

# THE SOUNDS OF METAL: A PROPOSAL FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF EXTREME METAL AS MUSIC

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## Abstract

In Part One, it is suggested that sounds that are heard as *music* – rather than just as sounds *simpliciter* – are sounds that are heard counterfactually. *Counterfactual hearing* is the apprehension of sounds as if they were something else, something that in itself is not a sequence of sounds. In Part Two, I propose that this framework allows for at least a theoretical distinction between the way in which extreme metal – e.g. black metal, doom metal, funeral doom metal, death metal – relates to its sound as music and the way in which much other music may be conceived of as being constituted by sound.

## Part One: Introduction and pre-metal background

This paper concerns itself with the challenges faced by any attempt to suggest an aesthetics of music for extreme metal genres – e.g. black metal, doom metal, funeral doom metal, death metal – given their utter contempt for any form of falsity/inauthenticity when approaching the music either as listener or as performer.

As the first part of this paper explicates, it can be argued that sound that is heard as *music* – rather than just as sound *simpliciter* – entails the intervention of some degree or other of *mediating* engagement, at the very least on the part of the listener.

In the second part of the paper, it is suggested that regardless of extreme metal's obsession with having an authentic/unadulterated relationship to its *sound*, it is nonetheless possible to ground a consistent aesthetics of *music* for extreme metal's audio production and reception. The framework developed in the first part of the paper will aid in so doing. I propose that this framework allows for at least a theoretical distinction between the manner in which extreme metal relates to its sound as music and the way in which much other music may be conceived of as being constituted by sound.

Before this paper can get down to the business of dealing with some of the aesthetic issues raised by extreme metal, however, some general theoretical background needs to be provided as regards issues that arise when we think carefully about the relationship between sound and music.

Why is music so *important* to us? Another way to pose this question is to ask “Why do so many of us find that paying attention to it matters so much?” Is there any explanation as to why many of us, at least, should choose to spend hours and hours of our lives listening to sounds that

- are not signals to which we need to attend in order to survive
- are not conveyors of propositional content (such as languages are)

. . . and is there any reason to have a category such as “music” that distinguishes these sounds from, say, “sound art”?

### ***Counterfactual hearing: Initial concerns***

Some 20 years ago, when I was in the midst of struggling to integrate – within the context of a doctoral dissertation (Grund, 1997) – a complex of intuitions I could not shake regarding the interrelationships among sound, music, metaphor and counterfactual thinking, an idea struck me that unified them all. It seemed to provide some insights into the questions posed in the foregoing subsection. It made the role of the listener primary – rather than the role of a composer, performer, or musicologist, at the time the preferred repositories of creative authority when matters of musical ontology and authenticity were to be decided. In short, the idea was that *music is sound that is heard counterfactually*: Listening itself is a creative activity. Music is sound that is heard as if the sound were something non-sonic. *Listening* – as a stance taken by a hearing agent to sound-regarded-as-music – is *counterfactual hearing*. *Counterfactual hearing* is then the apprehension of sounds as if they were something else, something that in itself is not a sequence of sounds.

The category to which that non-sonic something belongs is termed a *music-making predicate* (we’ll call it *P* here), and the full counterfactual statement – here labelled (1) – that indicates how a music-making predicate “filters” sound so that it emerges as music is as follows:

A sonic sequence **u** is music if and only if

(1) If the elements in *P* were sonic sequences, then **u** would be an element of *P*.

There is thus a kind of mapping of the non-sonic into the sonic, and the counterfactual image of the non-sonic in the sonic is *music*. A specific sonic sequence is music, if and only if it is within this counterfactual image. Another way of expressing this could be to say that the music-making predicate acts as a sort of counterfactual filter that separates sounds that are music from sounds *simpliciter*. An agent *a* hears **u** *counterfactually* when *a* hears **u** in such a manner that *a* agrees with (1).

