

AUTHENTIC HEAVY METAL AND CONTEXTUAL AESTHETICS

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Abstract

The present paper will outline under which conditions it is possible to make sense of aesthetic evaluations of music, without ending up merely referring to subjective taste, and attempt at providing an argument for why a contextualized account of musical aesthetics makes this possible. This will be done through addressing the supposed relation between ethical content and aesthetic quality in works of art, combined with a concept of music genre and a certain notion of musical authenticity – specifically what can be referred to as *genre-authenticity*.

Introduction

When music is debated as part of everyday conversation more often than not it is done so in evaluative terms. The heavy metal culture is no exception. Even further, it is seemingly a big part of the culture's self-image to debate music rather than anything else. This is most likely due to the fact that the heavy metal culture first and foremost is a music culture, which could also be one of the reasons why these music debates within the heavy metal culture is on the level of sophistication that it is.

Even so, often these debates end in the people involved agreeing to disagree and settling for the conclusion that “it is just a matter of taste anyway” - but is that all there is to say about music evaluation? If it is, why would this not prevent any further discussion from taking place?

Rather than jumping to the obvious conclusion that such discussions are meaningless and merely are ways for people within the culture socialize I would like to go in the opposite direction and see if there is a way of making sense of evaluating music. The question is, are meaningful evaluations of music possible; and if so, under what conditions and what do they amount to?

What I refer to as *meaningful evaluations* is merely that descriptions of a piece of music in evaluative terms under certain conditions, will have truth-value – that is, can be true or false.

The conditions for such evaluations is what will be addressed in the present paper.

Strong realism and subjectivism in aesthetics

Most issues raised about the problematic theoretical aspects of music evaluation (and aesthetics in general) can be said to stem from two basic views of aesthetics, which I will here call Strong Realism and Subjectivism, respectively.

The Strong realist view is in short the claim that the aesthetic value of a piece of music is *real* in the sense of being independent of everything else but the music itself and the world, as it is, mind-independently. This would mean that a song can be aesthetically good or flawed, without anyone knowing this to be the case, and more importantly it will raise the question whether a thinking individual can actually know if a work is good or not, and even on what basis that is the case. In short, we would not know for sure if a work can be good, neither would we know the principles on which a work can be said to be good, objectively. To my knowledge this view is not commonly defended in- or outside academia. James O. Young addresses this view in “Realism, Standards and Aesthetic Judgements” (2012), referring to it as Aesthetic absolutism. Along with this he also briefly addresses a view he calls Context-sensitive aesthetic absolutism, which is in line with the view I will be proposing later.

The contrary view, subjectivism, would appear to appeal more to common sense in a contemporary context. Simply put it is the view that aesthetic value only refers to a subjective view of the work in question and therefore cannot be said to be meaningful. Referring to individual taste is the most obvious example of this. Following this view it makes no sense to ever engage in any evaluation process regarding an art-form, as there is no room for applying terms like good, flawed, etc. Goldman argued, in *Aesthetic Value* (1995) that aesthetic evaluations can never be without an element of personal taste, which in turn will entail a nonrealist account – that is: an aesthetic evaluation does not have mind-independent truth-value. From this it does not necessarily follow that everything relevant to an evaluation is strictly subjective, but merely that it cannot be a completely objective matter.

My response to this view is that if one does appeal to this view then one is no longer talking about aesthetics – which might be the ultimate good for the proponents of subjectivism. However then it becomes uninteresting afterwards. Then there would be nothing more to say. But aesthetics is not about what different subjects individually prefer; rather it needs to be on a bigger scale. The fact is that we always evaluate music when we encounter it. The fact that we like or dislike something is not interesting – the interesting part comes out when looking at the justifications given. If an individual prefers Megadeth’s *Holy Wars* over Metallica’s *Master of Puppets* (or vice versa) it would be interesting to know why, no matter what the reasons would be. The important thing is to look at where the aspects that are brought forward as justifying choosing one over the other, are to be found in the one work, specifically.

The Genre notion

When being involved with music in one form or another one will more often than not encounter reference to genre(s) to varying degrees. Most noticeably in music stores records are sorted on the basis of genre and when musicians need to describe their music they use genre-terms, almost without exception. While the notion of genre is constantly referred to, it is not without certain theoretical issues. After all, music genres cannot have the same ontological status as an actual piece of music – the genre itself cannot be heard, as it does not consist of sound. Also, one might add, that it is impossible to make sense of determining the genre of a piece of music, as it is its own thing (in so far as it is original, in a quite loose sense of the word) and that applying genre terms to it will be unfairly limiting the music. Furthermore, it can be stated that when it comes to evaluating music, this should always be done on the basis of the specific work in question.

