects means that music no longer functions as a reflection of fans’ attitudes or values but as a means to “force the listener into a *different way of*

*listening*” (Laing 1985, p. 79, emphasis added). Consequently, identificatory models of music listening may have some utility within metal styles where the singing voice is foregrounded and lyrics address real social issues, but death metal’s deliberately oppositional approach to conventional musical discourses, the intentional incomprehensibility of the lyrics and the emotional ambiguity of their delivery seem to demand an alternate understanding of musical pleasure. It can be argued, for example, that death metal produces its own shock-effects at the level of lyrical theme, word choice and vocal sound. Fans’ gradual acclimatisation to the music suggests that the death metal listener, like the punk listener, must also learn to adopt a “different way of listening”.

Death metal subordinates the communicative function of the voice, often exploiting words and phrases for their affective sound quality alone. Hence, the genre can be seen to possess an example of what Barthes’ (1977) refers to as the “grain of the voice”. For Barthes, the timbral qualities of vocal sound are vital to a full understanding of musical pleasure and the “grain” is used as a designation for the moments in which the materiality of the voice interrupts or exceeds meaning; the moments in which meaning and signification are overwhelmed by music’s *jouissance*. To develop this idea, Barthes adapts Kristeva’s distinction between pheno-text and geno-text to vocal music by modifying the terms to “pheno-song” and “geno-song”. The pheno-song designates the structured, familiar reproduction of generic conventions (Barthes 1977, p. 182). The geno-song, in contrast, is the domain of the grain, and encompasses the moments where the materiality of the voice exceed its communicative and signifiatory functions. As Barthes elaborates:

[I]t forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression; it is that apex (or that depth) of production where the melody really works at the language—not at what is says, but the voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers, of its letters—where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work. (1977, p. 182)

These notions of vocal grain and geno-song are potentially useful for understanding musical pleasures that have little obvious relation to the literal content of musical texts, the moments in which the materiality of the voice, and not the clarity of its expression, is foregrounded (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, p. 61). Barthes' discussion of vocal 'grain' developed largely in response to a classical music tradition that sought to disavow embodied experiences of music. However, while a focus on the voice's materiality may have been considered disruptive within the classical tradition of which Barthes writes, this can hardly be considered so in contemporary popular music. After all, whereas classical music tended to insist on standardised, "pure" vocal timbres, vocal grain is commonly heard in popular music (Shepherd 1987, p. 164). In fact, popular music tends to utilise vocal grain not to disrupt conventional structures of meaning and signification or in the service of an implicitly deconstructive *jouissance* but as a signifier of emotional authenticity. As Gilbert and Pearson elaborate:

Within contemporary rock discourse, the 'dirty', untrained sounding voice has come to signify sincerity, authenticity, truthful *meaning* of a kind which a trained singer (supposedly) might not be able to produce... [T]he rock vocalist almost invariably uses the 'grain' of his voice to signify the corporeality of his music... This is a case of the music's relationship to the body being foregrounded, but precisely *in the service* of a phonologocentric ideal of the voice as a site of unmediated truth, of natural authenticity. (1999, p. 68, original emphasis)

The distinction between pheno-song and geno-song, then, is an inevitably blurry one; within particular musical and discursive contexts, the voice with grain can operate as a site of signification and identification.

However, the use to which vocal grain is put in death metal is largely at odds with dominant ideologies of popular singing, and is less readily available to a recuperative notion of phonologocentricity. In Szekely's (2006) adaptation of Barthes' ideas to popular music, he argues that a contemporary example of the geno-song can be found in the music of Björk where the "body at work—the convulsions that move through gut, throat, tongue, mouth, and lips—is quite palpable" in her singing, and this "often yields somewhat unsettled reactions, especially to the uninitiated: 'How on earth is she doing that?' 'Isn't that bad for her voice?' 'Doesn't it hurt?'" A similar comparison can be made with the death metal voice. Like Björk, death metal uses vocal grain not as an expression of truth or authenticity, but as a means to denaturalise the communicative function of the singing voice. Both vocal styles employ techniques of "non-singing" that non-fans conventionally hear as unpleasant. In death metal, this includes using low frequencies and heavy distortion to 'overdrive' the voice with an excess of materiality. The vocal sound is described variously (and often approvingly) as "guttural" (York 2004), "beast-like" (Purcell 2003, p. 11), "bellowing" (Baddeley 1999, p. 170), "snarling" (Weinstein 2000, p. 51) and "vomited" (McIver 2000, p. 14).

The notion that the voice with grain must be utterly original and inimitable (see Hicks 1999, p. 109) appears largely at odds with death metal's highly stylised and conventionalised vocal approach. Some death vocalists possess distinctive vocal styles, but a great number of the voices are essentially interchangeable. To the inexperienced listener, death metal can very often "sound...the same from one song to the next" (Baddeley 1999, p. 170). This interchangeability explains, in part, Cannibal Corpse's smooth transition between vocalists when original vocalist Chris Barnes was replaced



by George ‘Corpsegrinder’ Fisher in 1995. There are clear differences between the two vocal styles—Corpsegrinder, for example, draws upon a much wider vocal range, including deep grunts and mid-range screams—and fans continue to debate the relative merits of the two vocalists, but on the whole, the change was not viewed as a significant shift in the band’s musical direction. Despite a new vocalist, Cannibal Corpse’s fanbase demonstrated its continued support for the band by propelling Corpsegrinder’s debut release, *Vile* (1996), into the Billboard top 200 chart (McIver 2000, p. 51). That Barnes could be so easily replaced suggests a relative lack of importance placed on individual vocal identity.

If the grain represents the “body in the voice as it sings” (Barthes 1977, p. 188), then the death metal voice is largely dis-embodied, at least insofar as it can be seen as disconnected from *individualised* forms of embodied expression. Yet this lack of uniqueness may be key to death metal’s problematisation of the phonologocentric structuring of the singing voice. In his discussion of Russian cantorial music, Barthes implies that a lack of individual vocal identity may provide listeners’ with greater access to *signifiance*, as the voice becomes more difficult to recuperate into phonologocentric discourse. Describing a church bass, he argues:

The voice is not personal: it expresses nothing of the cantor, of his soul; it is not original (all Russian cantors have roughly the same voice), and at the same time it is individual: it has us hear a body which has no civil identity, no ‘personality’, but which is nevertheless a separate body. Above all, this voice bears along *directly* the symbolic, over the intelligible, the expressive. (Barthes 1977, p. 182, original emphasis)

Similarly, in death metal, the primary function of the voice is not to convey “unmediated truth”, “natural authenticity” or even individual personality, but to

promote a particular relationship to, and attitude toward, vocal performance in which music's conventional signifiatory and identificatory functions are eroded.

Death metal's departure from dominant codes of popular vocality can be seen as a contemporary example of how the voice can be used to access experiences which, in Barthes' terms, "escape the tyranny of meaning" (1977, p. 185). However, as I will demonstrate in the following sections, death metal's non-identificatory, anti-reflexive potential is not only confined to its use of the voice, but also involves other aspects of its musical structure, including its predilection for 'non-narrative' song forms. Rather than producing an organised and integrated experience, it will be argued that death metal's sonic conventions work to interpellate listeners as subjects open to experiences which exceed, evade, or even completely reject, the coherent narrative reconstruction implicit in the 'reflectionist' logic.

### **"Making sense of the world": Horror, narrative and identification**

The kinds of listening pleasures offered by death metal's lyrical, sonic and structural conventions cannot be easily apprehended by conventional accounts of musical meaning. As well as the melodic foregrounding of the singing voice, critics conventionally conceive of 'narrative' as one of popular music's key identificatory mechanisms, and one of the principle means through which musical meaning is established. Frith, for example, understands music listening principally as an encounter with narrative and suggests that concepts from literary and film studies can be usefully

applied to the analysis of popular song (1987, p. 146). Cubitt presents music as analogous to literary narrative in both structural form and social function, and views the melodic structures of popular music as equivalent to the events of a diegesis (1984, p. 208). In the literature on heavy and extreme metal, accounts of musical narrative have often been used to support claims for the music's ability to express something of fans' worldviews and life experiences. Kotarba notes the ability of lyrical narratives in thrash metal to "collectively conceptualize individual experiences of growing up" and foster intense relationships between artist and audience (1994, p. 143). Chidester emphasises the communicative and rhetorical function of song, describing death metal songs as "coherent narrative[s]" and "rhetorically potent story-form[s]" that help listeners come to terms with "their own individual and social experiences on the material plane" (2004, p. 185).

Walser (1993) and Purcell (2003) present a more implicit account of musical narrative through the development of an analogy with horror cinema. Walser argues that the social function of heavy metal closely resembles that of cinematic horror. He argues that "both heavy metal and the horror film address the insecurities of this tumultuous era. Both provide ways of producing meaning in an irrational society; both explore explanations for seemingly incomprehensible phenomena" (1993, p. 161). Horror and heavy metal, he concludes, are "nearly always concerned with making sense of the world" (Walser 1993, p. 162). Similarly, Purcell suggests that death metal has greater commensurability with cinematic horror than it does with other forms of popular music: "rather than comparing Death Metal to pop," she proposes, "it would be fairer to place it in the vein of the horror movie, which speaks to people in a figurative rather

than a literal fashion, and which explores the repressed and the forbidden” (2003, p. 171).

Both accounts theorise metal music and horror cinema as sites for the symbolic ‘playing out’ of anxieties that go unacknowledged, or are unacknowledgeable, within hegemonic discourse. For Walser, these stem mostly from the strains of socio-economic disenfranchisement, and the opportunity to explore the “dark side of the daylit, enlightened adult world” is thought to help fans survive the strains of modernity (1993, pp. 161-2). For Purcell, the anxieties are much more personal: fears of dying, of women, of being perceived as “weak” (2003, p. 185). She suggests that the primary function of both death metal and horror is to provide a “vehicle for the young angry teen to work out his [*sic*] fears and still uphold his image of toughness, masculinity, invincibility” (Purcell 2003, p. 185).

In developing these arguments, Walser and Purcell subscribe to a particular philosophy of horror, currently dominant in film and literary studies. Within the current ‘canon’ of horror scholarship, horror is theorised variously as a ‘return of the repressed’, as a means of symbolically ameliorating social and sexual anxieties, and as a site through which social norms are explored and reinforced. Each of these different positions, echoes of which can be found in Walser and Purcell’s work, rely on shared assumptions about how horror ‘works’ for its audience, including an emphasis on the narrative function, rather than potential pleasure, of horrific imagery. Walser and Purcell both draw their main sources from leading figures in this field: Walser cites Carroll (1990), King (1981), Ryan and Kellner (1988) and Twitchell (1985); Purcell

refers, among others, to Clover (1992), Creed (1993), Dickstein (1984) and Wood (2004).

In many of these accounts of horror cinema, narrative closure is cited as key to the meaning and significance of the genre. Twitchell (1985), for example, argues that the attraction of cinematic horror lies not with the fear and fascination elicited by the horror itself, but in the film's eventual restoration of order. He claims that it is not the pleasures of fright or horrific imagery that are most central to the horror experience, but the ways in which this imagery becomes articulated to lessons about 'proper' social conduct, particularly in relation to socially appropriate sexual behaviour. Twitchell argues that it is through the narrative progression of horror texts that we learn the consequences of certain behaviours. Reading horror monsters as symbolic representations of sexual taboos, he explains: "if...horror monsters are from the id, it is only because the superego feels the necessity of letting them out to air, and then presumably sends them back only after they have taught us something necessary" (Twitchell 1985, p. 92). By focusing on this opportunity to "send them back", Twitchell subordinates other potential pleasures of horrific imagery to its narrative function as an instructional device. In his reading of heavy metal, Walser largely rejects Twitchell's understanding of horror as a rite of passage to adulthood or reproductive sexuality, but shares a similar emphasis on horror as an educational tool. In both cases, the eventual restoration of order is considered paramount (for Twitchell this typically follows the punishment of transgression, for Walser it represents a reassuring mastery over decentring social forces).

For critics like Dickstein (1984) the value of horror can be found less in its educational function than in its potential for catharsis and expression of repressed fears. He argues that by conforming to a stable and predictable narrative structure featuring “clear-cut conflicts, villains, turning points, and resolutions”, horror films “neutraliz[e our] anxiety”, particularly our anxiety about death (Dickstein 1984, pp. 69, 70). In Purcell’s account of death metal, Dickstein’s work is used to substantiate claims that the music offers a safe, routinised way of exploring the “things that most terrify man”, and that this enables the cathartic displacement of anxieties about women, sexuality and death onto images of aggression (see Purcell 2003, pp. 172, 184).

According to King (1981), horror’s ability to provide a safe forum for the exploration of anxieties is precisely what gives much of the genre its reactionary tenor. He argues that most horror ultimately enforces dominant social values by showing us the punishments that await those who transgress social norms (King 1981, pp. 442-3). King demonstrates how the focal concerns of horror are intimately related to current social tensions, an argument also shared by Walser in relation to heavy metal (see Walser 1993, p. 161). Since the primary purpose and pleasure of horror is understood to be the amelioration of social anxieties, King considers narrative closure and resolution to be crucial to the genre’s effective operation. This is especially evident in his description of the film *The Exorcist*:

[T]his disturbing crack between our normal world and a chaos where demons are allowed to prey on innocent children is finally closed again at the end of the film. When Burstyn [Regan’s mother] leads the pallid but obviously okay Linda Blair [Regan] to the car in the film’s final scene, we understand that the nightmare is over. Steady state has been restored. We have watched for the mutant and repulsed it. Equilibrium never felt so good. (1981, pp. 443-4)

King reads the film as an expression of unease regarding changing social mores during the 1960s (1981, p. 197). In doing so, he suggests that horror offers a sense of reassurance to those unsettled by decentring social forces. Underlying this argument is a notion of horror as essentially (if implicitly) prescriptive, and a notion that this prescription is built in to the narrative structure of horror cinema: chaos is bad, equilibrium is good, moral ambiguity and unresolved disruptions are to be avoided. In Walser's account of heavy metal this notion is used to substantiate claims that the "decisive" conclusion and restoration of equilibrium at the end of Iron Maiden's song 'Seventh son of a seventh son' is crucial to the song's ability to establish a reassuring mastery over decentring social forces (1993, p. 157).

A similar focus on resolution and restoration is evident in Creed's (1993) work on horror. In contrast to King, Creed suggests that *The Exorcist* is concerned not so much with the social control of youth as with the control of the feminine more generally. Regan's 'monstrousness' is thought to function ideologically to prescribe norms for 'proper' female conduct and to sanction the regulation of 'unruly' female bodies. She describes the film in the following terms:

What is most interesting about Regan's journey is the way in which it is represented as a struggle between the subject and the abject. It is Regan's body which becomes the site of this struggle—a struggle which literally takes place within the interior of and across the body. Slime, bile, pus, vomit, urine, blood—all of these abject forms of excrement are part of Regan's weaponry. Regan is possessed not by the devil but by her own unsocialized body. (Creed 1993, p. 40)

According to Purcell, Creed's work emphasises the ways in which horror offers audiences the "thrill of seeing reason ditched in favor of bodily wastes", and she uses this as a basis for some of her arguments about death metal (see Purcell 2003, p. 178).

However, although Creed does acknowledge that the “abject forms of excrement” on display have their own forms of pleasure, her analysis tends to focus on narrative progression (suggested in part by word choices such as “journey” and “struggle” in the above passage). The graphic spectacles of slime, bile, pus, vomit, urine and blood are framed as primarily ideological, rather than sites of pleasure; within the logic of the film, such images represent a threat to the symbolic order that must be neutralised by the conclusion of the narrative. Creed’s analysis focuses on the way in which the film’s main priority ultimately lies less in its moments of visual intensity than in the eventual restoration of Regan’s “clean and proper body” (1993, p. 40).

In Clover’s (1992) theory of slasher horror, audience identification is considered to be a necessary precondition for the reassuring pleasures of narrative resolution. Purcell’s argument that death metal’s “pornographic” representations of violence function as expressions of “man’s repressed bestial nature” largely stem from her (mis)reading of Clover (see Purcell 2003, pp. 172, 175). It is Clover’s contention that slasher films allow young men to explore, and symbolically ameliorate, sexual anxieties by providing a female character (the Final Girl) as the primary site of identification. In doing so, she argues, sexual anxieties are often expressed via, or projected onto, representations of violence. At no stage, however, does Clover simplistically “equate” horror with pornography, nor argue that the violence in horror is straightforwardly “pornographic” in the way that Purcell suggests (see Purcell 2003, p. 179). What she argues is that the Final Girl functions as a double for the adolescent male, her femaleness providing an “identificatory buffer” that permits the male audience to explore taboo subjects in the “relative safety of vicariousness” (Clover 1992, p. 51). She draws on a Lacanian theory



of psychic development to suggest that the passage from the helplessness of childhood (culturally coded as ‘feminine’) to the autonomy of adulthood (cultural coded as ‘masculine’) is symbolised by the progress of the Final Girl in relation to the killer (Clover 1992, p. 50). The Final Girl’s eventual victory over the killer (conceived as a symbol of her masculinisation and, hence, of her successful entry into the symbolic order) is understood as a psychic victory for the male audience (that is, it is understood as a sign of their *own* masculinisation), while the restoration of order that this victory inevitably brings is seen as an ideological justification for the value and necessity of the symbolic order itself. Clover suggests that cross-gender identification can have progressive consequences (even if its intent is largely conservative), but unlike Purcell, she does not believe it to be an expression of anything “bestial” or “innate” (see Purcell 2003, pp. 175, 179).

While the approaches to horror discussed so far tend to emphasise the importance of narrative closure, some critics identify a radical impulse in films that deliberately delay or deny the reassurances of resolution. For example, Ryan and Kellner (1988) argue that in early horror films, the threat to ‘normality’ posed by the monster figure is typically purged by the end of the film. In many contemporary films, however, no reassuring vision of restored order is affirmed. This is, in part, because the monster is often less a figure of external threat to an essentially good social order than a dramatisation of the monstrousness of ‘normality’ (Ryan & Kellner 1988, p. 179). For example, in their reading of *Dawn of the Dead*, Ryan and Kellner view the zombies as metaphors for mindless consumerism (Ryan & Kellner 1988, p. 181). Similarly, in

Wood's reading of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the cannibal family is viewed as a monstrous by-product of the excesses of capitalism (2004, p. 131).

Crucial to each of these readings is not the films' ultimate restoration of order, but their potential for social critique. Although, on the whole, the scholarship to which Walser and Purcell refer tends to stress the importance of narrative closure, in these cases it is the refusal to offer the reassurances of narrative closure that is considered not only key to these films' popularity, but also to their political radicalism. As Wood argues:

[T]hey are progressive insofar as their negativity is not recuperable into the dominant ideology, but constitutes (on the contrary) the recognition of that ideology's disintegration, its untenability, as all it has repressed explodes and blows it apart. (2004, p. 134)

Indeed, these films can function effectively as social critique only so long as hegemonic forces are *not* reinstalled by their conclusion. However, despite this recognition that narrative resolution may not always be the goal of horror, both Ryan-Kellner and Wood are ultimately concerned with the narrative function of horrific imagery: that is, the focus of their analyses is fixed firmly on how this imagery operates allegorically rather than on how it operates experientially. The cannibal family or the undead are seen merely as metaphors for capitalist exploitation, not as something which generates emotional or visual intensity in its own right. In an argument directly echoed in Walser's claim that heavy metal offers fans a means of "making sense of the world" (1993, p. 162), Ryan and Kellner view horror as a "way of dealing with the irrationality of the American social system" and an "efficacious ideological mode which helps explain seemingly incomprehensible phenomena" (1988, p. 170). Meanwhile, Purcell attributes her claim that death metal expresses "innate desires for violence and sex"

(2003, p. 179) to Wood's argument that horror represents the "collective nightmares" of the audience (although Wood himself makes no claim that these nightmares are innate, nor that they only involve violence and sex) (Wood 2004, p. 117). Because they are principally interested in horror's social and ideological function—and in particular, how this enables them to differentiate the reactionary from the radical—these approaches tend to be unconcerned with developing approaches for theorising the other pleasures that the genre might offer.

