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ARTICLE

Imaginaries of spirituality, violence and health impacts in metal music: A critical history and case study

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ABSTRACT
In popular discourse, and in some research on music and health, a vague but universal healing potential is sometimes attributed to music in general. An important counterpoint appears in heavy metal music, which is often assumed to have deleterious effects on listeners and on society. This article reviews debates in politics, news media and research on health and metal music from the 1970s to the present, with particular focus on the UK and US contexts. Showing that research has been influenced by moral panics and legal controversies, the article demonstrates how ideas about transgressive religiosity have often influenced debates about health and harm surrounding metal music. A disciplinary and methodological polarisation is noted between, on one hand, psychological and behavioural lab experiments, and on the other, social sciences and humanities research with more ethnographic or contextual approaches. Noting that some lab-based methods seem highly contrived and even unethical, this article argues for an approach to research in this field which studies real listening practices. A case study of violence, religion and health is then outlined concerning the extreme subgenre of drone metal. In this music culture, listener discourses touch on mysticism, ritual and the sacred; on health, healing and catharsis; and on different modes of abstract and physical violence, in highly interrelated and sometimes surprising ways. The article concludes that noise and extreme music may offer particularly powerful —yet under-appreciated, at least to critics outside metal cultures— resources for positively influencing listeners' health.

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INTRODUCTION

From development in the early 1970s in the UK to a truly globalised spread over the following decades, heavy metal music has consistently attracted controversies in which ideas and extreme claims are made about connections between religion, violence and health in relation to the music. This article briefly outlines the history of this heated debate about the impacts of metal music on audiences and on society, a discussion which has taken place in public discourse, in court, and in research, particularly in the US and the UK. Assessing the connections between violence, religion and health in scholarship on metal and in public arguments about the music, I note a disciplinary polarisation where psychological and clinical research more often finds evidence for metal having deleterious effects, while sociological and humanities-based research tends to defend metal audiences and their music. Having examined some of the epistemological and methodological assumptions and orientations underpinning such studies, I call for an approach to studying music's effects which acknowledges an evident connection between ideas about religion, violence and health in metal music. In addition, metal's frequent depiction as music assumed to have seriously damaging effects on audiences is an important (though, again, overly polarised) counterexample to the sometimes uncritical magical thinking about 'the power of music' to simply and straightforwardly make things better. A more nuanced examination of metal, then, encourages us to seriously address the likelihood that different kinds of music, and participation in musical cultures, may have positive and/or negative effects, and that such impacts may intersect in complex ways. Further, responding to the rather artificial contexts in which some psychological or behavioural studies have been conducted (and from which sweeping generalisations have been extrapolated), I argue that conclusions about the impact of music on audiences must be drawn from assessment of the real contexts in which those audiences encounter that music. The controversial background of metal's historical reception overshadows or at least informs almost any contemporary engagement with metal, where even casual listeners are aware of its history of provoking moral panic and associations with transgression. Given this ongoing resonance, I explore listeners' engagement with drone metal, a marginal and extreme form of metal music, around which circulates ideas about catharsis, violence, mysticism and ritual. From ethnographic participation and discourse analysis of recordings, performances and surrounding artworks and discussion, I explore how ideas about violence, mysticism and ineffability inform listeners' understanding of the music's effects, how listening practices are developed and interpreted, and how violence and religiosity may be more inextricably linked to catharsis, therapy and healing in metal music than previous research frameworks have considered.

IDEAS ABOUT VIOLENCE AND RELIGION FROM METAL MUSIC'S ORIGINS TO A GLOBAL REACH

Black Sabbath's first recording, released in 1970 and widely considered as a mythical origin point for metal, already evokes concerns about the effects of encountering Satan (Black Sabbath, 1970). Ever since, through decades of stylistic diversification, global expansion, and continuously evolving quests for extremity, representatives of metal and its offshoots and subdivisions have explored transgression and prompted controversy through sounds as well as in representations of bodily abjection, occult or unusual approaches to spirituality, and radical depictions of the relationship between individuals and society.

In 1985, a group of powerful women led by Tipper Gore, wife of then senator Al Gore, formed the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) in response to what they considered to be outrageous content in contemporary popular music. Metal was not the only style identified as objectionable, as hip-hop was also prominently featured, as were some female and/or queer mainstream pop musicians. The campaign against corrupting influences did, though, foment concern about metal that lasted beyond the PMRC's limited reign. A particular feature of the PMRC's activities, which included media campaigns and senate hearings, was their 'Filthy Fifteen' list of especially horrifying songs, categorising problematic content according to sex, drug use, violence and occultism (Table 1).

