We Mean It Maaan:
Deconstructing Authenticity in the Punk and Metal Discourse

by

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Abstract:

Heavy metal music is a genre largely dismissed in sociological and cultural writing. Existing precariously at the intersections of artifice, theatricality, fantasy and self-indulgence, its tendencies often preclude it from study in the sociology classroom. I analyze the various discourses that have been utilized throughout metal’s history to delegitimize and reject the metal genre for these presumed proclivities. Leading these critiques of metal are often punk musicians and writers who reject the genre for its bombast and inauthenticity. Scrutinizing punk thinkers adherence to ‘authentic’ modes of expression, I attempt to expose punk’s problematic and anti-queer assumptions about modes of acceptable political and social communication in metal. Tied up in a web of its own ascetic self-denial, pleasure policing, and fraught hyper-masculinity, punk’s critique of metal returns to dated ideas about the self and expression of the self through mass culture. Ultimately, I explore how metal is the canvas against which liberal punk critics betray attachments to masculine ideas of realness, rawness, and efficacy within art.
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Preface

We are living in a moment of profound fucked-ness. I’m not really sure how else to describe a timeline in which the politics of cronyism, deliberate manipulation of facts, white supremacy, and misogyny are installed at the highest positions of power in the U.S. It’s been a wild ride dealing with these circumstances while the central tenet of my argument is based on disengaging with the world you perceive around you. Even if ultimately the goal is to re-emerge from a cocooned fantasy state, re-energized and renewed from the way you were before, it has been a struggle to argue for the kinds of fantasy and escapism that metal promotes, the supposedly a-political journeys that one can take through its turbulent halls. But, perhaps it is in this moment that we most need our imaginations, our diversions, our spaces of divine rest, artificial and fanciful, to remind us what it is to be grounded and in control of our own destinies. To imagine our bodies in places of power.

Punk, which I’m about to do my best to deconstruct, is all about authenticity, living out a consistent idea of yourself at all moments, on stage and otherwise. I don’t think this is an awful idea, but obsession with it is fraught. And that’s because it adheres to a notion that there is a genuine reality to attend to; that you can be a ‘real’ version of yourself. Punk is indebted to the ideology that some people are frauds and snakes and posers, and some people are REALLY punk. Tied up in this whole debate is a laundry list of the ways that you can craft yourself to be this authentic idealized self. That project seems impossible to me, and the fascination
with it implies that at all costs we must attend to the reality at hand. Why is it we return to playing by the rules of reality when fantasy is enacted constantly, not only on our TV sets and computer screens, but in the White House as well? I don’t think it is worth adhering to a set of fixed authentic ideals in the current era, I think perhaps the time is over for such a project. We need to embrace fantasy, embrace leisure, playing, and inauthenticity, wear costumes and constantly fuck with the idea of ourselves. We should stay angry and vigilant and flexible. That sounds metal as shit.
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Introduction: Worlds Apart

Sometime in the spring of 2016 I was sitting at a round table during a session of my Sociological Analysis Seminar, doodling and discussing a reading with the class. At some point the topic of music came up, probably in relation to Semiotics or Weber or another theorist that I can’t quite recall. The students assembled were all going back and forth about our favorite artists and the professor, joking around, mentioned heavy metal. She offered, “Does anyone even listen to heavy metal anymore”? The class broke out in giggles and a couple people exchanged comical glances. The unspoken answer from the collected students was, “Of course not”. I can’t say I was surprised, but I found myself getting defensive, and though I didn’t speak up, I wanted to assure the assembled crowd that yes, people did listen to metal and I was one of them!

The exchange kept churning over and over again in my head and I began to wonder what the underlying root of that disconnect was, that metal had no hold in the sociology classroom. Discussions of transgressive topics are common and even in the sphere of music punk, and hip-hop are given weight as sites of musical and social production, open to radical politics and discussions, queering and reclamation. Most topics make it to the table at one point or another, but it seemed outside the realm of most peoples’ lived experience in the class. Like rugby or old westerns, it just didn’t come up. However, unlike those two random examples, I had personally

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known metal to work in surprising and enlivening ways as fundamental to the construction of identities and social lives for my friends and myself.

Intrigued, I began research into the topic of heavy metal’s study within sociology and cultural studies. I quickly noticed, even in scanning the meager offering in my school’s library, that my experience wasn’t isolated. Metal had long been missing from sociological discussions, not only absent from students interests, but also “culturally, academically and spatially marginalized.”\(^2\) In marked difference to my awareness of punk through classes I had taken on music history and queer theory, the gap felt conspicuously absent. I was intrigued. Here was a genre that paralleled punk in many disruptive aspects yet deliberately turned away from the direct calls to action, manifestos and social righteousness that punk bands had developed.

Metal was chaos, violence, and distortion incarnate, designed to disrupt and shock and please, but here in the stacks of a liberal institution like Wesleyan University, the shelves were almost bare of books on heavy metal. The first extensive book on the genre – Deena Weinstein’s *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* – was only published in 1991, a shockingly recent date in contrast to the subcultural presence of punk given life through Dick Hebdige’s seminal *Subculture and the Meaning of Style* published in 1979.

To add insult to injury, metal is no underground fad; it was at one point hugely popular. In the 70’s and 80’s heavy metal was one of the highest selling genres, simultaneously taking up huge chunks of airtime and occupying the minds of

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well-to-do elites and concerned parents for decades. So why had metal lost its appeal? Observer published an article right around the time of my rising interest entitled “The Slow Death of Heavy Metal”, where even the heavy hitters of the genre like Rob Halford of Judas Priest and Slash from Guns and Roses, noted its waning presence.³ What was it about metal’s particular confluence of demographics, tendencies, and inclinations that left it by the wayside as scholars, thinkers and audiences continued to shower praises on punk, its power-chord popping little sibling?

Viewing these two particular genres in contrast brings to the forefront the ways that heavy metal has often been dismissed as a site of uncontested idiocy. From Hebdige’s *Subculture*, the same text that features full chapters on punk, metal receives a single paragraph in the references section, with such insightful commentary as, “Aficionados can be distinguished by their long hair, denim and ‘idiot’ dancing (again, the name says it all.)”⁴ While it is fair to note that in the year 1979 metal was just on the cusp of reemergence as a site of cultural generation, Hebdige still takes no time to apply any meaningful analysis to the legions of fans whose lives are defined by this “idiot” genre.

My project here however is not to defend or canonize metal in an attempt to legitimize the genre, I only wish to investigate the particular ideologies that lead liberal thinkers to dismiss metal before even committing to engage with it. The left’s

primary discontents with heavy metal run along three axes, the first being its theatricality, which I want to contrast with the misguided sense of masculine authenticity that permeates punk’s “working classness” and “scruffiness” in Chapter 1. Mostly looking to glam metal and early forays into heavy metal, I argue that critiques of metal centered on artifice and theatricality are rooted in old left attitudes fixated on a static masculine identity necessary for genuine expression or political engagement.

In Chapter 2 I wish to engage with the claims that metal represents escapism and fantasy, and that these traits inherently disqualify metal from the academic canon. The prominence of ambivalent fantasy in metal generates anxieties that metal promotes the ‘wrong’ kind of escapism and these apprehensions amongst politicians and theorists lead to policing of morality, pleasure, and autonomy in listeners and producers of metal.

Third, I will examine in Chapter 3 the claims that metal’s ties to capitalism result in proclaimed ‘excess’ and ‘indulgence’. These critiques embody an ascetic policing of pleasure and decadence that run counter to the “no future” claim laid both by the Sex Pistols and prominent queer theorists like Lee Edelman.

Chapter 4 deals with the legacy of these critiques and the subsequent molding of contemporary punk and metal bands into genre categories based on the now-canonical notions surrounding punk and metal’s aims and tendencies. The focus of the chapter is largely on the abandonment of queer and marginalized fans from metal because of its perceived affinities and relatively minimal subcultural capital.

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5 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture. p 63.
Deconstructing these critiques strikes me as a worthy project because they often insist on a version of political engagement and artistic merit that has begun to feel woefully dated. The reliance on modes of authenticity and politics beholden to outmoded ideas about the self and the singular nature of resistance within society are inconsistent with the project of liberation and justice at the heart of sociology. The marginalization of metal in cultural studies points to anxieties and attachments that pervade the discipline, often running in undercurrents beneath arguments formulated to prove the liberating nature of punk rock.

Drawing on analysis of a wide range of digital and physical texts, I wish to examine the critical, commercial, and academic reactions to metal and punk, comparing the two in an effort to parse out what drives activists and academics to punk in scores, but has left metal spurned for so long. I’m a pop-culture junkie at heart – a plebian proud of his unrefined taste – and by bringing metal and Sociology into close contact I hope to not deflate the power of popular music but instead “restore some of the powers and dangers of discourse which the procedures of academic institutions seek to ward off.”6 To begin this analysis I want to establish a loose outline of the two genres and their aural and aesthetic markers.

**Heavy Metal**

The roots of the metal genre lie in rock and roll, and even further back, the blues tradition. It is a musical style that comprises a loose collection of sonic, lyrical, and aesthetic choices, most predominantly invested in transgressive, violent, and fantastical narratives. Starting with the sonic element, which is undoubtedly the most important aspect of heavy metal, the genre is usually comprised of distorted and highly amplified electric guitars, loud pounding drums, and an impression of intensity. The genre is generally un-syncopated, relying on rhythms that are driving – producing intensity through volume, speed, or deliberate slowness. Usually a singer accompanies the music and the vocals tend to be on a similar spectrum of intensity, displaying emotion through distortion that results from extreme volume or a shape of the vocal chords. This comes in all kinds of fun flavors: screaming, yelling, and growling are all used to generate deviation from traditional pop vocal tones.

In terms of musical scales, much of metal dwells in minor, pentatonic and otherwise non-major scales. The deliberate use of chromaticism and dissonance is frequently invoked to distance metal music from its happier and more commercial cousins, rock, pop, and disco. The general intention of metal’s aurality is to generate ominous feelings of awe, doom, obscenity, dread, fear, anger, and ecstasy. Metal is Dionysian in its scope, attempting to invoke the utter extremes of bodily and mental pleasure through excess.

Formed in England around 1970 in a period of economic downturn, early practitioners of metal tended to be young white men who experienced
disenfranchised existences under increasing unemployment and a shrinking neoliberal government. In response to leaders like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and perhaps to spite the ‘good taste’ of their parents and grandparents, bands like Black Sabbath and Judas Priest assumed ever intensifying modes of music production that per(sonic)fied feelings of anxiety, emotional turmoil and rage from the 70’s onward. While metal bands initially started as outgrowths of traditional rock bands, they began to codify around the term ‘heavy metal’ in the middle of the 70’s, stealing vocal and instrumental styles from black vocalists and blues guitarists, and adding aural ‘fuzz’ and psychedelic influences to generate a style that was riddled with emotional as well as aural intensity.\(^7\)

**Punk Rock**

Punk rock, similar to metal, is a broad category used to include a range of musical styles, but unlike metal, punk uses amateurism, and in-your-face lyrics to confront and process the struggles of everyday life. The punk movement, most often associated with music from New York City, Los Angeles, and London, burst onto airwaves and turntables at the tail end of the 1970’s, carving out a new space for disenfranchised, angry, and anti-social kids. “Punk Rock” as a noun was first used by music critic David Marsh in the May 1971 issue of *Creem* magazine.\(^8\) The term was picked up by critics through 1971 and came to loosely define “white teenage


hard rock,” though it was another couple years before the genre solidified, signaled perhaps when a D.I.Y. music zine (that is, a self-distributed music magazine made with cheap materials through photocopying and collage) named itself *Punk* in 1976.

Early artists in the genre like the Sex Pistols and the Ramones saw limited commercial success at the time, but sparked a massive wave of underground music and cultural production in their wake. Uniting the artful degradation of beat fashion with speed-infused hard rock of the 60’s and 70’s, punk is characterized by simple guitar patterns, fast and un-syncopated drums, and a general focus on low production values and immediacy. The vocals in punk span from highly melodic pop singing to harsh shouting and yelling, though it forgoes the extreme guttural lows and piercing high shrieks of metal. Musically, punk tends to rest in the major scales defined through classic rock and pop in the 60’s, forgoing tonal complexity for memorable hooks and catchy melodies.