In contrast to most of the other critics cited by Walser and Purcell, horror's educational and ideological functions tend to be less central to Carroll's (1990) account of the genre. At the same time, however, he shares with these other critics a similar emphasis on horror's narrative conventions, even if he does not consider this narrative to be anchored to any particular social lessons or political positions. Carroll sees horror cinema as driven not by anxiety or ideology, but by curiosity, and he conceives of the protracted series of discoveries that structure the conventional horror plot as crucial to promoting and rewarding this curiosity. As he explains:

That horror is often narrative suggests that with much horror, the interest we have and the pleasure we take may not primarily be in the object of art-horror as such—i.e., in the monster for its own sake. Rather, the narrative may be the crucial locus of our interest and pleasure. For what is attractive—what holds our interest and yields pleasure—in the horror genre need not be, first and foremost, the simple manifestation of the object of art-horror, but the way that manifestation or disclosure is situated as a functional element in an overall narrative structure. (Carroll 1990, p. 179)

Walser cites Carroll only briefly, but his work is used to bolster a broader set of assumptions that the meaningfulness of horrific imagery is determined primarily by the ways in which it is situated and contextualised within a text's broader narrative framework. According to Carroll, any feelings of horror or disgust that the audience

might experience throughout the duration of a horror film are simply “part of the price to be paid” for the effective operation of the film’s narrative function (in Carroll’s case, the satisfaction of curiosity), rather than a source of pleasure in their own right (1990, p. 184).

In this way, a number of influential theories of horror can be seen as closely tied to a theory of narrative. It is not clear, for example, how horror might instruct viewers about sexual or social norms, help audiences work through suppressed anxieties and desires, or satisfy their curiosity in the way critics are suggesting *without* a clear sense of narrative drive and direction. This brief discussion of horror scholarship is not intended as an exhaustive study, nor is it meant to suggest that these are the only ways in which horror has been or can be read, but it does highlight the ways in which a number of leading critics in the field, each of them instrumental to Walser’s and Purcell’s own theories of metal-as-horror, have developed a theory of narrative action with limited capacity to theorise other kinds of pleasure. This is an approach that may be of some value for heavy metal where lyrics often deal with real social concerns and where these are often resolved via musical structures oriented towards closure and resolution (such as ‘Seventh son of a seventh son’). However, to place death metal in the “vein of the horror movie”, as Purcell seeks to do, is far more problematic.

Purcell’s metal-as-horror reading is primarily concerned with death metal lyrics, although it is a reading partly subtended by a view that the extremity and aggressiveness of the music functions as an aural counterpart to these horrific lyrical themes (see 2003, p. 39). Many of the most shocking scenarios presented in death

metal lyrics are indeed inspired by, or indebted to, horror films (Williams 1995), and this is partly confirmed by Cannibal Corpse's description of the group as a "horror band". As bass player Alex Webster explained in a recent interview:

We're like a horror band. Where you have horror movies, we're a horror band... We never have tried to convince people that we were ourselves crazy or evil people, you know what I mean? We're just like, 'Hey we're just normal guys. We think our lyrics are disgusting too, and that's why we do them.' I'm sure guys who make horror movies are not telling people to be axe murderers. It's the same way we're definitely not telling people to do things that we sing about. We're normal people and we've never tried to put on a front that we're a bunch of crazy, wild guys, 'cause we're not. (qtd. in Robyn 2006)

However, death metal cannot be approached simply as an aural equivalent of horror cinema—at least in the way horror has been conceived in the accounts discussed so far. As I have already argued, the horrific imagery in death metal lyrics is often disengaged from the identifiable narrative context required for reading it as a symbolic 'playing out' of social anxieties and individual desires. Even Webster's analogy to horror is used not as a means of connecting their music to 'real life' issues and concerns (as many accounts of horror seek to), but as a means of distancing himself from the sentiments expressed in his band's songs. Indeed, Webster's desire to produce highly explicit lyrical texts whilst claiming for himself and his bandmates an essential normality implies a non-identificatory relationship to the subject matter that is largely at odds with the 'reflectionist' account of the genre as it is currently conceived.

Of course, not all accounts of horror (or death metal) rely on such a clearly defined narrative framework. Critics writing on newer forms of "splatter" or "graphic" horror, for example, have argued that some films dispense with "pretensions to narrative structure" in favour of an emphasis on grisly visual spectacle (Arnzen 1994, p. 179).

Graphic horror films are thought to

### CHAPTER 3

revel in their lack of order and plot... Fragmented narrative (and direction)...is intrinsic not only to an intellectual response to a splatter text but also to an emotional response—the fragmentation itself displaces the viewer in relation to the film. (Arnzen 1994, p. 178)

By “displacing the viewer” in this way, graphic horror can be seen to promote experiences of viewing largely unrelated to the particularities of plotting and narrative.

Analyses that focus on questions of plot, theme and characterisation tend to neglect the pleasures offered by such films’ excessive forms of cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, editing and sound. They largely fail to consider the ways in which horror can exceed the purely signficatory properties of both language and image, and in which this intensity can both transcend narrative function and disrupt stable viewing positions (Powell 2005, p. 11). As Powell argues:

Horror’s frequent undermining of normative perspective by fragmented images and blurred focus operates in tandem with the erosion of the subjective coherence and ego-boundaries of its characters. It also affects the spectator’s sense of cognitive control over the subject matter as our optic nerves and auditory membranes struggle to process confusing data. (2005, p. 5)

According to Powell, any approach attuned to horror’s experiential specificity requires a greater awareness of the more “primal level of experiential engagement” prompted by a focal shift away from a straightforwardly representational logic (2005, p. 150).

Although Bogue (2004a, 2004b) does not seek to explicitly connect death metal to a theory of horror, his Deleuzo-Guattarian reading of the music is animated by many of the same concerns as Powell’s work on horror cinema. He argues that death metal differs so radically from conventional rock, pop and heavy metal with regards to its musical structuration that a new vocabulary is needed to explore the ways in which audiences are addressed by and engage with this music. His reading of death metal as

musical becoming suggests that the genre's "ascetic concentration on and intensification of certain possibilities inherent in rock music" (such as timbre, frequency, tempo and rhythm) produces a music of "intensities, a continuum of sensation (percepts/affects) that converts the lived body into a dedifferentiated sonic body without organs" (Bogue 2004a, pp. 88, 106). The body without organs is understood here as a kind of zero-degree intensity that is the experiential analogue of what can never truly be experienced, a purely affective realm that the lived body can intuit only as death (Bogue 2004b, p. 111). Consequently, lyrical images of death and corporeal disintegration function not as a reflection of 'real' attitudes or desires but as a means of dramatising and psychically approximating this experience of the dedifferentiated body. As he explains:

Death metal's recurrent images of bodies without organs and organs without bodies are so many efforts to invoke an intensive, acentred, prepersonal, and preindividual affective continuum, an ecstatic, disorganized body of fluxes and flows. (Bogue 2004a, p. 105)

This notion of horrific imagery as offering access to pleasures and experiences that are resistant to coherent narrative recuperation is also suggested in Freeland's (2000) discussion of graphic horror, an account cited by Purcell (2003) in relation to death metal. Freeland argues that while horror films often utilise graphic scenes of violence as a means of advancing the narrative, there are also many cases of films (such as sequels) in which these scenes are often not well integrated into the plot or narrative. In cases where horror prioritises graphic spectacle over narrative coherence, images of violence and gore can evoke a "metalevel sort of aesthetic appreciation" that transcends any narrative function (Freeland 2000, p. 262). In contrast to Bogue (2004a, 2004b) and Powell (2005) whose work implies a primarily immersive experience,

Freeland suggests that this aesthetic appreciation is concerned less with the affectivities of horrific imagery *per se* than with the techniques involved in its presentation.

In particular, she suggests that one of the key pleasures of horror involves attention to the skill and creativity involved in the production of visual spectacle. Devotees of horror, she explains, “appreciate the niceties of costumes, makeup and special effects, and they consider how scenes have been made at the same time that they react to them” (Freeland 2000, p. 259). In films where the depictions of violence and gore are particularly excessive, or where such depictions are disengaged from their narrative function, audiences are invited to experience representations of graphic spectacle as removed from their own attitudes and values; the potential for emotional investment is reduced once visual spectacle becomes a goal in its own right. Viewing sequels as an example of a wider tendency in contemporary horror cinema, Freeland argues that:

Despite all the gore and violence...the evil that is depicted in sequels shifts from being threatening or mysterious and uncanny to something more cartoonlike. This actually makes evil in sequels less potent even as the violence is increased... Since the battle’s outcome becomes more foreordained, the audience’s involvement can shift to sheer appreciation of the graphic spectacle as visual display. (2000, p. 262)

Freeland’s analysis suggests that when attention to technical skill and creativity is foregrounded, fans may become predisposed to respond to graphic visual material without recourse to conventional ethical precepts. For instance, they may respond with amusement or with purely aesthetic interest. Once graphic spectacle is placed at the centre of what horror ‘means’ (rather than something which is secondary to a broader narrative function), conventional understandings of how audiences are positioned by and experience horror may need radical revision. If visual representations of horror



elicit their own forms of aesthetic interest disengaged from their narrative function, the pleasures of horror need not be linked to identification with any particular character or characters, or to any kind of emotional or ideological investment in the actions witnessed onscreen.

Applying Freeland's insights to death metal, then, further suggests a textual basis for practices of reflexive anti-reflexivity, particular the ways in which a connection between technical appreciation and emotional distance may enable death metal listeners to disengage the literal content of lyrical texts from their own attitudes and values. The frequency with which musicians and fans seek to distance themselves from death metal's lyrics suggests that the experience of this music needs to be conceived differently than it has been in most current accounts of the genre. Bogue's vocabulary of musical becoming offers one suggestive alternative for conceiving the pleasures of death metal. However, his emphasis on the immersive capacity of death metal is often at odds with the ways in which fans describe and discuss their musical pleasures. In many ways, his notion of musical becoming finds compatibility with electronic dance music culture's rhetoric of subjectival loss (which would, in turn, strengthen Tagg's (1994) claims for the experiential compatibilities of electronic dance music and extreme metal). However, while discourses of ecstasy and oblivion form crucial elements of the electronic dance music scene's ideologies of listening (and theories of Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming are often utilised in support of these discourses—see Chapter 1), most metalheads reject outright the possibility that their music might promote subjectival loss. There is some suggestion that death metal listening is motivated by a desire to be “swept away” by the music (Berger & Del Negro 2002, p. 76), but most

fans do not understand or describe this as an experience of desubjectification (Sylvan 2002, p. 165).

Metalheads tend not to let the sound simply wash over them, but rather listen actively and attentively (Berger 1999a, p. 173). Transgressive bodily pleasures such as moshing, stage diving, and drug and alcohol consumption form an important dimension of many fans' experience of the music (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 43), but like horror fans interested in the cinematic skill required to create visual spectacle, death metal listeners often reserve their greatest appreciation for the music's 'technical' features, with some even viewing live performance as an opportunity for a music lesson. As one fan remarked:

I've been to some real heavy concerts, like Slayer, where you're watching those guys and say to yourself, 'That's amazing!' So I don't always go to a concert just to listen. I also go there to sit and observe, see how it's played. (Scott qtd. in Arnett 1996, p. 64)

However, Bogue's notion of musical becoming need not necessarily presuppose subjectival loss. In the work of Deleuze and Guattari, becomings operate as a means of facilitating new forms of thought and experience, with desubjectification only one of many possible results (in fact, according to some readings, a desubjectified body may even be considered a "botched" body without organs) (Fitzgerald 1998, p. 52). This suggests some possibilities for thinking differently about death metal. After all, an emphasis on technical skill may inhibit desubjectification, but when graphic images of horror are disengaged from their narrative function, fans' experience of these images may not be one in which they can see their real values or desires reflected, but in which new kinds of thought and (aesthetic) experience can be produced and explored. If death metal operates as a musical becoming, then it can be seen to produce not an

immersion or a desubjectification, but a different way of listening to and experiencing ordinarily contentious material. The refusal to reflect on the ethico-political implications of death metal song texts enables other kinds of pleasure to be experienced and explored.

So far, my discussion has centred predominantly on lyrical meanings, but it is important to consider also the impact of *musical* meanings on fans' and musicians' experience of death metal music. Just as the lyrics often feature conceptual content that has been disengaged from an identifiable narrative context, the sonic conventions of death metal also disrupt many of the conventional patterns of musical narrative. These conventions prompt a reorientation of customary practices and expectations of listening. This works to both further denaturalise lyrical meanings and inhibit the potential for identification with the scenarios and attitudes depicted.

### **Death metal and the reorientation of listening**

As I have been suggesting, a number of influential accounts of music listening rely on an account of musical narrative. Cubitt (1984) views melody as possessing a 'diegetic' function that operates as a musical equivalent of a literary or cinematic narrative. Indeed, melody is considered key to a song's meaning, bringing with it the dual pleasures of disruption and resolution:

Melody must disrupt the perfection of the tonic just as any good story has to begin with a departure, a mystery or some similar intervention into the 'normal' state of affairs; and, like the narrative, in its departure from the norm, melody must contain a promise to return to the narrative closure of restored order.... [W]ithout the promise of narrative closure..., the subject hears 'just a lot of

noise'. The expected pleasures are not produced, only a bafflement. (Cubitt 1984, p. 209)

Just as he views an identificatory relationship to the singing voice as essential to listening pleasure, narrative closure (conceived here as harmonic resolution) is what characterises sonic texts as *musical* (rather than merely “noise”).

Heavy metal generally tends to stress melody less than other forms of popular music, but it still articulates clear melodies understandable within conventional harmonic and narrative structures (Bogue 2004a, p. 94). Death metal, on the other hand, distances itself more fully from the mainstream of popular music. Through experiments with timbre, tonality, speed and song structure, death metal rejects conventional melodic forms and identifiable narrative structures, and in doing so, disrupts many of popular music's familiar patterns and customary pleasures. One of the characteristic features of death metal is its distinctive timbre. The “heaviness” of all metal music is largely a quality of guitar timbre (Berger & Fales 2005, p. 182), but death metal creates the heaviest timbres of all the metal subgenres through the use of ‘scooped-mids’ guitar tones, as well as through playing techniques such as palm muting. Scooped-mids are created by boosting the guitar's extreme high and low overtones and sharply reducing the mid-range overtones, either by using the instrument's onboard amplifier tone controls or an external equaliser (Berger 1999a, p. 176, n. 2). Palm muting is achieved when the guitarist slightly muffles each note with the palm of his/her picking hand (Pillsbury 1996, p. 11). Combined, these conventions intensify both the lower frequencies and the upper harmonics of the sound envelope and produce a distinctly percussive distortion timbre. To further increase the force of the bass frequencies and produce a ‘thicker’, heavier sound, guitarists also tune their instruments well below

standard tunings. Some bands, like Cannibal Corpse, tune down one half-step (strings are tuned low to high: Eb Ab Db Gb Bb Eb),<sup>3</sup> while others, like Carcass, tune down two-and-a-half steps (low to high: B E A D F# B). To counteract the inevitable string slackness, guitarists opt for heavy gauge, flat wound strings (typically .011—.050 gauge).

Death metal songs rarely employ a clear harmonic progression towards stabilisation and resolution. Instead, compositions fracture the conventional harmonic vocabulary through the insertion of unexpected half steps and tritones which disturb the listener's sense of tonality and obscure the tonal centre (Berger 1999b, p. 62). The music's harmonic language is deliberately impoverished, with musicians working almost exclusively within the Phrygian and Locrian modes. Besides sharing many of the musical connotations of traditional minor scales and the blues pentatonic scale, the Phrygian includes the half-tone interval between the tonic and second degree of the scale (E-F), an unstable interval with "exotic, claustrophobic" associations within the Western tradition, and one virtually unused within popular music (Bogue 2004a, p. 94).<sup>4</sup> The Locrian is the only mode to stress the interval of the augmented fourth (E-A#), or tritone, known as the *diabolus in musica*, an interval which provides maximum tension and dissonance within the language of classical harmony (Bogue 2004a, p. 94).

Death metal offers few moments of respite from this dissonance, since the guitar solos so central to heavy metal's sonic vocabulary of transcendence and release, are virtually

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<sup>3</sup> Cannibal Corpse also occasionally tunes to drop-Db (low to high: Db Ab Db Gb Bb Eb).

<sup>4</sup> A notable exception is electronic dance music, which commonly uses the Phrygian mode (Tagg 1994, p. 215).

absent in death metal. As Walser argues, heavy metal often sets up a dialectic between the potentially oppressive power of bass, drums and rhythm guitar, and the liberating, empowering vehicle of the guitar's solo flights (1993, p. 149). However, while some death metal songs also feature guitar solos, they are seldom more than thirty seconds long and possess little of the soaring, virtuosic character that they do in heavy metal.

As Bogue explains:

With no conventional harmonic progression against which to develop their solos, death guitarists combine extremely rapid polytonal and atonal riffs with feedback shrieks and whining glissandi produced through intricate tapping techniques, harmonics, string bends, slides, pick slides, tremolo bar bends and other effects. Unlike the blues-based, expressive solos of mainstream metal, in which performers make their guitars 'talk' or 'sing', death metal solos function as frenetic emissions from the sonic blocks, brief spates of upper-register, organized noise that blur tonality and provide little in the way of a discernible melodic contour. (2004a, p. 95)

For example, Cannibal Corpse's solos tend to be very fast and chaotic, characterised by a high degree of chromaticism and featuring multiple pick squeals and whammy bar dives. Solos appear in less than half of the band's songs: only four out of the eleven tracks on *Eaten Back to Life* (1990) feature guitar solos. On these four tracks, the solos are conspicuously succinct—even for death metal. 'Shredded humans', for instance, features two solos of twelve seconds each, while 'The undead will feast' features two solos of only six seconds each. On Carcass's first album *Reek of Putrefaction* (1988), solos comprise little more than short blasts of noise structured by no clear organisational principle. By *Symphonies of Sickness* (1989), however, Steer's solos are increasingly structured. In the songs 'Reek of putrefaction' and 'Exhume to consume', fast-played notes blur tonality, and an overriding fractured aesthetic governs much of the execution of the solos, but at times Steer also adopts some of the more 'expressive' harmonic structures and melodic figures typical of traditional heavy metal. However,

unlike traditional heavy metal where solos tend to appear towards the end of songs as a climactic moment, the placement of Carcass's solos tends to be unpredictable. Carcass's solos may appear towards the end of songs (e.g. 'Vomited anal tract', 'Slash dementia'), or they may appear as an introduction to a track (e.g. 'Burnt to a crisp'). That death metal solos are often chaotic and unpredictable lends the music a disruptive, almost arbitrary character.

A similar sense of 'randomness' can also be found in death metal's structural organisation. In contrast to the standard verse-chorus-bridge sequence of popular song (including most heavy metal), death metal compositions are structured as a series of short motivic blocks of four, eight or sixteen measures, with each unit added on to the next (Bogue 2004a, p. 94). For example, Carcass's song 'Ruptured in purulence' (1989) is composed of 14 riff sections (plus a short guitar solo). If the song's guitar parts can be notated such that each riff is signified by a different letter of the alphabet, its structure can be expressed as:

A A A A B B C A A A A B B C D D D D E E E E F F G H I  
 I I I E E E E F F J J I I I I K K K K (SOLO) L L M M M M  
 M M L L M M M M M N N N N.

Some songs feature more structured repetitions, with a smaller number of key riffs. For example, 'Slash dementia' (1989) is composed of eight different riff sections. Its structure can be expressed as follows (numbers signify a minor variation of the original riff):

A A A A B B B B A A A A B B B B C1 C1 C2 D D D D E1 E1  
 E1 E1 E2 E2 F F E2 E2 F F G (SOLO) B B B B.