Artist	Song	Genre	Theme
Prince	Darling Nikki	Pop/R'n'B	Sex/masturbation
Sheena Easton	Sugar Walls	Pop	Sex
Judas Priest	Eat Me Alive	Metal	Sex
Vanity	Strap On 'Robbie Baby'	Pop	Sex
Mötley Crüe	Bastard	Metal	Violence/language
AC/DC	Let Me Put My Love Into You	Metal/hard rock	Sex
Twisted Sister	We're Not Gonna Take It	Metal	Violence
Madonna	Dress You Up	Pop	Sex
W.A.S.P.	Animal (Fuck Like a Beast)	Metal	Sex/language
Def Leppard	High 'n' Dry (Saturday Night)	Metal/hard rock	Drug and alcohol use
Mercyful Fate	Into the Coven	Metal	Occult
Black Sabbath	Trashed	Metal	Drug and alcohol use
Mary Jane Girls	In My House	Pop	Sex
Venom	Possessed	Metal	Occult
Cyndi Lauper	She Bop	Pop	Sex/masturbation

Table 1: Table of the Parents Music Resource Center's 'Filthy Fifteen' list of songs deemed corrupting to American youth

Nine of the 15 songs can be categorised as metal, or at least hard rock. While rap and hip-hop were certainly PMRC targets, notably Geto Boyz and Ice-T, no songs from those genres are included. All the non-metal tracks are highlighted for the theme of sex (or sex/masturbation), and aside from Prince, each of those non-metal tracks are by women as solo artists or in groups, suggesting the PMRC had a particular fear of female and ambiguously non-hetero sexuality. While sex does feature as a concern for some metal (Judas Priest, AC/DC and W.A.S.P.), it is significant that all the other categories of problematic content (language, drug and alcohol use, violence and the occult) are attributed to metal music. Given that these were apparently the fifteen worst songs for young people, it is therefore implied that while pop music may cause concern relating to sex, metal's danger arises from sex, drug use, violence and the occult.

In subsequent court cases, moral panic controversies and sensationalist media representations, the latter two themes of violence and the occult became ever more strongly combined in association with metal's effects on its audiences. High-profile court cases in 1986 and 1990 sought to conflate metal music with violent influence and occult purposes, specifically attempting to blame teen suicides on apparent subliminal or dangerous effects of listening to particular metal tracks. Former Black Sabbath singer Ozzy Osbourne's 1980 song 'Suicide Solution' was accused of malevolent influence in the 1984 suicide of Daniel McCollum in California, with the parents suing Osbourne and the record company. Osbourne defended the song as a cautionary tale about alcoholism which referenced AC/DC singer Bon Scott's recent death, and the case against the song failed. In 1990, a song by Judas Priest, 'Better by You, Better than Me' which had been released in 1978 on the album *Stained Class* (the song in fact being a cover of rock band Spooky Tooth's 1969 original) was alleged to be responsible for the joint suicide attempt of James Vance and Ray Belknap in Nevada. Both young men shot themselves, with Belknap dying but Vance surviving the injury (though he died three years later after a painkiller overdose). Vance's parents argued that a subliminal message ('do it') had been included in the song, and it was this message which prompted the shotgun incident. The band's singer Rob Halford defended their actions, arguing that including messages to kill their own fans would be counterproductive, and that in any case the message 'do it' was extremely vague. The case was also thrown out.

An array of similar controversies have since broken out in the US and elsewhere, featuring parents and other self-appointed moral guardians alleging that particular recordings or bands, or the metal genre itself, had influenced young people to cause violence to themselves or others. In the US, Slayer songs 'Postmortem' (1986) and 'Dead Skin Mask' (1990) were unsuccessfully alleged in a 2000 court case to have incited three teenagers to the 1995 rape and murder of Elyse Pahler in California; Marilyn Manson, KMFDM and Rammstein were implicated in the 1999 Columbine school shootings by two teenagers who listened to those bands (with Marilyn Manson attracting the most attention, as an American artist with a higher profile than the other two German industrial metal bands). In Europe, media attention was attracted to the early 1990s 'second-wave' black metal scene in Norway after musicians were associated with (and sometimes convicted of) several church burnings, as well as instances of murder and suicide (see Moynihan & Søderlind, 1998); while the 'Beasts of Satan' murders in 1998 and 2004 in Italy connected metal music to Satanism (with metal fans included amongst the victims as well as the perpetrators). In the Norwegian cases, church arson was connected to sonic extremity together with acts of violence between musicians, and it seems likely that accusations against Marilyn Manson were fanned by then-recent album title *Antichrist Superstar* (1996). In locations outside Western Europe and North America, too, association with metal music has been targeted by authorities as deviance in ways that conflate religious transgressions with threats to political and social order (Barone, 2015; Hecker, 2012; LeVine, 2009; Magout, 2010).

This history of controversy has frequently conflated the question of metal's impact on individual and social health with the issue of metal's religious connotations. Satanism and 'the occult' were themes in metal that were assumed to be obviously corrupting influences on young people (despite poor understandings of the diversity of meanings that each term could have), while religion, metal and violence were constantly juxtaposed in court cases, as if to show that metal caused religious deviance, which in turn caused violent crimes. Popular debate in news media often took a sensationalised lead from the PMRC's outraged and censorious tone and, as a result, research investigating such topics could not remain unmarked by this overwrought atmosphere.