A chief motivation for this line of thought was thus to provide a way of distinguishing between sonic sequences *simpliciter* and sonic sequences that have been imbued with some sort of intentionality that grounds the emergence of *music* from sound. These intentionalized sound sequences are then *music*, which, in turn, may take on significance (Grund, 1998). The latter are then the intentional objects and load-bearing vehicles for whatever sort of significance we experience in sounds that are music. Philosophically, I found it quite problematic – particularly in discussions of music semiotics (see Grund, 1996) – that there seemed to be a lack of precision as to when we were regarding sound sequences *simpliciter* as that to which we should be directing our attention, or when we were regarding *music* as that to which we should be directing our attention. The counterfactual filtering of sound through a music-making predicate or predicates addresses this problem.

### ***Counterfactual hearing: Further concerns***

This opens the door then to pondering what qualities might be regarded as important for such predicates if they are to function as music-making, and how do these qualities relate to the characteristics of a given community of hearers/listeners. My rather bold philosophical mission was to propose a “definition” of music that would cover even far out cases such as *what would it mean for us to attribute music as a cultural concept that would be meaningful for beings such as androids or space aliens* above and beyond that they somehow could “hear” sound. First, we would have to dare to propose some music-making predicates for us humans. My suggestion – and I still am quite fond of this – was food. (1) then becomes

(2) If foodstuffs were sonic sequences, then **u** would be food.

There are many aspects of the category “foodstuffs” that make it a prime candidate for at least a plausible music-making predicate for many humans and many kinds of sounds. (A list of these aspects is provided in (Grund, 1997b) the section entitled “The Fictional Grounding for C”). Extended to androids and space aliens, given that

(a) these beings can perceive sound in a hearing-like fashion (this, of course, requires some further discussion, but some sort of bodily response to sound waves seems called for) – call it hearing\* – and

(b) they ingest nutrition in some form or other,

if they were to indulge in counterfactual hearing\* using this nutrition\* so that they would affirm that they regard one or more sonic sequences **u** such that

(3) If nutrition\* were sonic sequences, then **u** would be an element of nutrition\*,

then we could say that **u** were, indeed, *music* for *them*, whether or not *we* could appreciate it as such.

The inherent appeal of this definition is that while it commits itself to certain defining aspects for music, it does so by

1. highlighting the role of the hearer and what is required for a hearer to become a *listener* (i.e. counterfactual hearing)

2. providing the notion of the music-making predicate (possibly predicates) as the linchpin for a kind of metaphorical transferal of the non-sonic into the sonic. This sidesteps and short circuits any risk of making music *inherently representational or language-like*. It does *infuse*, however, sound that is music with a sort of “alternate ontology”, without making it refer to, signify or, “mean” anything. As is the case with metaphor, properties and relations that were literally the case in the home domain are mapped onto correlates in the target domain. As has been adumbrated in the above, one could go so far as to say that the sound *is intentionalized* by the music-making predicate.

3. providing enough characterizing structure, but not too much: the indexicality inherent in the relativization within the definition to (a) a community of listeners and (b) to what choices of music-making predicates might

hold for a given community saves the definition from imposing one culture's values on another's while at the same time positing a minimal requirement for creative, engaged listening – namely, that of counterfactual hearing.

This counterfactually “filtered” sound then becomes the appropriate stuff about which to conduct discourse as to whether or not it expresses anything, represents anything, activates meanings, etc. At least an attempt has been made to provide the scaffolding – or perhaps the base of a scaffold – for the subtle and slippery discussion of musical significance in philosophical and music-semiotic terms.

## **Part Two: Onward to metal**

### ***Counterfactual hearing – hearing-as-if v. hearing-as***

A significant amount of metal discourse concerns itself with the matter of authenticity: what instruments are authentically metal, whether or not a given piece is an authentic representative of a given genre, whether or not the performing and listening experience is “true” or “real”. (Frandsen, 2011 *passim*).