Punk topics tend towards issues of personal and societal struggle, whether that is fighting back against oppressive politicians or unfair parents. Usually the lyrics express some kind of discontent, and often the songs include anthemic slogans or chants intoning the singers’ desire to fight the powers that be. The music is tight and economic in almost every aspect, utilizing the bare minimum of technology and proficiency to convey its particular message. Short and to the point, every outsized urge is subsumed to serve the greater whole, a compact package of vitriol wrapped in music to pogo and protest to.
Chapter 1: We Mean It Maaan\(^9\)

Despite my effort to pin it down, punk rock is an anxious and tenuous subject. Defining ‘punk’ is rarely a positivist project, mostly because the punk aesthetic and lifestyle is a product of negation. Seemingly aware of its own fragile existence from the first murmurs of the movement, punk has been defining and re-defining itself for the better part of 40 years. Punk’s obsession with its own boundaries seems limitless. No future, no posers, no hippies, no escapism, endless bones picked for infinity, the confines most succinctly outlined by a poem/rant published in the 2\(^{nd}\) issue of the 1982 zine, *Anathema*:

This is the new era, the new age. Its killing music, tho its barely alive at the best of times. Screw the lyrics, pose for the camera, hide behind make up and expensive exclusive clothes, promote the image, turn music into sex, sweet sex, tit 'n' arse, upon the screen, camera tricks and special effects, arty poses and synthesised drivvle\(^10\)

This particular passage highlights almost all of the issues that punk strove to rid itself of in the puritanical search for a musical movement that would reignite culture and re-infuse, “the new age” with some semblance of authentic, grounded existence. Among the author’s listed fallacies are expensive clothes, make-up, eroticization of music, special effects, affected poses, and camera angles, all culminating in a vacuous pile of ‘synthesised drivvle”. These qualms, directed at

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seminal punk Siouxsie Sioux of Siouxsie and the Banshees (after her rise to stardom), dictate a loose circle of the ways that authenticity in punk is derived through negation of pretense and artifice. The writer, an ambiguous pseudonym, ‘Lee’, strives to quarantine the essence of the punk project, but in doing so refuses an entire mode of operation, that of willful and self-conscious theatricality. The artiness and affected posture, costuming, and outsized performance of Siouxsie, coupled with the “14-inch portable tv” that the concert is broadcast to lend the event an air of unreality. The perceived falseness inspires not only disappointment but also rage and terror in the mind of the writer. This performance from a so-called punk is perceived to destabilize the authenticity of the whole subcultural project by reveling in an outsized synthetic theatricality. Siouxsie’s performance reads as artificial melodrama; hated tropes for a diehard punker. This revulsion towards conscious artifice is the central reason that punk in all of its incarnations has been an essentializing and limiting framework for thinking about identity and politics.

Ironically, it is this selfsame policing of authentic performance that may have led punk to the pedestal that it now dwells upon, the protest genre of choice for many academics, musicians, and critics in the 40-odd years since its birth. From its inception punk rock has been the vessel for a messianic promise of new world order through rock and roll. Even its generic (here referring literally to ‘genre’) designation as “New Wave” implies a break from tradition, a re-ignition of culture infused with the investments of a new kind of musician/activist hybrid. As soon as

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punk became codified as its own musical style, it was regarded in both academic and critical circles as not only a new musical form, but as a significant cultural break, rising, “as a dream shared by a small coterie of critical voices concerning what rock should be and could be.”\textsuperscript{13} Punk wasn’t just fun to listen to, it was gonna’ change the world.

Contained within the ‘authentic’ realm of punk was supposedly a true project of rebellion, community, anti-racist, and anti-fascist rancor. Punk quickly became a buzzword for describing art that was deliberately counter-culture; the terminology of ‘punk’ has been used to describe art movements, political protest, movies, clothing, writing, philosophy, hairstyles, attitudes, furniture, websites, and a lot of different music genres that sonically differ from this hyperactive art form. All of these products are strapped with the punk marker when they successfully adhere to the rejection of the ‘inauthentic’. For “furniture punk” Gary Knox Bennet a twisted nail through a beautiful cabinet debunks the fetishism of the “contemporary studio carpentry scene.”\textsuperscript{14} At a punk themed gala in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “the sewn-on patches and the badges convey a message.”\textsuperscript{15} The signals that convey this rejection prioritize a type of masculine authentic ideal that seems incongruous with the proclaimed revolutionary ends that pepper the punk discourse – “Immaculate hair, cover-girl makeup and mani-pedis just isn't punk.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} Waksman, Steve. This Ain’t the Summer of Love. p 7.
\textsuperscript{15} “Punk Fashion and the Met Ball: An Embarrassment”. The Economist. May 19, 2013.
\textsuperscript{16} “Punk Fashion and the Met Ball”. The Economist. May 19, 2013.
One begins to notice that this thread, of a desire for authentic revolution through a specific mode of expression, plays into larger trends of performance policing that lead punks, in their commitment to being “untamed and seditious,” to exclude all manner of performance that relies on playful constructions of identity. This is where metal enters into the picture, as a kind of antithesis to punk in its formation. Where the punk mode of music and cultural generation feels bound to a ‘primitivist’ fixed reality, metal offers instead a playful and theatrical way to move bodies and engage in fantastical thinking. Metal exists precariously at the crossroads of melodrama and theatricality – its debt to these ‘impotent’ forms of expression prefigures its scorn and dismissal from the cultural studies canon.

Most of this recoil is a result of the taste shift during the first wave of punk away from what was perceived as the inauthentic “commercial artifice” of rock bands in the 1970’s. Musicians and critics deliberately moved towards displays of musical and personal behavior that strove to remove constructed theatrics from punk, deemed the “authentic voice of exploited youth.” This maneuver is touted again and again as one of the ways that punk rock saved rock and roll from the likes of metal “posturing” from bands like Alice Cooper and Kiss, invested as they were in “spectacles of blood, fire, smoke, and makeup.” Stripping down these large spectacles into simple displays with no more than the bare minimum of a stage and

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the performers atop it, the new punk theater avidly disavowed its lineage to the arena shows and stagecraft of 70’s metal and rock acts. Whereas previous 70’s musicians utilized pyrotechnics, stagecraft and showmanship to create, in Ryan Moore’s words, “a theater of fantasy and horror,” the punks were interested in a sound that was “stripped to the bone.” Metal concerts delighted massive audiences throughout the 70’s and onwards, but musical groups participating in ‘heavy metal theater’ were “unanimously ridiculed by rock critics and other arbiters of taste” (Moore 9), who were “hostile towards visual spectacle, which they saw as…compromising rock music’s ‘authenticity’” (Walser 10-11).

This critique of metals’ artifice was not invoked from conservatives -who were desperately trying to highlight the power of metal’s influence on the delicate minds of future Americans - but by those on the left who saw metal as mindless diversion, incapable of any sort of artistic or political meaning. In recognizing just how many writers were invested in the idea that punks no-nonsense politic was giving 70’s metal theater a “kick in the arse” one begins to see the knotty ties between punks disavowal of spectacle, fun, and theatrics and its investments in a reductionist gritty realism.  

**The Shirtwaist Strikes (back)**

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A number of theorists have similarly identified this authentic/theatrical axis that runs beneath the liberal discourse, and their analysis of social moments where it has also surfaced help shape my argument for the underlying root of academia’s distaste for metal. The “Efficacy/Effeminacy Braid” as Stephen J. Bottom’s labels it, represents the intertwined impulse of a liberal “anti-theatrical prejudice” that dismisses “unnatural construction of a presentational artifice” and an insistence on the “serious business” of revolution that denies imaginary or playful modes of being.22 The problems with this affinity for authenticity receive expanded critique and deconstruction from a group of modern day theorists. Selected works from Nan Enstad, Andrew Parker and Stephen J. Bottoms form the theoretical basis for my assessment of punk discourse. Each author focuses on aspects of social and cultural production unrelated to punk, but the paradigm they establish for rooting out and questioning adherence to authenticity maps well onto my project.

Nan Enstad’s 1999 book *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* centers on labor relations, popular culture and working women at the turn of the 20th century, a far cry from 70’s punks, though the thorough conception of the authenticity/theatricality paradigm is worth diverging from my object of study. Enstad, in the chapter “Fashioning Political Subjectivities”, hones in on the press surrounding a labor strike held in New York City in 1909. In November of that year 20,000 workers, predominantly young women, took it upon themselves to strike against shirtwaist

manufacturers, walking off their factory jobs for over three months in order to improve wages and the right to unionize. Their strikes, occupying streets around the factories, drew media press predominantly because of the perceived novelty and spectacle of working class women organizing in the public sphere. Rooted in sexist preconceptions of rational political engagement, newspapers harped on the fact that the strikers were less deserving of serious reckoning because of their festive and raucous demeanor. The media frenzy ultimately dismissed the “young women irrationally out of control in public” because they were consumers, and because their boisterous playfulness did not match the academic construction of “normative – and heroic – political subjectivity.”

Enstad’s analysis shows that the demeanor and “elaborate” dress of the strikers, “signaled femininity and irrationality: two qualities that disqualified a person from being a political subject” (Enstad 86). The signals that disqualified the strikers’ from receiving the sort of political legitimacy lent to “rational” thinkers and politicians can be easily plotted against the behaviors that deterred academics and critics from delving beyond the costuming and outsized behavior of heavy metal acts. Because metal and its 70’s rock forbearers were a product of consumerist pleasure-centered ideologies, their rhetoric and manner of expression were viewed as


flimsy illegitimate bids for political and artistic agency. I believe this fixation has less to do with a prescient taste judgment than with a mismatch between metal stylings and preconceived critical notions of the proper expression necessary for meaningful political engagement.

Enstad’s analysis of the 1909 strike does not end with the mainstream media’s coverage, but also engages with the evolving tactics that the leftist strike leaders used in reaction to the dismissive portrayal from the popular press. In an attempt to shape the discourse around the workers, the strike leaders from various labor conglomerates generated a new unified media front to “promote a positive view” and legitimate the image of the strikers as “political actors” in the following weeks.\(^{27}\) It was precisely the established left that became invested in characterizing and valorizing the authentic nature of the strike workers, ensuring that they were recognized by middle class America as demonstrating the correct demeanor for a revolutionary political agent. Strike leaders engaged in a number of strategies to ‘clean up’ the strikers and conform them into respectable and legitimate political actors, offering an expanded view into one specific project of constructed authenticity. This effort involved not only attempting to reduce the publicity of the strikers violent skirmishes with police, but also to justify them to the eyes of the public by “representing them as thinly clad, downtrodden, and powerless, yet rational in their actions and capable of political participation.”\(^{28}\) Afraid and contemptuous of the flamboyant, fun and frivolous nature of the women engaged in


the strike, the attempt to lend political legitimacy to the strikers carried a number of implicit assumptions about modes and meanings of protest.

In encouraging the assembled women to dress modestly in a manner more befitting the ‘deserving poor’, the strike leaders demonstrated their implicit biases against the meaningful ways that oppressed and marginalized groups navigate space to produce joy and pleasure in the context of dominant ideologies. Enstad thus adds a dimension of class to the dichotomy of theatrical and authentic production, that movements born out of the working class must bear their authenticity through established modes of working class expression. When we turn to punk, this preconception will become one of the largest markers that established punk’s prestige in academic circles, its embodiment of a specific kind of working class expression that grapples constantly with the struggles of everyday life. Again, this stands in contrast with early metal artists who, despite also coming from working class backgrounds, opt out of this preconceived working class identity to embrace a glamorous ostentatiousness that eschewed “established ideals of what a political subject looked like.”

Andrew Parker does similar work defining the theatrical/authentic axis in regards to letters and writing from Karl Marx and Frederich Engels at the end of the 19th century. Parker highlights in his piece “Unthinking Sex” the dichotomy between Western Marxist conceptions of true, authentic production of the working class, and the “parody” of production specific to “musicians, opera singers, dancers” who

“produce no value, just circulate labor.”

This discursive distinction, in Parker’s view, stems from Marx’s attempts to present revolution as “a serious business where seriousness itself is defined as an ability to distinguish the imaginary from the real… the theatrical from the authentic.”

Marx’s distinction between parodied versus authentic production conceptualizes the two ends of the authentic/theatrical axis along which punk and metal occupy, one attempting a project of true production, and one gleefully reveling in its falsity. Though punk rock still falls into the “parodied” category of music, its practitioners often champion its relation to direct action, its divestment from the symbolic that separates it from the other kinds of production Marx deemed unworthy.

### The Efficacy//Effeminacy Braid

The critical requirement of “authentic performance” has been observed in other social realms, and like the case of metal, precludes other notable disciplines from being readily associated with the radical socio-political canon. As I previously mentioned, Theater Studies professor Stephen J. Bottoms constructs the model of the “Effeminacy/Efficacy Braid” in relation to the academic split between Theater and Performance Studies. Mirroring differences in the discourse around punk and metal, Bottoms stakes his claim that the emergence of Performance studies’ as an entity separate from theater studies hinged on a fixation for a specific brand of authenticity. Bottoms highlights that Performance artists’ attempts at highly masculine, heterosexual and non-commodified presentation were generally accepted by the

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academic canon as the most ‘effective’, and thus valuable, form of presented expression. The flip side of this perspective is that enactment occurring scripted within the confines of the theater complex could amount to no more than ‘effeminate’, thus ineffective entertainment. Bottoms himself is a theater studies professor and relays a similar anecdote to my own about his “embarrassment at being so retrograde” when engaging with his fellow academics who align more with performance studies. His colleagues, who he says view his preoccupation with theater as “oddly quaint,” do not share his interest in recognizing theater’s embrace of acknowledged fabrication as capable of transcending ineffective capitalist systems.  