RESEARCH ON METAL IN THE SHADOW OF MORAL PANIC

In contrast to some other areas of popular music, such as subcultural studies approaches to punk, research on metal has largely developed in response to this atmosphere of moral panic and controversy. A polarisation in terms of disciplinary background (and therefore in methodological and epistemological assumptions and general orientation) has also emerged over the decades in which metal has formed an object of study between psychology and behavioural or 'deviance' studies on one hand, and sociological or interdisciplinary humanities approaches on the other. Early scholarship on metal was often situated as behavioural and/or psychological research, with articles frequently stating that their studies were designed in direct response to media controversies about metal in general, and the PMRC's activities in particular (e.g. Greenfield et al., 1987, see especially p. 316). In some cases, it was clear that researchers were interested in the topic because of the PMRC, and that they expected or were seeking findings relevant to the PMRC's hypotheses of damage. This tendency appears in a particularly irresponsible example in which public debate about metal music and suicide prompted a study in which heavy metal magazine subscription rates were compared with youth suicide across 50 US states. From this flimsy connection the researchers found that "the greater the strength of the metal subculture, the higher the youth suicide rate", and also, through rather circular reasoning, that metal music "perhaps nurtures suicidal tendencies already present in the subculture" (Stack, Gundlach & Reeves, 1994, p. 15). A later publication by one of the researchers adds an implicitly moralistic judgement linking low religiosity to higher 'suicide acceptability' rates in US metal fans (Stack, 1998), reinforcing the combination of metal, transgression of normative religiosity, and violent damage to health.

While public debate can always influence research agendas, the sensationalist tone of media coverage seems to have influenced the research conversation, with Arnett, for example, acknowledging that questions in one of the first studies to include the responses of metal listeners were "based partly on the public debate over whether or not heavy metal music is a destructive influence on adolescents who listen to it" (Arnett, 1991, p. 78). A study which sought to draw links between metal and rap and 'adolescent turmoil', for example, set out by assuming that such music contains 'negative messages', unquestioningly reports that adults correctly understood lyrics to be about Satanism and violence while adolescent listeners 'misinterpret' songs to be about dealing with everyday life, and define 'turmoil' as a broad umbrella term which includes a lack of religious affiliation, and draws participants from a population receiving mental health care who already by definition are considered as 'in turmoil' (Took & Weiss, 1994). The prejudice in these supposed representatives of objective science is stark, especially when combined with some attempts at a 'knowing' humour which expects or perhaps attempts to manufacture in readers agreement about the obviously dreadful aspects of metal and its audiences, underscoring how pervasive such stereotypes were in the US in the 1980s and 1990s. See, for example, Marianna Wertz on David Merrill's poorly designed, wasteful and deeply unethical student research project in which loud metal music was played at mice for 24 hours a day until many of them died, and in which it is taken for granted that the music somehow contained 'bad morals' (Wertz, 1998).

The shadow of the PMRC, tabloid speculation, and moral panic, is evident in 1980s and 1990s studies on metal, influencing the production of research and often showing through in biases, assumptions, arbitrary and decontextualising methodologies, and overreaching conclusions of researchers. A strong connection between metal music, damaging violence, and dangerous religion was nevertheless established in the public imagination and confirmed by research which designed methods specifically to provide evidence for such ideas. As Paul King —author of early studies linking metal music and drug abuse, and expert witness at a 1985 PMRC senate hearing— wrote, metal music itself for young people was a problematic 'new religion' (King, 1985, 1988).

SOCIOLOGICAL DEFENCES OF METAL AND ITS LISTENERS

A response came from a sociological and, later, a broader humanities perspective, which explicitly sought to defend metal audiences from such attacks, notably in the work of Donna Gaines (1991) and Deena Weinstein (1991). Weinstein's book opens with three pages of quotes by metal's detractors, from politicians and music critics to religious leaders and academics, before setting forth her attempt to "step back and reveal the elusive subject that is at the center of the controversy" and "show how heavy metal music is made, used, and transmitted" (Weinstein, 1991, pp. 3-4). Similarly, Gaines begins by discussing teen suicide (and her apprehension about studying it) before declaring herself "really pissed off at what [she] kept reading", indicating that her work was motivated by observing others' refusal to listen to young people and dismissal of their agency (Gaines, 1991, p. 6). Influenced by these books, and no doubt by the gradually increasing acceptance of popular music as an object of study in subcultural studies, sociology or analysis of lyrics and music videos, more work on metal appeared from the later 1990s.

In defending metal, some scholars sought to disassociate metal from Satanism, arguing that occult references were simply provocative symbolic play. While this was true in some cases, it was certainly not in all; King Diamond of PMRC-censured band Mercyful Fate is, for example, a self-described and longstanding Satanist. Attempts to disarticulate metal and problematic religion thus left unchallenged an assumed causal relation between transgressive religion and violent acts. Other defences of metal criticised the untheorized, uncritical models of musical meaning that were implicit in some research on deviance (as well as in popular media narratives, highly publicised court cases, and in the campaigns of moral entrepreneurs). Robert Walser and Glenn Pillsbury, for example, have both cast doubt on the 'hypodermic' model in which harmful messages or influences are imagined to implant directly into listeners' brains (Pillsbury, 2006; Walser, 1993). While such assumptions are rightly criticised, it is important to avoid concluding that, therefore, music cannot have negative effects, is not related to Satanism or transgressive religion, and has no connection to violence, aggression or trauma, for example. About the history of research on religion in metal and popular culture more broadly, Titus Hjelm has observed that