For the sake of good order, I think it is of relevance to note here, that the author of this paper began to appreciate metal only within the past few years and to appreciate extreme metal (for example black metal, doom metal, funeral doom metal, death metal and related genres) within the past year or so. This has occurred quite a few decades into a long life of listening and playing music, and postdates by two decades or so my formulation of the counterfactual hearing definition for music.

It is thus both timely and revealing for me to reflect upon my recent and ongoing experience with discovering the rewards of listening to metal. Honest reflection upon my listening experience suggests that much of it is relevantly cashed out in terms afforded by the counterfactual hearing framework sketched in part one, particularly with regard to the ever-lurking issue of authenticity, even more specifically with regard to extreme metal: At ground level, would not absolute authenticity be a puritanical *hearing-as*, that never elevated itself above the recognitional? This sort of recognitional hearing-as is, to be sure, important to the development of a sophisticated listening stance with regard to metal. There is aesthetic expertise-related capital in the ability to discriminate between – i.e. recognize – the sounds of various instruments, to know to what subgenre a number suitably belongs, to recognize similarities between one album and another. This sort of discrimination could be said to be important in pinpointing some aspects of any comprehensive aesthetics for (extreme) metal, since it would be crucial to the formation of *taste* and to any discourse involving taste in (extreme) metal music (Gracyk in Grund & Harboe, 2015b).

Vital as hearing-as may be to some levels of comprehension necessary for the appreciation of (extreme) metal, it can in no way be the end of the story. A stance that began and ended with hearing-as would flatly contradict so much of what is core to much metal, particularly of the extreme sort – the acoustic and visual creation and exploration of mythic universes, the dense and sophisticated sound mixing, the integration of the listening experience with the visuals on album jackets and in logos. (Grund and Harboe, 2015a).

. . . and here is where *hearing-as-if* comes to assume an important role in an aesthetics for (extreme) metal with regard to the sort of theoretical scaffolding mentioned in the above. It is certainly something other than the essentially recognitional *hearing-as*, that at its most basic consists of identifying the sound heard at a performance or on a recording as proceeding from the appropriate instruments. More sophisticatedly, *hearing-as* identifies the sound heard at a performance or on a recording correctly as belonging to a particular subgenre. *Hearing-as-if* on the other hand involves another level of engagement on the part of the hearer. The *as if* can in a sense be misleading, however, incorrectly suggesting the adoption of a listening stance that somehow would not be an authentic one. What it provides rather, is a means of cashing out one's experience of sound as music in a way that can allow for even more intensity and directness. Counterfactual hearing with an identified music-making predicate/music-making predicates sets the stage for discrimination of perhaps previously "unlistened to" features of the sonic material, disclosing new structures and associations within the music itself. It does not impose any referential relationships obliging the resultant music to *point* to something else; the sound becomes the *sonic counterpart* of that something else, the something else is metamorphosed into the acoustic realm, bringing with it inter-relationships among elements of the counterfactually mapped elements from the source space usually sorted by the music-making predicate(s).

### ***A Theory of interpretation for sound as music of particular relevance for extreme metal***

As has been outlined in the above, behind the original strategy for proposing counterfactual hearing lay concerns related to matters of musical ontology and definition. A strong motivating factor was to investigate a way of characterizing music in as general a fashion as possible without sacrificing consideration of substantial content and structural issues.

The positing of the music-making predicate or predicates as a technical device for establishing a base-line for demarcating sonic-sequences-as-music as opposed to sonic sequences *simpliciter* is the step in the scaffolding for a theory of sound as music that turns out to be helpful in the case of the subgenres sorting under extreme metal, where authenticity is key.