This more focused, structured approach is also characteristic of Cannibal Corpse's songwriting. 'A skull full of maggots' (1990), for example, is composed of nine main riff sections, with several minor variations:

A A A A A A A B B A A A A C1 C1 C2 C2 C2 C2 C3 C3 C2  
C2 A A D E F1 F1 F1 F1 F2 G A A H I I I I.

Similarly, 'Put them to death' (1990) features seven main riffs, and its structure can be expressed in the following terms:

A A A A B B A A C C D1 D1 C D1 D2 D1 D2 E E F F E E  
G1 G1 G2 G2 G3 G3 D1 D1 D1 D1 D1 D1 D1 H E E.<sup>5</sup>

Each of these songs lacks the conventional structure of popular song. The fact that few riffs are repeated, and even then, repeated only at irregular intervals, lends an evolutionary randomness to the songwriting that makes the songs difficult to understand in terms of the conventional patterns of musical narrative. With no clear organisational principle through which to understand the placement and repetition of riff sections, listeners are offered little sense of narrative progression and limited possibility of a clear conclusion or resolution.

Because death metal songs tend to eschew a central melody line or other cohesive melodic statements, tonality tends to be perceived as "hyperstable" in each of these riff sections (Bogue 2004a, p. 106). If a shift in tonality does occur, it usually occurs at the point of transition from one section to another. As a consequence, listeners tend to hear the shift between sections not as a natural progression from one tonal area to another, but as an abrupt break between tonal blocks (Bogue 2004b, p. 102). Because the music of Carcass and Cannibal Corpse lacks an identifiable verse-chorus

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<sup>5</sup> These representations of death metal song structures are approximate only, and based on guitar tablature accessed from <<http://metaltabs.com>>, September 2005.



framework to provide structure to these shifts, listeners have little opportunity to anticipate, or make sense of, the songs' moments of sectional transition. Rather than 'natural' progression, then, these sectional breaks are often heard as sudden and unpredictable.

In addition to jarring sectional breaks, frequent tempo changes also disrupt much of the 'flow' of death metal songwriting. At its fastest, death metal is performed at speeds most listeners find difficult to process (Bogue 2004a, p. 99). Extreme metal is commonly performed in the range of 150 to 250 BPM (beats per minute), although individual drum beats can exceed 400 BPM and individual guitar riffs 600 BPM (Kahn-Harris 2007, pp. 32-3). Death metal's rapid tempos tend to be dominated by blast beats, a drumming technique unique to extreme metal which is achieved through the rapid, cut-time alternation of snare and bass drum. Carcass drummer Ken Owen plays in a more conventional 'Euroblast' style, which involves playing simultaneous 8th notes on the ride cymbal and kick drum, plus alternate 8th notes on the snare (which essentially amounts to Owen playing 8th notes with his feet and 16th notes with the combination of both his hands). In contrast, Cannibal Corpse drummer Paul Mazurkiewicz has pioneered a distinctive style of blast beat known as 'Cannibal blasts', which involve playing a 16th note double-kick roll while hitting only 8th notes on the snare. These accelerated rhythms are also characterised by sudden and frequent tempo changes. 'A skull full of maggots', for instance, features six major tempo changes over a period of two minutes. In order, they are:

270 BPM → 200 BPM → 270 BPM → 230 BPM → 130 BPM → 270 BPM.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> BPM is approximate and based on estimates published on <<http://metaltabs.com>>, September 2005.

Rather than providing coherent musical and lyrical narratives through which listeners can see some dimension of their own lives reflected and affirmed, death metal's unconventional approaches to tempo, song structure, timbre and tonality fundamentally reorient listeners' habitual practices and expectations of listening. According to Bogue, death metal's hyperaccelerated rhythms and sudden tempo changes grant listeners access to the floating, unpulsed time of Aeon and the realm of qualitative speeds, where time and meter are temporarily suspended and actions and emotions are desubjectified and rendered inoperative (2004b, pp. 103-4). Rather than working to create continuities—songs with a clear beginning, middle and end—death metal disrupts many of the conventional patterns of musical narrative by progressing in “jolts, fits and starts, angular contrasts rather than smooth transitions” (Bogue 2004a, p. 93). Bogue suggests that the results are ‘plotless’ song structures devoid of closure or resolution:

[I]n death songs a curious stasis pervades the ubiquitous high-speed motifs. Each section is like a plateau of intense constant energy..., full of motion but going nowhere in particular, section following section in a series of discontinuous shifts from one plateau to another, those shifts themselves possessing no identifiable developmental drive or direction. (2004b, p. 103)

Without a coherent narrative framework through which to interpret, and symbolically resolve, personal and social anxieties, death metal offers few pleasures of recognition or identification. In fact, if melody/narrative is one way that listeners are interpellated as listening subjects by their music, then death metal's ‘plotless’ song structures and structural subordination of melody would seem to position listeners in quite a different way than more conventional song forms. As a ‘first step’ toward expanding the critical vocabulary of death metal scholarship, my readings of Carcass and Cannibal Corpse in Chapter 5 suggest some ways in which death metal's disruptive properties might be

read as sites of pleasure. If death metal involves a departure from customary norms of popular composition and from conventional practices and expectations of listening, any approach which does not consider the implications of this reorientation may miss something crucial about the kinds of listening pleasures offered by this music.

This is important because despite the opportunity this provides to develop alternative understandings of the pleasures of death metal, some critics still attempt to recuperate the genre into more conventional models of music listening. Chidester (2004), for example, argues that because death metal's hyperstable tonality invites listeners to perceive a linearity in death metal song-texts, this predisposes them to hear songs in narrative terms. As he writes:

[D]eath metal songs clearly invite listeners to perceive narrative patterns beneath even the most chaotic of expressive moments, and to expect these patterns to build toward moments of distinct, undeniable conclusion. (Chidester 2004, p. 341)

This emphasis on moments of "distinct, undeniable conclusion" seems at odds with death metal's tendency toward unresolved dissonance. In a novel solution to this apparent inconsistency, Chidester argues that even in cases where songs *appear* to end abruptly and ambiguously, the harmonic tension is resolved through the presentation of additional death metal songs. For example, in his analysis of Slayer's album *Divine Intervention* (1994), he notes that the song 'Sex, murder, art' concludes ambiguously, on a tone a full step above the root. However, when the next track, 'Fictional reality', commences on the root this immediately resolves the harmonic tension of the previous song (Chidester 2004, pp. 316-7). In cases where an entire album ends ambiguously, such as Slayer's *Diabolus in Musica* (1998), Chidester argues that the tension of the final

song is resolved by playing this, or another, death metal album again from the start. As he explains:

[W]hen an entire *album* concludes without a clear sense of resolution..., the effect is jarring in the extreme, and the consequence is a remarkably potent call to seek a more acceptable statement in either a repeat consumption of other, more definitive songs on the album or, in fact, in an interaction with yet another album in the death metal genre. (Chidester 2004, p. 328, original emphasis)

Given that even the most dedicated death metal fan will eventually have to take a break from listening, this ongoing process of closure and resolution at best merely postpones an inevitable experience of harmonic tension and instability. Remarkably, Chidester never considers the likelihood that unresolved dissonance may be an integral part of death metal composition, rather than something that needs to be reconciled or reduced. This is because, for Chidester, death metal appreciation is about learning to assimilate the sonic and structural incongruities of death metal into familiar and conventional patterns of listening; it is not, for the most part, about learning to listen *differently*.

Berger's (1999a) discussion of death metal highlights how the genre's sonic and structural conventions fundamentally alter conventional practices of listening, and how its disruption of tonal expectations is, in fact, central to fans' and musicians' enjoyment of this music. He demonstrates how death metal's subcultural milieu fosters distinctive sets of listening practices that not only encourage fans to hear harmonic tension as pleasurable, but also predisposes them to hear dissonance even in musical structures that, outside the death metal scene, would ordinarily be perceived as stable. Berger recounts how, from the perspective of traditional music theory, the "pitch collection" of the guitar solo from the death metal song 'The final silencing' would normally be

understood as a straightforward example of E minor (1999a, p. 167). However, he was surprised to learn that the line is heard as wildly chromatic and unpredictable within the death metal scene. He surmises that since death metal appreciation involves positively revaluing chromaticism and unpredictability, musicians and fans would feel little need to find stability or consonance in the genre's musical structures. As he explains:

[U]nexpected non-diatonic intervals, wide melodic leaps, fractured variations of stock chord progressions, and brief forays into atonality are common in death metal. It is no surprise that a listener constantly exposed to such melodic techniques would interpret the wide leaps and unresolved trill of this part [in 'The Final Silencing'] as a sudden shift to a new key area, rather than enfolding the D and D# within the larger key area of E minor. (Berger 1999a, p. 171)

Berger's work challenges customary expectations of how death metal's sonic conventions are perceived, but he does not seek to revise dominant conceptions of music's social function. Like Chidester, Berger views death metal as an expression of, and response to, fans' material realities, and hence as a means of symbolically ameliorating social and individual anxieties. He argues that death metal fans learn to hear dissonance as pleasurable because it affirms their experiences of socio-economic disenfranchisement and dislocation. This is thought not only to lead songwriters to compose chromatic and unpredictable parts, but also to predispose fans and musicians to hear lines in a highly fragmented fashion (Berger 1999a, p. 171). Because Berger ultimately seeks to reconstruct death metal's sonic and structural conventions as a narrative of socio-economic disruption and displacement, he reinscribes the kinds of 'literal' interpretations of lyrical and sonic conventions that I have been suggesting offer only a limited understanding of the genre.

### CHAPTER 3

If death metal appreciation requires a reorientation of listening such that the genre is no longer best seen as a straightforward reflection of fans' values or experiences, then new critical approaches to the pleasures of death metal music are needed. Two alternative ways of reading death metal music will be considered in more detail in Chapter 5.

# CHAPTER 4

## Moral panic and the mundane production of transgression

**B**efore exploring these alternative readings of death metal, it is important to consider one of the other key ways in which critics have sought to positively evaluate heavy and extreme metal. While some critics have attempted to counter cultural studies' negative characterisation of metal through recourse to 'reflectionist' discourse, others have argued that the genre's vulnerability to 'moral panic' reveals its latent counter-hegemonic potential. Considering heavy metal in terms of moral panic has been one of the most popular and influential scholarly approaches to the genre. This is worth discussing in some detail partly because of its importance to heavy metal scholarship and partly because the attempt to read *death* metal—a genre which trades in highly contentious material but which has suffered few public attacks—in terms of moral panic further highlights the extent to which current critical tools are often limited by their prioritisation of political criteria. In the discussion that follows, I will argue that any approach that views death metal as controversial or transgressive, or which seeks to recuperate it as social critique, inevitably neglects other ways in which the pleasures of the genre might be understood. While metal may be constructed as shocking and 'dangerous' within both conservative and fan discourse, the ways in which the music might offer more mundane or uncontroversial listening pleasures

suggest a need not only for thinking differently about the pleasures of death metal, but some additional ways in which this re-thinking might occur.

### **Metal and moral panic**

Most of the major accounts of heavy metal focus on the genre's vulnerability to moral panic and conservative attack as evidence of its counter-hegemonic potential. For example, critics focus on the ways in which in the United States during the 1980s sustained campaigns against heavy metal argued that the music promoted a range of problematic behaviours including violence, suicide, drug use and Satanism. One of the most significant events in this campaign occurred at the 1985 US Senate Hearing instigated by the conservative parents' group, the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC). It was the PMRC's claim that heavy metal's central themes—which, according to one of the group's academic allies, consist of “extreme rebellion, extreme violence, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity/perversion (including homosexuality, bisexuality, sadomasochism, necrophilia, etc.), [and] Satanism” (Stuessy qtd. in Walser 1993, p. 139)—functioned as literal exhortations to action and exerted a profoundly negative and dangerous influence on the genre's young fans. The Hearings generated significant media interest and, fearful of a possible backlash from concerned parents, the recording industry elected to adopt a voluntary labelling system to warn listeners of ‘explicit’ lyrics on commercially available recordings. As part of their book-length studies of heavy metal, Walser (1993) and Weinstein (2000) have convincingly rejected the claims of the PMRC, arguing that the allegations were unsupported by the available



evidence, and that mainstream heavy metal in the 1980s was nowhere near as ‘extreme’ as its critics suggested. For example, in response to claims that heavy metal promotes Satanism and suicide, Weinstein argues that heavy metal’s transgressive lyrics function merely as a form of harmless rebellion rather than anything truly sinister. As she explains:

Heavy metal’s embrace of devilry is not a religious statement. It is a criticism of the phoney heaven of respectable society where no one boogies and everyone goes to ice cream socials. It is not a countertheology. Metal lyrics do not attack God and certainly do not malign Jesus... [M]etal deploys Satan and suicide as symbols of freedom from and resistance against organised constraints. (Weinstein 2000, p. 260)<sup>1</sup>

Although the PMRC insisted that censorship was not its intention, the impact of labelling has been described as essentially akin to censorship by some of metal’s defenders. For instance, due to the significant lobbying power of the PMRC, a number of retail chains chose not to stock labelled recordings. One of these chains, Wal-Mart, is America’s largest music retailer. In many smaller towns, Wal-Mart is the only music retailer, which means that many consumers—particularly those without internet access—have limited opportunity to buy music with parental warning stickers (Fox 2005, p. 512). Restriction of distribution outlets has made record companies increasingly wary in their artistic choices and this has resulted in the production of fewer records required to carry the “Parental Advisory” tag (Chastagner 1999, p. 188). “All things considered,” Chastagner concludes, “labelling can hardly be considered as

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<sup>1</sup> Here Weinstein is referring only to mainstream heavy metal, and not to extreme metal, where explicit attacks on God and Jesus, as well as more ‘authentic’ Satanic perspectives can be found. The Floridian death metal group Deicide is among the best known of the ‘anti-Christian’ metal bands. In 2003, the then Attorney-General Daryl Williams directed the Australian Record Industry Association and the Australian Music Retailers’ Association to ban the sale of Deicide’s album *One Upon the Cross* (1995) to minors as a result of concerns that songs such as ‘Kill the Christian’ and ‘When Satan rules His world’ may incite “violence, hatred and the killing of Christians” (*Daily Telegraph* 2003, p. 9).

anything but censorship, although an elegant form of it disguised as consumer information” (1999, p. 189).

That the recording industry complied with the PMRC’s requests—or, indeed, that their claims warranted a Senate Hearing at all—is indicative of the political power neoconservative groups enjoyed during the 1980s. Indeed, the PMRC’s success in presenting their claims as acceptable and commonsensical reveals the extent to which neoconservatism and religious fundamentalism had become ‘mainstreamed’ in American cultural and political life. The Senate Hearing lent respectability to the fundamentalist position against heavy metal (Weinstein 2000, p. 249), and in doing so, helped to further normalise and legitimate political agendas aimed at eliminating cultural difference, especially anything perceived as opposing the uncompromising doctrine of “family values” (Wright 2000, p. 370). It also provided a platform from which neoconservative groups could mount legal challenges that, Wright observes, “only a few years earlier would have seemed laughable” (2000, p. 370). For example, in 1985, Ozzy Osbourne and his label, CBS Records, faced court on charges that the song ‘Suicide solution’, from the 1981 *Blizzard of Oz* album, had caused 19-year-old John McCullom to attempt suicide, despite Osbourne’s repeated claim that ‘Suicide solution’ was written about the alcohol-related death of AC/DC’s Bon Scott and was in fact anti-suicide and anti-alcohol in sentiment (Weinstein 2000, p. 251). The case was dismissed on the grounds that song lyrics are protected speech under the First Amendment. However, a similar action was brought against Judas Priest and Columbia Records five years later, in which the song ‘Better by you, better than me’ from the 1978 album *Stained Class* was alleged to have caused the suicide of 18-year-old

Raymond Belnap and the attempted suicide of his friend, 20-year-old James Vance. On this occasion, it was claimed that subliminal messages, achieved by “backward masking”, were to blame for the incident (Walser 1993, p. 145). Again, the charges were eventually dropped, but both cases further assisted in normalising claims of the pernicious influence of heavy metal (Wright 2000, p. 371).<sup>2</sup>

One study found the anti-metal campaign to be so influential that some law enforcement officials and mental health practitioners elected to implement an ‘interventionist’ approach to heavy metal fandom. In California, for example, police and probation departments imposed “demetaling” programs on young offenders who also happened to be heavy metal fans (Rosenbaum & Prinsky 1991, pp. 529, 531). In addition, the overwhelming majority (83%) of staff from the adolescent psychiatric facilities interviewed believed heavy metal to be such a harmful influence on its fans that, even in the absence of behavioural or psychiatric evidence, a strong preference for the music was considered sufficient justification for the involuntary hospitalisation of adolescents (Rosenbaum & Prinsky 1991, p. 533).

According to metal’s defenders, this seemingly heavy-handed approach to heavy metal fandom highlights the extent to which the genre was viewed as posing a threat to neoconservative hegemony. For Walser, controversy is what situates the music and its subculture within a “forthrightly politicized context of cultural struggle over values, power, and legitimacy” (1993, p. xiii). Heavy metal is constructed as a danger from

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<sup>2</sup> See Richardson (1991, pp. 210-13), Walser (1993, pp. 145-51), and Weinstein (2000, pp. 250-7) for a more detailed discussion of these cases.

which adolescent fans and the wider community need to be protected because it celebrates and legitimates sources of identity and community that do not derive from parental authority or the fundamentalist doctrine of so-called ‘family values’ (Walser 1993, p. 138). For Weinstein, conservative disapprobation is what reveals the music’s potential to subvert the homogenising forces of the dominant culture (2000, p. 275).

As she explains:

It is no accident that the groups leading the attack on heavy metal are parent interest groups... They identify in the music and its subculture a challenge to parental authority, even if they systematically mischaracterize and distort the nature of that challenge. (Weinstein 2000, p. 270)

In the US, conservative attacks on heavy metal were indeed politically motivated and had real, material consequences for some fans and musicians. Outside the US, however, metal has been criticised by religious and other neoconservative groups, but has rarely been subject to the same kind of sustained attack. In other Western contexts, including the UK and Australia, anti-metal rhetoric tends to receive far less attention and publicity (Harris 2001, p. 130). Consequently, any approach which relies on evidence of moral panic to positively revalue the genre as social critique is one largely unavailable to contexts in which metal is not subject to conservative condemnation or in which it is not otherwise framed as a social problem.

Death metal bands produce some shocking and ‘extreme’ material that would probably be subject to moral panic—and, indeed, to outright censorship—if exposed to wider public scrutiny, but the scene’s ‘underground’ status has largely insulated it from conservative attack (Kahn-Harris 2003, p. 88). Even in the US, where the anti-metal fervour has been most intense, attacks on death metal have only ever been sporadic

and unsystematic. In 1994, death metal was implicated in a convenience store robbery in which one employee was fatally beaten and another seriously wounded. Following the convictions of all four perpetrators (one received the death penalty), a civil suit initiated by the surviving store clerk and the family of the deceased alleged that the criminals' behaviour was inspired by the music of Cannibal Corpse and Deicide. The bands' record labels, Metal Blade and Roadrunner Records, agreed to settle out of court, whilst "expressly not admitting guilt" (qtd. in Moynihan and Søderlind 1998, p. 291). Several years later, presidential candidate Bob Dole briefly criticised Cannibal Corpse as part of a broader attack on the media (Kahn-Harris 2003, p. 87), while Connecticut senator Joseph Lieberman described the band's lyrics as "vile" and "extremely awful, disgusting stuff" (qtd. in Christe 2004, p. 302). Each of these cases was covered by the mass media, but neither of them resulted in the kind of sustained attacks comparable to the moral panic surrounding heavy metal in the previous decade (Kahn-Harris 2003, p. 88).

Nevertheless, a number of critics have continued to attempt to contextualise death metal in relation to moral panic discourse. Pettman, for example, describes the Australian response to death metal as a "moral panic" (1995, p. 216). The only evidence he is able to provide for this, however, is some negative commentary from television presenters Peter Couchman and Derryn Hinch, and the "banning" of three death metal albums (although, he admits several paragraphs later, only the album liner notes were restricted from sale; the albums in question continue to be widely available in Australian shops, albeit without printed lyrics) (Pettman 1995, p. 217).