> in academic terms, there seems to be a discrepancy between the attitude of the earlier debunkers and the emerging paradigm that argues that popular culture and the media are important —perhaps even primary— sources of religious identity formation in late modernity. (Hjelm, 2015, pp. 494-495)

The same point can be made about metal's relationship with health and violence; a question that has often been framed in relation to issues of religiosity in society. Research influenced by moral panic controversies tended to assume that metal had dangerous and pathological effects based on crude models of musical influence, which were then sharply criticised by research based in humanities approaches. Later research developing from those studies in sociology and musicology, however, assumes that music and participation in musical cultures can be rich and vital resources for socialisation, learning, health and perhaps religion.

Further complicating the uses of musical cultures as rich and vital resources is an awareness of this pervasively contested history of claim, counterclaim and controversies. Metal listeners cannot help but have their responses in some way influenced by the pre-existing cloud of extreme and sensationalist ideas that have circulated around the music culture for so long. Pierre Hecker recognises the effects for both adherents and opponents of metal culture in Turkey:

> The phenomenon of a moral panic may be volatile, but its impact as far as the effects of symbolization persists much longer. People may be quick in forgetting about the actual events of a moral panic, but the newly formed categories (long hair, black clothes = Satanist) persist in their minds, consequently affecting their future thoughts and behaviour. (Hecker, 2012, p. 115)

That participants in metal cultures are always at least implicitly responding to prior controversies about religion and violence is also shown within metal culture's productions. An extreme twist on the influence of mutual feedback between detractors adherents is reported by researcher (and Church of Satan member) Gavin Baddeley, wherein death metal band Deicide were involved in performing a 'Satanic' ritual. The researcher could find no evidence of the particulars of this ritual in actual Satanic tradition, but instead in media description – according to Baddeley, the ritual which was invented by sensationalist moral panic, and only then performed for real by the metal band (Baddeley, 2010). Mötley Crüe, who were included on the PMRC's 'Filthy Fifteen' list, included in album sleeves for some versions of *Shout at the Devil* (1983) the printed line "Warning: May contain backward messages", making a knowing, sarcastic and perhaps daring play on the earlier controversies.

This feedback can also arguably be found in research contexts: in an article linking metal-listening to alienation, Jeffrey Arnett quotes a listener approvingly citing Mötley Crüe's anti-drugs message. While it is possible that this listener is describing in earnest their interpretation of a particular song, it seems perhaps more likely, given Mötley Crüe's notorious party lifestyle and straightforward glamorising of alcohol and drugs, that the fan is in fact gently teasing the researcher by making an obviously counterintuitive suggestion (in Arnett, 1991, p. 81). These are examples of what Deena Weinstein describes as the 'proud pariah' status of the metal listener, where a rebellious outsider status is actively welcomed and cultivated (Weinstein, 1991), with transgressive subcultural capital accrued (Kahn-Harris, 2007). As Benjamin Hedge Olson has observed,

> it is crucial to understand that the satanic cult conspiracy was not simply a paranoid delusion that existed exclusively in the minds of conservative Christians. Metalheads, from the earliest days of the genre, have embraced these characterizations to varying degrees. (Olson, 2017, p. 51)

'HOT SAUCE RESEARCH' CONTINUES

Past the turn of the century, research on metal has continued to develop along these divided lines. Research based in humanities and social sciences has gradually become a thriving research community of 'Metal Studies', with an International Society, a biannual international conference supplemented with a large number of other symposia, and a dedicated journal, *Metal Music Studies*. Metal Studies research is not often referenced in psychological and behavioural research, and vice versa. Meanwhile, psychological and behavioural research about metal in relation to traits such as aggression, emotion-processing and anger has continued, with experimental design generally based on interventions tested in artificial lab conditions. For example, in 2011, John Mast and Francis McAndrew published in the *North American Journal of Psychology* the results of an experiment designed to test the hypothesis that violent lyrics in metal 'cause' aggression (already implying that this connection existed). Groups of test subjects either listened to metal or did not and, after the metal or silence condition, were asked to add as much hot sauce as they wished to drinking water which was supposedly to be given to other individuals to drink. The metal-condition participants "added significantly more hot sauce"; the researchers concluded that this was "clear evidence that exposure to such lyrics was linked to aggressive behaviour" (Mast & McAndrew, 2011, p. 64). Aside from the complete absurdity of this method as a measure for aggression, the nature of the test is unethical: it is either unethical to put individuals in the position of drinking hot-sauce water (or even to simply waste their time), or it is unethical to lie to participants for no good reason. Indeed, if (as I suspect) participants guessed that no-one was going to actually drink the hot-sauce water, this renders the methodology itself entirely inconclusive (Mast & McAndrew, 2011). This is a particularly silly but by no means unusual or remarkable method in the field, which metal researcher Tore Tvarnø Lind has, in honour of this study, described collectively as 'hot sauce research' (Lind, 2016). Another example is a study comparing physical arousal between heavy metal and silence conditions, in which researchers specifically chose women subjects who did not like metal without justifying or explaining this choice (Becknell et al., 2008, p. 26). A further study measured physical responses to music for coping with stress, in which a metal condition was introduced as opposed to a self-selected relaxing music or silence condition, with a passing admission that the purpose of using metal was to agitate the listener, seemingly without imagining that anyone could self-select metal as relaxing (Labbe et al., 2007). While these methods may be outlandish, the sweeping and overreaching conclusions drawn from them can be dangerous and irresponsible, particularly when reported in news and popular media without critical examination but with the powerful, if implicit, backing of scientific authority. If they do correctly assert (or, arguably, contribute to) a conceptual connection between metal and violence, such studies sadly do not help us much in understanding how metal can potentially affect health and harm of listeners in the contexts in which they engage with the music.