So why this seemingly constant need for applying genre-terms when addressing music? As with many other aspects of life we tend to categorize our experiences and their content. This is useful for the purpose of finding music we (might) enjoy – if nothing else – since it will not be necessary to know about the specific piece of music or band in order to find it. Someone enjoying melodic death metal is more like to find what she is looking for by using those words in a search rather than “music similar to Arch Enemy”. Obviously, this is not all there is to say about the matter. Keeping in mind that the purpose at hand is to outline under what conditions it is possible to make sense of evaluations of music, it must be clear that this cannot be done solely on the terms of the work in question. It needs to be in a relation to something else, namely that which it is being evaluated to. As Fabian Holt wrote:

”A genre can be viewed as a culture with the characteristics of a system or systemic functions. Individual elements of signification do not gain meaning as isolated events but through their connection and organization in symbolic contexts with certain regulatory procedures and overarching mechanisms” (Holt 2007:23).

The points to note here is that a genre is a kind of entity which only is what it is due to its relation to something else.

One of the nagging questions about the ontology of music genres is how it can come into existence in the first place. There was a time when the term heavy metal did not refer to any music, but this changed. Whether this can be said to be an instant change or not is beyond the present purpose. Rather it has been argued that a music genre is something that comes into existence in virtue of a sufficient amount of musical works that are sufficiently alike create the basis for a scene (or culture) devoted to that kind of music (Fridth 1996). At this stage the collection of sufficiently similar music is given a name. If this is all there is to say about the establishment of music genres, then it is hard to see how applying a genre label to a piece of music can serve any purpose. However, as we shall see it can serve a purpose relating to music evaluation, which I will address later in this paper.

An important point here is that genres are not static. Over time certain pieces of music will no longer be considered to be part of the genre it once was. Rick Altman is one of the thinkers who addressed the questions of genre-establishment and genre-evolution, focusing on the visual media of motion pictures (Altman 1999). For genre-establishment (or formation) he lists eight hypotheses. In short they amount to the following:

H1: Often works get their generic identity from shared flaws, rather than shared qualities (Altman 1999:33).

H2: Genres are established by an apparent coincidental gathering of qualities, from other non-related genres (Altman 1999:34).

H3: If a genre is already in existence in another medium it cannot merely be established as for instance a film genre from sources outside of the film-medium – it will have to be created (Altman 1999:35).

H4: Before a genre will be firmly established it will go through a period where the works are only connected through superficial aspects, which are taken from other generic contexts (Altman 1999:36).

H5: Works can be redefined, whereby the genres can be regulated (Altman 1999:43).

H6: Genres start out as reading positions, established by critics and expressed through production, viewed as applied criticism (Altman 1999:44).

H7: If the first step in genre-formation is to establish a reading position – through critical analysis – and the second step is to maintain the position – through production of works – then the third and necessary step will be a broad agreement in the industry about the proposed reading position and hence the genre (Altman 1999:46).

H8: The generic terminology we have inherited is primarily retrospective and will always be incomplete (Altman 1999:48). Based on this the notion of genre we arrive at can – for the present purpose – be formulated along these lines: A genre is a) a type, b) a temporal entity being brought into existence through an establishment of a culture initially defined negatively in relation to already established culture around the art-form, c) a label applied for categorization of artefacts within a specific art-form, and d) is a constant subject to re-definition, as the tokens of the type challenge the limits of the culture.

This will be the basis for what is following.

Genre-defining properties of music

Relating to the establishment of a genre it is crucial to address what can end up being defining for the genre, as such. These I will refer to as genre-defining properties.

While it might be argued that certain songs have been defining for a genre (like in the case of heavy metal, Black Sabbath's *Iron Man*) it is also central to investigate what aspects are commonly used in the genre afterwards and how these can be replaced by others over time.

One likely mistake to make at this point is to return to the thought that genres in some way are static entities or in some way have properties *essential* to it. It is a misconception to think of the genre-concept in such terms, as it is something which is created on the basis of a culture (music scene or other) and will evolve along with this culture. This means that an analysis of the defining properties for heavy metal (or any other genres) needs to be done at a point in time and cannot unreflectively be investigated solely through an account of the full history of the genre in question. If done this way one will be operation with properties that are no longer part of the genre in question, from a contemporary standpoint.