Of all the accounts of death metal, though, Purcell's (2003) is perhaps most reliant on a notion of the genre as perpetually under siege. Her book is framed explicitly as a "challenge [to] censorship advocates" and seeks to oppose the "nearly universal condemnation" of death metal fans (Purcell 2003, pp. 1, 81). Following long sections on the history of congressional interest in television violence and debates over high school shootings, the only concrete example she provides of this censorial agenda and "universal condemnation" of death metal is an unfavourable news feature in a New Mexico newspaper (see Purcell 2003, p. 81). Consequently, the substance of her argument is primarily and necessarily pre-emptive:

Although Death Metal only emerged onto the debate floor a few decades ago, the topic *will probably* be tackled with the same evocative irrationality and hot air that has accompanied all attempts at broadcast content regulation in the twentieth century. Politicians are *likely* to vociferously label Death Metal music as a cultural pollutant, but whether any legislation will come of their emotional tirades in [*sic*] another matter. (Purcell 2003, p. 93, emphasis added)

Purcell's argument is, ultimately, that although death metal is not currently framed as a social problem, it *might* be so in the future, and that this *might* lead to calls for legislation or censorship to restrict access to the music.

Of course, with more thorough and detailed research, she may well have identified a number of other relevant incidents or controversies involving death metal music that would have made her claims appear more plausible. Still, given their essentially isolated and low profile nature, it would be difficult to argue that such incidents constitute a sustained assault on the genre (Harris 2001, p. 131). More importantly, however, any approach to death metal which relies on conservative condemnation as 'proof' of the genre's subversive potential misrecognises the real functions and effects of controversy within the death metal scene. This is highlighted particularly clearly by one of the few

incidents involving death metal that has received some (albeit brief) scholarly attention: the controversy surrounding Carcass and Earache Records in 1991.

### **Carcass and the limits of transgression**

In March 1991, the UK office of Earache Records was raided by police with a warrant to look for “obscene articles and associated documentation kept for gain” (qtd. in Cloonan 1995, p. 353). Although a large amount of stock was seized, all was soon returned except for three albums which were sent to the DPP for possible prosecution: Carcass’s *Reek of Putrefaction* (1988) and *Symphonies of Sickness* (1989), and *Hallucinating Anxiety* (1990) by the Norwegian band Cadaver. In each of the cases, the albums’ purported ‘obscenity’ related principally to the cover artwork. The artwork for *Reek of Putrefaction* featured a collage of decomposing corpses and diseased and dismembered body parts, all cut-and-pasted from pathology textbooks. *Symphonies of Sickness* added images of meat and cutlery to a similar montage of decaying human remains. *Hallucinating Anxiety* featured an animal’s eye, maggots and part of an animal’s brain laid out on a sheet. In the end, no charges were laid, but the incident generated considerable interest in the British press, especially surrounding Carcass, who bore the brunt of most of the negative media commentary by virtue of their status as a ‘local’ band.

Front-page newspaper articles warned of the potential for Carcass’s music to “corrupt and deprave” as well as “pervert...the minds of impressionable young people”. Both

*Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* were described as “disgusting” and even “evil”.<sup>3</sup> While the police had been concerned only with the albums’ cover art, the British press attacked the entirety of Carcass’s artistic output—especially the group’s lyrics. Songs featuring themes of cannibalism, such as *Symphonies of Sickness*’s ‘Exhume to consume’, were subject to the greatest negative media coverage.<sup>4</sup>

A number of the band’s supporters responded to this controversy by arguing that such songs do not reflect the band’s degeneracy or immorality, but are a statement of the members’ commitment to animal rights. Each of Carcass’s three original members are well known for their vegetarianism, and it has been suggested that the similitude of the animal meat and human meat on the album cover flesh collages, as well as songs preoccupied with the consumption of human flesh, form part of a protest against animal cruelty (*Metal Maniacs* 1991; *Rock Hard* 1993). If animal flesh and human flesh are understood as morally equivalent, then artwork and song lyrics centred around themes of cannibalism can be understood as highlighting the repulsiveness of a non-vegetarian diet. Indeed, the liner notes of the band’s third album *Necroticism: Descanting the Insalubrious* (1991) include an epigraph that makes explicit the analogy between human cannibalism and the consumption of animal flesh. The excerpt, a quotation taken from the work of Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Stekel, reads:

When I have read of cannibals, I have put to myself the question whether I could eat human flesh. I have always felt then a severe nausea. Now I often imagine that I am eating human flesh and feel the same disgust. I should like

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<sup>3</sup> This information was obtained from a compendium of undated newspaper clippings included as part of the promotional package for the re-issue of *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* by Earache Records in 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Both *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* include several tracks devoted to themes of cannibalism. *Reek of Putrefaction* (1988) features ‘Festerday’, ‘Fermenting innards’, ‘Feast on dismembered carnage’ and ‘Psychopathologist’; *Symphonies of Sickness* (1989) features ‘Exhume to consume’, ‘Embryonic necropsy and devourment’ and ‘Slash dementia’.



best to be a vegetarian. I always have to think of the animal corpses. (qtd. in Carcass 1991)

This animal rights subtext has been one of the main means by which the conservative condemnation of Carcass can be and has been challenged, and by which Carcass's artistic project can be and has been recuperated as social critique.

Indeed, both Carcass and Earache Records viewed the police intervention and negative media coverage as a concerted attempt to enforce a narrowly-defined set of conservative values onto the production of their music and artwork (Cloonan 1995, p. 354). Due to concerns about the potential legal ramifications, both the band and label adopted a more cautious approach to future cover art and elected to voluntarily censor the original *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* album covers.<sup>5</sup> As was the case for mainstream heavy metal, 'controversy' has inevitably political consequences. At the same time, however, there was a sense in which the attacks on Carcass were less a reactionary attempt to suppress dissident forms of artistic expression than something which was welcomed, even desired, by the band, its record label and its fans. Earache Records tacitly acknowledged in a press release for the 2003 re-issue of *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* that the 1991 police raid helped to boost album sales and to ensure the "legendary status" of both albums. In interviews, band members explicitly reject attempts to politicise their music, suggesting instead that censorship was pursued as a goal in itself. Of *Reek of Putrefaction*, Jeff Walker recalls:

Our initial intent was to record a 'cult' album that would sell a thousand copies (which we thought was a lot) with the most gross sleeve ever, which hopefully would get 'banned', but only for notoriety, not for sales. (qtd. in *Earache.com* 2003)

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<sup>5</sup> Only censored versions of the *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* covers were sold between 1991 and 2003. In 2003, Earache re-issued the discs with their original artwork (albeit concealed by a black plastic wrapping that could be removed after purchase).

In such cases, controversy may be courted not as a form of protest against neoconservative hegemony, but as Thornton (1995) has argued, as a means of fulfilling particular subcultural agendas. According to Thornton, controversy is often one of the desired outcomes of youth cultural pursuits; negative attention may be disparaged, but it is also subject to anticipation, even aspiration (1995, p. 135). Christe, for example, suggests that death metal bands welcome conservative attacks on their music. Referring specifically to Senator Lieberman's criticism of Cannibal Corpse, he argues:

Cannibal Corpse could not have asked for a more precious authentication of its shock value. The more the inhuman image of such bands was taken at face value by politicians, the more curious new fans sought out the band's sensationalized CDs. (Christe 2004, p. 303)

In such cases, contentious musical or lyrical matter functions more as a form of cachet that secures a subculture's rebellious or 'outsider' status than as a measure of any real potential for political radicalism. This is, in part, why moral panic has now become such a lucrative and routine method of marketing popular music to youth—including material by 'mainstream' bands and record labels (Thornton 1995, p. 120). If the controversy surrounding Carcass and other death metal bands is not necessarily indicative of the music's incendiary potential, it may be because the death metal scene is a space in which transgressive themes can be explored textually without being viewed as precursors to any 'real' acts of transgression.

**Proud pariahs and the logic of mundanity**

Critics' tendency to emphasise the music's role in constructing transgressive 'outsider' identities for its fans overlooks the potential mundanity of death metal listening. Instead of an orientation towards transgression and controversy, death metal fans' everyday practice and experience of the scene is, on the whole, structured by what Kahn-Harris refers to as a "logic of mundanity" (2007, p. 59). This "logic" describes the ways in which scene members seek to make their experience of the death metal scene ordinary, routinised and suited to the demands of everyday life (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 60). Seen from this perspective, death metal listening represents not an endorsement of or commitment to any real acts of transgression, but an opportunity to experience and explore ordinarily transgressive imagery in mundane and banal terms.

Critics have conventionally politicised heavy and extreme metal as sites of social conflict and contestation. For example, some have emphasised the ways in which the music serves as a point of contention between parents and their teenage children, suggesting that metal fans seek out conflict as a means of challenging their parents' conservative values (Arnett 1996; Gaines 1998; Jagodzinski 2005). However, death metal attracts a large non-adolescent fanbase for whom domestic conflict is not a significant motivation for listening. For example, Kahn-Harris highlights the frequency with which scene members express gratitude to their parents for their ongoing support and encouragement, and notes their reluctance to antagonise or put strain on this

relationship by exposing parents to material they would disapprove of or be offended by (2007, p. 62).

Weinstein suggests that what metal fans seek is not so much parental conflict as broader social conflict. She argues that since fans have already been rejected and devalued by “respectable society” by virtue of their marginal socio-economic status, metal music and iconography are used to construct identities even more “symbolically unacceptable” to the mainstream (2000, p. 272). She describes heavy metal fans as “proud pariahs”:

Proud pariahs wear the grounds for their rejection from society as a badge of honor. Dominant society looks unfavorably enough on the groups that it marginalizes; it becomes militantly hostile against groups that flaunt the grounds for their rejection as marks of virtue. (Weinstein 2000, p. 271)

Metalheads are thought to invite, and in many ways *seek*, cultural warfare in order to affirm and revalue their outcast status as an “outlaw” identity (Weinstein 2000, p. 138). Indeed, the “constant barrage of ridicule heaped upon metal” is seen as one of the key factors in engendering solidarity among members of the subculture (Weinstein 2000, p. 137).

Some critics suggest that rejection of or by mainstream society in itself implies a kind of politics, and aesthetic transgression can form an important precursor to a more clearly articulated contestation of dominant social norms and hierarchies (Halnon 2004, p. 777; Purcell 2003, p. 178). However, such studies are frequently unclear as to precisely which norms and hierarchies are being contested by death metal. This is evident in Purcell’s description of a “typical Death Metal fan” (2003, p. 185):

A high-school boy, not very popular, probably suffering from acne, is likely to feel that his life is quite out of his control. He may have difficulty handling his relationship with his parents, and his social life is yet another battlefield. He may feel devastated when he cannot get a date to the prom, when he is rejected from the basketball team, or when he seems to be good at nothing at school. Compared to the prom king, the football hero, the pre-med student, he looks and feels weak. Death Metal music contains images of chaos and destruction that are far more terrible than anything he or any of his peers must face. Anyone who can watch a vicious murder and still maintain a straight face—or better yet, a smile—is tough. Anyone who wears black T-shirts featuring splattered guts is not to be messed with or laughed at. The attire, the music, the gore itself provide a protective barrier. (Purcell 2003, p. 185)

The notion of gore as a “protective barrier” has obvious resonances with Weinstein’s (2000) view of metalheads as “proud pariahs”. For Purcell, as for Weinstein, ‘shocking’ imagery serves to exclude outsiders and foster solidarity amongst members of the scene. Taking the argument one step further than Weinstein, however, Purcell argues that this solidarity not only ensures the scene’s resistance to a hostile mainstream, but also guarantees its essential inclusiveness and egalitarianism. As she writes:

Metal is exclusive; it is about effort and enthusiasm, not inherent talent, charm, beauty or intelligence. Anyone can be metal if he or she feels metal; that is the sole criterion, and it keeps the scene pure, protecting the solidarity, identity, and subculture status of scene members. Ironically, in being exclusive, the metal scene is not trying to be elitist in the traditional sense of the term. Metal heads are trying to keep the typical elitists out. They want to exclude from their scene those who might judge and rate them. (Purcell 2003, p. 112)

A notion of the death metal fan as “proud pariah” may have some explanatory power for a number of the scene’s practices and conventions. However, while Purcell occasionally echoes Weinstein’s claims about the disenfranchisement of adolescent males, her reluctance to pursue the class-based implications of this argument means that her analysis often lacks a clear conceptual framework from which to understand death metal’s participation in cultural contestation.

Indeed, her description of the “typical” death metal fan is at odds even with her own fieldwork data. In an earlier section of her book, for example, she notes that the average age of fans is approximately 20 years old—which would tend to problematise the high-school-centredness of the above characterisation (see Purcell 2003, p. 99). Moreover, her portrayal of fans’ experiences of dejection and failure is also difficult to reconcile with the generally positive outlooks that they report (see Purcell 2003, p. 120). In her desire to politicise or legitimate metal by presenting it as perpetually under siege, either from conservative authorities or elitist outsiders who would seek to “judge and rate” scene members, Purcell fails not only to recognise the possibility of the internal hierarchies within the death metal scene, but to consider the extent to which this notion of being outcast or under attack functions ideologically within the scene itself. It is, after all, the primary means by which scene members politicise and legitimate their *own* activities and musical preferences (Reynolds 1990, p. 59; Thornton 1995, p. 129).

The insularity and obscurity of the death metal scene also means that although the desire to shock and offend may appear to be a motivating impulse of death metal fandom, the genre’s most transgressive material is largely inaccessible to those outside the scene. Recordings are usually released either through independent labels and distribution services or self-released by the bands themselves, so accessing much of this material demands considerable commitment to, and insider knowledge of, the extreme metal scene (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 63). As a result, most death metal music is heard only by listeners who experience shocking and transgressive material as *pleasurable*, not as an affront to conservative social norms.

Of course, given that death metal requires listeners to gradually acclimatise to a series of disorientating, and sometimes disturbing, sonic and thematic conventions, many death metal fans *themselves* may initially experience the music as shocking and transgressive. For example, one Slayer fan recounts his initial experience of the music:

First time I heard Slayer, I couldn't handle it... I'd heard about it I knew it was fairly, totally fast totally manic, hardcore metal, and I couldn't handle it—man it was like, all this satanic stuff it's like whoa what's going on here? (Jason qtd. in Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 56)

In some cases, the discursive construction of the music as shocking and transgressive has been interpreted as a precursor for real acts of transgression. For example, in the Norwegian black metal scene, these acts included murder and arson.<sup>6</sup> During the early 1990s, fifteen black metal musicians and fans were arrested for these crimes and several major figures in the scene received prison sentences: Varg Vikernes of Burzum was sentenced to 21 years for the murder of Mayhem's Euronymous, Faust of Emperor served 14 years for the murder of a stranger, while two other members of Emperor served shorter terms for arson (Baddeley 1999, pp. 194-5). On the whole, though, 'transgression' is something performed for the benefit of other scene members and not for some hostile 'mainstream' that would seek to attack the music or the scene (Kahn-Harris 2004b, p. 110).

The death metal scene is primarily sustained and reproduced not via acts of 'transgression', but by far more banal and uncontroversial means: producing and consuming musical texts, collecting records, reading or publishing fanzines and webzines, corresponding with other scene members and attending live performances

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<sup>6</sup> These were the incidents which Sylvan (2002) views as musicians' and fans' "disturbing literal" commitment to the scene's ideology of transgression (see Chapter 3).

(Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 63). In this respect, the practices of the extreme metal scene closely resemble the practices of scenes less invested in constructing such confronting and transgressive identities for their fans (see Cohen 1991; Finnegan 1989; Kruse 1993). Because the production of transgressive material is essentially a precondition of participation in the death metal scene, death metal's apparently 'shocking' conventions eventually become familiar and routinised for the majority of scene members (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 132). Death metal appreciation requires fans to reorient customary practices and expectations of listening, but once this reorientation is complete, the experience of the music is usually not an exceptional one. Fans may privilege transgressive sonic and lyrical discourses, but most adherents are reluctant to embrace, or even acknowledge, the music's full transgressive potential. In fact, there seems to be a desire to make transgression banal and conventionalised in fans' tendency to distance themselves from the sentiments expressed. Scene members' practices of reflexive anti-reflexivity mean that they often confront discussions of the implications of the texts they produce and consume with "silence and inarticulacy" (Kahn-Harris 2004a, p. 105). Kahn-Harris cites a 'typical' response from an interview subject who, when asked why he likes death metal, replied: "I don't think there's a reason it appeals to me it's just I like it you know, it's not the sort of thing you can say, I like it because...it's just, it's just there" (qtd. in Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 54).

If this opportunity to experience highly transgressive as mundane—as something that is "just there"—is approached as one of the pleasures offered by death metal rather than a deficiency or oversight that needs to be changed in the interests of a more politically engaged practice, this suggests the possibility of alternative understandings of



the meaning and significance of death metal. Making practices mundane and uncontroversial allows scene members to play with a range of highly transgressive texts in relative 'safety': that is, without committing to any 'real' acts of transgression or viewing such material as a 'real' reflection of their values and attitudes. A tendency to make banal and routinised material that many non-fans find shocking and disturbing is also characteristic of other scenes centred around the consumption of contentious media, including banned material (Seim 2001); however, the specific pleasures that this kind of disconnection may offer the death metal listener will be explored in more detail in the readings in Chapter 5.

For the most part, though, alternative ways of understanding the pleasures of conventionally contentious material go largely unacknowledged by critics seeking to politicise the scene as a contestation of conservative social mores. Even Bogue (2004a, 2004b), whose insights regarding the 'non-narrative' properties of death metal offer one of the most productive new readings of the music and culture, neglects the essential mundanity of death metal listening. In Bogue's formulation, death metal's musical experience is one removed from the structures and strictures of everyday life, its musical becoming predicated on an experience of disequilibrium and disorientation that "engages a dimension of reality that is qualitatively different from ordinary experience" (2004b, pp. 97, 98). However, although this experience of disequilibrium and disorientation may be characteristic of listeners' initial experience of the music, Bogue largely neglects to consider that it is one that does not persist once death metal listening becomes more familiar and routinised.

At the same time, however, his notion of musical becoming provides a kind of textual basis for both the logic of mundanity and reflexive anti-reflexivity. If, as Bogue suggests, death metal produces similar effects to a Francis Bacon painting, where the aim is to use the materials of artistic composition (paint for Bacon, sound for death metal) to “work directly on the nerves and bypass the brain” (2004a, p. 88), then this would suggest that some of death metal’s most desired listening experiences occur in the absence of reflexive or rational thought. Indeed, listeners’ tendency to disengage impulses toward reflexive engagement may be key to understanding the logic of mundanity: transgressive musical texts can be experienced as mundane only so long as adherents do not reflect on the political and ethical implications of the discourses they produce and consume.

The opportunity offered to fans to view the content of their music as banal and disconnected from their personal values and practices not only suggests that the kinds of ethico-political issues normally raised by such contentious material may become peripheral to their engagement with this music, but that death metal musical texts may offer experiences that resist, exceed or evade the clear and logical systematisation a more complete engagement with reflexive practice would demand. The ways in which this “mundane production of transgression” (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 66) may offer alternative understandings of the pleasures of death metal will be considered in more detail in Chapter 5.

# CHAPTER 5

## The pleasures of death metal

In the previous chapters, I have critiqued the dominant critical approaches in heavy and extreme metal scholarship, and have suggested that each of these has key limitations that have circumscribed the theorisation of death metal within unnecessarily restricted parameters. I argued, in particular, that death metal's reorientation of listening means that the genre can be seen to resist many of the terms through which it is conventionally understood—especially with respect to 'politics'. By emphasising political questions and concerns, dominant critical approaches have tended to neglect the kinds of musical pleasures that exist outside of political or structural concerns.