In summary, a history of controversy, media sensationalism, and politicised research on metal music has produced such a fraught and polarised discourse that metal's impact on audiences unfortunately cannot be considered outside of this context. That is, a background of claims, stereotypes, myths, and contestations between moral panics and the vociferous defences of metal audiences are always implicit, and research on metal is already responding to these themes and contestations in some way, even if this is not overtly stated. Given this overdetermined history, a more complex acknowledgement of the possibilities and potential of music to be helpful and to be harmful in different or complicatedly intersecting ways, it is therefore necessary to give an account of metal's relation with health and harm by engaging with individuals and communities participating in musical cultures. More nuanced approaches have been put forth which attempt to somewhat bridge the divide in orientation and methodologies between humanities and medical science approaches. Research by teams involving Suvi Saarikallio and Katrina McFerran, for example, have used both qualitative and quantitative methods in research on metal-listening, mental health and youth, while working on the basis that music may have healthy and/or unhealthy impacts, an unusually nuanced approach to this topic (Hines & McFerran, 2014; McFerran et al., 2015; Saarikallio, Gold & McFerran, 2015).

I hope to contribute to this literature by summarising the findings of my ethnographic project on an extreme form of heavy metal (Coggins, 2015, 2018). This research allows the possibility for music to have helpful and/or harmful impacts on individuals and groups, and acknowledges that a strong connection exists in metal between ideas about violence, religion, and health, while resisting simplistic explanations of cause and effect. Emphasising the need for research into the real contexts in which people engage with extreme music and how they understand its impacts on them, I explore how the language of ritual, transcendence, spirituality and mysticism in response to drone metal music overlaps with discourses of catharsis, healing, health, and also violence in various forms.

DRONE METAL: A CASE STUDY IN VIOLENCE, RELIGION AND HEALTH

Drone metal is a marginal and unusual form of heavy metal characterised by extremes of repetition, extension, amplification and distortion, with metal riffs stretched and elongated to slow and monotonous dirges, and tracks sometimes lasting as long as an hour. Appearing in album artworks, titles, concert performance practices, associated imagery, and, importantly, in listener discourse surrounding the music, are a range of ideas, symbols and themes relating to a variety of religious traditions. Some bands, such as Om, employ an overt bricolage from sacred texts and artistic traditions; for example, using an orthodox-style icon of John the Baptist on an album with a name, *Advaitic Songs*, referencing Indian religion, which contains samples of Islamic pilgrimage prayers and a recitation of a Hindu mantra, as well as references to Kabbalah and Christianity (Om, 2012). Other musicians deploy more oblique references which still connect, if indirectly, to ideas about religion; such as Earth's references to William Blake's visionary imagery, Biblical riddles, or angels and demons in titles (Earth, 2005, 2008, 2011), or Bong's fragmentary quotes of Lord Dunsany's fantasy tales about weird fictional gods (Bong, 2011, 2012). Likewise, some listeners respond to and recirculate such ideas and references relating to religion more than others, but engagement with this music on records or in live performances frequently (though not at all exclusively) elicits descriptions in terms of ritual, mysticism and spirituality. In five years of ethnographic research with this marginal, fragmentary and translocal music scene, I have attended hundreds of drone metal live sets (often coinciding, or sharing bills, with other forms of extreme metal, or other forms of experimental music), conducted 74 ethnographic interviews with drone metal listeners, collected more than 300 survey responses about particular live shows or concert tours which I also attended, and compiled and analysed a vast amount of online materials relating to the music and surrounding culture. The particular focus of my doctoral project (Coggins, 2015) and subsequent book (Coggins, 2018) was how ideas and themes relating to mysticism and ritual circulated around the music, and how audiences participated in the construction of drone metal music as an ambivalent space in which listeners could explore engagements with spirituality and society.