So, what can be considered to be genre-defining for heavy metal? It should be noted that I will not attempt at providing an exhausted list of aspects of the heavy metal genre, but merely point out a few examples of what could be included, if such a list were to be made (based on the content of the contemporary heavy metal scene).

The most obvious aspect to point as is instrumentation. While the utilization of the individual instruments within heavy metal might not be exclusive to the genre, they are commonly associated with heavy metal, and for good reason

with other genres closely related to it. The distorted sounds of the electric guitar, the double bass-drums and the nearly mandatory guitar-solos are among the aspects to keep in mind. Also, one could point at the vocals. While the utilization of vocals differ to a significant degree between the different sub-genres of heavy metal it is common for it to be described as rough – and in towards the extreme end of the genre-spectrum one will find growling and screaming almost exclusively.

Genre-authenticity

The notion of authenticity is central in philosophy of music, musical ontology in particular. Mostly the term is used to refer to what is sometimes called “historical authenticity”, where authenticity is about being in correspondence with something “historical” – this could be the intentions of the original composer, achieving an identical sound or performing the music with the same means as it originally was. Needless to say, this view was formed on the basis of considering classical music from Western Europe.

Another notion of authenticity is common to encounter in certain music cultures, such as metal, punk and blues. This I call genre-authenticity. Among the very few thinkers who have addressed this notion of authenticity is Joel Rudinow, when he wrote “Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?” in 1998. Although this article is about blues and not metal many of the aspects still apply on a general level.

The most important aspect in this regard is the claim that authenticity can be dependent on non-auditory properties of the music. In the case of blues Rudinow addresses possibilities such as an ethnic group having the rights to a genre and if accessibility to certain kinds of experiences can be relevant (Rudinow 1994:161). Whether these are actually relevant in the case of blues will not be address here – however it merely serves to point to the possibility of non-auditory (or non-musical) aspects being relevant for a music genre.

One important thing to note here is the apparent relation between the notion of authenticity and the notion of truth. That is: It is a relational property between two entities of different kinds. In the case of truth it is commonly considered to be a relation between a proposition and the mind-independent world, with ‘true’ meaning that the proposition corresponds to the state of affairs. When considering musical authenticity the relation is mostly considered to be between musical works and performances thereof. However, when considering genre authenticity – and provided that we can make sense of referring to musical genres in general – it is possible to examine the authenticity-relation between works and genre on the one hand, and performances and genre on the other.

The determination of whether a work or performance is authentic to a given genre can then be assumed to be conditioned by how well they incorporate a sufficient amount of the genre-defining properties. This would mean that in the case of heavy metal, it is hard to image any work or performance not utilizing an electric guitar / bass or drums, at least at this point in time (keeping in mind the possibility for genre-evolution, as mentioned above).

Contextual aesthetics and the value-relation

The point is merely that attempts at providing a meaningful evaluation of a piece of music, without reference to the context in which it belongs, will fail.

As an analogy one can look a film as an art-form. What makes a film belong to the comedy genre is about what is attempted and not so much about how well it is actually carried out. Most people can pick out comedy films which are not funny, and so can be labelled “bad comedy films”. The same goes for horror films that are not scary. Even further, certain old horror films are considered funny, not by intention, but by mere virtue of the contemporary eye being able to see through many of the effects used in order to create a frightening scenario. This does of course not change the film from being a horror film to a comedy. It only goes to show that as the world changes, so do our perception of these cultural artefacts. The important thing to note in the case of a horror film is that the standards by which a horror film is evaluated have changed. What is now considered scary in a film is different from what it was 40 years ago, even though they are still based on many of the same principles (such as avoiding showing the monster for as long as possible). This also applies to music both as it relates to genre-determination and music evaluation.

Berys Gaut, who is one of the well known experts in the debate about the relation between ethics and the aesthetics, put forward a model for analysing, and in the end reconstructing the theme in his work *Art, Emotions and Ethics* from 2007. The first thing to consider is whether the relation between ethics and aesthetics is invariant or complex (Gaut 2007:52). If it is invariant, it means that the relation cannot change, no matter which artwork is evaluated. That is, if one is convinced that an ethical flaw necessarily results in an aesthetic flaw, then the relation is invariant (Gaut 2007:52). To argue that the relation is complex, is to claim that the relation can vary, meaning that an ethical flaw in a work of art can in some cases result in an aesthetic merit, but not necessarily in all cases (Gaut 2007:53).