Stephen Bottom’s identifies a particular function of the ‘braid’ when he starts dissecting acting styles that were initially marked as tainted ‘theater’ yet eventually “annexed” by performance studies and rebranded for their valorization. Despite the fact that many performance artists utilized elements of theatricality, they would recoil, “from the label of theater, because what they do is for real instead of for show.” The label of theatricality, inflected as it was with weakness and ineffectiveness, became increasingly associated with a kind of impotence that performance artists wished to distance themselves from. “The term ‘performance’ today carries with it the connotations of having real effects in the real world,” writes Bottoms in his commentary on the disciplines, noting that eventually a mode of dogmatic authenticity began to color the perception of theater studies; anything that

didn’t prescribe to the affects of the new performance model was distanced.\textsuperscript{35} This discursive project can be mapped onto punk histories on artists like the Sex Pistols and the Dictators, who were interested in stage antics, yet were retroactively distanced from their peers enacting metal theater.

One of the most damning examples of this phenomenon comes from the biography page on the official website for the Sex Pistols, the very band poised as the ringleaders of “year zero” of punk (Dale)\textsuperscript{36} The Sex Pistols were a group of London lads who helped foment punk’s legacy as one of brash immediacy, infectious political slogans and disdain for the current social order. Early singles like “God Save the Queen” (the lyrics from which this paper derives its title) and “Anarchy in the U.K.” delighted and shocked audiences with their anti-social lyrics and loud, discordant rock stylings. In 1975 the now infamous lead singer Johnny Rotten, unknown punk John Lydon at the time, auditioned to be in the Sex Pistols by miming along to Alice Cooper’s “Eighteen” on a jukebox. Johnny Rotten’s tryout performance of “self-mocking fits, hunches, and weird dances,” inspired by Cooper – a pioneer of metal theater –, supposedly caused his bandmates to “fall about laughing.” The writer of this bio, an anonymous member of Virgin Records editorial staff, situates the event as a goof, a self-effacing act that his bandmates could \textit{overlook} because “deep down, they knew they had found their man.”\textsuperscript{37} The trouble is that Lydon was, and is, a huge fan of Alice Cooper, citing Cooper’s 1971 record

Killer in a Pitchfork piece about his favorite albums growing up. This troubles the official biography, which characterizes his tryout as intentionally funny, a post-script used to inflect irony into a situation where a seminal punk singer drew upon metal theatrics to impress his future bandmates. Even after rising to stardom atop Johnny Rotten’s outsized persona, The Sex pistols still were pigeonholed as progenitors of punk performance, even as they moved in and out of stage theatrics to advance their particular image. Punk authors like Robert Garnett are determined to frame the Pistols as managing “an imminent and transcendentual critique” of popular music. This rhetoric is trotted out every time starry-eyed aging punks reflect on their time in the ‘scene’, the notion that the Pistols were “refus(ing) the illusory pleasures and fraudulent myths of the pop culture industry itself” when in reality, they had renewed the “fraudulent myth” of stagecraft for their own performative ends. Garnett thus falls into the trap of the efficacy/effeminacy braid, invoking a band that was deliberately, playfully constructed, yet ascribing the lexicon of revolution and realism to assert the bands’ authenticity. If we acknowledge instead that political and artistic expression can exist along a wide spectrum of artificiality, the Pistols slot into a history of music-theater, an “authenticity” performed just as much as any other previous pop artist.


Further solidifying the masculine ideals of this authentic mode, most of the canonical “authentic” punk bands cemented their punk-ness through acts of bodily harm and physical pain. Looking at proto-punks The Stooges in their 1973 performance at Max’s in Kansas City, one can see this self-destruction on display in full form. Pioneering the bastardized version of hypermasculinity that characterized many iterations of punk to come, lead singer Iggy Pop performed shirtless, baring his wiry chest, twisting on-stage, both embracing and mocking his imposing manly stature. On one particular night, Iggy, frustrated with broken glass left over at the venue from the previous show, rolled around in the debris cutting himself and performing the whole show bloodied and torn. He ignored medical attention and was hospitalized for his display. The moment is remembered in a Rolling Stone article as an early and seminal punk act, signaling his status among “visionaries and geniuses.”

His one-time manager and friend Danny Fields remembers another night when Iggy bummed a couple dollars from a VIP audience member to shoot up before a show. After the curtains rose, “The lights went down, the music went up, (Iggy) stood onstage and collapsed. Without a note being sung. He'd OD'd in front of everyone.” Fields remembers this particular concert as “one of his greatest shows ever…it was so minimally perfect. It just says a very great deal.” Regardless of Iggy’s propensity for drugs, this event of ultimate, life-endangering self-destruction speaks volumes precisely because it personifies an ideal so authentic that it nearly

kills the performer. Iggy Pop supposedly transcends ‘theater’ by grounding his performance in a display that physically affects his body. Similarly, Paul Nelson claims in a 1978 Rolling Stone article that he believes it, “when Johnny Rotten screams, "We mean it, man," only “in conjunction with destruction.” Acts of bristling ‘real’ violence, self-inflicted and self-destructive, successfully mark these performances as punk. It permeates every corner of the punk conversation, in Hedegard’s mind Iggy Pop, “lived the totally messed-up life and wrote the totally messed-up songs without which there could have been no angry punk-music explosion of the 1970s.”

This begs the question; does the pain experienced by Iggy lend his performance some sort of ‘non-theatricality’? It would seem to me that to deem Iggy Pop’s particular stunt ‘authentic’ begins to conflate ideas about experiences of pain with legitimacy, because it is not Iggy’s overdose that becomes re-read as heroics, it is his overdose-as-performance – the ultimate signifier of intention.

To view the critical preference for this ‘embodied’ authenticity, one can turn to another performance in 1973, from metal musician Alice Cooper and his nationwide tour in support of the album Billion Dollar Babies. The extensively choreographed event involved Cooper’s signature dark make up, set pieces, and at the climax of the show an execution by guillotine of Cooper himself. In this symbolic display Cooper teamed up with highly skilled magicians and stunt actors to


have his head chopped off and brandished for the audience to ogle. According to an online discussion forum, the on-stage effect was believed to a varying degree by different fans, although in every concert it was followed by a rebirth, where Cooper was revived to champion the encore, ending the charade and recouping his throne in front of the audience.45

This elaborately staged event was precisely the hated ‘theater’ of early punk critics because it occurred strictly in a symbolic realm, and when performed correctly caused no physical harm to Cooper. Theatrical, therefore deemed inauthentic, Alice Cooper’s heightening of artifice constitutes a dilution, a distraction from the sound of the music, unlike the Pistols and the Stooges’ antics that affirm the sincerity of the performers. Rolling Stone, who gushed over early Stooges and Sex Pistols records, hated Alice Cooper. The album that the show itself supported, Billion Dollar Babies, was described “only as the soundtrack of the latest group traveling extravaganza,” by writer Gordon Fletcher in 1973, lampooning that, “the Cooper troupers insist upon acting this soundtrack concept out to the bitter end.”46 The fact that the spectacle of Alice Cooper’s performance of ‘metal theater’ somehow deflates his expression, a detraction from what should be an exercise in direct, unmediated communication between performer and audience demonstrates the nature of punk authenticity at work. Despite the drastically different critical reception to these separate events –“Back then, critics loved Iggy and the Stooges” –


both Cooper and the Stooges occupied a realm of intense symbolism. Iggy’s stagecraft did result in bodily pain, but isn’t that the lineage of the “downtrodden suffering” from the shirtwaist strikers, a false means of demonstrating that someone ‘really’ means what they are saying? Rolling Stone’s journalistic fervor assumes that in order to be a legitimate expressive force, one must practice self-destruction and masochistic self-denial, prioritizing bodily affect as means to legitimacy.

To see Alice Cooper staging his own execution on stage is to witness to a symbolic performance, to a larger than life stage show. His spectacle is acknowledged to be entirely fictional, presented as stage drama, as *metal theater* beyond the scope of what is even feasibly achievable or authentic. Instead of attempting to draw symbolic power from depictions of authenticity, the metal theater is a celebration of the obscene, the uncanny and the playful rather than the bodily or the masochistic. This divorce from punk politics, from the down-n-dirty rolling in the glass to glorified symbolic death is precisely the factor that draws metalhead into lifelong fandom, and the reason that critics dismiss Cooper as impotent “shock” rock. To deny that Cooper’s act has any sort of political agency or embodies any emotional affect is to prioritize one symbolic act over another, the only difference being an experience of self-denial and pain, some kind of heroic self-sacrifice that still exists in the realm of the stage despite its pretensions of authenticity.

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The pitfall that many punk writers and academics fall into is to accept that the modes of confrontation, political displays and direct-message politics of punk were the be-all-end-all in the realm of music making and the performance of popular politics. In Neil Nehring’s, *Popular Music, Gender and Postmodernism*, he provides an excellent overview of the multitude of times that postmodern thinkers, in their concerted efforts to generate reasoned critiques of popular music’s lack of efficacy, removed metal and its theatrical ilk from potential radical forms of music making. In reading cultural criticisms from postmodern academics Lawrence Grossberg and Bret Easton Ellis, Nehring concludes the dominant postmodern view still maintains, “Strong affect and any meaningfulness (or ideology) are disconnected.”

This troubling dichotomy implies that some sort of impossible purity is required on behalf of performers in order to convey a message with any weight, an effort happily engaged by punks like Tommy Ramone, who in a misguided premonition, figured that, “what was needed was some pure, stripped down, no bullshit rock ‘n’ roll” in the formation of the Ramones. Luckily enough for punks, some of the cited thinkers in *Popular Music, Gender and Postmodernism* are willing to make a conceit that one affectation, anger, is justifiable so long as it can be directly related to, “commitment and action.”

Returning to efficacy of form as the central ingredient in culturally productive art, the obtuse and fantastical work of metal and glam musicians gets hit the hardest, because of its distance from affective modes that


prove commitment to overt social action. Sadly, even in this exposé Nehring is not interested in breaking down the boundaries between politically effective art and impotent expression, he only attempts to prove that punk belongs in the former category. What begins as a project to debunk postmodern myths about angry pop music still ends up as a resume for punk’s acceptance into the good favor of the academic elite. One moment almost redeems Nehring, when he conceives of avant-garde art as not necessarily needing to “fuel revolutionary change,” its aim “simply to hold open the possibility of refusing to go along”. This reads initially as a sign that he could possibly be interested in the pleasure and non-productivity of metal theater, that is, until he finishes his sentence saying the avant-garde mode is “…Always a first step toward political renewal.”

If we accept only the first half of Nehring’s clause and dismiss the addendum, can we argue that music generated for pleasure and fantasy requires nothing beyond providing escape? The shirtwaist strikers deployed flamboyance in combination with political action, but what about the celebration of escapism in and of itself? Punk critics’ insistence on direct engagement with political reality betrays a conservatism that undercuts moves made by prominent social theorists to destabilize the relationship between productions of signs denoting reality, and some underlying ‘real’. The debate of authenticity, efficacy and proper expression becomes even more intense when metal exits entirely the realm of the ‘real’ and bounds outward into elaborate visions of fantasy and escape.

Chapter 2:
Advance Upon the Real

“Escape states are unstable”

-Roy F. Baumeister

In Nan Enstad’s *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, Enstad documents a particularly salient comment handed down to the assembled shirtwaist strikers by writer and activist Pauline Newman in the union pamphlet *Ladies Garment Worker*. In the pamphlet, Newman encourages the women to, “get rational” and “discourage(s) the reading of “dime novels” in favor of “GOOD fiction, fiction that is to an extent a reflection of life.” This impulse, from a woman of established status sets up the second axis of liberal discontent with metal: its ambivalent fantasy. The advice is given to assist in the transformation of the strikers from frivolous daydreamers to staid iconoclasts. The strikers consumption of alternate existences that deviate from established societal realities irks the middle-class strike leaders because it offers the potential to become duped into happiness, and the ideal striker is at all times made miserable by their sordid reality, reflecting only gloomy darkness. The “dime novels” Newman speaks of were precursors to late 20th century mass-

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culture, an early example of escapist adventures centered on heroic adventurers and thrilling romances, mostly meant to provide ephemeral pleasure.\(^4\)

These channels of pleasure invoke fear from the proactive left, willing as they are to believe that any flight from harsh reality is a betrayal, an inexcusable diversion that might make people happy who are supposed to be commensurately miserable. The pacifying effect of mass media has long been one of its biggest theoretical demerits, a position put forth most notably by the Frankfurt school of theory – no surprise that punk was once labeled by writer Griel Marcus as “a new version of the old Frankfurt School critique of mass culture.”\(^5\)

Not merely ineffectual, the “Dime Novels” are portrayed as dangerous in their capability to inspire unrealistic and flawed expectations in the women who consume them. When Newman admonishes, “Don’t read books that take you to a fairy land and introduce you to Prince Charming,” the anxiety is not equivalent to say, taking a nap, or a mindless activity, fantasy can be actively “dangerous,” it can inspire “tragedies”, “rejection of meaning” and in relation to last chapters investigation, “wallowing” in fantasy “becomes a substitute for making history.”\(^6\) To put it succinctly, as philosopher Yi-Fu Tuan so righteously does, “escapist places…all lack…in a single word – ‘weight’.”\(^7\) The way academics, psychologists, and

\(^{7}\) Baumeister, Roy F. \textit{Escaping the Self}. 1991. p 36, 76.
sociologists pathologize excessive fantasy presents strike workers’ escapist desires as problematic because such desires distract from reality and inspire a yearning for the unattainable. Worse than non-productivity, fantasy is the substitution of grim reality with a pacifying, pleasured escape.