While conducting this research, it became clear that listeners not only experienced and talked about the music in the shadow of the decades-long conversation about transgressive religiosity, social/individual health and violence, but that they also specifically found resources for health and therapy within the music. Further, it was evident that aspects or dimensions of violence, pain or suffering represented in, or even caused by the music, were important aspects of the therapeutic potential of the music. I will briefly outline relevant themes that characterise the description of drone metal by audiences, each of which are inflected with a sense of ritual, spirituality or mysticism. Drone metal is described as indescribable, and therefore special, in its extreme qualities; it is often connected to imaginary other times, other spaces and other states of bodily consciousness; materiality and (non-dualistic) bodily consciousness are prominent features in musical engagement; and shifting conceptions of violence are crucial elements of the most powerful instances of responding to drone metal. These themes together prompt an overlapping rhetoric of mysticism and catharsis which is reported to represent profound and lasting beneficial effects. These findings I present in order to provide a methodological and epistemological counterpoint to the previously discussed research, which has correctly identified a connection between violence and health in metal often expressed in terms of religiosity and transgression, but which has mistakenly attempted to simplify this in order to conclude either that listening to metal causes violence, aggression, suicide, self-harm or delinquency, or instead that the socially experienced violence of anomie and alienation ‘causes’ young people to listen to metal. Instead, from this case study, I argue for a more complex understanding of the shifting significance of violence and its connection to ritual in music and in metal in particular. Such an approach would pay attention to the self-directed ways in which individuals and listening communities find and develop uses for music which they understand to be helpful and healthy in response to their conditions and situations.

FROM MYSTICISM TO CATHARSIS THROUGH VIOLENCE

Often the first thing said about drone metal is that it is indescribable, in album or concert reviews, or in survey responses, interviews or fieldwork conversations; and just as often, claims that the musical experience is indescribable is followed by description which can be elaborate, lengthy, humorous, absurd and enlightening: “We can’t describe this experience: it is loud, dark, violent, meditative, powerful”, reported one survey respondent asked to describe drone metal performance. Or, people mention the necessity of talking about drone metal and its deeply felt impacts, even if it is impossible to know how. I asked a listener in an interview, “Did you talk about the performance with your friends afterwards?”, they responded, “Yes, but what can you say?”. This resonates with the recognition in the 20th-century study of religion that descriptions of indescribability or ineffability is a characteristic of mysticism, and this indescribability is connected to the lasting, transformative and potentially healing power of engagements with mysticism (James, 1982; Sells, 1994).

Rather than suggesting that these paradoxical statements are in some way mistaken, however, I suggest that they are deliberate attempts to strain the boundaries of language and therefore demonstrate its limits. As Michel de Certeau writes of ineffability in mystical discourse, “the ineffable is therefore not so much an object of discourse as a marker of the status of language” (Certeau, 1995, p. 443). This performative contradiction can be understood alongside other rhetorical strategies such as jokes or self-conscious hyperbole and excess, where drone metal, for example, was described in surveys as “Like traveling through middle ages wearing capes”, “similar to death”, or, in a surreal and grammar-contorting example, as “like rusty needles of time would be taken from my eyes”. Here language is called upon in order to communicate, because of a basic communal impulse to discuss and compare events of significance; yet it is simultaneously reduced to failure or malfunction, precisely in order to assert or acknowledge the importance by discursively placing the event beyond what can be rendered in everyday language.

Another kind of estrangement is expressed in the many and varied ‘elsewheres’ that are evoked in talking about drone metal. Listeners discussing what the music is like, or reporting about attending a live concert or listening to a recording, call up images of far-off places such as deserts, mountains, oceans and forests, occasionally with exoticist notes; or distant epochs far in the past or future; or unusual states of bodily consciousness, such as being sick. Pilgrimage is a key theme in these descriptions (and indeed in album titles, for example Om’s 2007 recording of that name), with the music tending to be described in terms of journeys through outlandish vistas and altered states; the extraordinary and extended aspects of the journeys giving them a special, extreme quality that approaches a sense of the sacred or sublime.

Beyond referencing the traversal of ancient deserts or mountain ranges or outer space, language-use itself also shifts, such that there is not only movement in the content of description but also in form. For example, in the space of a short review, drone metal is described as being like pilgrimage, being a pilgrimage, and being like the music that pilgrims would listen to at the end of a journey. Elsewhere, grammatical shifts between discussing themes of music, then using metaphor, simile and identification effect similar shifts: from “drone metal is about…” to “drone metal is like…”, to “drone metal is similar to…”, to “drone metal is…” and so on. In language as well as thematic content, then, a shifting traversal is effected in communication about drone metal. The ways of talking about drone metal cover spirituality, magic, catharsis, transcendence and healing, with this terminology used ambiguously. Each theme is introduced with the caveat that it is not quite appropriate for describing something indescribable, but that it is language which approaches a certain resonance, or contains something that, if not quite accurate, hints in the right direction. What is unambiguous, however, amid these shifting themes, is the profound potential impact of this music; an importance that is asserted through claims that it is beyond language, and which is sought out for its extreme powers for catharsis.