The next thing to consider is whether the value-relation of ethics and aesthetics is symmetric or inverted. An invariant symmetric relation means that, in all cases, an ethical flaw will result in an aesthetic flaw. If the relation is inverted, however, it means that an ethical flaw will always result in an aesthetic merit. For obvious reasons, such a position has never been noticeably promoted. All theories that suggest a complex relation between ethics and aesthetics will propose that the relation is symmetric in some cases, while inverted in others (Gaut 2007:53). In order to have a plausible theory that proposes an inverted relation, it has to be complex rather than invariant. This position is often called immoralism, however contextualism is a better term for it. If one holds that the relation is invariant and symmetric, it will be a variant of what is normally called moralism (or ethicism in Gaut's terminology). What is the focus here though is contextualism.

The claim here is not that a work of art will be aesthetically good, in virtue of its content being ethically flawed – rather, in so far as it does have the specific kind of content along with being determined to belong to a certain context that aspect of the work of art will be aesthetically positive, all else being equal. That is, if the lyrics of a death metal song – which will belong to the death metal genre, as it is for the time being – is portraying for example murder and mutilation, this lyrical aspect of the song can only be seen as a positive aesthetic quality for the song as death metal, provided that the music as such is expressive of emotional qualities which fit the lyrical content – in this case, aggression. However, the song might still be aesthetically bad overall, if it is badly composed or has other flaws. It is of great importance to note at this point that while the lyrical content found in death metal can vary to a significant degree and that this is not an attempt to claim that in order for a death metal song to

be good it must include these specific themes in the lyrics. This is merely meant as an example of what *can* amount to a positive aesthetic quality of a piece of music, in the sense of being coherent between instrumentation, vocals and lyrical content.

The important thing to remember here is merely that under such conditions an evaluative statement about a song can be said to have truth-value, as it is referring to entities which are not merely subjective. We know what it means if an agent states that Roxette's *The Look* is a good song, and while we might be surprised that the same agent might in the same breath state that she does not like it, this does not make the statement any less meaningful. All it means is that *The Look* is a song belonging to a certain context, at this point in time, and is a good example of what that context (music genre) is about – but whether one will like the song or anything else within the context in question is another matter all together.

So the main argument here is that a piece of music belongs to a context and needs to be evaluated (if at all) on terms determined by the context itself. In the case of heavy metal, if a song contains certain well-crafted or well-performed aspects central to heavy metal as such (genre determining properties) this will add to the degree of genre-authenticity being possible to ascribe to that piece of music and will in turn, all else being equal, be an aesthetically positive feature of the piece of music *as* heavy metal than another piece of music without those qualities. As I have argued elsewhere it is important for a sense of coherence between the instrumentation and the types of vocals utilized, as well as between the lyrical content and the vocals (Frandsen 2009). A negative example illustrates this point significantly better than a positive one: Imagine a death metal song, with lyrics often found in death metal (which to a certain extent can be ascribed aggressive qualities). How would this sound if the instrumentation and lyrics were kept true to death metal as a genre but the vocals were utilized in a manner of the typical blues singer (if there is such a thing)? Most likely something would seem not quite right, either due to the difference in pace or the lack of aggression in the voice. This would, all else being equal, amount to an aesthetically poorer death metal song *as a death metal song evaluated as such* than if it would incorporate growling or screaming.

Closing remarks

The purpose of the present paper has been to show under what circumstances meaningful evaluations of music can be possible, in the sense that evaluative statements can have truth-value. To the extent that we are able to apply a dynamic notion of genre as well an understanding of musical authenticity this will be possible. If a musical work, belonging to a particular musical genre is evaluated to be authentic to that very genre, then it will be true – strictly speaking – that it is aesthetically positive *as a work of that genre* since it would adhere to the standards set by the context within it *needs* to be kept.

It is important to note here that I do not claim that this is all to say about music evaluation. All I do claim is that this is a way to ensure meaningful music evaluations, on some level. Obviously, what I like might not be the same as what others like, but this will lead us to not actually talking about music aesthetics, as noted earlier. The context is what determines the basis for evaluations of the aesthetic value of the entities within the context. A context-less evaluation of any work of art will not amount to much. At best it would merely serve as a description of the obvious in the work and not include it's relation to

any other thing (or aspect) of the world. Even further: I think that a *meaningful*, context-less evaluation is impossible. When we evaluate music (as we constantly do) we, if nothing else, compare it to music we know in advance or we end up considering an imaginary work instead, to compare it to.

We need to keep in mind that when engaging with music any evaluation needs to be made of it as *of a certain kind* or within a context, so to speak. Music in itself is too general a term for it to contain any implicit standards for aesthetic evaluation – however such standards can be found within certain music cultures, such as heavy metal.

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