This chapter offers some alternative ways of understanding and theorising the pleasures of death metal music via two readings of death metal: the first a reading of Carcass's albums *Reek of Putrefaction* (1988) and *Symphonies of Sickness* (1989), and the second a reading of Cannibal Corpse's albums *Eaten Back to Life* (1990) and *Butchered at Birth* (1991). The purpose of these readings is to explore some ways in which musical texts invite particular practices of listening, and to consider how these practices can offer access to musical pleasures neglected or misunderstood in dominant accounts of the genre. Neither is intended as a definitive account of what death metal 'means', but as a starting point for thinking about death metal differently. Each is an attempt to

explore death metal 'beyond' political criticism: to think the genre on its own terms, rather than according to a pre-determined evaluative framework.

Each also offers a different way in which death metal's reflexive anti-reflexivity might be thought *with*. One way of thinking with reflexive anti-reflexivity in relation to the music of Carcass is through Bogue's (2004a, 2004b) notion of death metal as musical becoming. Through fractured, disruptive song forms paralleled by lyrics fixated on threats to the organic integrity of the body, *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* invite explorations of new experiences of the body and of subjectivity. Listeners' practices of reflexive anti-reflexivity enable the rejection of an identificatory logic of music listening; Carcass's musical and lyrical conventions can be seen less as a reflection of fans' 'real' social conditions than as a point of access for musical becoming. I suggest that this is a becoming in which Carcass's aesthetic of disruption offers listeners ambivalent, decentred listening subjectivities as sources of pleasure and play.

Cannibal Corpse's approach to representations of death, in contrast, is far less disruptive and playful. Rather than a means of exploring the limits of the body and the self, the pleasures of Cannibal Corpse's music can be compared to those of cinematic forms of graphic horror in which narrative coherence is displaced in favour of graphic visual spectacle. This kind of graphic spectacle can be seen to foster insistently non-identificatory forms of engagement in which listeners are offered not an emotional investment in the scenarios depicted but a 'technical' appreciation of their construction. It is my argument in this section that invitations to reflexive anti-reflexive

practice can be seen in Cannibal Corpse's tendency to fracture songs into narratively incoherent but interesting musical moments, whilst making its songwriting predictable and routinised; each of these techniques invite modes of listening in which ordinarily transgressive lyrical scenarios are offered as essentially unremarkable and uncontroversial. An exploration of the different kinds of pleasure offered by Carcass and Cannibal Corpse provides some productive starting points for developing more nuanced understandings of how death metal 'works' as a genre.

**Becoming death: pleasure and play in *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness***

In Chapter 4, I suggested that the notion of 'moral panic' is a less productive framework for reading death metal than it is for heavy metal. However, although death metal could not be said to constitute a moral panic in the classic sense of the term, the incident involving Carcass and Earache Records highlights the ways in which death metal is still sometimes subject to controversy. In this section, I am interested in the ways in which such moments of controversy might form the beginning of an alternative reading of death metal. The 1991 raid on Earache Records, in which Carcass's albums *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* were sent to the DPP for possible prosecution, was conducted by police operating under the UK's 1959 Obscene Publications Act. According to the Act, "obscene" articles have a tendency to "deprave and corrupt" those who come into contact with them (qtd. in Cloonan 1995, p. 350). This definition of obscenity is one in which obscene articles are those which have morally and psychologically corroding effects on their audience. Unlike the

previous moral panics surrounding heavy metal, authorities in this case were concerned less that the music functioned as a literal exhortation to action, but that it was the cause of a deeper moral and psychological corrosion. It is my argument in this section that consideration of this question of ‘obscenity’ opens up a productive exploration of the particular pleasures of Carcass.

Bataille (2001) has noted that in societies where ‘obscenity’ is subject to strict regulation, the transformative potential of ‘obscene’ articles becomes either misrecognised and/or subject to repression. For Bataille, obscenity harbours a deeply transformative impulse; it represents a point of access to ‘limit-experiences’ which lie at the limit or extreme of the physical body. Obscenity, he writes, is “our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognised and stable individuality” (Bataille 2001, pp. 17-8). Within Bataille’s work, limit-experiences associated with death and putrefaction are especially privileged, given the extent to which they are subject to prohibition and taboo within Western culture. In the context of artistic representation, however, death and decay operate as powerful metaphors for intersubjectivity, offering access to “inner experiences that overwhelm any sense of the distinction between interiority or exteriority” and through which “un-knowing is activated, a process in which *subjectivity is torn apart*, unworked at the core of physical and mental being” (Botting & Wilson 1997, p. 2, emphasis added). According to Bataille, in societies of prohibition and repression, where such experiences are often considered taboo, this transformative impulse is often *mistaken for* depravity and corruption.

As Botting and Wilson's reading of Bataille's work suggests, experiences at the limit of the physical body and of subjectivity activate un-knowing, and it is through this un-knowing that the unitary subject is torn apart. Un-knowing is experienced at the limit of the subject, and hence disrupts the production of a stable and recognised subjectivity. In Bataille's work, un-knowing (or *non-savoir*) is a dual impulse: it is both a *not*-knowing and a deliberate attempt to seek or evoke an experience of the void (1986, p. 95).<sup>1</sup> It is not simply an abandonment of knowledge but a refusal, for a time, to accept it; un-knowing signals a suspension of strict logic and a rejoicing in an experience of contradiction and disequilibrium as a kind of "play" (Bataille 1986, pp. 95, 97).

This notion of un-knowing as a temporary refusal of knowledge that disrupts stable subjectivity connects with the notion of reflexive anti-reflexivity. As I have been arguing, reflexive anti-reflexive practice in death metal is not a passive response to the music (i.e. it is not a form of *un*-reflexivity) but a deliberately cultivated disposition in which musical texts are consumed without recourse to ethical or political precepts. Like un-knowing, it is not a complete abandonment of knowledge or reflexive thought but a temporary suspension of them (after all, Kahn-Harris's work suggests that reflexive anti-reflexivity applies only to listeners' practices within the death metal scene and not to their practices outside it). Consequently, Carcass's music offers an opportunity to think of reflexive anti-reflexivity as a kind of un-knowing (as opposed to *not*-knowing). This in turn suggests that reflexive anti-reflexivity may not only be a

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<sup>1</sup> Bataille describes un-knowing in the following terms: "When I...speak of un-knowing, I mean essentially this: I know nothing, and if I continue to speak, it is only insofar as I have knowledge which leads me to *nothing*" (1986, p. 95).

strategy of listening that allows death metal fans to consume ordinarily contentious subject matter without recourse to ethical or political concerns, but may also be a key means through which death metal listening subjectivities are constructed.

Adopting a stance of reflexive anti-reflexivity can enable listeners to temporarily suspend rational or unitary thought, and in doing so, rejoice in an experience of contradiction and disequilibrium. That is, reflexive anti-reflexivity allows listeners to experience the music not as a reflection of their 'real' lives, attitudes or beliefs but as a site in which contradiction can be explored as a source of pleasure. Consequently, although reflexive anti-reflexive listening practices can be described as characteristic of death metal listening as a whole, these practices offer particular kinds of listening pleasure in the music of Carcass: reflexive anti-reflexivity is what enables the abandonment of music's identificatory logic in order for it to function as a site of play. In the case of *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness*, the music's sonic and structural conventions work to promote new modes and experiences of listening that are largely disconnected from political or structural concerns. This is not to suggest that Carcass's music cannot be read in terms of politics, but rather that the musical texts also invite practices of listening largely predicated on the listeners' abandonment of political precepts.

If 'obscenity' can be viewed as an access point to limit-experiences that exist at the limit of the physical body and of subjectivity, then the visual and lyrical images judged 'obscene' in Carcass's work can be understood not as forms of moral or psychological corrosion but as sites of corporeal and subjectival transformation. Reynolds and Press's



(1995) reading of death metal suggests that the music may be productively viewed in a similar way: as a site of corporeal and subjectival transformation, rather than as a reflection of fans' 'real' attitudes and values. They connect the thematic fascinations of death metal lyrics to the sonic properties of the music, describing death metal as a:

remorseless threshing machine, an aural abattoir of hacking riffs and flagellating drum rolls. Any sense of organic musical flow [is] brutally ruptured by tempo changes and gear shifts, while the grisly lyrics [are] morbidly fixated on threats to the organic integrity of the body. (Reynolds & Press 1995, p. 94)

Thus they establish a parallel between death metal's lyrical and musical conventions. Of Carcass specifically, they contend that the "music [is] as surgical as the lyrics, a staccato battery of incisions and perforations" (Reynolds & Press 1995, p. 95). They suggest that images of, and sounds likened to, corporeal destruction serve as a means of imagining new experiences of corporeality and subjectivity, and argue that, musically and lyrically, death metal effects a kind of "transcendence-through-abasement" in which the dissolution of the self is experienced as an "annihilating ecstasy" (Reynolds & Press 1995, p. 94). In this way, Reynolds and Press connect lyrical themes with an affective experience of the music, suggesting that this relationship between music and lyrics operates as an 'access point' to new experiences of subjectivity.

Reynolds and Press's discussion of Carcass focuses primarily on the group's third album, *Necroticism: Descanting the Insalubrious* (1991), which demonstrated a far greater degree of technical exactitude than either *Reek of Putrefaction* or *Symphonies of Sickness*. Neither *Reek of Putrefaction* nor *Symphonies of Sickness* could be described as particularly "surgical" or "staccato" in the same way as *Necroticism*; however, Reynolds and Press's notion of the lyrics functioning as a verbal analogue of the music remains a productive way of reading Carcass's earlier material. In this case of *Reek of Putrefaction* and

*Symphonies of Sickness*, lyrics that are concerned with the disintegration of the organic integrity of the human body can be seen to parallel and literalise musical structures concerned with the disruption of organic musical flow. Reynolds and Press's work thus provides an opportunity to reinterpret Carcass's music not as a reflection of fans' 'real' social conditions but as a site where different types of musical experience can be enjoyed and explored.

However, their emphasis on subjectival annihilation suggests a particularly immersive, ecstatic experience of the music that seems at odds with the more banal, distanced forms of musical appreciation that I discussed in Chapter 4. Fans may, at certain moments, experience the music as an "annihilating ecstasy", but death metal listening is largely routinised for most listeners. Although Bogue's (2004a, 2004b) notion of musical becoming similarly tends to privilege the ecstatic and immersive dimensions of death metal listening, his approach nonetheless offers a more productive avenue for reading the music of Carcass. His argument that lyrical images of death and corporeal disintegration function as a means of dramatising and psychically approximating an experience of the body without organs (Bogue 2004b, p. 111), suggests that representations of death and decomposition can be seen to function not as an opportunity for identification with or endorsement of the actions or scenarios depicted, but as a means of dramatising and psychically approximating this musical becoming.

The realm of becoming can be conceived as a realm of affectivity incommensurable with conventional ethical and political discourses. Yet it need not be understood as an

immersion or desubjectification, but rather as something that provides access to new forms of thought and experience. Bogue's work on death metal tends to emphasise the music's desubjectifying capacity—and the experience of becoming is indeed one which definitionally evades or escapes unitary conceptions of subjectivity. However, the notion that becoming might signal a different way of listening to and experiencing ordinarily contentious subject matter suggests that death metal harbours a transformative impulse whilst allowing for the possibility that this transformation lies not simply in the annihilation, but also in the disruption or reconfiguration, of the unitary subject.

In Chapter 3, I discussed the ways in which the pleasure of popular music is often understood to be a pleasure of identification; listeners are thought to be interpellated as listening subjects via identification with the singing voice and with sonic codes identifiable in terms of musical narrative. However, death metal's displacement of the singing voice as an identificatory locus of listening and use of 'non-narrative' musical structures represents a radical departure from both conventional practices of popular composition and customary practices of listening. Instead of an opportunity to view the music as a reflection of or response to their 'real' social conditions, Carcass's music and lyrics alternately offer and undermine this conventional identificatory logic. The alternating establishment and disavowal of identification suggests that the Carcass listener is constructed as a profoundly ambivalent listening subject.

Lyrically, Carcass explores the dissolution/annihilation of the subject as a source of play and delight. Lyrics are dominated by depictions of bodies cheerfully cognisant of

their own demise. For example, ‘Reek of putrefaction’ (1989) presents the dissolution of the body as both transcendent and liberating. The song depicts a protagonist revelling in the sights and smells of decay and decomposition, with the stench of putrefaction presented as simultaneously pleasurable and comedic: a “hallucinogenic trip” and “orgasmic rush” that “turns your brains to pus”. ‘Exhume to consume’ (1989) presents a vivid and nauseating tableau of a feast on decomposing human flesh. Yet the narrator does not discuss the act using a discourse of depravity or corruption, but describes it in terms of pleasure and transcendence. He is not repulsed by the decaying flesh, but savours it with zeal, speaking not of mere cannibalism but of “culinary necromancy”:

Grimly I dig up the turfs  
 To remove the corrupted stiffs  
 Trying to contain my excitement  
 As I desecrate graveolent crypts...  
 Fingers claw at coffin lids  
 Eager festal exhumation  
 Hugging your wry, festered remains  
 With post-humous joy and elation...  
 Body snatched, freshly interred  
 Whatever takes my fancy  
 To satisfy my gratuitous pica  
 My culinary necromancy...  
 Scrutinised then brutalised  
 My forensic inquisition is fulfilled  
 My recipe is now your epitaph  
 Be it fried, boiled or grilled... (Carcass 1989, ellipses in original)

While the listener is also offered the opportunity to identify with the narrator (since the “me” or the “I” that is “grimly...dig[ging] up the turfs” may be conventionally read as an identificatory figure), the opportunity to identify with the narrator’s *victim* (the “you” whose “wry, festered remains” are being hugged) suggests a different kind of identificatory strategy. This use of the second-person pronoun “you” invites listeners

to view this as a disintegration of the *self* rather than as an act of violence against an *other*.

Indeed, Carcass's lyrics frequently invite listeners to view their *own* death, bodily disintegration or decay as sources of fascination, comedy or entertainment. The lyrics to 'Ruptured in purulence' (1989) ask the listener to picture him/herself as a "cankorous corpse" and to imagine experiencing the processes of putrefaction and decomposition until his/her corpse explodes in a mass of "bubbling viscera" infested by maggots. 'Feast on dismembered carnage' (1988) invites the listener to imagine him/herself enjoying a cannibalistic feast, even as this act of cannibalism accentuates his/her own physical demise:

Sterile carnage, dried sanguined personae desecration  
Scooping out the entrails, violent entrail emancipation  
The taste of violent gorge hot on your breath  
Digesting the succulent corpse in your succous death (Carcass 1988).

In a more explicitly parodic vein, 'Vomited anal tract' (1988) asks the listener to visualise vomiting up their own rectum and to envision the "stench of hot faeces scorch[ing] your nose" and "your tongue gargling on [*sic*] your dislocated anus". In each of these cases, the disintegration of the body is conceived as a dissolution of the subject. This is a dissolution conceived in the Batailleian sense of the term: not an access point to a transcendent 'outside', but an immolation in natural process (see Dollimore 1998, p. 256). Carcass's recurring preoccupation with corporeal disintegration can be seen as an exploration and dramatisation of a quite literal "tearing apart" of the individual subject.

As Reynolds and Press suggest, Carcass's lyrical fascination with corporeal disintegration can be paralleled with the sonic qualities of the music. Indeed, Carcass seems explicitly to invite listeners to connect the lyrical themes with the sonic qualities of the music. The band often provides evocative titles for their guitar solos. These titles can be interpreted as literalisations of what the music seeks to evoke sonically. For instance, 'Vomited anal tract' (1988) features a solo entitled 'Grotesque anal disgorgement'. The solo's conclusion with a series of deep whammy bar dives can be read as a sonic rendering of "disgorgement": it is a bowel-churning, 'expulsion'-type sound. Similarly, 'Ruptured in purulence' (1989) features a solo entitled 'Smear'd organic mess'. While it references the expressive, melodic solos of traditional heavy metal, 'Smear'd organic mess' is only partially ordered, featuring a jagged melodic contour that lends it frantic sensibility: a flurry of unpunctuated notes that can be heard as something of a "mess". By providing titles for their solos in this way, Carcass offer the possibility of reading the band's written textual material as a cue for interpreting the music's sonic affects. Here, the disintegration of the subject can be read both lyrically and musically.

While the band explores the dissolution/annihilation of the subject as a source of pleasure and play, Carcass also resists the possibility of 'pure' subjectival loss. This is partly due to the comedic tenor to many of the lyrics, but also due to the music's disruptive, jarring sonic conventions. Carcass's non-melodic, non-natural treatment of the voice, the evolutionary randomness of the song structures and rhythmic irregularity of the songwriting imparts a 'messiness' to the music that complements the grisly fantasies of the lyrics, but in a way that prevents the establishment of any consistent,

stable locus of listening (thereby also inhibiting the possibility of any straightforwardly immersive or ecstatic potential). Although Carcass's lyrics largely work to establish an identificatory logic, the band's music works to thwart identificatory patterns of music listening. Some identificatory mechanisms are featured in the music, but on the whole, these are stymied by techniques which deny the listener the conventional pleasures and expectations of popular music. Since music only needs to facilitate new forms of thought or experience to provide access to this realm of becoming, in such cases, Carcass may invite listeners to see their subjectivities not so much as dissolved but as *disrupted*, and to view this disruption as one of the pleasures that this music offers.

Walker and Steer's vocal style resists the identificatory logic of popular singing. In contrast to the deep, resonant bellows of some other death metal vocalists, the two voices have particularly gargled/garbled qualities. These are accentuated by the use of double-tracking and other vocal effects. On 'Exhume to consume' (1989), for example, the unison of the vocal double-tracking is frequently imperfect: the first voice is sometimes ahead of and sometimes behind the second, meaning that the individual words often blur and merge into one another. On 'Feast on dismembered carnage' (1988) and 'Vomited anal tract' (1988), the vocals are processed with echo and reverb which, in the latter case, lends the voice a 'gurgled' quality that sounds as if it is literally coming up from the anal tract. In contrast to the melodic foregrounding of the singing voice in more conventional rock, pop and heavy metal, vocal recordings are often so heavily distorted and poorly recorded that they frequently either disappear into or 'peak' in the mix. On the majority of tracks on *Reek of Putrefaction*, the vocals are noticeably muffled and indistinct. On a small number of tracks, however, the vocals

are prominently foregrounded. The vocals on ‘Carbonized eyesockets’ (1988), for instance, sound as if Steer is blowing into the microphone, causing the sound to peak in the mix. On ‘Splattered cavities’ (1988), the voice is uncomfortably dominant in the mix; at some points, it is so loud that it ‘drowns out’ much of the other instrumentation. Despite the explicitly identificatory invitation of some of the lyrics, such performance and recording techniques work to denaturalise the communicative and identificatory function of the singing voice.

As I argued in Chapter 3, Walker (in particular) overdrives his voice with an excess of materiality whilst revelling in the materiality of particular words and phrases. Although the majority of the lyrics are incomprehensible, a few key words remain audible. Consider, for example, the lyrics to ‘Reek of putrefaction’ (1989):

Maturing *corpse*, the stale smell of decay and *rot*  
 —A sickening asphyxiation  
 Gross remains *gush*, innards turn to *sludge*  
 —With partial liquefaction. (emphasis added)

In this section of the song, the words “corpse”, “rot”, “gush” and “sludge” emphatically punctuate the accelerated rhythms of the music, with the onomatopoeic sounds of “gush” and “sludge” particularly clearly enunciated. In ‘Excoriating abdominal emanation’ (1989), the evocative words “...Scour...abrase...scrub...erase...” are emphatically and repeatedly enunciated (ellipses in original). In such cases, vocal ‘grain’ and the emphasis on evocative words are used to resonate with and amplify the intensity of the music. In combining identificatory lyrics with vocal techniques that thwart this identificatory logic, Carcass’s music disrupts the production of coherent listening subjectivities.