USES OF VIOLENCE IN RESPONDING TO VIOLENT CONDITIONS: A SHIFTING RITUAL LOGIC

An important feature of the reported powerful impact of drone metal music is an abstract and multimodal understanding of violence and ritual. Violence has been straightforwardly represented as a general aura of malevolence around metal and related musics, associated with acts of aggression against individuals within and outside of the music culture, against the self, and against society itself. However, critical assessment has seldom addressed the mechanics of how violence is enacted, nor how exactly musical sounds and surrounding symbolism and practice are actually connected to violence beyond simplistic assumptions that bad lyrics are to blame. Analysis of ethnographic material on drone metal shows a much more complex relation between violence, ritual, health and metal music. Hyperbolic tales of bodily excess are common in drone metal, as in metal culture more broadly. Albums and concerts are routinely described as hitting listeners in the face, attacking audiences, or destroying their organs, for example; with this language becoming so conventional as to be read by those with any familiarity with metal as obviously commending the music. Drone metal, according to positive descriptions in surveys, interviews and reviews, "reduces your bones into the right spot", "destroy[s] bowels", makes "bones feel fuzzy", allows a listener to "feel [their] body liquefy". The music was compared to saunas, drugs, rollercoasters, extreme forces of nature, horror movies, sleeping, and even spicy food, for its qualities of physical engagement (Coggins, 2018).

While this pushing of language to absurdity in describing bodily impossibilities and excesses is clearly and self-consciously hyperbolic, it does connect to the actual physical impact of drone metal, particularly as experienced at live concerts. Extreme or unusual effects on the body are reported at gigs, including having difficulty breathing, noticing different areas of the body vibrating differently, feeling unable to move or swallow. At performances I observed extreme responses, such as people appearing transfixed, collapsing or even running away. While waiting for the band SunnO))) to perform in Bristol, I was told enthusiastically by fellow audience members that the last time they had seen that band, they had vomited almost as soon as they started playing; an experience they subsequently commemorated by getting tattoos. Stories of people experiencing vomiting, nosebleeds, and even involuntary defecation circulate, and while some seem exaggerated or apocryphal, it is significant that people enjoy telling and retelling such tales. Clearly an important symbolic aspect of the musical culture is circulated in stories of potential, rhetorically emphasised or hyperbolically imagined damage to the body, testifying to the extremity or even violence experienced in listening.

This violence appeared not just as incidental or anecdotally amusing, but as important constitutive aspects of listeners' engagement with the music. A sense of violence was even part of its (perhaps paradoxical) appeal, with listeners at least in part attributing to this violence the production of beneficial physical and social effects. The volume, and the materiality of the physical engagement of the body with sound, make listeners "mind their bodies", or push them to limits (Coggins, 2018, p. 159). One listener reported feeling that "It was really testing [...] something like hurt [...] Not a huge hurt but something difficult to experience. Yes, I think these difficulties are part of... give birth to something like a community, you know?", going on to describe how this gave a feeling of mutual communion with other audience members present because of a collective participation and endurance of a testing experience. The sense of violence shifts between the abstract and the concrete, from sounding aggressive or seeming to represent violence and suffering, to temporarily or permanently causing actual physical damage to ears and other organs. The production through drone metal of a strange response, which is striking through its distance from the everyday, in itself can prompt associations with religiosity and transcendence; and this sense of violent removal from the ordinary further connects with religion in anthropological theories of ritual. In these models, a certain aspect of violence is necessary in ritual in order to effect a demarcation between the ritual context and the mundane world which thus allows a powerful social sense of *communitas* with fellow ritual participants (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960); to channel the chaotic presocial violence into imposed social structures through the violence of a scapegoating mechanism (Girard, 1977); to assert conceptual categorisations, enforce adherence and punish or excise transgression (Douglas, 1966); to safely express the rebounding violence of social constraints in mediated ways (Bloch, 1992), and even as figured in the relation between music and noise (Attali, 1985). Indeed, references to imagined 'archaic' or 'primitive' societies, and their rites and religious practices, are commonly invoked in descriptions of drone metal; listeners implicitly conjuring the context of the classical anthropological imagination and connecting further their experience of the music to vaguely articulated ideas about mysticism and spirituality beyond language. In each case, different conceptions, manifestations or articulations of violence take up multiple positions in this logic of sacrifice and ritual connecting violence, religion and cathartic healing. In this way it can therefore be suggested, in the light (or shadow) of the debates and discussions connecting violence, religious transgression, and health in the history of metal, that these themes are indeed inextricably connected, yet in a much more intransigent and complex economy of forces than simplistic unidirectional causal frameworks can portray.