By being obliged to have the sort of interior experiences afforded by listening to music that is comprised of sonic sequences counterfactually heard as if they were suffering, pain, torture, suicide and the like, we undergo temporally extended experiences in which these dark phenomena are metamorphosed into the sonic realm. From a combined phenomenological, epistemological and ethical point of view, a listener is personally obliged to confront these dark sides of life in the form of a counterfactual mapping into sound, and thus to ascribe to them some sort of *personally experienced* cognitive/perceptual content, content that replaces whatever default and idiosyncratic placeholders that serve as our personal correlates for suffering, death, pain, etc. This listening experience is one that can be *experienced together* with others, explored and worked through in the company of others. Of course, music can be listened to alone, but the affordances for group experience are manifest. The penetrating nature of music, experienced as it is as vibration within our own bodies (Mannes, 2014) grants it peculiar access to our neurophysiology, making it a potent tool for individual and shared experience. It goes without saying that timbral density of extreme metal and the volume at which it is experienced literally amplify this point.

As has been noted, the theory of counterfactual hearing as the linchpin for a definition of music had as a central component the “filtering” of sound sequences through a music-making predicate or predicates, with the result then being – music. Foodstuffs (and their nutritional correlates for aliens and androids) was suggested as the principle music-making predicate of choice in so bold a fashion as to make it more-or-less the unique one to use in distinguishing sound *simpliciter* from sound that is music. I am going to offer that extreme metal is a case where this boldness may be challenged, and that the way in which extreme metal becomes an *exception* to the otherwise broadly formulated condition of counterfactual hearing of sound-as-foodstuffs as the condition for the emergence of music from sound actually *supports* this kind of definitional scaffolding for music:

The idea behind the whole foodstuffs suggestion as the counterfactual filtering device for characterizing the emergence of music from sound was to point out that music was already an intentionalized form of sound and that this intentionalized sound *in turn* could be further interpreted – as having something or other to do with emotions, programs, or whatever. This framework, it turns out, can provide the scaffolding for an account that accords extreme metal the status of music, while yet differentiating it importantly from music *tout court*: In the case of extreme metal, counterfactual hearing is still the theoretical device that accounts for the emergence of music from sound, but we cut out “foodstuffs” as the music-making predicate/counterfactual filter in the process of counterfactual hearing. The music-making predicate(s) for extreme metal then become one or more of the following: suffering, death, deprivation, unresolved conflict, chaos, anarchy, tortured existence (both physical and mental), the demonic and the mythic. Thus, in extreme metal, the music emerges from sound via these – and related – counterfactual filters, so that the expressive content of extreme metal is, as it were, already latently present at the most basic level possible – already functioning as the filtering mechanisms of the counterfactual hearing that underlies the emergence of the music from sound.

Note that this serves to differentiate extreme metal in two ways from music as characterized in the more general sense as sound that has been filtered through the foodstuffs-suggestion for a principle music-making predicate:

(1) extreme metal is music that has a significantly different kind of non-sonic filter compared with that that was proposed for the “generalized” music case, and

(2) extreme metal is music whose expressive substance is one step closer to the sonic material itself, emerging as music *directly* through the filtering afforded by any of the following: suffering, death, deprivation, unresolved conflict, chaos, anarchy, tortured existence (both physical and mental), the demonic and the mythic.

*This second step is important in the context of the issue of authenticity and (extreme) metal, and provides us with a way of capturing and articulating a source of this authenticity:* One could say that extreme metal has a more direct and authentic relationship to its sonic underpinnings than, say, music which first has emerged from sound via a more generalized form of counterfactual hearing to then subsequently go on to acquire more expressive substance.

It has struck me time and time again that an important sort of authenticity in the extreme metal context – perhaps the leading sense from which all other sorts of authenticity stem – is best unpacked as *a rejection of hypocrisy*. If this is a legitimate characterization, then it is clear why the themes of suffering, death, deprivation, unresolved conflict, chaos, anarchy, tortured existence (both physical and mental), the demonic and the dark mythic abound in extreme metal: Given the extent to which human history and the population of the world today have been and are confronted with – suffering, death, deprivation, unresolved conflict, chaos, anarchy and tortured existence (both physical and mental), would it not be hugely hypocritical simply to go on making “beautiful” or “delicious” (bowing temporarily to use of “foodstuffs” as music-making predicate in the foregoing) music? Given the interior and bodily nature of musical experience – literally amplified in the case of the metal concert – do not the various genres of metal oblige us to confront head on these darker aspects of life, restoring a sort of balance in our engagement with the whole of our world, without being destroyed ourselves in the process? It would seem that the accordance of the role of music-making predicate to any of the following – suffering, death, deprivation, unresolved conflict, chaos, anarchy and tortured existence (both physical and mental) – would result in immersive experience that confronts us with these dark sides of life, but from the art-producing remove afforded to us by the essentially metaphorical *hearing-as-if*.