In musical terms, the band also offers a simultaneous establishment and disavowal of identification. The music's conflicting impulses can be seen as a means through which Carcass dramatises and enacts the 'tearing apart' of the unitary subject—not as an annihilation or dissolution, but as a means of imagining new kinds of listening subjectivities. Listeners are constructed as fractured, ambivalent subjects without a stable locus of listening. This too can be seen as part of the band's configuration of contradiction and disequilibrium as sources of pleasure: listeners are invited to suspend reflexive practice in order for the music to be explored as a site of intensity and play rather than of literal meaning or communication. The reflexive anti-reflexive subject is an ambivalent subject, and this stance of reflexive anti-reflexivity also enables ambivalence and instability to be experienced as sources of pleasure.

Both *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* feature conventionally melodic passages that possess the kind of identificatory, 'narrative' qualities described by critics like Cubitt (1984). Indeed, Carcass is often cited as an influential early precursor to the Swedish melodic metal movement, a sub-genre with few of the disruptive, non-narrative characteristics of death metal. On the band's first two albums, however, these conventionally melodic passages are almost always disrupted, preventing them from offering the listener a stable locus of listening. If narrative closure is what characterises sonic texts as *musical* (rather than 'noise') and what interpellates listeners as unitary listening subjects (see Chapter 3), then Carcass explore the possibilities of noise as a way of unsettling this production of conventional musical subjectivities. On some tracks, noise is utilised as a deliberate aesthetic. For example, 'Festerday' (1988), like several of the tracks on *Reek of Putrefaction*, is a combination of frantic blast beats and

fast, muddy riffs with little discernable melodic contour. The song is only 20-seconds long, over half of which is occupied by a shrill, chaotic guitar solo dominated by frenetic whammy bar ‘shaking’.

For the most part, though, the music’s ‘noise’ is not in its deployment of overly harsh or dissonant sounds, but in its failure to establish coherent narrative flow. For example, rather than adopting a verse-chorus-bridge structure, ‘Exhume to consume’ (1989) features eight main riff sections structured largely through juxtaposition: each section is simply added on to the next. Some of these riffs are repeated, reworked and reprised (including the descending chord progression of the opening riff), but the song’s tendency towards acceleration and abrupt gear shifts prevent these riffs from functioning as a stable locus of listening (such as functioning in a ‘chorus-like’ way). The song’s discontinuity is particularly pronounced in the sections following the guitar solo, where multiple rapid shifts disrupt the stabilisation of meter and tempo. Ken Owen’s understated drumming contributes to this sensation of disequilibrium as he rarely utilises drum fills to ease and/or foreshadow these moments of change and transition (and even in the cases where he *does* foreshadow these moments, this foreshadowing is relatively brief). Even Steer’s expressive, melodic solo is jarring, as the abrupt shifts in and out of the solo prevent it from functioning as the site of climax and transcendence that is the solo’s traditional role in heavy metal. Moreover, although he uses heavy gauge strings, the string slackness resulting from the guitar’s B tuning remains conspicuous and lends his playing an imprecise, slightly out-of-tune feel.

Similarly, 'Reek of putrefaction' (1989) connects fast-played, muddy riffs in a sequence of paratactic shifts, with the precise chord patterns and changes often obscured by a strong fuzz of distortion and raw production values. A number of key riffs/sections are repeated, giving 'Reek of putrefaction' a more structured feel than many of Carcass's other songs, but the song still resists a conventional verse-chorus structure. The repetition of these sections may give them chorus-like features, but the fact that there appears to be no regular order to the repetitions (i.e. it is impossible to anticipate *which* riff section will be coming next) and that the riffs tend to be varied or reworked upon each repetition makes it difficult for these sections to function as a site of familiarity and/or release as they would in a more conventional chorus.

In other cases, Carcass disrupts conventional patterns of musical narrative through rhythmic irregularity and imprecision. These techniques unsettle narrative flow by preventing the establishment of a stable locus of listening from which the musical narrative can be worked through and 'resolved'. On 'Cadaveric incubator of endoparasites' (1989), the vocal line deviates from the rhythmic pattern of the guitars: the vocals are heard slightly behind the anticipated beat. On 'Excoriating abdominal emanation' (1989) there are conspicuous imperfections in the unison of Steer and Walker's vocals. The rhythmic patterns and moments of emphasis of each vocalist are noticeably different, lending the vocal lines a jumbled quality.

Carcass also plays with rhythmic irregularity as a deliberately disruptive technique. 'Vomited anal tract' (1988), for example, alternates passages of conventional 4/4 timing with shorter passages dominated by blast beats, lending the song a sensation of

alternating acceleration and deceleration. 'Splattered cavities' (1988) juxtaposes measured sections of 4/4 timing with rhythmically disruptive passages. In one section, Owen leaves out the 4<sup>th</sup> beat of a previously insistent 4/4 metre, giving a 'lopsided' and unsettling feel to the drum beat. On 'Embryonic necropsy and devourment' (1989), a key section of the song sees the rhythmic focus of the drums shift from the on-beat to off-beat within the scope of a repeated 8-beat measure. At the 4<sup>th</sup> beat of the measure, the listener expects to hear the snare on the on-beat; however, it is played on the off-beat. The rest of the 8-beat measure is then driven by this off-beat rhythm. This 8-beat measure is cycled through several times, preventing the listener from resting on any regular meter. Because the listener is offered neither a regular on-beat or a regular off-beat rhythm but a combination of both, the establishment of a regular meter is repeatedly interrupted.

While some of these techniques could be argued to lend a 'non-narrative' quality to Carcass's music, much of the music's disturbance of narrative occurs as momentary irruptions within otherwise narratively coherent musical texts (rather than in any thoroughgoing rejection of musical narrative). Many of Carcass's songs feature sections that are quite conventionally 'catchy' and which articulate clear melodies understandable within conventional harmonic structures. For example, one of the main riffs of 'Feast on dismembered carnage' (1988) is noticeably Black Sabbath-esque: a punchy, rock riff reminiscent of the famous riff from Sabbath's 'Children of the grave' (1971), albeit reconfigured in a faster, more galloping style. However, the potential for this riff to situate Carcass's music more firmly within the mainstream of popular music is largely thwarted by the tendency to overlay this riff at seemingly random intervals

with jarring whammy bar dives. These whammy bar bends are significantly more dominant in the mix than the original riff, lending them a shrill, piercing quality.

This tendency to disrupt conventionally 'song-like' passages is a technique commonly used on *Reek of Putrefaction*. For instance, like 'Feast on dismembered carnage', 'Fermenting innards' (1988) punctuates catchy rock riffs with deep whammy bar dives. In this song, Steer experiments with the slackness that comes from the whammy bar's detuning of the guitar strings to create sounds that are alternately shrill and churning, disrupting the melodic contour of the original riffs. 'Suppuration' (1988) similarly unsettles heavy metal/rock riffs with jarring irruptions of guitar noise. This time, rather than being punctuated by the extreme use of the whammy bar, otherwise melodic rock riffs are disrupted by the unexpected sliding or 'dropping' of key notes. The chorus and echo effects on the guitar make these moments unexpectedly shrill and prominent in the mix. Meanwhile, although the song largely works to establish a clear metre and tempo, passages of rhythmic regularity are often interrupted by abrupt changes in time signature. For example, in one particularly jarring passage, the drums switch from 4/4 to half time, with drummer Ken Owen hitting the snare slightly behind the anticipated beat. This lends the passage a feeling of lurching forwards, a disorientating sensation accentuated by the fact that it is another four beats until the regular meter is re-established.

In each of these cases, Carcass utilise elements of traditional heavy metal/rock, but either disturb the clear melodic contours with jarring irruptions or reconfigure the song form in off-kilter, disruptive ways. The more conventionally 'song-like' passages offer

the listener conventional identificatory mechanisms, but this is a potential for identification that is repeatedly thwarted or interrupted. Carcass's departures from norms of popular vocality and disruptions to organic musical flow form part of death metal's broader disruption of customary listening practices that I outlined in Chapter 3. If death metal's sonic and structural conventions provide access to musical becoming in which the lived body is converted into a dedifferentiated sonic body without organs, Carcass necessarily offer this becoming as a space of ambivalence. The combination of identificatory and non-identificatory conventions refuses both the production of a stable listening subject and its complete desubjectification.

If death metal listening is a learning to listen differently, then Carcass's music invites the construction of ambivalent listening subjects open to disruption and destabilisation as sites of pleasure and fascination. This kind of destabilisation may be what Bataille is referring to when he describes obscenity as the "open[ing] out" of the unitary subject (2001, p. 17), and may be another way in which we can see the "tearing apart" of the subject literalised and explored in Carcass's music. For Bataille, the transformative potential of so-called 'depraved' images of corporeal disintegration explains, in part, the motivation to restrict access to 'obscene' material—especially within a social order where hegemonic processes rely on notions of individual subjectivity as fixed and unitary.

Insofar as the experience of becoming is one resistant to reflexive inquiry (see Chapter 4), it is an experience that largely escapes or evades normative regimes of signification and representation. The reflexive anti-reflexivity of death metal listening may be seen

as one of the key pleasures offered by the music: it is what enables listeners to experience the disavowal of identification as a source of pleasure. Carcass offer listeners the opportunity to play with the aesthetic experience of death, not as a reflection of their ‘real’ lives or experiences, but as a means of accessing new kinds of experience: in this case, accessing experiences of fractured, ambivalent, anti-reflexive subjectivity. Taboo subject matter and jagged, disruptive musical conventions are offered as sources of pleasure, fascination and play. This suggests quite a different understanding of how death metal listening ‘works’ and what death metal ‘means’ as a musical experience. Exploring Carcass’s music as a “becoming death” (Bogue 2004a, p. 83) is one way of thinking *with* the pleasures of death metal. Another way is through an examination of the more ‘technical’ forms of appreciation offered by the music of Cannibal Corpse.

**“Bodies prepared for slaughter”: ‘technical’ appreciation in *Eaten Back to Life* and *Butchered at Birth***

While *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* can be seen as part of a more light-hearted project in which an aesthetic interest in death and decomposition is satisfied and explored, *Eaten Back to Life* and *Butchered at Birth* offer far more confronting images of violence and aggression. Like Carcass, Cannibal Corpse is fascinated with ways in which the body can be destroyed and mutilated, but in contrast to Carcass’s comedic depictions of death, Cannibal Corpse presents death as savage and brutal. Moreover, whereas Carcass’s emphasis is on musical rupture and discontinuity, Cannibal Corpse’s music is characterised by a greater degree of structure, repetition and predictability.

The band is a key progenitor of “brutal” death metal (Purcell 2003, pp. 59, 62). In contrast to Carcass—and many other death metal bands—Cannibal Corpse avoids almost any semblance of conventionally recognisable melody and harmony in favour of a distinctly percussive sound. These key differences between the two bands suggest the possibility of a different reading of the pleasures of death metal. It is my argument in this section that impulses toward reflexive anti-reflexivity give rise to the pleasures of a ‘technical’ appreciation in which the literal meaning of song texts is subordinated to an interest in individual (and largely discontinuous) musical moments.

With few musical gestures towards traditional heavy metal, Cannibal Corpse’s music combines prominent drumming with deep, often staccato-style growled vocals and high speed, palm-muted power chords and single-note riffs. Although this non-melodic songwriting disrupts the conventional norms of popular composition and the expected listening pleasures of popular music (making it, in one sense at least, about rupture and disruption), Cannibal Corpse offers a different kind of listening pleasure to the music of Carcass. Whereas Carcass’s jarring unpredictability seems crucial to the listening pleasures on offer, Cannibal Corpse’s greater sense of structure and predictability means that its music would tend not to be heard as disruptive by listeners familiar with the conventions of death metal.

Rather than offering access to a musical becoming in which new experiences of the body and subjectivity are imagined and explored, Cannibal Corpse invites experiences of listening in which the ‘technicalities’ of musical composition become a central focus of attention. For example, rather than narratively coherent, identificatory song texts,



listeners are invited to distance themselves emotionally from the literal meaning of lyrical texts and to focus on interesting, but largely discontinuous, musical moments. In this way, Cannibal Corpse offer an opportunity for the ‘technical’ appreciation of death metal discussed in Chapter 3. The predictability of Cannibal Corpse’s songwriting as well as the emphasis on the ‘technicalities’ of musical composition suggests a basis for the logic of mundanity; after all, the emotional distancing required of technical appreciation is possible only if listeners do not experience song texts as shocking or transgressive. Via an examination of *Eaten Back to Life* and *Butchered at Birth*’s somewhat predictable but insistently non-narrative musical conventions, I suggest one way of thinking with death metal’s non-identificatory, anti-reflexive forms of listening.

On the whole, Cannibal Corpse’s songwriting is far more routinised than the music of Carcass. The band offers some musically unsettling moments in which listening positions are destabilised, but overall, there is much less emphasis on rupture and instability. Whereas Carcass’s musical disruptions occur in a range of different and often unpredictable ways, Cannibal Corpse’s disruptions are often quite patterned and predictable: most involve rhythmic disruption. For example, on ‘Covered with sores’ (1991), some of the vocal lines jar uncomfortably with the rhythmic patterns of the guitars. These lines overcrowd the regular triplet patterns of the guitars with too many syllables, such as the second line “digesting the clotted scabs” which is two syllables too long to line up comfortably with the rhythm of the guitar riff. Similarly, in the introductory sections of ‘Buried in the backyard’ (1990), the pace of the snare drum does not match the pace of the tremolo riff. The transition into this riff signifies a shift into half-time, however, the snare does not slow down correspondingly; instead it

maintains its previously insistent pace without alteration. The fact that the riff would suggest a half-time drum speed creates an unsettling relationship between the riff and the fast-paced snare. At one point on 'Innards decay' (1991), the guitars shift from a 4-beat to a 6-beat riff (i.e. a shift from 4/4 to 6/4 time), disrupting the previously regular rhythm of the 4-beat measure, and lending the riff a sensation of unexpectedly lurching forwards. Other tracks bookend lurching breakdowns with sections of faster riffing, a technique used to particularly jarring effect on 'A skull full of maggots' (1990), where a breakdown unexpectedly appears only 18 seconds prior to the end of the song.<sup>2</sup>

Other songs, like 'Born in a casket' (1990), disrupt listeners' expectations of the structural organisation of death metal music. The song opens with slow, muscular power chords that shift into a faster, more compact riff punctuated by ensemble, staccato 'stabs' played by the full band. In thrash and other forms of extreme metal, this latter kind of riff is conventionally used as a transition technique: that is, it is used to signal a shift from slow opening riffs to the faster pace of the song itself. However, rather than use the riff in this way, 'Born in a casket' unexpectedly reprises the muscular opening riff before commencing the main part of the song.

While some of these musically disruptive moments are heard as jarring interruptions (such as the introduction to 'Born in a casket'), for the most part, they appear as familiar and routinised songwriting conventions. For example, sections of rhythmic irregularity tend to be sandwiched between more rhythmically straightforward sections, lending the

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<sup>2</sup> In metal and hardcore music, a breakdown is a section of music played in half time. In thrash, these are sometimes called "mosh parts" (Pillsbury 2006, pp. 10-11).

songwriting a greater sense of structure and focus. Tracks like ‘Rancid amputation’ (1991), ‘Gutted’ (1991) and ‘Rotting head’ (1990) alternate faster, more rhythmically complicated riffs with simpler riff sections. While the faster sections tend to be dominated by frenetic blast beats and feature complex guitar patterns or fast tremolo picking, the simpler sections tend to be centred around punchy, muscular riffs created through palm-muted power chords. These latter sections are what might be described as ‘headbanging’ riffs (insofar as they have a regular rhythm and metre that is ideal for headbanging). The fact that these headbanging moments are provided as ways of minimising disruptions created by other sections of the music suggests that Cannibal Corpse offers more stable listening positions than is the case for Carcass. Within such a context, rhythmic disruptions are more likely to be heard as musical *complexity* than as rupture or as something which disrupts conventional structures of the body, subjectivity or signification.

Similarly, Cannibal Corpse’s guitar solos suggest a disruptive potential, but one which is largely contained by the patterned and routinised ways in which these are incorporated into the songwriting. Unlike the solos of traditional heavy metal (elements of which are referenced by Carcass), Bob Rusay and Jack Owen’s solos generally do not offer expressive, melodic lines but are shrill, frenetic emissions of sound, featuring frequent string bends, whammy bar dives and forays into chromaticism. Some solos offer a semblance of melody, but these melodic figures are not presented in conventionally ‘pleasing’ or ‘expressive’ ways. For example, the solos generally lack the kind of dynamics necessary for conventional understandings of musical expressiveness: the solos are often a frantic flurry of notes, each held for around the same length of

time, and with few pauses or other kinds of musical ‘punctuation’. In addition to this, string bends and whammy bar dives often lend the melodic figures an unsettling feel. For example, the first solo on ‘The undead will feast’ (1990) employs a number of lengthy string bends that give a sensation of awkwardly lurching up to the note. Similarly, on ‘Mangled’ (1990), the chromaticism of the solo’s descending pattern gives the melodic figure a sense of feeling slightly ‘off-kilter’.

As with the band’s rhythmic conventions, the potentially disruptive capacity of these solo techniques is reduced by the mostly predictable appearance and placement of the solos in the song arrangements. In contrast to Carcass’s random and unexpected placement of solos, Cannibal Corpse’s typically appear in pairs: first one solo, then the second one a few bars later. Consequently, although the appearance of the first solo is sometimes sudden and surprising, the appearance of the second solo can be easily anticipated. Also, the *kind* of solos used are readily predictable. Solos are generally structured around short, repeating figures shifted either up or down the fret board in recurring half step movements. ‘The undead will feast’ (1990) and ‘Living dissection’ (1991)—songs from two different albums—feature almost identical examples of solos played in this style. Chromatic ascending or descending patterns, such as the one in ‘Mangled’ (1990), are also common.

On the whole, then, the music’s greater sense of structure and stability means that Cannibal Corpse does not disrupt stable listening positions in quite the same way as is the case for Carcass. Kahn-Harris (2003, p. 86) ascribes a politics to these key differences, suggesting that this reveals a reactionary tenor in Cannibal Corpse’s work

that contrasts with the radical potential of Carcass. Whereas Carcass explores the dissolution of the body and the self as sources of pleasure, liberation and comedy, he argues, Cannibal Corpse's more focussed and controlled songwriting suggests a reassertion of the boundaries of the gendered body.

In lyrical terms at least, Cannibal Corpse display an interest in gendered violence that is simply absent in the lyrics of Carcass. Whereas Carcass's lyrics are presented from a 'second-person' perspective that is almost completely ungendered, Cannibal Corpse's lyrics are dominated by a first-person perspective often featuring fantasies of sexual violence and misogynistic murder. For instance, 'Born in a casket' (1990) depicts a protagonist impregnating decomposing corpses (there is a particularly tasteless image of the protagonist "suck[ing] out the goo, feast[ing] on her crotch). 'Butchered at birth' (1991) also depicts necrophilia, but this time includes a description of a dismembered infant carcass ripped from the "guttled bitch". On some of the group's subsequent albums, including *Tomb of the Mutilated* and *The Bleeding*, the gendered violence is even more extreme.

Even in cases where this violence is not gendered, there is still a reluctance to invite the listener to identify as a *victim* of the violence, and hence a reluctance to play with the boundaries of the body and of the self. In the few instances where the listener is invited to do this, s/he is not offered the same opportunity for identification as that provided by Carcass. 'Edible autopsy' (1990), for instance, invites the listener to see him/herself as a victim of cannibalism. However, throughout the song, the lyrical focus shifts between descriptions of what is happening to "you" as the victim of the

violence, and more abstract descriptions of violence without a clear victim/subject.

Consider the following section:

Guts and blood, bones are broken  
 As they eat your pancreas  
 Human liver, for their dinner  
 Or maybe soup with eyes  
 Cause of death, still unknown  
 Gnawing meat, from your bones  
 Bone saw binding in your skull  
 Brains are oozing, a human stump  
 Needles injected, through your eyes  
 Pulling off flesh, skinned alive.

In this section, the emphasis shifts between what “they” are doing to “you” (e.g. “they eat your pancreas”) and more abstract depictions of violence that lacks a clear subject (e.g. “bones are broken”, “brains are oozing”, etc).