Metal, in its popular 70’s and 80’s incarnation, owes a significant history to these dime novels. Dispelling the concept of an accurate or sordid “reflection of reality,” songs from Deep Purple, Judas Priest, Alice Cooper, The Runaways and Kiss evoke other worlds, distant zones in which problems are explored from afar, or entirely ignored. This imaginary realm is the domain of metal moreso than any other popular music genre. The “mini-abysses” established in the prototypical metal song mirror the dime novel, presented as “easily digestible…escape from the intractable problems and horrors we deal with or read about every day.” However, just as Newman’s self-righteous admonishments contest the striker workers claims to their own fantasies, late 20th century critics and writers contest the metal space of ambivalent fantasy. They claim that when musical fiction is invoked in any form it must either reflect reality, or its didactic lesson must effectively advance the greater good.

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Fantasy//Reality

To begin this chapter, I define fantasy as the use of imagination or projection to generate in the mind, or through visual or audible text, a scenario or environment that does not actually exist. That’s about it, encompassing everything from the fantasy of going on a date with your crush, to the entire worlds produced in the novel *Dune*, to the incisive racial commentary presented in *Get Out*. Fantasy includes elements of technology and of mysticism, it can closely mirror real life, but it must somehow be un-real to fit my definition. The problem becomes that in describing un-reality, one must also delineate *reality*, which may be the trickier concept to define. The reactions processed by two brains resulting from identical stimuli may be radically different, and because perspective is eternally fixed to individual persons, attempting to situate commonality becomes nearly impossible. Jean Baudrillard and other post-structuralists spent years devaluing and deconstructing the symbols, media, and communications that supposedly ‘depict’ or ‘reflect’ reality. But, for the purposes of this paper, let us define the real as the hegemonically accepted boundaries, stimuli, and environments that people interact with on a day-to-day basis.

Reality includes things that may have elements of ‘unreality’ to them, or a symbolic nature that renders them abstract: things like governments, nature, light and consciousness. Even my definition of reality can become cloudy, because in many cases it is a collective fantasy that has given rise to reality, and the current accepted operation of reality is based heavily in abstract invention. Take the existence of nation-states; these are imagined things, no more than words on a page, buildings set up in specific locales, the agreements and handshakes of multiple people. What sets
these institutions apart and places them in my definition of reality is the mass of people who have simultaneously decided to adhere to this fantasy. When a group of people construct a fantasy that is convincing enough to be participated in by some population for long enough, it becomes reality. And so one begins to see that fantasy and reality are incredibly, intrinsically linked. Fantasizing can very easily affect or ‘advance’ into reality, generally when multiple people agree to certain boundaries and tenets of the new collective fantasy.

Even as fantasy and reality seem so closely rendered, most people from the left and the right will disavow deliberate fantasy in high doses. Adherence to the real, the ability to react to common stimuli and maintain contact with the pre-established environment that we have constructed as “the real” seems to be of great importance to the left, back to Marx’s attempts to “abolish the...trace of non-presence” from his utopic conception of post-capitalist commodities.\footnote{Shaviro, Steven. ”The Pinnochio Theory: Specters of Marx.” Wayne State University, 8 Feb. 2006.} Twenty-five hundred years ago Plato’s allegory of the cave positioned most of humanity as merely perceiving the shadows of reality, fleeting images and impressions of a true universe that only the unchained philosopher has full access to, or any knowledge of at all. Even though Plato’s allegory prefigures some postmodern theory about symbolic reality, there is still a consummate underlying reality to observe in Plato’s model, a tangible and true object that can be observed if you look hard enough.

Many social theorists will agree that perception of reality can be distorted or inaccurate, but still express a desire for uncovering and addressing a legitimate
underlying truth. Poststructuralist theorist Jean Baudrillard posited that modern society has become so far abstracted from any tangible truth that reality currently exists only as the symbols and simulations of itself. Drawn from Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulations* written in 1981, the argument switches from Plato’s description of a distorted or incomplete perception that masks reality, to a simulacrum, “the truth that conceals that there is none.”10 This incisive view holds that culture, media, and other simulations of underlying reality begin to replace and refigure tangible reality; constructed perceived reality now becomes the baseline of truth, hiding the fact that the floor has fallen out, and no underlying reality exists. Recognizing that most of our own perceived realities exist along the spectrum of fiction is perhaps an implicit argument for engaging in fantasy, mostly because we do it all the time without explicit awareness. One can see how Baudrillard’s dismissal of a palpable reality might undermine the arguments of punks and performance artists about adhering to an “authentic” self, if all semblance of ‘realness’ is based in illusionary social construction.

In terms of specific political critiques of fantasy, the complaints from both sides of the aisle take decidedly different forms. From the (American) conservative end the imperative of social and political actions is to remain rational, to look at the facts, the figures, and the studies that have pinned and stuffed ‘reality’ so it can be examined without the need for imagination. Conservatism implies a conservation of

that which already exists, so by extension there can be no fantasy in examining the past or present. The conservative project attempts to look objectively at what has worked effectively to meet specific goals and seeks to maintain those processes, culling the systems that are perceived to have failed. Extended fantasy, conservatives fear, can lead to idealism, to impracticality, to a place where answers are not derived from the state of the real but instead from a state of the unreal which pre-determines their ineffectiveness. In this regard, I have read, the phrase “Liberal Fantasy Land” on a myriad of alt-right and hyper conservative websites like The Blaze and Breitbart News. From the heart of a conservative viewpoint, the idea of a “Fantasy Land” captures much of the essence of ‘baseless’ ideologies dangerous power. Fantasy is seen as a separation of the body and mind from the real, thus it disables one or both parts of a human’s critical capacity.

Liberal critiques are also concerned with escape from reality, but instead of harboring the fear that fantasy will radicalize and mislead consumers, they fear that distance from brutal reality allows atrocity and conservative forces to shape and destabilize the world. The real is a battleground, fought in courthouses, legal backrooms and legislative floors; therefore, prolonged fantasy constitutes a desertion from the battle that must be forever fought against the conservative project. In my reading of punk discourse, fantasy and escapism allow for ignorance towards the real, towards problems and oppressions that are suffered every day across the globe. To

escape to fantasy is to ignore the prioritized reality where struggle and death and hardship are constantly experienced in an internalized, embodied and wholly “real” way. Punks on the left are more likely to decry capable bodies that play *Warcraft* instead of protesting. This is why punk is often prioritized over metal in the liberal domain, because punk is engaged constantly with the real, with the dismantling of the conservative reality, and the replacement with a progressive reality.

Though both of these critiques view fantasy as problematic, they also unwittingly reinforce the idea that fantasy holds unique disruptive power as a space where commonly treaded modes of thinking are disrupted, and new avenues of thought emerge. If it were true that fantasy *is* harmless, a space without power or consequence, it would be unworthy of study, yet academics and psychologists often concern themselves with the ways that fantasy affects, manipulates and rearranges ways of being and perceiving the world. Social theorists thus recognize the power inherent in fantasy, though most fantasy that receives preferential treatment and academic recognition still maintains a didactic and reality-affirming modality.

This is identifiable in the codifying of fantasy like Afrofuturism as a generative and canonized tradition. Afrofuturist thinkers focus on the ways that P-Funk, Sun Ra, Octavia Butler and other black musicians and writers utilize the framework of science fiction to recontextualize the diasporic African experience. A recent and blooming development in a number of medias, Afrofuturism is a genre that imbues art with themes of hyperfuturism, technological advance, and space travel all with people of color at the helm. Partly a reclamation of technologies denied to marginalized communities in the past, and partly a recognition that the machineries of
race theory, eugenics, and race science render black lives a form of “science fiction” in and of itself, Afrofuturism explores and subverts these tropes.\textsuperscript{12} Even bell hooks, an author uninvolved directly in Afrofuturism, opined in her essay “Life on the Margins” that, for marginal groups, “our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised.”\textsuperscript{13} It’s a prime example of a canonized fantasy; Afrofuturism is celebrated precisely because its practitioners utilize fantasy as a tool for expression and reclamation of marginalized identities.

**Politics in the Fantasy Landscape**

Though metal theorists point to the myriad of thematic tropes within metal, the genre infrequently engages in the kind of self-conscious counter-hegemony that characterizes Afrofuturism and other projects of socially generative fantasy. This stems from the historical tendencies of the metal, but is likely exacerbated by the fact that a majority of metal artists creating music through formalized channels are white, and exist within some spectrum of the dominant white patriarchy. There is definite overlap between metal and radical political fantasy, and a few key bands exist in this overlap, worth discussing before we delve into the a-social fantasy of many metal bands.

Queensrÿche’s 1988 conceptual opus *Operation Mindcrime* is a thrash metal record with an overt political agenda, the content firmly rooted in revolutionary calls


to action. The story, which follows a mindless modern man brainwashed by the
government to assassinate political dissidents, plants its fictional stance directly
adjacent to the real. Queensrÿche’s cries of “Educate the masses, we’ll burn the
White House down” and “Speak the word (Revolution!)” are political slogans raised
readily in the concurrent reality. Couched in the story of a young man led astray by
the brainwashing of religion, government, and corporations, the album invokes a kind
of fantastical politics, though it still conforms to generally accepted modalities of
political art.

Metallica, a hugely popular bay-area metal band, released a string of records
that condemned militarism and injustice throughout the early 80’s, with albums like
Master of Puppets from 1986 espousing ideology against the control of mass
propaganda, drug use, and global warfare. In the song “Disposable Heroes” James
Hetfield, the lead singer, fumes about the “Soldier boy, made of clay/ Now an empty
shell /Twenty-one, only son/ But he served us well” Master of Puppet’s grim
portrayal of the corrupted and fraudulent nature of institutions and power structures
fits the narrative of anti-hegemonic protest, and is one of the highest regarded metal
albums ever released, buoyed certainly by its pin-sharp instrumentation, political
sloganeering and gloriously heavy riffs.

These albums spring to mind quickly, because they traffic in critically
approved fantasy and their authors write with the acknowledged purpose of, “raising
political questions about marginalized people” in Samuel R. Delaney’s words.

Other groups, like contemporary metal band Animals As Leaders, exist in a gray area between overt and subdued politics. The group is a highly technical fusion of modern metal guitars and industrial electronic synths and drum beats. The band, fronted by Nigerian American protégé Tosin Abasi plays instrumental music, but their combination of highly virtuosic guitar and techno-focused sonic palette lends the music a decidedly futuristic tone. Tosin Abasi is one of the most widely recognized metal guitarists in the modern canon, and recently has begun designing guitar models that extend the range of the instrument, implementing both harmonic and aesthetic modifications. Animals As Leaders’ expansion of metal music’s sonic palette and deliberate infusion of futurism can be read as Afrofuturist in legacy, although Abasi and his band have never directly invoked the label.

These artists musical ideologies all fall well within the bounds of radical sociology, but when this canonizing project becomes contentious is when one dives into precisely those fantasies of ambivalent or escapist pleasure. What provokes censorship like Pauline Newman’s is not fantasy full stop, it is fantasy that purports no political agenda, or advances notions of dangerous unreality. The ‘hidden power’ of fantastic excursion is no longer an asset but a boon, and a desire to deny fantasy users access to improper or frivolous escapism re-centers the debate around undesirable worldviews and pleasure pursuits.

According to psychologist Roy Baumeister, enacting fantasy disengages specific parts of the brain associated in self-construction, which can lead, in his eyes, to the abandonment of normative pathways of thought in pursuit of more ‘fantastical’ ones. This can result in “bizarre, unorthodox, weird thoughts, ideas and fantasies” that
are thus problematized as dangerous by the author.\textsuperscript{17} If we assume that these psychologists, by their status as degree-wielding published authors, are heavily invested in the modes of operation currently undergirding the hegemonic state, wouldn’t these “bizarre…weird thoughts” be considered dangerous specifically because they may lead to the creation of radical new realities? Going further, Baumeister even claims that prolonged fantasy generates “novel and deviant systems or ideologies” which sounds oddly like the entire project of the radical left.\textsuperscript{18} Pauline Newman’s critique of dime novels similarly recognizes the power of fantasy, but resists the pull to understand practitioners of fantasy as visionaries, fearful, as she is that the striker’s misuse of the radical power of fantasy could undermine her vision of a possible future. The explorers of fantasy are medicalized or dismissed as deviant, but that’s precisely because they may possess some ability to disrupt established structures more effectively than their reality-bound peers.

Psychologist Yi-Fu Tuan in his book \textit{Escapism} espouses similar worries for the fantasy prone. His concern is again with overdosing on fantasy, like some sort of drug that is harmless so long as “it remains a passing mood, a temporary escape, a brief mental experiment.”\textsuperscript{19} Tuan recognizes, as Baudrillard does, that culture “is a product of imagination” but still worries that imagination can veer off into harmful territory in imagining and “acting out evil” when users are lead astray into “fantasy, the unreal, and the grotesque.” This is the conservative impulse at play in Tuan’s work, a fear that fantasy detaches and predisposes people to atrocity, a judgment

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Baumeister, Roy F. \textit{Escaping the Self}. 1991. p 77.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Baumeister, Roy F. \textit{Escaping the Self}. 1991. p 77.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Tuan, Yi-Fu. \textit{Escapism}. 1998. p xvi.
\end{itemize}
never defined, but assumed along an axis of moral normativity. Even Tuan’s conception of positive fantasy carries the liberal critique as well, concerned as he is that, “Even the good that imagination brings forth can be ambivalent.”