The inheritance of the serious nature of the music-making predicates counterfactually heard in the music can thus help to account for the serious attitude with which extreme metal is regarded by its fans, as opposed to, say, pop music, more traditional rock and roll, and the like.

The shared type of experience sketched above can have several upshots, many of which have ethical implications that range beyond the scope of the present paper.

1. If one wants to live a life in which there is even the illusion of integration into a world that is drenched in suffering and pain, there is perhaps something ethically commendable about forging relationships to these dark aspects of life through artistic immersion, which can at best foster empathy, and at a more modest level, a grounded cognitive stance, not just one of indifferent ignorance.
2. The in-your-face confrontations with artistic renderings of the dark sides of life can heighten awareness of the way we go through what we think are our normal and “healthy” lives with blinders on. Just one example: The vast majority of humans living on earth have been acculturated into thinking that eating animals who have lived – and died – in deplorable ways is, well, okay. The decentering engendered by considering themes such as carnal mutilation, cannibalism and the like that are worked out in some extreme metal subgenres and *experiencing them through counterfactual hearing* could well, by its in-your-face nature, cause a listener to confront the disturbing relationships among eating, suffering and death, rather than repress them, as is so very commonly done.
3. The conceit of counterfactual hearing integrates nicely the explicit integration of the visual into the metalscape: listening while looking at an album cover that has been painstakingly rendered to appropriately accompany the listening experience is directed listening, a definite nudging towards a hearing position where what is seen is heard, clearly a move well characterized as

*hearing as if.* (Please see Grund & Harboe 2015a for more on the visual side of listening to metal.)

4. A topic for further discussion with regard to the whole issue of counterfactual hearing as the way of characterizing the hearing of sound as music is that of the way it relates – or doesn't relate – to more narrative approaches to structuring the listening experiences (see Grund & Westney, 2011)

### **In conclusion**

I believe that the model provided by counterfactual hearing as it is explicated here is useful for framing discourse regarding a number of philosophical and aesthetic issues relevant to metal, more precisely, extreme metal. Regardless of extreme metal's obsession with having an authentic/unadulterated relation to its sound, it is nonetheless possible to ground a consistent aesthetics of music for extreme metal's audio production and reception. By retaining the conceit of counterfactual hearing as constitutive for the emergence of music from sound, but by placing the substance of much extreme metal – the darker aspects of life including suffering, death, deprivation, unresolved conflict, chaos, anarchy and tortured existence (both physical and mental) – in the role of the primary filter through which sound is filtered to emerge as music, extreme metal is one conceptual step closer to the sounds of which it is constituted than is music in general on this approach (which employed "foodstuffs" as the overarching music-making predicate of choice for music in general). Thus attention has been paid to the extent to which extreme metal accords value to authenticity while nonetheless placing it within the general music-ontological project of grounding the emergence of music from sound in counterfactual hearing.

. . . and we have come at least a step or two closer to addressing the sweeping questions posed at the onset of this paper. We spend hours and hours of our lives filling our ears with music, since this listening affords us the experience of sound counterfactually heard that affords us with creative engagement with sound. This is not to say that "sound art" cannot be interestingly made from sound and appreciated by audiences; the case made in this paper, however, is that there are intriguing insights to be gained along the way to understanding what makes the sounds we relate to as *music* special, and that extreme metal – although regarded by many as belonging to a very particular sort of sound realm – is indeed *music* of a very authentic sort.

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