

A “nihilistic dreamboat to negation”?

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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

DECLARATION

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

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

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