Tuan therefore establishes a tight rope of fantasy, where it can only assist productively when it operates in small doses and along socially appropriate lines. Tuan’s anxiety about fantasy does indicate one thing very firmly, and that is the perceived power of artistic and mediated expressions that encourage and lodge other users within fantastical worlds.

So, if fantasy and escapism are largely recognized as having influence, then the modes of music making central to metal’s popularity – spectacle and involved fantasy – may be a site of ripe cultural and societal production. The problem then becomes not the vehicle of fantasy, but the nature of the fantasy, valorizing proper use, and demonizing improper or immoral fantasies. Imagining these guidelines highlights the ways that metal particular combination of escapism, artifice, and transgression are uniquely problematic. Because fantasy is viewed as a space of radical generation of thought, the wielders of this tool must be intensely monitored to promote socially just modes of thinking.

If we imagine this site of production to be as fertile as I have positioned, you would think people would be up in arms about metal’s use of playful extended fantasy, hoping to reign in particularly deviant or unpleasant manifestations. And you would be right; metal is one of the preeminent targets for social and political control in the musical realm.

What Are You Dreaming About?

The most obvious and direct attempt at regulation of metal fantasy was through the Parental Music Resource Center’s infamous push for censorship of popular music records and videos. In a 1985 senate hearing led by PMRC representatives Tipper Gore and Susan Baker, the merits of “porn rock” were discussed in front of the Senate, with testimony from music professor Joe Stuessy and a coalition of high profile senate members and their spouses.\footnote{Walser, Robert. \textit{Running with the Devil}. 1993. p 138.} Dr. Stussey’s pamphlet “The Heavy Metal User’s Manual” was cited extensively by Tipper Gore in her senate hearing, espousing that “most successful heavy metal…projects one or more of the following basic themes: extreme rebellion, extreme violence, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity/perversion (including homosexuality, bisexuality, sadomasochism, necrophilia etc.), Satanism.”\footnote{Walser, Robert. \textit{Running with the Devil}. 1993. p 139.} These trends marked metal as deviant, and because they were often served up to predominantly young listeners as fantasies to be consumed and enjoyed, they represented a “threat to youth.”\footnote{Walser, Robert. \textit{Running with the Devil}. 1993. p 138.} When the PMRC came out against the “Filthy Fifteen”, in their view the artists transmitting the most unsavory material, nine artists in this group were metal bands (Black Sabbath, Judas priest, W.A.S.P., AC/DC, Venom, Def Leppard, Mercyful Fate, and Twisted Sister).\footnote{Weinstein, Deena. \textit{Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology}. New York: Lexington, 1992. p 169.} The subject matter of metal music came under fire repeatedly, as songs like “Suicide Solution” by Black Sabbath, and “Under the Blade” by Twisted Sister were picked apart in this media spectacle. It was the acceptance of the “hypodermic model” of

\begin{flushright}
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\item 22 Walser, Robert. \textit{Running with the Devil}. 1993. p 139.
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\end{flushright}
cultural effects that drove them to this point, assuming that meaning was “dumped” into listeners who were helpless to dispel the ideology pouring into them through their headphones. In response MTV established a Program Standards Department that required artists submit the lyrics to their videos, though often it was metal’s combination of visual spectacle with lyrical content that the PMRC reacted to most intensely.

The PMRC hearings provoked outrage from musicians and citizens alike who despised the way that cultural elites were policing the particulars of what songs could and could not be broadcast. In Robert Walser’s *Running With The Devil* he fights valiantly to prove that metal’s tendencies were not only by-products of the social systems from which they were created, but also no less harmful than “Monster Truck races” or “corporate boardrooms.” I agree that metal’s tendencies are less harmful than its critics are lead to believe, but I also find myself frustrated with Walser’s attempts to normalize the deviance apparent in heavy metal, downplaying its eccentricity versus admitting and accepting the perversity inherent in the genre. Attempting to justify and normalize deviant and ‘perverse’ fantasy within art leads to a similar ethic that the PMRC derives from, a valorization of certain fantasies and a dismissal or criminalization of others. It becomes, in essence, an effort of relative moral judgment.

Years down the road the qualms of the PMRC strike me as asinine, and have mostly faded from public outrage, but their censorship points to the dangers of policing forms of artistic expression. I don’t believe collective and sweeping

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legislation demonizing specific fantasies or lyrical content is a ‘progressive project’.
Glam metal especially came under fire for its “sexually explicit, violent, and morally
suspect” material, perhaps a reaction to its consistent genderfucking and incredibly
inconsistent political stance.27 Glam metal opened up flamboyant and highly
performative spaces for its members to dress beyond traditional gender expression,
while simultaneously including forms of locker room misogyny and homophobia in
lyrics and attitudes of performers. Glam thus received conservative critique for its
outsized genderfluid aesthetic (check out photos of Poison, Twisted Sister, or T-Rex)
and concurrent liberal critique for its crass propagation of male virility.

As a result of the PMRC hearings, the Parental Advisory label on music
releases is now industry standard, and stores and outlets will forgo stocking a bands
material if it fails to comply with the regulation. Even more sour is the decision by
record labels to issue censored versions of songs for radio and television, which have
become so common in the pop-music landscape as to go almost unnoticed in their
big-brother-esque project of manipulating messages and artistic voice. Any time one
determines what forms of fantasy and expression are deemed socially acceptable, and
what words must be wiped from the airwaves, a project of suspect morality begins to
take hold. (While not a metal song, I was always amused that the censored version of
Panic At the Disco’s I Write Sin’s Not Tragedies, which contained the phrase “god-
damned,” bleeped out the god but left the “damned” intact, a telling case of moral
suggestion). These hearings were guilty not only of reducing artistic license in the

public sphere, but their fixation on metal music specifically betrays a fear of the pursuit of ecstasy and turmoil in the absence of a direct moral conscience.

In my own experience, wide ranges of bizarre fantasies have entered and exited my consciousness through the conduit of metal music. Amusingly anti-social, the doom-metal band Sleep’s 1999 epic *Dopesmoker* tracks the pilgrimage of a race known only as the Weedians as they journey to Nazareth, not to quest for any great savior, but to get really, really high. The opening lyrics, which enter the fray around the 8-minute mark after the listener has been bombarded by crescendos of drums and low-strung guitar, powerfully intones, “DROP OUT OF LIFE WITH BONG IN HAND/ FOLLOW THE SMOKE TOWARD THE RIFF FILLED LAND”. It’s relatively inane, but certainly portrays a distinctly different message than Metallica’s “And Justice For All”. The phrase is enlivened by the immersive experience of listening to the record on headphones, it becomes overwhelming and entrancing, an offering of eternal drug-fueled malaise.

Other violent and strange fantasies put forth by bands like Carcass have recently joined my iTunes rotation. Carcass, a grindcore outfit from Liverpool, put out a string of records through the 80’s and 90’s, although 1989’s *Symphonies of Sickness* has received most of my attention recently. The album depicts in gruesome, petulant detail the putrefaction and consumption of dead bodies. Songs like “Exhume to Consume” feature the ingestion of corpses after they have been dug from their graves,

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What a funeral feast (putrid reek)
Weeping tissue is stripped
Pus dribbles from my lips
Pulverizing this pustular chaff
Butchering up morgues makes me laugh

While obviously inflected with some amount of humor, this is the sort of gore that might turn stomachs and incite backlash for its “richly conflicted” mode of exploring transgression. Demonstrating the presence of pleasure in the midst of gruesome fantasy, Carcass’ fetishized gore not only offers scenes of virulent carnage, but delights in them. There is no admonishment from a narrator, or punishment against the practitioner of this act, the actor escapes satisfied and unscathed.

Fantasy of another sort, Poison’s 1988 hair metal single “Nothing But A Good Time” doesn’t stress any particular transgressive ideology, but instead playfully suggests a hedonistic ambivalence, a particular apathy towards pro-social worries of fiscal management and responsible self care,

They say I spend my money on women and wine
But I couldn't tell you where I spent last night
I'm really sorry about the shape I'm in
I just like my fun every now and then (nothing but a good time)

All of these fantasies exist as easily accessible diversions, offering enticing modes of ecstasy to any willing to lend an ear. Even in the throes of these expansive universes, that supposed “psychologically induced” fantasy state where “inhibitions

cease to function,” one still maintains the ability to impress their own baseline agency, and exit the fantasy when they desire: that’s precisely the allure of escapism. To reiterate this point, I have not dropped out of life with bong in hand; I’m writing a senior honors thesis. Charting the path of the Weedians as the “Lungsman unearth the creed of Hasheeshian,” or grimacing as Carcass makes their way through “Ruptured in Purulence” is therefore enjoyable both for the music’s consuming totality, and for its ability to be negated, and dismissed when the music ends.

My construction of fantasy is then a project in reiteration of desires, a space flexible enough to allow one to distance themself when confronted with fantasies they have no longing to inhabit. There is no hypnotic specter in music that is capable of mind control, this is not a Queensrÿche concept album, and regardless, to deny the pleasures of a metal daydream is to facilitate the establishment of ‘proper’ thought. To prioritize the establishment of realistic fiction or didactic modes of fantasy denies the “alternative forms of difference or otherness” that metal practitioners willingly embrace.

With all that in mind, I sincerely believe that the desire to escape to fantasy is not a desire to be demonized, or feared. It can provide spaces of catharsis, or it can simply feel good, or freeing, or constricting. The longing to be elsewhere must not be mutually exclusive with the desire to be ‘here’, though it can be. The modes of fantasy that metal is hellbent on producing may not be to your taste, but to dismiss

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metal altogether for wishing to inhabit escapism is troubling and rests in judgments of moral and ethical relativism based in a crude conception of reality. So whether or not these fantasies approach reality, or ignore it, they exist to stimulate and should be left alone to do so.
Chapter 3:  
Dead-End Pleasure and Metal Excess

Self-indulgence: characterized by doing or tending to do exactly what one wants, especially when this involves pleasure or idleness.  
-Mirriam Webster Dictionary

“The slide into progressive rock saw the rise of a more self-conscious indulgent…style of performance”  
-Bill Osgerby, Punk Critic

In keeping with punk’s production as an austere and direct expressive movement, the self-indulgent nature of various metal and rock bands frequently comes under fire. Previously I discussed metal’s deliberate use of fantasy and inauthenticity, but the musical style is also frequently characterized as one of the most self-indulgent genres, and artist’s unnecessary embellishments are often a topic of critique in musical circles. What does this particular gripe say about the mindset of the punk coterie of critics? 

If we imagine that self-indulgence, the process of “tending to do exactly what one wants” involves a deliberate turn away from constant self-denial, then its incarnation within metal evokes an ethos of unbound hedonism, which often falls under the jurisdiction of the highly conscientious liberal idiom. Enmeshed within issues of ‘needless’ virtuosity and materialism, metal music is ridiculed for its

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pointless pleasure and its denial of simplicity, involved as it is in superstardom and destructive decadence.

Tommy Ramone of the Ramones once pointed to “endless solos that went nowhere” as one of 70’s rocks biggest flaws, no doubt looking to progressive rock and metal bands as engaging in music production that didn’t correlate to some direct identifiable message or end point. One Yahoo article entitled “The 5 Most Self-indulgent Albums of all Time” lists two metal albums, Queensryche’s *Operation Mindcrime*, and Dream Theater’s *Metropolis Pt.2: Scenes from a memory*, along with a distant relative in progressive rock band Styx’s *Kilroy Was Here*, an impressive feat considering metal’s relatively small footprint in the entire discography of popular music. Metal fans often point out that the showy, maximalist tendencies of some metal bands are their biggest asset (“That’s what makes them great!” emits Johnny Connor on a music fan forum) yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, punk writers and thinkers are resistant to this mode of self-indulgent pleasure. Critics of metal aim to deconstruct its pro-capitalist tendencies, its “alignment with…dominant values of the Reagan/Thatcher era” but often end up overreaching in their denouncement, disparaging lifestyles and social choices that should remain solely in the domain of the autonomous individual. Artistic ideals, modes of achieving satisfaction and

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ecstasy, and harmless hedonism all take flak from the indiscriminate cannons of the punk rebellion.

The main focus of this chapter is progressive rock and metal bands in the 70’s and 80s’, artists who elaborated on rock’s generic markings with lengthy solos, additional instruments, and increasingly large and elaborate concert experiences. Further examples will draw from hair and glam metal bands, whose music features fewer elaborate melodic and rhythmic moments, yet receive critique for their hedonistic and self-indulgent lifestyles.