‘Rancid amputation’ (1991) invites the listener to imagine him/herself as the recipient of a violent dismemberment, but the lyrical focus is often on the “I” that is doing the dismembering, rather than the “you” that is being dismembered:

*I slice through the limb*  
*A human dissection portions of half-eaten flesh in *my* mouth*  
*Starting to chew your now bleeding stump*  
*I will swallow your pus your own rectal slime*  
*I’ll force you to drink. (emphasis added)*

Cannibal Corpse appears reluctant to fully explore the destruction or dissolution of the self as a source of pleasure or fascination. So although not all the violence in Cannibal Corpse’s lyrics is gendered violence, the fact that the listener is predominantly invited to view the violence as an act against an *Other* potentially makes the US group’s lyrics problematic in a way that Carcass’s are not. Cannibal Corpse still configure violence as a source of aesthetic interest, but this violence is generally not presented as an access point to becoming or to imagining new experiences of the body and of subjectivity.

For Kahn-Harris, it is not only the group's lyrics, but its musical emphasis on structure and control that demonstrates the band's overwhelming concern with masculine "mastery over a female Other" (2003, p. 82). Echoing earlier critiques of heavy metal virtuosity in which technical control is equated with masculine mastery, he quantifies the differences between the two bands in ethical and political terms:

[W]hile Carcass musically and lyrically revels in fantasies of losing oneself in the abject, Cannibal Corpse musically and lyrically presents fantasies of mastering and dominating it. Although both bands explore transgression, Cannibal Corpse in fact reinforces certain limits through its emphasis on control. That control is achieved partially through extreme musical discipline and partially through obsessively constructing images of dominant masculinity. (2003, p. 86)

Indeed, both lyrically and musically, there is a deliberate *aggressiveness* to Cannibal Corpse that is simply not evident in the music of Carcass. Perhaps as a result of the band's brutal death metal leanings, there is nothing of Carcass's sense of play and delight, but rather a greater obsession with images and sounds of *power*. For Kahn-Harris, this demonstrates the ease with which a radical transgressive project that questions the boundaries of the body can be transformed into a "more sinister project that strongly affirms both gendered bodies and the violent forms of power through which gender is affirmed" (2003, p. 87).

He suggests that listeners' refusal to interrogate (or even reflect upon) the politics of such imagery reveals a problematic un- or unethical impulse at the heart of the scene. Kahn-Harris finds scene members' repeated unwillingness to address political questions regarding the scene's textual or social practice to be "very problematic" (2004a, p. 108), and ultimately views reflexive anti-reflexivity as a refusal to act in the interests of an ethically and politically engaged practice. The misogyny of some of Cannibal Corpse's lyrics is a troubling aspect of the band's work that Kahn-Harris

rightly identifies and interrogates, and it is not my intention to act as apologist for representations of sexual or gendered violence. At the same time, however, Kahn-Harris's emphasis on the political dimensions/implications of death metal music provides an inevitably limited understanding of the different ways in which listeners may engage with such musical and lyrical texts. That is, in his equation of technical control with masculine domination (and concomitant assumption that images/sounds of power and aggression are necessarily oppressive), he fails to consider alternative ways in which these sounds and images may be experienced and understood. Some aspects of Cannibal Corpse's work can be read as politically problematic, but the band's musical and lyrical conventions also invite mundane and anti-reflexive forms of engagement that might problematise some aspects of this political critique. Although Kahn-Harris's is a considerably more sympathetic departure from more conventional political criticisms of metal—after all, his reading of Carcass suggests that political radicalism is at least *possible* within death metal—it is not, ultimately, a thinking *with* the reflexive anti-reflexivity that he otherwise acknowledges as so central to the pleasures of the music and of the scene.

Despite the misogyny of some of Cannibal Corpse's lyrics, it is difficult to read these as literal exhortations to action or as accurate representations of fans' current attitudes. Death metal's tendency towards reflexive anti-reflexivity may invite fans to disconnect such representations from their 'real' ethical, moral or political values in order for other kinds of aesthetic interest to be satisfied and explored. A number of the group's musical and lyrical practices invite non-identificatory and emotionally distanced forms of listening, highlighting two of the ways in which reflexive anti-reflexive listening



practices are offered by the musical texts themselves. Chris Barnes' vocals reject both the melodic foregrounding and the phonologocentric structuring of the singing voice that I have suggested in Chapter 3 is crucial to emotional identification in popular music. Barnes' vocal style is typically quite monotone as it is lacking in both melody and the conventional signifiers of 'emotion'; in the cases where he utilises staccato screams, growls and grunts, these tend to have little obvious relationship to the emotional tenor of the song lyrics. For example, 'The undead will feast' (1990) is a story of a zombie attack: the first half of the song describes the protagonist's attempts to escape the attack, while the second half details his attacks on others after he has become a zombie himself. The lyrics suggests a range of emotions, beginning first with fear, then anger, then finally ending in pleasure as he comes to enjoy feasting on the bodies of others. Yet none of these emotions are conveyed through the tone and sound of the voice itself; at no point does the voice change to convey the 'story' of this song. In fact, Barnes' vocal style on this track is more or less interchangeable with his vocal approach with most other songs on the album: the sound of the voice is not connected to the subject matter in any kind of obvious way.

In the few instances in which the voice *is* used in an expressive capacity, it is used in self-consciously *sinister* ways. However, this use of the voice is disconnected from a sense of individualised bodily expression (that is, it is unlikely to be heard as an expression of Barnes himself), but is largely the result of unconventional vocal recording and mixing techniques. For example, on 'Scattered remains, splattered brains' (1990) and 'Butchered at birth' (1991), Barnes' deep growls are gradually faded in: the effect is as if the voice spookily 'emerges' from the music. On 'Meat hook

sodomy' (1991), sections of the vocals are reversed (i.e. played backwards) and panned quickly between left and right speakers. Again, there appears to be an attempt here to use the voice in deliberately 'spooky' and disorientating ways—effects which are particularly pronounced when listening to the music through headphones. This remains a departure from the phonologocentric structuring of the singing voice commonly heard in more conventional rock, pop and heavy metal: it is not an attempt to represent an emotional truth about the vocalist or his audience, but is probably best seen as a concerted attempt to sound 'frightening' or 'extreme'.

Given the band's utilisation of such sounds, it is worth exploring Webster's description of Cannibal Corpse as a "horror band" in more detail. In Chapter 3, I described the way in which Cannibal Corpse, and bass player Webster in particular, consider the band's music to be analogous to horror cinema; he states that "where you have horror movies, we're a horror band" (qtd. in Robyn 2006). While Carcass also attempt to evoke the horrific, Cannibal Corpse is more closely indebted to cinematic horror (and also to comic books and graphic novels) than the British band's medical horrors. Whereas the cover artwork for *Reek of Putrefaction* and *Symphonies of Sickness* shows images of decay and disease cut-and-pasted from pathology textbooks, Cannibal Corpse's artwork represents a shift into a more explicitly fantastical space. Both *Eaten Back to Life* and *Butchered at Birth* feature graphic novel-style artworks by horror comic illustrator Vincent Locke. *Eaten Back to Life* shows a graveyard scene featuring an eviscerated and partially skeletal ghoul, eating a strip of his own flesh and clutching rib bones that he has presumably torn from his own rib cage. The rest of his insides are strewn across the tombstones. *Butchered at Birth* depicts two skeletal, corpse-like figures

removing the flesh, internal organs and bloodied foetus from the body of a dead woman. A number of other dead infants, in various stages of decomposition, are strung up in the background.

Many of Cannibal Corpse's lyrical scenarios are also indebted to horror cinema. 'Shredded humans' (1990) depicts a gruesome car accident caused by a "homicidal fool". 'The undead will feast' (1990) describes a zombie outbreak and attack. 'Scattered remains, splattered brains' (1990) depicts a "psychotic coroner" maniacally carving up both dead and live bodies. Although there is not a thoroughgoing attempt to parallel music with lyrics à la Carcass, Cannibal Corpse's musical emphasis on 'brutality' suggests a sonic complement to the violent and horrific fantasies of the lyrics—an observation also made by Purcell who argues that violent lyrics and album art "serve predominantly as a means for bands to promote an image that visually displays the aggressiveness and extremity of their music" (2003, p. 39).

Cannibal Corpse's close identification with the horror genre suggests that the band's music may also offer listeners similar pleasures to cinematic and other forms of horror. However, these are unlikely to be the narrative, identificatory examples of the genre typically discussed in the scholarship, but the 'splatter' or 'graphic' forms of horror that "displace...the viewer" in relation to the text (Arnzen 1994, p. 178). As I have argued in Chapter 3, much of the current scholarship reading metal-as-horror tends to rely on work concerned mostly with the narrative function of horrific imagery. In this literature, narrative development and resolution are understood as crucial to the meaning, significance and pleasures of horror. In contrast, work on 'splatter' or

‘graphic’ horror may be more useful for reading a genre like death metal—and a band like Cannibal Corpse in particular. In these films, coherent narratives are displaced in favour of an emphasis on grisly visual spectacle. Where depictions of violence and gore are particularly excessive, this can promote experiences of viewing largely unrelated to the particularities of plotting and narrative, as well as a lack of emotional investment in the action witnessed on screen. Freeland (2000) describes this as a ‘distanced’ or ‘technical’ appreciation, in which texts are enjoyed for their constituent parts rather than as narratively coherent wholes. It is a form of appreciation that seems to require a disposition of reflexive anti-reflexivity: only by adopting non-identificatory forms of engagement in which the ethico-political implications of horror texts are ignored can emotional distanciation be achieved. It is also an approach which assumes that horror texts can be experienced as somewhat banal: as something which can be divided into its individual components and be assessed at an emotional remove, rather than something which provides an intense and immersive experience.

Cannibal Corpse’s lyrical scenarios have clear counterparts in graphic horror cinema insofar as the way that they are presented suggests an emphasis on grisly spectacle rather than narrative development or resolution. Cannibal Corpse’s horrific scenarios are largely disengaged from a narrative logic. Only the violence itself is depicted: no broader narrative context is provided through which to make sense of the action. Of all the songs on the first two albums, ‘Shredded humans’ (1990) provides the most detailed context for the violence and is the most coherent of the lyrical scenarios offered. However, this context is very brief: all we know about the perpetrator is that he is a “homicidal fool”, and all we are told about the victims is that they are a “family

of five” on their way home following a “day in the sun”. The lyrics primarily centre on the *results* of the car accident—the intestines strewn on the road, the victims’ smashed skulls, burning flesh and gushing blood. In addition, sections of verse are repeated in ways that confuse any sense of narrative development. Consider, for example, the song’s opening verse:

Early hours, open road, family of five—on their way home  
 Having enjoyed a day in the sun, their  
 Encounter with gore has just begun  
 A homicidal fool not knowing left from right  
 Now has the family in his sight  
 Trying to perceive if he’s blind or insane, he  
 Steers his car into the other lane.

This verse, which would appear to both introduce and contextualise the ensuing violence, is repeated in the second half of the song where it no longer serves an explanatory or contextualising function. As a result, the listener is provided with few tools with which to make sense of the violence.

Whereas ‘Shredded humans’ has a semblance of narrative context, the majority of Cannibal Corpse’s songs feature wholly abstract depictions of violence and gore. In such cases, the subject of the violence is often unclear. For example, ‘Under the rotted flesh’ (1991) is ostensibly a depiction of the necrophiliac and cannibalistic urges of a protagonist who violates and consumes rotting corpses. However, the lyrics use descriptions of live and dying bodies more or less interchangeably with the images of decomposing corpses. The narrator describes how he “rip[ped] the *corpse* in half” in order to consume “human shit for nourishment” and then goes on to talk about “consuming feces of the *dying*” (emphases added). This slippage between ‘dead’ and ‘dying’ works to obscure the subject of the violence. A slippage between pronouns “you” and “her” suggest a similar kind of confusion. Consider the verse:

The bodies prepared for slaughter, wallowing in your own blood  
 Grinding of your fingers and toes feeding on your meat  
 I immerse my sharpened implement into a fresh bleeding gash  
 Her body used for my sick desires  
 The blood thirst I can't control.

In this section, it is unclear whether “you” are invited to identify with “her” (i.e. to imagine your fingers and toes ground into meat *and* your body used for his sick desires), whether these are separate events (i.e. *first* your fingers and toes are ground into meat, *then* her body is used for his sick desires), or whether the subject of the violence is less important than the descriptions of the violence itself.

The lyrics to ‘Covered with sores’ (1991) provide almost no context; the listener is offered instead a series of disconnected, and sometimes confusing, images. As with ‘Under the rotted flesh’, there is a slippage between the dead and the dying (in this case, between necrophilia and the rape of the dying). The protagonist talks about being “infected” and of infecting others (with what it is unclear), but almost all of the acts of violence described involve long-dead corpses. Interspersed with these are cryptic statements which do not provide enough contextual information to make sense of the material (e.g. “Remembering the future is the key to unlock my past”). In the absence of this contextual information, the listener is invited to focus primarily on the acts of violence themselves—the meat whittled from bones, the mutilated, defiled bodies. Each of these cases, then, suggests a rejection of identificatory models of music listening. Listeners are not invited to invest in the actions described in the song texts, but to observe them at an emotional remove.

Cannibal Corpse's lyrical focus on images of gore and violence suggest an appreciation of these as interesting in themselves. As Freeland has argued, a focus on graphic elements of gore and violence as aesthetically interesting is a key component of the distanced appreciation of graphic horror. In her work, this is partly a consequence of textual conventions that emphasise visual spectacle and partly the result of a cultivation of audience engagement (such as a 'technical' interest in how images of horror are constructed, rather than an emotional investment in the characters or in the action witnessed on screen). What this suggests is that violence and gore can become aesthetically interesting and enjoyed in the absence of conventional ethical, moral or political precepts once they become disengaged from narrative context and identificatory logic. In doing so, the acts of violence can come to be seen as essentially banal and uncontroversial.

In the case of Cannibal Corpse, this does not result in the interpellation of fractured, ambivalent listening subjects as is the case for Carcass, but in the cultivation of emotional distanciation. The abstract quality of the lyrics presents horrific scenarios not as an invitation to identification but as a point of aesthetic interest. This is supported by listeners' broader impulses towards reflexive anti-reflexivity: a refusal to engage with ethical or political questions in order for other kinds of musical experience to be explored and enjoyed.

If technical or distanced appreciation is a key component in the way that audiences are invited to engage with graphic horror texts, the kind of technical appreciation offered by Cannibal Corpse may not be of the lyrics (such as an appreciation of word choices

or language use), but in the way that abstract and ‘non-narrative’ images of horror come to support and complement a technical appreciation of ‘non-narrative’ elements of the music. In this case, the musical texts invite a technical appreciation of key riffs. Although Cannibal Corpse employ a greater number of structured repetitions than is the case for Carcass, songs are still largely arranged in the series of paratactic shifts that is characteristic of death metal more generally—and these discontinuous ‘blocks’ of riffs appear to be key to the ways in which listeners are invited to engage with the music.

For example, on a recent death metal DVD, a large group of fans are shown boisterously singing along to a series of Cannibal Corpse songs (Skinless 2004). However, the crowd is not shown singing along to the songs’ lyrics or even to the vocal line, but to the songs’ *main riffs*. This is a clear case in which it is the instrumentation, rather than the voice, that “engages [fans]’ desire most directly” (Cubitt 1984, p. 211). Fans’ investment in the guitar parts, rather than in the voice or the lyrics, suggests a way of engaging with this music that departs significantly from the conventional understandings of musical identification discussed in Chapter 3.

This invitation to invest in the music’s guitar parts as a kind of technical appreciation is evident in much of Cannibal Corpse’s songwriting.<sup>3</sup> As I have mentioned above, the band’s tendency to sandwich rhythmically complex riff sections between more straightforward ‘headbanging’ sections emphasises the complexity and technicality of

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<sup>3</sup> Although drumming is equally important in death metal songwriting, the focus of the discussion here is on the guitars, largely due to the way in which the guitar parts highlight most clearly the segmented pattern of death metal songs.



the songwriting, but conceives the riff sections as largely discrete musical moments. The listening focus of many of the songs is thus centred around powerful, interesting or iconic riffs. Songs like 'Edible autopsy' (1990) interrupt sections of regularly down-picked riffs with bursts of alternate picking, lending these riffs a powerful, staccato feel. In some cases, songs' arrangement directs listeners' attention to particular riffs or riff sections, such as the case of 'Butchered at birth' (1991), where riffs in the song's middle section are offered as a focus of listening. This middle section commences with a short breakdown that consists of triplets of palm-muted notes and single power chords performed only by the rhythm guitar. The absence of drums, bass, lead guitar and vocals in this section demarcates it from the rest of the track. Its brevity means that it functions mostly as a 'sign post' or introduction to the next section, which comprises one of the song's most rhythmically unpredictable riffs. The riff consists of very fast, almost 'trill'-like melodic triplets interspersed with palm-muted root notes. The final power chord of the riff lends the section an unusual and complex timing, requiring that the riff be repeated in blocks of three in order to conclude on the beat. That the arrangement invites listeners to focus on this section suggests both a highlighting and valuing of moments of technical complexity.

Importantly, key riffs are often not repeated in more than one riff section. The iconic opening riff of 'Covered with sores' (1991), for example, is not repeated or reprised outside of the song's introduction. The riff begins with three emphatic power chords, two palm-muted and one open. The next part of the riff features a series of three notes (the intervals being a minor third and then a single semi-tone) which are repeated at a chromatic interval. The combination of these intervals produces a characteristically

‘death metal’ sound that would be immediately recognisable to fans as a Cannibal Corpse ‘signature’. That such an iconic riff is not repeated at any other point in the song further highlights the ways in which listeners are invited to hear songs as composed of discrete riff sections rather than as coherent musical narratives.

In the 2000 re-issue of *Eaten Back to Life*, the liner notes include a short reflective piece by guitarist Jack Owen discussing the development and recording of the band’s debut album. He talks about a deliberate decision to concentrate on writing songs that were “more involved, and arranged more dramatically” than the band’s relatively straightforward, earlier demos. For example, the long instrumental introduction to ‘Buried in the backyard’ (1990) was added because the band was concerned that there were too many overly short songs on the album. This decision was made not with questions of storytelling or narrative coherence in mind, but stemmed from a desire to make the songwriting as ‘technical’ as possible. This emphasis on individual, technical riff sections suggests an invitation to listen to Cannibal Corpse’s music as a series of pleasurable, but largely discontinuous, musical moments. In such cases, technical mastery may not so much signify domination and control, as enable particular forms of musical appreciation.

The lack of opportunity for identification means that it is less likely for listeners to view Cannibal Corpse’s music as a reflection of their own values and attitudes. Although the predictability and rhythmic consistency to some of Cannibal Corpse’s songwriting suggests a greater opportunity for identification than is the case for Carcass, most of these rhythmically regular riff sections are largely ‘percussive’ in style

and do not offer a sense of melody (and are hence ‘non-narrative’ and non-identificatory in Cubitt’s terms). Footage of the band’s live performances suggests that, on the whole, non-identificatory forms of listening predominate. On live performances of ‘Born in a casket’ (1990) and ‘Covered with sores’ (1991), for example, the band members themselves headbang in unison to the songs’ rhythmically regular sections, but the audience moves in a far more disorderly fashion. They do not mosh or headbang in time with the beat, but move erratically about the front of the stage, randomly shoving each other, showing the ‘horns’ or punching the air.

These insistently non-identificatory modes of engagement suggest ways in which death metal’s orientation toward reflexive anti-reflexivity works to offer a particular kind of listening experience; in the case of Cannibal Corpse, it is an experience in which technical appreciation and emotional distancing are key components. This also suggests a textual basis for the logic of mundanity. After all, emotional distance is possible only if otherwise violent and aggressive musical/lyrical texts can be experienced as uncontroversial. On the whole, then, Cannibal Corpse may not provide access to musical becoming in quite the same way as Carcass. Although both bands form part of the same genre, Cannibal Corpse may be offering different kinds of listening experience. Still, if becomings offer new forms of thought and experience, Cannibal Corpse’s musical becoming may be to offer a different way of listening to and experiencing ordinarily contentious material—in this case, an opportunity to experience this material as abstract, fragmented elements rather than as coherent narrative wholes. In the end, then, thinking *with* the pleasures of death metal may require attention to individual bands and individual musical moments.