CONCLUSION: VIOLENCE, THE SACRED, AND POTENTIAL FOR THERAPY; ESCAPING LANGUAGE THROUGH EXTREME MUSIC

In conclusion, there does seem to be a connection between non-normative religiosity, different conceptions or manifestations of violence, and health and wellbeing in metal music cultures. However, they intersect in more complicated and nuanced ways than has been acknowledged in moral-panic news media or in psychological research informed and influenced by that public debate. Complicating factors not accounted for in much of this research include the fact that listeners often strongly assert that this music is helpful rather than harmful, sometimes in combination with a framing of the music and associated cultural practices as rebellious and resistant to authority and authoritarian censorship and restriction. A feedback mechanism, functioning in complex ways, therefore incorporates transgression and shock into the practices and understandings associated with the music and, by extension, its impacts on health. Contributing to extremity in sound and association, then, this transgressiveness itself could be a factor in the powerful experience of otherness beyond language that metal music is sometimes reported to offer its listeners. Understanding that the effects and impacts of this music may be complex, can be positive and negative, and must be understood in their own contexts for listeners, this article has outlined a case study of extreme music in which violence is manifested or conceptualised in different ways; whether in the music representing aggression or oppression, or in actually damaging listeners' bodies, or in prompting or offering a radical differentiation or escape from everyday life, or in evoking the otherness of archaic ritual forms. Thus a better model for understanding violence, religion and health in metal music is suggested here, which accounts for exactly this multimodal complexity: where violence can occupy different and shifting positions in a logic of ritual, and where certain kinds of violence can be instrumentalised through music to achieve goals related to therapy, catharsis or healing, or even to specifically avoid or ameliorate other kinds of violence such as alienation or trauma. Noise and extreme music may be particularly valuable for this kind of work, where extremes of sound can be mobilised in exploring mechanisms and economies of channelling violence. This is by no means to suggest that all such uses and effects of metal and extreme music are necessarily helpful and healthy, and in fact it is perhaps unavoidable that there may be dangers to health inherent in the power of such music. However, rather than sensationalise or demonise the music, investigating it in the contexts in which it is enjoyed and used may allow greater understanding of the music's power to impact listeners for good as well as ill.

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Ελληνική περίληψη | Greek abstract

Εικονικές εκδοχές της πνευματικότητας, της βίας και των επιπτώσεων στην υγεία στη χέβι μέταλ μουσική: Μια κριτική ιστορία και μια μελέτη περίπτωσης

Owen Coggins

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Τόσο στον κοινό, καθημερινό λόγο όσο και σε κάποιες έρευνες που αφορούν τη μουσική και την υγεία, αποδίδεται στη μουσική μια αόριστη αλλά καθολική θεραπευτική δυναμική. Σε αντίθεση με αυτήν την οπτική, η χέβι μέταλ μουσική θεωρείται συχνά ένα είδος με αρνητικές επιπτώσεις για τους ακροατές και την κοινωνία. Αυτό το άρθρο αναλύει τις απόψεις που εκφράζονται στις διάφορες πολιτικές, στα μέσα ενημέρωσης και στις έρευνες που σχετίζονται με την υγεία και τη χέβι μέταλ μουσική, από τη δεκαετία του 1970 μέχρι σήμερα, εστιάζοντας κυρίως στο πλαίσιο του Ηνωμένου Βασιλείου και των ΗΠΑ. Παρουσιάζοντας τις επιρροές που έχει δεχτεί η έρευνα από τον ηθικό πανικό και τις νομικές αντιπαραθέσεις, το άρθρο παρουσιάζει τους τρόπους με τους οποίους οι ιδέες για την παραβατική θρησκευτικότητα έχουν συχνά επηρεάσει τις συζητήσεις που περιστοιχίζουν τη χέβι μέταλ μουσική σχετικά με την επιρροή της στην υγεία και με τη βλαπτικότητά της. Σε επίπεδο επιστημονικής προσέγγισης και μεθοδολογίας, επικρατεί μια πόλωση ανάμεσα στα ψυχολογικά και συμπεριφορικά εργαστηριακά πειράματα, από τη μία μεριά, και στην έρευνα των κοινωνικών και των ανθρωπιστικών επιστημών, οι οποίες βασίζονται σε εθνογραφικές μελέτες ή σε προσεγγίσεις που έχουν ως άξονα το πλαίσιο, από την άλλη. Σημειώνοντας ότι κάποιες εργαστηριακού τύπου μέθοδοι φαίνεται να είναι στημένες ή ακόμη και αντιδεοντολογικές, το άρθρο αυτό υποστηρίζει μια ερευνητική προσέγγιση στον τομέα αυτό, η οποία μελετά πραγματικές πρακτικές ακρόασης. Στη συνέχεια παρουσιάζεται μια μελέτη περίπτωσης βίας, θρησκείας και υγείας που αφορά την ακραία μουσική υποκατηγορία της ντρόουν μέταλ [drone metal]. Σε αυτή τη μουσική κουλτούρα, με ισχυρά αλληλένδετους και μερικές φορές απροσδόκητους τρόπους, ο λόγος των ακροατών ακουμπάει τον μυστικισμό, το τελετουργικό και το ιερό, την υγεία, τη θεραπεία και την κάθαρση, και τους διαφορετικούς τρόπους της ακαθόριστης και της σωματικής βίας. Το άρθρο καταλήγει στο συμπέρασμα ότι ο θόρυβος και η ακραία μουσική –αν και έννοιες υποτιμημένες, τουλάχιστον από τους κριτές που βρίσκονται έξω από τη χέβι μέταλ κουλτούρα– μπορούν να προσφέρουν ιδιαίτερα ισχυρά μέσα για τη θετική επιρροή της υγείας των ακροατών.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

μέταλ [metal], ντρόουν μέταλ [drone metal], θόρυβος, βία, παραβατικότητα, θρησκεία, μουσική και υγεία, ηθικός πανικός, αντιπαράθεση, μεθοδολογία