“The new artists coming through were very materialistic and Hollywood, not so engaged in communication. As a citizen I was very concerned about what was happening to my genre”

-Patti Smith

Patti Smith’s quote above, given during a 2006 interview with Simon Reynolds, author of Punk Rock: So What? neatly defines the dominant punk attitude that surfaces in regards to metal and its attachments to excess. Smith’s apprehension isn’t directed at industry execs or record labels, but at the incumbent rock artists who were polluting the soul of rock and roll with decadence and glitz, destroying the ‘soul’ of rock by turning it into “showbiz.” Because the “new artists” were “not so engaged in communication,” Patti Smith, in a turn of paternal investment, becomes concerned as “a citizen” about what had happened to her genre. This quote illustrates the problematic of commercial success and showiness in rock and roll not only as an

7 Reynolds, Simon. Retromania” 2012. p 244.
issue of taste, but as a matter deserving approach in the public sphere. Smith’s conflation of materialism, degeneration, showbiz, and ineffective communication interprets the hedonistic tendencies of 70’s rock and metal music as embroiled with a corporate offering of mass media meant predominantly to pacify. This reading, of aimless pleasure as pacification, discounts and discredits the fundamental desire for ecstasy as problematic and anti-radical.

One of Smith’s most salient critiques in this quote relates to a perceived lack of “communication” from the new artists. The rock and metal musicians from the 70’s certainly weren’t using any less lyrics than their punk counterparts, thus the lack of “communication” critiqued must be interpreted as a lack of a specific kind of communication. Heavy metal records with titles like “Runnin’ With the Devil” “Nothing but a Good Time” and “Hell Bent For Leather” may have led Smith to worry that 70’s bands were so invested in “bombast and sentimentality” that they neglected to directly address issues of social importance, here positioned as the central task of rock n’ roll and punk. Even ignoring punk’s own reliance on traditional modes of capitalism (The Sex Pistols were allegedly set up to help Malcolm McLaren “Sell more Trousers”) the policing of pleasure through its manifestation in excessive intemperance signals an extension of punks no-prisoners politics into realms of personal pleasure and social experiences, experiences that I

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believe are not only harmless, but lie at the heart of anti-hegemonic queer resistance.10 The regulation of consumed pleasure in the rational-political tradition extends back as far as the 18th century, coinciding with the rise of mass culture. Marxist critique of commodities is rooted in the notion that passive consumption supplants creation and numbs laborers to their oppressed condition. This vision, while necessary for the foundation of communism and capitalist critique, demonizes the potential for pleasure in self-indulgent consumption, and sets up a dichotomy between duped consumer and hermetic revolutionary. Given that Marx’s own definition of commodities is an “object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another,” it becomes difficult to separate the economic critique from the recognition that commodities are, by definition, objects that produce pleasure in one form or another.11 Obviously commodities exists within complex and oppressive systems of alienation and labor, but I can’t help but see their existence as potentially separable from those systems, or at least more complex in their simultaneous generation of pleasure and necessitation of exploitation.

In the mid 20th century Guy Debord’s updated Marxist view envisioned the modern spectacle as a digestible fantastic commodity that attends to workers “leisure and humanity” in an effort to deny persons knowledge of themselves and their

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oppression. The “consumption of abundance” portrayed in Debord’s work is not only directly linked to modern spectacle, “paltry contests from competitive sports to elections,” but creates an inability to distinguish “true satisfaction from a survival” rendering pleasure derived from commodities as a physical process of numbing and dumbing down. The condemnations of self-indulgent consumption often rest on arguments of the illusory pleasure of intemperance, rendering the pleasures in question fleeting and phantasmal, they “wreath no flower” in their ecstasy, they cannot be transformative, or self-critical.

The punk subculture’s debt to Marxist traditions followed a trajectory away from hedonism during the late 70’s by bringing pleasure politics deeply into the realm of ascetic anti-capitalism and self-denial. The punks, for all the claims that they embodied a break from hegemonic structures, adhered very rigidly to a sense of puritan self-discipline that reduced the possible space to navigate pleasure within capitalism. Bill Osgerby, in Punk Rock: So What? is willing to come right out and say it: “unlike the loose limbed hippie 60’s, punk celebrated the rigors of restriction, constriction and sado-masochistic denial.”

The D.I.Y. straight-edge hardcore scene of Washington D.C. in the early 80’s was the poster child for this self-denial, radically opposed to imbibing any mind-altering substances, or pursuing casual sex in their quest for total bodily control. In order to purge the “loose limbed hippies” and “Big fucking doofuses at the local

14 Tuan, Yi-Fu. Escapism. 1998. p 144.
sports bar having successful lives…listen(ing) to Phil Collins” from the ranks of punks, they had to be engaged in a constant process of self-denial.\textsuperscript{16} Minor Threat, one of the preeminent bands in the D.C. hardcore scene and originators of the term ‘straight-edge’, had songs that often set up an intense contrast between consumers of alcohol and the heightened, tack-sharp nature of the celibate. Lyrics from the anti-alcohol tirade, ‘In My Eyes” bludgeon the listener with lyrics like, “You tell me you like the taste, you just need an excuse” and “You tell me its only natural, you just need the proof, Did you fucking get it”\textsuperscript{17} It is an intense orthodoxy, a funneling of anti-capitalist rhetoric into thinly veiled sermonizing. Elicited by the excess and consumption of Minor Threat’s forbearers, they preached to their devoted followers, “I’m a person just like you/ But I’ve got better things to do/ Than sit around and smoke dope/’Cause I know I can cope.”\textsuperscript{18} This kind of self-regulation was a deliberate act by the band to disrupt stereotypes of punks as being hedonistic, and self-indulgent. Ian McKaye, the lead singer and visionary of the group, once described the band by saying, “We're honest as shit, we never steal, we go to the store, we pay our money, we're just totally nice, and best of all we got our heads shaved and we're totally punk rockers and we're totally going against what they want.”\textsuperscript{19}

If punk supposedly heralds the future of anti-capitalist, anti-hegemonic rebellion, it seems that its strict adherence to self-discipline plays into many of the

\\textsuperscript{16} Reynolds, Simon. \textit{Retromania}. 2012. p 268. (Taken from quote of Billy Childs)
\textsuperscript{17} Minor Threat. “In My Eyes”. \textit{In My Eyes}. Dischord. 1981.
\textsuperscript{18} Minor Threat. “Straight Edge”. \textit{Minor Threat}. Dischord. 1981
same regulatory forces that generate the norms of modern society. Instead of a pleasure-focused liberation, old taboos of normative sexuality, capitalist consumerism and sociality were reinforced through strict regulation of excess and pleasure in Minor Threat. To be sure, Minor Threat were attempting to combat the ideas that grown-ups had about belligerent punks, but straight edge politics seem more like an attempt to bring punk negationism into the realm of parental and societal tolerance. McKaye has, in recent years, even renounced the straight-edge movement that he helped spawn, disappointed in the ways it has turned into an evangelical orthodoxy, though the guiding force of punk cannot be dismissed from these pivotal roots.20

**Technical Ecstasy//Playing With Yourself**

While punk treaded in anti-consumerism, the movement was not only described by Bob Andrews, a music critic as, “A backlash against the big megatours” but also a refusal of the “flashy guitarists” that came with it, economic excess and virtuosic excess rejected simultaneously.21 If one thinks of the recoil outlined in chapter one against the mode of the theatrical self, here the through-line continues, a distinctly punk desire for an economy of expression that both prioritizes idealized politics, and dismisses alternative forms of indulgence and pleasure. It’s a mindset of self-governance that doesn’t cease when big box stores and corrupt politicians have been successfully boycotted – it continues into peoples drug and alcohol consumption, their desires for casual sex, and their freedom to pursue pleasure through the means they so desire.

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To pinpoint precisely the issues of indulgence in metal, one Alice Cooper interview details the metal mindset at the height of the first wave of 70’s metal: “We were into fun, sex, death, and money when everybody was into peace and love.” Cooper represents an idiomatic metal star in this quote, denying the collectivity of the hippie generation and acknowledging unabashedly a desire for fun and excess. The surrounding backlash against Alice Cooper’s proclaimed hedonism demonstrates the punk pleasure police out in full force (To be clear, punks were not advocating for “peace and love,” but instead desired a replication of the collectivity of the hippie movement and the renewal of “common feeling” from the 60’s with a slight musical and political facelift). Metal’s “perceived lack of political engagement” stems from forswearing this tendency more than any other: through an acknowledgement of a desire to get wasted, to enjoy carnal pleasures and to enjoy loud music without necessarily patrolling peoples desire, metal musicians doomed themselves to be eternally perceived as members of a second-rate subculture.

Alice Cooper, purveyor of dead-end pleasure, is quoted in a Rolling Stone piece as saying “one of the things that turned him on most was jacking off.” This act of self-pleasuring is a key corollary to metal’s indulgence, and helps in understanding why ascetic regulation of metals pleasure seeking is problematic. Masturbation, I would hope, is past the moment of strict policing in liberal spheres, and generally recognized as an enjoyable tool at the disposal of willing participants. Metal’s

22 Waksman, Steve. *This Ain’t the Summer of Love.* p 82.
investment in its own, self-focused pleasure can be imagined as masturbatory, its end goal to use noise and narratives of fantasy as a space for listeners to inhabit, offering sonics as a means to orgasmic euphoria. While elements of metal are certainly cerebral, it is often noted as a genre rooted in bodily sensation, the physicality of deeply distorted guitars, or the thump of a heavy bass drum in the chest. It requires no partner to dance with, the act of head banging favored in many metal genres is a singular activity and even mosh pits represent intimate contact in impersonal settings.

The prototypical metal lifestyle reinforces the dead-end, internally focused pleasure politics with freewheeling substance use, sex, and glamour. Punk, in contrast, was more taboo tolerant than the staunch buttoned-up 50’s and suburban 60’s, but lurking underneath the green mohawks was a punk desire for a meaningful and connected community produced through art and sex.

In a lengthy op-ed published in the punk zine Anathema #2, author Lee says, “I'm sick of the way sex is cheap thrills, sick of the way its turned into entertainment” which sets up a contrast between “cheap” sex, and the authors desired sexual atmosphere, which is laden with meaning and apparently, unentertaining. This argument exits the realm of patriarchal critique, extending beyond calls of misogyny to require that sex, and music that traffics in sexual themes, maintain its puritanical function as a mode of connection and reproduction. It is pleasure manifest in materialism and casual sex that, according to Lee, doesn’t generate enough meaning, or stimulate connection in the proper way, relegated to entertainment, the void of the spectacle.

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An amusing lens to view this punk critique through is conservative Christian rhetoric surrounding masturbation. Not only does this parallel help in understanding and fomenting the masturbatory impulse of metal, but it also highlights the unintentional puritanism inherent in critiques of musical and social ‘self-indulgence’. "Masturbation essentially takes the act of sexual pleasure and cancels the possibility of its connective function, a perversion of the sex act that repurposes pleasure for self-indulgent and non-productive ends. Dr. Juli Slattery in an article from *Today's Christian Woman’s* notes that masturbation is problematic because the goal is “to bring pleasure to yourself, typically outside of relationship”.27 The key to this anti-masturbation stance is that the very act forgoes connection, its capacity to bond two people together in ‘holy’ alignment. Similarly, when performer Robin from the punk band Screaming Toenail comments, "Music is a little like masturbation. If you can do it for an actual reason, I think it can be more important” it’s a sincere and misguided dig at the a-social pleasure of music’s masturbatory impulse.28 The ambivalent and self-centered enjoyment generated through metal music does not immediately produce meaningful revolutionary communities, thus it is demoted for lacking social connective tissue.

Located in the music video for hair-metal band Twisted Sister’s video “We’re Not Gonna Take It”, is a lovely moment demonstrating dominant views towards anti-social metal pleasure. In the video, a boy’s father catches him listening to metal, and

the dad, in a bout of explosive anger, yells, “you do nothing, you are nothing. You sit in here all day and play that sick, repulsive, electric twanger... Who are you”!? In this delightful description of playing metal guitar, the sons “twanger” is recast as a masturbatory tool, both generating non-productive pleasure, and reducing the son to a wastoid, sapping energy that would be presumably used in a more normative productive capacity.

The argument that masturbation “squanders our sexuality” is likewise invoked in another article from Christianity Today, a precise corollary to the father’s problem with metal in the Twisted Sister video. Masturbation and metal both squander the impulse for self-actuation, polluting the powerful tool of music or sex with a desire to just ‘get off’. Author Eve Tushnett opines that, “Instead of our urge driving us to pour ourselves out for others...we seek to satisfy our urge on our own terms. Ecstasy becomes something we achieve by and for ourselves.”

This anxiety, that ecstasy might serve merely to pleasure oneself, lies at the heart of critiques of metal’s massive popularity. It’s just too much pointless pleasure, indulgence for its own sake, and beyond being harmless; it actively reduces the capacity for generative contact, media or otherwise. Like the way soda sucks calcium from bones and coats the bone to make it harder for new calcium to enter, indulgent rock music supposedly saps ones radical energy, and precludes the return of that force.