In this thesis, it has been my argument that analytical approaches which view political engagement as the most desirable outcome of popular music practice tend to neglect other pleasures that the music may offer. A more productive theorisation of death metal would necessitate attention not only to structures of power and inequality within the death metal scene or to the role of the music in producing or legitimating these structures, but also to the pleasures the music offers its listeners. These pleasures may be different for different examples of the genre. As a result, I am not suggesting that death metal criticism ‘replace’ political criticism with another overarching framework that seeks to explain what the music means; rather the different examples of the genre need to be thought on their own terms. Modes of listening such as musical becoming, reflexive anti-reflexivity, the logic of mundanity and ‘technical’ appreciation offer ways of thinking about the different kinds of pleasure offered by death metal. These alternative ways of thinking about death metal may reveal it to be not a “nihilistic dreamboat to negation” (Breen 1991, p. 192) after all, but a site of various pleasures and investments. Cultural studies need not dispense with its commitment to political criticism and social transformation, but rather it can broaden the critical vocabulary through which death metal (and perhaps also popular music more generally) is explored and understood. The ‘limits’ of political criticism need to be more carefully considered.

# CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have explored the ‘limits’ of political criticism within the scholarship of heavy and extreme metal. I have argued that, on the whole, critics’ analytical frameworks presuppose a set of values and priorities that lead them to subordinate questions of musical pleasure to political concerns. The political implications of metal music are important, but what *else* metal might be about has remained largely unexplored within work in this field.

Chapter 1 described a tendency within the cultural study of popular music to focus on the ethico-political implications, rather than listening pleasures, of popular music. Via discussions of the critical literature on punk, hip hop and electronic dance music, I argued that studies often assess the value and significance of different musical genres according to the extent to which they can be seen to address and resist social inequality. Punk is seen to provide a liberatory and egalitarian culture for disenfranchised whites: hip hop a radical activist culture for poor, urban blacks. Electronic dance music culture is understood to offer a pluralistic communitarianism that transcends inequalities based on race, class or gender. That studies are so often structured by political concerns, rather than by questions of how the music is or might be enjoyed and experienced by listeners, stems from cultural studies’ desire to find wider political agendas in all popular cultural practices.

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Rather than something which emerges through the process of analysis, then, the question of ‘politics’ is often a starting point for many studies. This has contributed significantly to the persistent negative characterisation of heavy and extreme metal that I discussed in Chapter 2. Critics focus on whether metal’s emphasis on pleasure and escapism diverts the energies of disaffected youth away from more productive political goals, or they consider whether the genre’s musical and performance conventions or ideologies of gender and race promote inequitable social relations within the scene. They tend not to consider how these aspects of the genre might operate as sources of musical pleasure. So, for example, musicians’ technical skill is considered not in terms of its ability to offer enjoyable listening experiences, but as a means of creating and legitimating hierarchical social relations in the metal scene, particularly with respect to gender. Because critics tend to be discomforted by dimensions of musical experience that cannot be readily connected to political concerns, progressive criticism of metal often operates as a framework for categorising ‘radical’ cultural activity rather than a means of understanding how the music becomes meaningful on its own terms.

The ‘reflectionist’ account of metal, which was discussed and critiqued in Chapter 3, is one means by which critics have sought to resolve this impasse. By viewing metal’s apparent nihilism and fatalism not as a political failure, but as a reflection of, and response to, fans’ material realities and life experiences, critics avoid much of the explicitly evaluative language of more ‘conventional’ cultural studies. Those adopting this approach argue that fans identify directly with the sentiments expressed in heavy and extreme metal; the preoccupation with themes of mayhem and destruction is thought to resonate with their own experiences of frustration and disenfranchisement,

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and to provide a means for them to “comprehend and critique” the realities of modern life (Walser 1993, p. 170). However, its tendency to assume an equivalence between metal’s musical and lyrical conventions and the attitudes and worldviews of its audience means that the ‘reflectionist’ approach often resembles (and, in some cases, legitimates) progressive criticism of the genre. For example, Chidester (2004) argues that by merely reflecting fans’ material realities (rather than seeking to change them), death metal promotes a fatalistic acceptance of the *status quo*. Meanwhile, Purcell (2003) defends death metal’s “pornographic” imagery by suggesting that it simply reflects biological male urges. In either case, the ‘reflectionist’ approach imposes an almost aggressively literalist understanding of metal’s sonic and lyrical conventions.

This is problematic because death metal appreciation involves a reorientation of conventional listening practices which means that the genre’s musical and lyrical conventions cannot be understood as a literal reflection of listeners’ values, attitudes or desires. Death metal’s displacement of the singing voice as an identificatory locus of listening, its disruption of conventional tonal, harmonic and melodic expectations, as well as its adoption of ‘non-narrative’ song structures, work to promote new experiences of listening, but these remain inadequately theorised by critics unable to countenance a disjuncture between death metal’s literal textual content and the musical pleasures it may offer listeners.

One of the main alternatives to the ‘reflectionist’ account of metal currently popular in metal scholarship is to approach the genre in terms of its potential for ‘moral panic’. As I argued in Chapter 4, this approach understands fans’ investment in the music as only

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tenuously related to its literal textual content, and understands the music instead as a discourse of transgression designed to shock and outrage conservative groups. Those adopting this position tend to view the moments in which metal has been embroiled in controversy or 'moral panic' as evidence of its counter-hegemonic potential; hence, this argument is often an attempt to claim a progressive politics for metal. Conservative condemnation is seized upon as a means of defending and legitimating heavy and extreme metal, in part because few alternatives currently exist for scholars seeking to challenge progressive criticisms of the genre, and in part because an overriding emphasis on the political implications and effects of popular cultural practices works to impose a particular kind of research agenda on the study and evaluation of these practices. The fact that even studies of death metal, a genre whose 'underground' status has largely insulated it from public scrutiny and moral panic, rely on a notion of the genre as under siege from conservative forces highlights the extent to which such an approach neglects alternative ways in which the meaning and significance of 'transgressive' or other contentious material might be theorised.

Any analytical approach which views political engagement as the most desirable outcome of popular music practice inevitably limits the ways in which controversy can be understood as a source of pleasure for death metal listeners. Rather than proof of the scene's nascent political radicalism, the discursive construction of metal as 'shocking' and 'dangerous' is often welcomed by scene members as an opportunity to play with transgressive musical and lyrical discourses without committing to any 'real' acts of transgression. A more detailed consideration of how this mundane production



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of transgression offers particular sorts of listening pleasure would help to expand the critical vocabulary through which the genre can be explored and understood.

Chapter 5 began to do this by offering readings of the music of Carcass and Cannibal Corpse. These were provided as some starting points for thinking through an alternative conception of the pleasures of death metal, and for building on insights and arguments introduced in the previous chapters. In this chapter, the pleasures of death metal were described as both complex and multiple, with the genre seen as providing the pleasures of mundane experience, of ethico-political evasion, of technical appreciation and of becoming. The music of Carcass, with its emphasis on musical and lyrical disruption, arguably offers access to an experience of musical becoming in which corporeal dissolution and ambivalent listening subjectivities are offered as sources of pleasure and play. In contrast, the more structured and predictable music of Cannibal Corpse invites modes of listening in which the 'technicalities' of musical composition are a central focus. By constructing its songs as a series of discontinuous musical moments, the band offer ordinarily contentious material as banal and as distanced from listeners' 'real' attitudes or beliefs. In this way, the music's invitation to ethico-political evasion can offer access to alternative forms of listening pleasure. Both readings suggested ways in which the pleasures of death metal might be thought *with*, rather than anchoring analyses to an evaluative agenda which subordinates questions of musical pleasure to an overarching concern with questions of politics.

This thesis offers some starting points for understanding the complexities of musical pleasure; interesting further work might involve ethnographic study to explore the

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ways in which death metal listeners understand and respond to these invitations in death metal musical and lyrical texts. In the end, though, an effective theorisation of death metal demands a suspension of prior judgements, and a refusal to answer the new questions raised using only pre-given tools.

In her study on *The Ethics of Cultural Studies*, Zylinska has demonstrated that cultural studies' has always been motivated by an ethical imperative, but in seeking to define or fix its object of study so that it might formulate its agendas and politics, cultural studies has not always *acted* ethically (2005, p. 34). She argues that a truly ethical cultural studies

will not provide a corrected version of morality in advance, even if it was to come disguised as political intervention. Instead...it will call for a permanent vigilance—towards the injustice and power games committed by the third party but also towards our own prejudices. (Zylinska 2005, p. 60)

One of these prejudices—the fear of apoliticism—has often prevented critics from fully engaging with the complexity and specificity of musical pleasure. This is relevant not just to the scholarship on heavy and extreme metal, but to popular music scholarship more generally. After all, if, as I have been arguing, the dominance of political criticism has limited the extent to which critics have been able to engage with and explore the pleasures of death metal, how might such an approach have limited our understanding of other musical genres? In metal scholarship, critics' discomfort about the genre's apparent disengagement from progressive politics has often served to foreclose the possibility of developing an alternative conceptual model that could explain metal's apoliticism without sacrificing an understanding of the complexity of musical pleasure. The 'limits' of political criticism reveal the importance of approaching musical genres on their own terms, and not in relation to a pre-determined evaluative framework. To fully deliver on its political and intellectual promise, a cultural studies

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approach appropriate to death metal needs to interrogate these issues more thoroughly. The genre awaits a more sympathetic exploration within the cultural study of popular music.

### **Post-script**

In October 2006, I had the opportunity to see Cannibal Corpse perform during their first tour of Australia since 1994. Upon entering the venue, I was slightly shocked to discover that, of the few women at the show, several were wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the words 'Fucked with a knife'. The slogan refers to a song on Cannibal Corpse's 1994 album *The Bleeding* that depicts a woman being brutally raped with a knife. This was a song that particularly concerned Kahn-Harris in his 2003 article on death metal. The thing I found more troubling than the song's lyrical content was that the shirts these women were wearing were small and tight-fitting: that is, they had been manufactured *specifically for* women. I found myself wondering both about the political implications of the shirt and women's willingness to wear it. What did this shirt say about the gender politics of the death metal scene? What is its impact on attitudes towards women in the scene? What does women's willingness to wear this shirt say about their relationship to the music and to the scene? I found it profoundly disturbing that these women could be so wilfully uncritical of the problematic gender politics of Cannibal Corpse in general and 'Fucked with a knife' in particular.

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Intellectually, I understood that this was simply an example of reflexive anti-reflexivity *par excellence*. Given the nature and extremity of the actions depicted in this song, it is most likely that these women were wearing the shirt as an expression of their commitment to the music and the band, and not as a sign of their endorsement of or desire to experience rape and brutality. Their willingness to wear the shirt is also an example of how reflexive anti-reflexive practice can be deeply discomforting. To approach death metal on its own terms in the way I have been suggesting—to think *with* reflexive anti-reflexivity—requires the adoption of an intellectual politics largely at odds with my personal politics. In some ways, this can be difficult, as it limits our ability to critique the aspects of the music and the scene with which we disagree or find politically or ethically problematic. In other ways, it can also be productive. Challenging our customary modes of political critique weakens the play of identification between academic and non-academic audiences that, as I have argued, has allowed many critics to systematically misrecognise their own interests as those of ‘the people’. Thinking death metal on its own terms forces us to acknowledge our politics as our own and not someone else’s on whose behalf we claim to act. In the end, if we are to fully understand the pleasures of death metal, cultural studies’ spirit of intellectual openness must be extended to all music cultures, not just to those most compatible with our own politics and agendas.

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## Select song list

- Cannibal Corpse 1990, 'A skull full of maggots', *Eaten Back to Life*, Metal Blade.
- 1990, 'Born in a casket', *Eaten Back to Life*, Metal Blade.
- 1990, 'Buried in the backyard', *Eaten Back to Life*, Metal Blade.
- 1990, 'Edible autopsy', *Eaten Back to Life*, Metal Blade.
- 1990, 'Mangled', *Eaten Back to Life*, Metal Blade.
- 1990, 'Put them to death', *Eaten Back to Life*, Metal Blade.
- 1990, 'Rotting head', *Eaten Back to Life*, Metal Blade.
- 1990, 'Scattered remains, splattered brains', *Eaten Back to Life*, Metal Blade.
- 1990, 'Shredded humans', *Eaten Back to Life*, Metal Blade.
- 1990, 'The undead will feast', *Eaten Back to Life*, Metal Blade.
- 1991, 'Butchered at birth', *Butchered at Birth*, Metal Blade.
- 1991, 'Covered with sores', *Butchered at Birth*, Metal Blade.
- 1991, 'Gutted', *Butchered at Birth*, Metal Blade.
- 1991, 'Innards decay', *Butchered at Birth*, Metal Blade.
- 1991, 'Living dissection', *Butchered at Birth*, Metal Blade.
- 1991, 'Meat hook sodomy', *Butchered at Birth*, Metal Blade.
- 1991, 'Rancid amputation', *Butchered at Birth*, Metal Blade.
- 1991, 'Under the rotted flesh', *Butchered at Birth*, Metal Blade.
- 1992, 'Hammer smashed face', *Tomb of the Mutilated*, Metal Blade.

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- 1992, 'Necropedophile', *Tomb of the Mutilated*, Metal Blade.
- 1992, 'Split wide open', *Tomb of the Mutilated*, Metal Blade.
- 1994, 'Fucked with a knife', *The Bleeding*, Metal Blade.
- Carcass 1988, 'Burnt to a crisp', *Reek of Putrefaction*, Earache.
- 1988, 'Carbonized eyesockets', *Reek of Putrefaction*, Earache.
- 1988, 'Feast on dismembered carnage', *Reek of Putrefaction*, Earache.
- 1988, 'Fermenting Innards', *Reek of Putrefaction*, Earache.
- 1988, 'Festerday', *Reek of Putrefaction*, Earache.
- 1988, 'Psychopathologist', *Reek of Putrefaction*, Earache.
- 1988, 'Splattered cavities', *Reek of Putrefaction*, Earache.
- 1988, 'Suppuration', *Reek of Putrefaction*, Earache.
- 1988, 'Vomited anal tract', *Reek of Putrefaction*, Earache.
- 1989, 'Cadaveric incubator of endoparasites', *Symphonies of Sickness*, Earache.
- 1989, 'Embryonic necropsy and devourment', *Symphonies of Sickness*, Earache.
- 1989, 'Excoriating abdominal emanation', *Symphonies of Sickness*, Earache.
- 1989, 'Exhume to consume', *Symphonies of Sickness*, Earache.
- 1989, 'Reek of putrefaction', *Symphonies of Sickness*, Earache.
- 1989, 'Ruptured in purulence', *Symphonies of Sickness*, Earache.
- 1989, 'Slash dementia', *Symphonies of Sickness*, Earache.

### Select discography

3rd and the Mortal 1994, *Tears Laid in Earth*, Head Not Found.

Aborted 2001, *Engineering the Dead*, Listenable.

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- A.C. 1994, *Everyone Should Be Killed*, Earache.
- Agoraphobic Nosebleed 2002, *Frozen Corpse Stuffed With Dope*, Relapse.
- Anathema 1992, *The Crestfallen*, Peaceville.
- Anthrax 1987, *Among the Living*, Island.
- 1988, *State of Euphoria*, Megaforce/Island.
- Arch Enemy 1999, *Burning Bridges*, Century Media.
- 2001, *Wages of Sin*, Century Media.
- Atheist 1991, *Unquestionable Presence*, Relapse.
- At the Gates 1995, *Slaughter of the Soul*, Earache.
- Bathory 1985, *The Return...*, Black Mark.
- 1987, *Under the Sign of the Black Mark*, Black Mark.
- 1988, *Blood Fire Death*, Black Mark.
- Black Sabbath 1971, *Paranoid*, Vertigo.
- Blood Duster 1996, *Yeast*, Relapse.
- Blue Öyster Cult 1976, *Agents of Fortune*, Columbia.
- Bon Jovi 1986, *Slippery When Wet*, Mercury.
- Brutal Truth 1992, *Extreme Conditions Demand Extreme Responses*, Relapse.
- Burzum 1996, *Filosofem*, Misanthropy.
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- 1991, *Butchered at Birth*, Metal Blade.
- 1992, *Tomb of the Mutilated*, Metal Blade.
- 1994, *The Bleeding*, Metal Blade.

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- 1996, *Vile*, Metal Blade.
- 1998, *Gallery of Suicide*, Metal Blade.
- 1999, *Bloodthirst*, Metal Blade.
- 2002, *Gore Obsessed*, Metal Blade.
- 2004, *The Wretched Spawn*, Metal Blade.
- 2006, *Kill*, Metal Blade.
- Carcass 1988, *Reek of Putrefaction*, Earache.
- 1989, *Symphonies of Sickness*, Earache.
- 1991, *Necroticism: Descanting the Insalubrious*, Earache.
- 1993, *Heartwork*, Earache.
- 1996, *Swansong*, Earache.
- Cathedral 1993, *The Ethereal Mirror*, Earache.
- 1995, *The Carnival Bizarre*, Earache.
- County Medical Examiners 2002, *Forensic Fugues and Medicolegal Medleys*, Razorback.
- Cradle of Filth 1997, *Dusk and Her Embrace*, Music For Nations.
- 1998, *Cruelty and the Beast*, Music For Nations.
- Cryptopsy 1996, *None So Vile*, Wrong Again.
- Cynic 1993, *Focus*, Roadrunner.
- Dark Tranquillity 1995, *The Gallery*, Osmose.
- Darkthrone 1994, *Transylvanian Hunger*, Peaceville.
- Death 1987, *Scream Bloody Gore*, Combat.
- Def Leppard 1983, *Pyromania*, Mercury.
- Deicide 1990, *Deicide*, Roadrunner.
- 1995, *Once Upon the Cross*, Roadrunner.



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- Dimmu Borgir 1999, *Spiritual Black Dimensions*, Nuclear Blast.
- 2001, *Puritanical Euphoric Misanthropia*, Nuclear Blast.
- Dismember 1991, *Like an Ever Flowing Stream*, Nuclear Blast.
- Dokken 1984, *Tooth and Nail*, Elektra.
- 1987, *Back for the Attack*, Elektra.
- Dying Fetus 1998, *Killing on Adrenaline*, Morbid.
- Emperor 1994, *In the Nightside Eclipse*, Candlelight.
- Entombed 1990, *Left Hand Path*, Earache.
- Exhumed 1998, *Gore Metal*, Relapse.
- General Surgery 1991, *Necrology*, Relapse.
- Godflesh 1989, *Streetcleaner*, Earache.
- In Flames 1997, *Whoracle*, Nuclear Blast.
- Iron Maiden 1982, *The Number of the Beast*, EMI.
- 1988, *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son*, EMI.
- Judas Priest 1978, *Stained Class*, Columbia.
- Kiss 1975, *Alive*, Casablanca.
- Led Zeppelin 1971, *Led Zeppelin IV*, Atlantic.
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- Mayhem 1993, *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas*, Deathlike Silence.
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- Metallica 1984, *Ride the Lightning*, Megaforce/Elektra.
- 1986, *Master of Puppets*, Elektra.
- 1988, *...And Justice for All*, Elektra.

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- Morbid Angel 1991, *Blessed are the Sick*, Earache.
- Mourning Beloveth 2001, *Dust*, Sentinel.
- My Dying Bride 1994, *Turn Loose the Swans*, Peaceville.
- Napalm Death 1987, *Scum*, Earache.
- Nasum 2003, *Helvete*, Relapse.
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- Pig Destroyer 2004, *Terrifyer*, Relapse.
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- Quiet Riot 1983, *Metal Health*, Pasha.
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- Regurgitate 1994, *Effortless Regurgitation of Bright Red Blood*, Lowland.
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