Theorists have explored these avenues of non-productive pleasure, sexual and otherwise, perhaps most notably in the field of queer theory, where Lee Edelman

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wrote his seminal work *No Future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive* in 2003. The book outlines a queer mode of living that ignores productive, heterosexual relationships in favor of hedonistic and pleasure centered living. Flouting the “reproductive futurism” invoked by moralists, liberal and conservative, Edelman argues that Queer existence involves disturbing the heteronormative futures “unquestioned value” in which children, produced through heterosexual intercourse, are the bearers of a promised utopia, imbuing meaning into heterosexual intercourse and relationships. Flouting the “reproductive futurism” invoked by moralists, liberal and conservative, Edelman argues that Queer existence involves disturbing the heteronormative futures “unquestioned value” in which children, produced through heterosexual intercourse, are the bearers of a promised utopia, imbuing meaning into heterosexual intercourse and relationships.\(^{31}\) Viewing metal through the lens of Edelman’s work recasts its role as distinctly queer in its insistent on non-productive pleasures, fantasies and “unlimited hedonism.”\(^{32}\) Edelman writes with the hope that the queering of current social relationships would allow for hedonism and indulgence of self to radically alter the assumed trajectory of the productive heteronormative future. So too could metal be read to alter homogenous pro-social, and overwhelmingly moral musical and social trends. Where punk music was certainly meant to invoke euphoria it also, “directly and dramatically confronted the social system and its hegemonic culture” through its inception.\(^{33}\) The genres of indulgent progressive rock and metal *maintain* that ecstasy and euphoria, but their withdrawal from meaning-making, results in a so-called “embrace” of “self-absorption”, a perversion of rock and roll, taking potential protest music and squandering it in a way that would make Edelman proud.\(^{34}\)


I apply this queer reading with caution, as other authors have, because metal engages in hegemonic misogyny and neo-liberalism just as much as it decries normative limits of pleasure. Its practitioners have been noted for homophobia in the past, and not many metal bands intentionally heft the banner of queer resistance, whether or not they subtly evoke it. Still, Authors like Laina Dawes and Daniel Drews have dealt with the queering of metal much more explicitly, and in Chapter 4 I will illuminate more intently metal’s legacy in queer and marginalized social circles.

Further illustrations of metal’s queer and masturbatory impulse can be found in a number of places, one of the most notable being the song “Cherry Bomb” by the Runaways. Featuring eventual superstars Lita Ford and Joan Jett, “Cherry Bomb” is a riotous dismissal of puritan attitudes that seek to delimit the pleasures of sex. “Hello World, I’m your wild girl//I’m your ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch cherry bomb” rings out through the chorus, accompanied by elaborate costumes of corsets and teased hair in the music video.35 Cherrie Currie, the singer, was sixteen at the time of release, and the song is said to be Currie “taunting her parents and other adults with suggestions of promiscuity and bad behavior.”36 However it is the guitar solo, the classic rock symbol of -usually male- self-indulgence that provides the songs most electric moment. During the final bridge of the 1976 studio version of the song, guitarist Lita Ford shreds her way up and down the neck as vocalist Cherry Currie gasps and moans in simulated orgasmic pleasure. Ford’s act of directing attention to herself for the performative pleasure of rapidly stroking the neck of the guitar, underpinned by the ecstatic cries of Currie’s vocals is a highly sexed and radically self-centered explosion

of traditional romantic pop music. Steve Waksman has read the song as a recasting of the “phallocentric guitar solo... as a source of female pleasure,” but alongside the songs gender subversions, the moment also directly spotlights the indulgent masturbatory pleasure of the metal solo. It works as both a counter-patriarchal middle finger, and ownership of the masturbatory aspects of the guitar solo and metal music in general. It is amusing to reconcile this musical moment with a quote from the Sex Pistols biography that calls the 70’s “bland and insignificant.” Punk writers sound nearly identical to the Christian puritans in their insistence that meaning and connection must be at all times present during sensation and ecstasy. The very fact that metal bands were constantly uniting masses of people into spaces and then simply pleasuring them with no ulterior motive is blasphemous to a dedicated punk – and no symbol signals this perversion more readily than the arena.

**Into the Arena**

The Arena – or stadium – even in its nomenclature calls to mind bloodsport, vacuous impersonal contact, and superstardom, hated tropes in the mind of punk writers. Arena’s are large concert venues, sometimes converted from football and baseball stadiums in the off-season, capable of holding upwards of 10,000 people in a single space. Because of their size, and the potential for profit, the arena becomes the symbol through which metal bands enact their own indulgence: large spaces capable of entertaining many, yet too big to afford some sort of intimate ‘real’ bond between performer and audience. These large stadium shows, in contrast to the 350 people that

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37 Waksman, Steve. *This Ain’t the Summer of Love*. p 138.

could fit in a small punk club like CBGB’s, are places where huge amounts of the public are offered “scandalously ambivalent pleasure.”39 Punk’s distaste for the travesty of the arena pierces music across genres, not limited to metal. Billy Child, a member of a singular sub-culture called the “Stuckists” devoted to early 60’s punk and pop incarnations, laments the moves that punk made into the stadium saying, “I preferred punk when it was a minority think, bands playing in small rooms on the same level as you. But it got to be about large concerts again.”40 The elitist mindset of requiring a small venue in order to convey meaning conjures an imagined audience of listeners ‘in the know’, preserving a feeling that a spectacle, by its isolation, is more meaningful. Even seminal punk band The Clash had to defend their move to a major label as an effort to reach more fans, though that may be unsurprising considering the issue of selling out seems to never leave the discourse around contemporary music.

In contrast to the tiny club, the arena atmosphere stirs deep disgust in the gut of liberal theorists, because upon study, arena shows appear as a perversion of the liberal dream of collective, united action. Guy Debord writes extensively in The Society of the Spectacle about the overwhelming takeover of society by commodities, which manifest themselves in massive orchestrated events, “spectacles” that are the “concrete manufacture of alienation.”41 Debord’s conception of the “spectacle” is a “permanent opium war” waged by dominant powers that debilitates workers capacity to separate commodified reality from un-commodified reality.42 The “glitter” of

39 Waksman, Steve. This Ain't the Summer of Love. p 134. (Original Quote from Fred Pfeil).
42 Debord, Guy. ”The Society of the Spectacle." Society of the Spectacle. 1967. 44.
massive media events subsumes the audience to commodity, here posited as the arena rock show, which is the producer of a “bad dream of modern society in chains.”43 Instead of the image of political utopia in a place like Woodstock, these gatherings exist as massive, paid orgies of sound, “raw spectacle,” thus void of transformational power, or worse, capable of “block[ing] further development toward real collective social formations.”44 When proto-metal act Grand Funk Railroad states, “the ‘goal’ is to get off – and in the mystery of the rock you get off on what’s yours” it evokes both the fear of masturbation, and a reinforcement of anomie, that one possesses the means to which they themselves can be pleasured in the absence of any sort of productive community moment.45 Because affect must somehow be related to commitment and action, the sublimation of critical thought to pleasure is seen only as an anti-revolutionary act.

This critique of ‘empty’ metal pleasure also extends to elitist distaste towards the ease with which audience members are entertained by metal music. Writers and critics in the heyday of metals first wave of popularity (1970-1973) liked to say that audience members only enjoyed the music because they weren’t discerning, an easy way of dismissing the huge throngs of people interested in attending metal concerts as irrational. A number of claims are thus lofted at the “duped mass audience” of metal as a distancing project to insure that the members of society invested in the “hopelessly corrupt and counterfeit” pleasure of mass media are denied autonomy.

45 Waksman, Steve. This Ain’t the Summer of Love. p 40.
and vilified for their leisurely interests.\textsuperscript{46} In the vein of Debord, theorists like Frederic Jameson emit the constant fear that mass culture “can arouse hopes of utopia, yet perpetuate their containment within hegemony.”\textsuperscript{47} This particular apprehension, that the masses of the proletariat are \textit{so close} to achieving a mass utopia, yet are held back by the sort of pleasure peddled by metal culture reinforces a condescension towards fans of metal music, and popular music in general, in my reading this makes a strange bedfellow with supposedly liberal attitudes.

Fortunately, other media theorists have heavily contested this argument by positing that consumers navigate and generate personal fulfillment from the forms of media they consume. David Gauntlett explores this theory in regards to visual media, disputing that television viewers are passive receptors for the ideologies of the programs they watch, and points to evidence that no direct link exists between media consumption and peoples “subsequent actions.”\textsuperscript{48} Similarly, John Fiske in \textit{Television Culture} posits that meanings are not directed in a one-way exchange from producer to consumer, but exist and are modified by the active viewing and listening of the receiver, whether it is a daytime soap, or a violent action program.\textsuperscript{49} Seeing the arena show as strictly a pacifying event discredits both the fans of metal music, and the music producers by assuming that their investment in non-productive pleasure directly correlates to future apathy. Given that metal artists were perpetually in the

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\textsuperscript{47} Walser, Robert. \textit{“Running With the Devil”}. 1993. p 125.
\end{flushright}
flux of identities, dressing up and dressing down, they approached the expanse of
mass media as one ripe for experiences of euphoria without intense political gesture.
To imagine that no participants in the mass of metal stadium shows could go home
and call their senator, or participate in radical socio-political lifestyles is a limiting
framework to construct mass culture.

Pinned to the “Primitive”

In the same vein of critique that positions the ‘duped’ metal fan as unable to
engage in serious critical thought, punk fans often prided themselves on higher taste,
directly in contrast to easily digestible arena acts. Affinity for punk bands like The
New York Dolls “perversely required a refined sensibility” because of the
overwhelming “crudity and clumsiness of the sound.” This trait links a taste for this
band with superiority of the listener, maybe one active reason that the Dolls were a hit
with New York critics.50 The New York Dolls seemingly prefigure their success by
playing ‘crudely’ in contrast to the ‘unnecessarily’ virtuosic work of metal guitarists
and musicians.

The virtuosic proclivity of metal is “often looked on with suspicion,” and
punk writers have implied that the desire for instrumental proficiency somehow
hindered artist’s ability to convey real and legitimate emotions.51 Famed critic Lester
Bangs once wrote, “Grand Funk Railroad was only good when they sounded like shit
and played to the squalor of the ‘brothers and sisters’ in their audience.” Bangs’
conflation of Grand Funk’s musical progression with their inability to perform ‘good’

music is an argument built on dissonance. Bangs noted later in the same 70’s opinion piece that Grand Funk Railroad was “losing legions of fans with every dollop of proficiency they gained,” thus solidifying the equation of virtuosity with bad music.52 This curious conundrum is not unfamiliar to punk musicians, who long held that in order to be a revolutionary force, you could never give in to the impulse to purchase better equipment or to attempt some mastery over your instrument.

Critic Greg Shaw similarly notes that Grand Funk succeeded only when they stripped Rock to “its primal blues roots.”53 When GFR dismiss their virtuosic impulses and move towards a sound figured as “primal” that they are a successful unit. Other critics often return to this particular word *primal* as a descriptor of the proper way that rock and roll subgenres should sound. Rolling Stone’s review of Alice Cooper’s *Killer* lets his “cornball” musical stylings slide because they are undergirded by the “sheer sustained impact of its primal rock and roll jolt.”54 Billy Child, member of the Stuckists, responded in an interview that its always “essential to stay with the primal, the thing closest to the ground.”55 Invocations of realness, and rawness litter the discourse around the early punk movers and shakers, proving that the indulgence and artifice of 70’s rock bands was unnerving, enough to inspire serious backlash. The language used to describe early punks like the Dictators who were “fed up with 10-minute concertos that had become the staple of American Rock” becomes “stripped to the bone” again evoking a strange connection to an imagined

52 Waksman, Steve. *This Ain’t the Summer of Love.* p 66.
53 Waksman, Steve. *This Ain’t the Summer of Love.* p 67.
primal past. The conflation of early blues music, which is rooted firmly in the black music tradition, and the world "primal" evokes racist imagery, some illusionary past conjured by punk writers to reclaim an authentic expressive power. The fixation on the primal and the primitive, in contrast to the “arty-farty” tendencies of metal and some “new wave” bands, is a substantive example of this arguments dialectic.

Artists were often commended for their “primitive” sounds, and when metal did receive critical acclaim, it was often on these grounds. In Waksman’s book, punk’s “off-key, out of tune, primitive screams and hyena gyrations still remain the purest form for expressing teenage desire and arrogance.” Here, the word “pure” is added to the mix, and an animalistic description proves that critics surrounding punk were perhaps anti-virtuosity because it ran counter to an imagined conception of ‘pure’ human nature, never tainted by leisure and always intent on direct unmediated expression. By presenting virtuosic, lengthy songs, metal musicians were straying from an idealized sense of human expression, best economized and maintained through a return to an imagined ‘primitive’ voice.

In Stephen Bottom’s theater studies research an author named Eugino Barba, in a 1965 issue of Tulane Drama Review, criticized theater for failing to “purify itself” of non-essentials,” its insistence on “hybrid forms” incompatible with what Barba saw as the “potency and salvation” held within “primitive rituals” re-enacted by the burgeoning performance art scene. Not only is shamanistic power granted to

58 Waksman, Steve. This Ain’t the Summer of Love. p 139.
the primitive, but the decision by metal to extend into maximalism and indulgence is a direct route to impotence. Virtuosity can only bring one farther from the imagined primitive self; therefore it is a veneer, something that interferes with an artist's ability to express themselves untainted and “pure”.

Metal critics have been known to traffic in this critique as well, and even within the metal discourse some bands are needled for their use of “non-essential” modes of expression. This occurs most frequently in the crossover punk/metal scene where themes of asceticism, political engagement, and strict self-control are more common, a nod to the genres punk lineage. Metal studies writer and musician Ovskum once declared that his music comes “from a pre-critical compulsion, and instinct which comes prior to thought.”60 This notion, of instinct providing a primal route to purified expression, again runs contrary to the decadent and deliberately artificial modes of music making that many heavy metal bands trafficked in. It is the conscious deploying of a veneer, of a deliberate move towards the pleasure of the self that is portrayed as a shot through the heart of the legitimate ‘primal’ project of punk and metal. Ultimately, the austerity outlined centers on establishing control – power over the desires and pleasure of others – the antidote to the “superstar virus” even more poisonous than its source.61

61 Waksman, Steve. This Ain’t the Summer of Love. p 66.
Chapter 4: Metal’s Legacy

While the previous three chapters have largely dealt with metal musicians and records from the past, the current debate about metal's place in mass culture and the academy rages on. There still exists a thriving underground metal scene that occasionally breaks into the airwaves of hard rock radio or VH1 classic video marathons, but by-and-large metal has faded from mainstream ubiquity. The current scene flourishes underground on YouTube, through dedicated metal labels, small metal concerts, and a global network of diehard fans. 80's superstars continue to put out new records, and Metallica, Iron Maiden, and Megadeth still draw large crowds, but their singular presence represent the biggest influence of metal on mass mainstream culture. The furor surrounding metal music and censorship has died down, and what is left to debate is the legacy of metal and the merits of bands duking it out in the shadow of the mainstream.

In the meantime, punk ascends. Newly minted in films like *20th Century Women*, popular culture reaffirms punk’s penchant for social and cultural change, its fetishization of unmediated affectation and its “rawness of expression.” The definitions and delineations outlined in this paper are thus not simply disputes of retroactive legacy, but markers of punks continued aspirational ideal, an unquestioned

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authenticity artists strive towards in the modern era. Metal’s disappearance from the mainstream coincides with films like *Hesher* about a metal-loving burnout with a troubled past, and *The Judge* where a selfish lawyer soothes his conscious with Metallica. The assembled discourse around metal and punk has largely restricted their politics to fixed ends of a spectrum: authentic revolution and insincere chauvinism. These designations generate friction, and have resulted in frustration from – and misconceptions towards – metal artists, especially those of marginalized identities, who operate outside established norms.

Laina Dawes, in her autobiography *What Are You Doing Here?* writes frequently about the struggles of being a black woman heavily involved in the metal scene. Her irritation is apparent throughout the novel, brought into focus by the decision to eschew hardcore and punk, genres “widely perceived as giving a voice to the voiceless,” and emphasis her position within heavy metal.\(^2\) Metal’s pariah status becomes a signifier which de-legitimizes Dawes construction of self and desire. Dawes, rallying against the ways that her identification with metal has led to resistance with outsiders, declares, "I am outraged by the classism that stereotypes metal as music for angry, racist, sexist white men, and the snobbery that questions the racial authenticity and legitimacy of the black heavy metal fan.”\(^3\) Informed by punk critical discourse, the “monolithic portrayal of metal’s participants” dismisses real experiences of marginalized heavy metal fans and the “multiple experiences of


metal’s participants.”\textsuperscript{4} Involvement in metal now carries with it the stigma of being unthinking or complicit in the genres presumed racist or misogynistic pockets, which does little beyond compressing the identities and complexities of the genre into convenient talking points or ideological guideposts. Metal, in the case of Dawes, elucidated "the potentially dangerous internal anger" that she recognized at a young age.\textsuperscript{5} It transported her from feeling like "it was inappropriate to express my rage through words or violence" towards a place of catharsis, providing a space for her and others "who cannot or choose not to conform to societal standards."\textsuperscript{6} However Dawes growth through the metal subculture becomes subsumed to larger narratives generated about the genres ineffectiveness, or its presumed politic.

People who occupy marginalized identities have often chafed with the dominant view of metal, the “normalization of the straight, white, male metalhead” and in recent years seek to contest the claims and foundations of this legacy. A project of modern metal theorists has been precisely the reframing of identity and marginality within metal, examining what happens when “the assumption that metal is straight, white, and male (and western) is challenged”?\textsuperscript{7} The result of this characterization is that a number of aggressive marginalized and queer bands that share sonic similarities with metal do exist, but either claim a non-history with metal or identify instead with punk.

\textsuperscript{5} Dawes, Laina. \textit{What Are You Doing Here?}. 2012. p 45.
\textsuperscript{6} Dawes, Laina. \textit{What Are You Doing Here?}. 2012. p 17.
This predilection manifests itself in a very interesting corner of the metal/punk divide, the close proximity of two crossover genres in the extreme hardcore scene. One genre, entitled "powerviolence" tends to identify heavily with the lineage of punk, and one entitled "grindcore" links itself more to the metal tradition. Both of these genres involve incredibly fast drum parts, down-tuned guitars, intense tempo changes, and brutal shouted or screamed vocals that match the instruments in intensity. Both styles push the limits of metal's aural intensity, and share roots in the hardcore punk scenes, as well as the thrash and death metal genres. These styles share so many aural qualities that the only marker that distinguishes them is their ideology and lyrical content. By highlighting or underplaying specific visual and textual markers, bands invoke either their punk, or metal roots, displaying which genre lineage embodies some desired band ethos. What occurs in this liminal space is the rejection of metal from bands that utilize its sonic markers, precisely because of its ascribed politic, solidified in part by punk and critical discourse.

HIRS, a trans punk band from Philadelphia, strongly dismiss their generic ties to metal, stating in an interview, "I wouldn't even call it grind, its punk. I understand there's blastbeats and people want to call it grind and all these other genres, but we've always just agreed that any band that were ever in is just a punk band." No fault of the band, there is strong incentive to identify with the legacy of punk, and this interview highlights just how punk has become the golden child to which all other genres then exist in contrast to. The interviewer follows up with, "So why punk"? to

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which the response was "The idea of ethics...we're just aggressive and fast and trying to be better people and burn the bridges of all awful people and make sure to leave them behind." Through the discourses of authenticity elucidated in the previous three chapters, 'ethics' is now located solely within the domain of punk, and the issue becomes what is left on the other side of that identification. The "grind" bands who identify with that metal legacy then become the proponents of unethical behavior, further problematizing the arbitrary generic distinctions between the two camps of highly similar music styles. It is the "fucked up lyrics" and "stupid imagery" of metal bands that HIRS wishes to distance themselves from, a direct result of muddled critiques of metal.9

Metal scholar Lewis Kennedy writes extensively about the symbiotic relationship between punk and metal in the grindcore and powerviolence scenes. His central thesis is that both genres, in their proximity, have driven the progression of crossover scenes through antagonism and “underground pride.”10 Frequently, when genres with such different lineages come into close contact the subtlest differences become the sticking points by which various bands define themselves against competing artists. Kennedy notes that it is most frequently the musicians engaged in the punk tradition avidly protect the generic markings of their music, generally in regards to the lyrical and structural content of their music. Instead of relying on "fantastical imagery and allegory" the hardcore bands are intensely concerned with

"the everyday, mundane lives of (their) participants." These "unwritten hardcore 'rules'" strike Kennedy as "constraining rather than useable guidelines for creativity," yet placed in the context of genre warfare, these defining categories become not only defensible, but also imperative for maintaining scene purity.\textsuperscript{11} This, coupled with the "premise that hardcore lyrics must be easily understood by the audience in order to most effectively communicate," insists on hardcore and powerviolence’s central task as conveying an important and easily understood message.\textsuperscript{12} Bands so heavily steeped in the punk mythos continue to deny the sort of fantastical and silly lyrical and stylistic play that metal bands are more often engage in. The legacy of hardcore thus feeds into the most constricting tendencies of punk, forgoing metal’s glam for the down-and-dirty notion of "living realistically and being proud of it."\textsuperscript{13}

Modern artists like Connecticut based Space Camp infuse and subvert traditional metal stylings with odd instrumentation and lyrics that rally behind the destruction of hyper-masculinity in hardcore scenes and beyond. ‘Queering’ the genre through the subtraction of guitar and addition of keyboards and visual aesthetics indebted more to avant-garde art and zine culture than Metallica, they perform in a space not easily quantified. Despite generic markings like blast beats, breakdowns, and a Napalm Death t-shirt that that drummer was wearing when I saw them perform (a seminal grindcore band), Space Camp most frequently seek a non-identity with metal, noting that, “There’s no spot that we occupy concretely.” They often find


themselves performing at shows with “emo, pop-punk and acoustic balladry” given their prioritization of communal D.I.Y. ethics over strict generic limitation. Because of critical and public priorities surrounding the grindcore/powerviolence debate, no significant queer metal scene exists and bands like Space Camp don’t have the infrastructure to play with other similarly attuned bands, thus reinforcing queer metals absence as a permeating force.

The band Naive Sense similarly sound very at home in the grindcore scene – with short, explosive, and intensely distorted songs – but apply the moniker of ‘hardcore’ and the tradition of queer punk. Using hollow-bodied guitars and fuzz pedals, they also actively subvert "what is expected in hardcore" both sonically and lyrically. Just like Space Camp, they also distance themselves from metal offshoots, and self-identify on their Bandcamp music site as “punk” “angry” and “Queercore”, adhering intensely to the way punk and metal genres have been politically structured in the surrounding discourse.

The disillusionment of marginalized bands with the metal subculture is a circle with no artist at fault, a constant cycle of re-identification and reification. Even when festivals like Philly’s Get Better Fest, and Bent Fest in London do collect aggressive queer, trans, and POC hardcore bands, it is always under the banner of “D.I.Y. Punk” and never explicitly metal. The lineage of metal remains statically

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15 Stanley-Ayre, Sarah. "'Fuck Your Standards' Says Trans-fronted Hardcore Band Naïve Sense." City Pages. City Pages, 4 Nov. 2015.
16 Naïve Sense. [Self-Titled]. Bandcamp. 06, April 2017.
17 White, Woodrow. "Queers To The Front! Bent Fest & the Queer DIY Punk Scene." The 405. 20 Apr. 2015.
fixed, thanks in no small part to its outsider characterization from liberal and critical punk discourse.

**Electric Funeral** — A Brief Conclusion

My thesis largely stems from my own embittered stance as both a metal fan and a sociologist. Occupying both of these realms has forced me into situations where I have to choose which distinction matters more, my love of Black Sabbath or my theoretical schooling. It’s a frustrating conundrum that has led me to seek out places where these spaces overlap, pushing both disciplines into contact with each other when possible. My work has been a fascinating journey through the critical and popular discourses that have shaped and stamped metal, leading it to its current place in the annals of music and culture.

In my private life I play the electric bass in a band called Yer Trash, an eclectic hodgepodge of heavy guitar work, noise, hip-hop and experimental. We’ve always struggled to define our sound in words, incorporating as it does queer expression, heavy breakdowns, spoken-word, and mosh pits. When I began this thesis, I once posed to the guitarist in my band, “do you think of us as metal”? His response was a definitive no. Despite moments in our songs that actively feature the distorted, chromatic scales of doom metal, and passages of guttural screams, it was never a legacy invoked in the context of our ‘experimental’ ‘forward-looking’ band. Perhaps we wouldn’t attract the shows or fans that appreciate our genre-blender

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styling, for many people the tag of metal might be an automatic turn-off based on their understandings of the genre.

So, for now, punk has become the umbrella term under which Yer Trash waves its freak flag. And to me, that’s a sad accommodation. Punk relates a very specific worldview to its practitioners, of ins and outs, posers and pioneers. To recognize that the punk genre has so many inflexible boundaries by which someone’s expressive merit can be judged as inauthentic does little to persuade me of its viability. It is time to blow the scene wide open. If the acceptance of playful identity, pleased fantasy and taboo were incorporated into the experiential ecstasy of aggressive music, what would rock subculture look like today? New articles continue to glorify punk as the “right kind of pain,” a purified ascendance from the base pleasures of sex, and sound, escape and frivolity. If the prime directive of alternative subcultures is to foster people who have felt rejected from society, how could punk ever force fans and musicians through a vetting process to ascertain if they are legit, if they ‘deserve’ their genre? I want a subculture that recognizes its own boundaries as fluid, and porous, capable of encompassing and holding every sick fantasy, every mundane daydream.

Metal’s explosion as a genre entwined with fantasy and inauthenticity should prefigure it from this kind of elitism, but even in fantasy people bring along their bigotry and insecurities. I look forward to the day when the elasticity promised by metal’s practitioners becomes a hallmark of aggressive music genres and not a hollow projection, subverting expectation and mutating endlessly. And I mean it man.

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As Tenacious D once wrote in “The Metal” their love song to all things heavy:

Punk rock tried to destroy the metal
But they failed, as they were stricken to the ground

Metal’s zombiefied corpse promises to rise again after nearly a half-century of attempts at dismemberment. Undead, therefore unable to be slain, it will shamble forward, stained in glitter and bound for ecstasy.

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Works Cited


Songs Referenced


