

HEAVY METAL: A GENRE FOR ALL AND NONE

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Abstract

This paper draws links between the Apollonian and Dionysian figures in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzschean ethics, Bataille's writings of sacrifice and non-productive expenditure, Foucault's repression hypothesis, and the Heavy Metal communal experience. The rejoicing of life through music, even throughout its darker periods, is present in the Heavy Metal communal setting. Likewise, the concept of "self-overcoming" (*Selbst-Überwindung*) fits the festival-like happenings that are Heavy Metal concerts. Moreover, the life-affirmation that occurs within the communal experience demonstrates a creation of a transgressive Self, only possible through group affirmation. This creates an atmosphere that allows catharsis and sensorial affirmation.

Introduction: Into the void

"There are some, who, from obtuseness, or lack of experience, will deprecate such phenomena as 'folk-diseases,' with contempt or pity born of the consciousness of their own 'healthy mindedness.' But, of course, such poor wretches cannot imagine how anemic and ghastly their so-called 'healthy-mindedness' seems to contrast to the glowing life of the Dionysian revelers rushing past them." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy* (1995, pg. 4)

A discourse against popular discourse can be seen in Heavy Metal, where lyrical subjects address things that may be outside of one's discursive legitimacy. Addiction, religion, and things belonging to the clerics or medics are fully addressed in metal music, thereby bending what Foucault establishes as the three methods of discourse control (1972, pp. 226-228). However, one method still remains more or less intact. There is a ritual preceding the lyrical advancement in Heavy Metal music. One must do it in the process of writing music, a collaborative endeavor that forces the pooling of musical creativity into a harmonious energy. Likewise, the emotional energy that flows in music and concerts presents that ritual in full force, where the loss of Self is present in order to worship at the festival. Here, Bataille and Foucault can be combined to better ascertain what happens in the festivals known as concerts. Could the positing of the band and its music as something divine lead the audience to go through a celebration ritual that has an end of ascending themselves to the level of that divine? Let us hold on to that question and answer it in the following sections.

Bataille and Foucault are both clearly influenced by the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. Without the development of a genealogy like the one found in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche, 2013), Foucault's analysis of discourse could have been different. Not to say that Foucault was only influenced by Nietzsche, but Nietzsche's genealogy is of immense importance. In the same vein, Bataille is not solely influenced by Nietzsche, however an influence is definitely present. *Visions of Excess* is a collection of essays written by Bataille

that serve to demonstrate his critiques against utilitarianism (much like Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*) as well as provide a possible place for transgression. In this case, transgression would be against the Christian elements in our society: the restriction in favor of a reproductive, heteronormative sexuality, the denial of the earthly body, and so on. Throughout these essays, Bataille describes a critique of a purely rational capitalist system in which we consume only as we produce. However, he also notes the contrast that different societies keep: a purely rational system such as contemporary economy exists alongside festivals and social gathers that harken back to a time of unproductive expenditure. Finally, Bataille's erotic and surreal writing exist in opposition towards the obsession with the mind. In this case, the mind is defined as a secular form of the spirit, and consequently, our actions as mindful are another iteration of spiritual. In other words, contemporary societies' emphasis on reason and the development of the mind consequently ignore the body and that which ties us to the earth: sensory experience in an irrational form. Therefore, Bataille provides imagery such as the Solar Anus in order to posit something to earthly and "dirty" as the great midday sun of Zarathustra: our bodies in all their glory (2013, pp. 5-10).

These influences are important to consider when analyzing the festival that is a Heavy Metal concert, however, what else can we see? What else can we derive from Nietzsche himself regarding the ebbs and flows of that communal experience? How do we study what happens inside the festival? Nietzsche's devices in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1995), namely the Apollonian and Dionysian spirits, serve as accurate tools in order to properly analyze the structure, or lack thereof, of what goes on in a Heavy Metal concert. Apollo, as the god of forms and reason, is in constant tension with Dionysus, the god of revelry and chaos. As is his duty, Apollo seeks to organize the Dionysian chaos and fully eliminate the amalgam. However, Apollo ends up using the language of Dionysus and speaks in order to maintain the structure of the tragic play.

The festival-like atmosphere that occurs in Heavy Metal concerts floats between the chaotic and the organized. There is a rigid structure that is appropriated to it, and, through this, we have the rational capability to understand the difference between the band, the audience, the instruments, and the stage. However, at the same time, a chaotic principle is clearly manifest in opposition: a screaming horde that chants rhythmically can be seen in either side, whether it be the audience or the band itself. In fact, if that rational principle were not there (and it just might disappear on a good night) a person inside the concert would not be able to tell where the music comes from, who produces it, and who enjoys it.

In order to properly affirm this life, we must not deny any aspect. Therefore, to deny our past is to deny ourselves because it is the past that constitutes us as we exist. Instead of falling to the weakness of reason that denies the unchangeable parts of life, that which has happened before the present, one would rather reflect upon it and declare "Thus would I have it" (Nietzsche, 2013, pg. 191) as Zarathustra declares to those malformed citizens that he encounters in his travels from his mountain.

Taking these two quick, and rather superficial, considerations of Nietzschean philosophy, one begins to see how there exists an intersection between Nietzsche and the rise of Heavy Metal. The affirmation of life and its absurdity, even in its darkest form, is without a doubt present in Heavy Metal. The use of music to highlight the darkness that occurs in our existence serves to celebrate

that darkness and not negate it to the point of disappearance. Those who listen to Heavy Metal, without generalizing too much, typically feel a motivation to continue thanks to the music itself. Whether it is due to a feeling of belonging or simply a release of emotions, Heavy Metal is a gateway to a life-affirmative rhythm that reacts against the hedonism of the soul (mind) that is ever so present in Judeo-Christianized societies.

Metal in the communal setting: a headbanger's ball

As the lights fall, the crowd rises. Their time has come. The long anticipated wait of the band is finally over, and the anxious crowd reaches a fever pitch when the band walks on stage. What happens during a Heavy Metal concert is nothing short of a festival. The fervor of the crowd is matched only by the fervor of the band that plays. The intensity of one reflects the intensity of each, if everything goes well. If not, then the festival is shattered and there is a sharp disconnect between those that perform the festival; so much so that even feelings of anger and frustration overcome various minds with screams of "we are rejected, thrust down into the mud and muck, and forced to live as outcasts. We are not wanted, we are not even wanted *alive*, and we are in danger: a danger of extinction!"

However, if the festival goes well, then there is a mass break towards divinity. Following Bataille's analysis of the festival (1989, pp. 43-65), if everything goes well in the festival, then the results are absolute. The sacrifice here is one of the body: frenetic expenditure of the audience's own energy is offered as a legitimizing principle in Heavy Metal. Mosh pits, head banging, and chanting all serve as forms of sacrifice reminiscent of tribal dances in their most euphoric moments. Bataille describes festivals and sacrifices as those that create a person as immanent with divinity in order to elevate the sacrificed thing towards the realm of the divine. However, there is no clear thing that is sacrificed: there are usually no crops, livestock, or children sacrificed in Heavy Metal concerts. This being said, there is still something that is sacrificed: ourselves. As previously mentioned, the expenditure of energy as sacrifice, following Bataille's train of thought, combines with our own impulse towards divine immanence by the hand of the elevated band. In other terms, the band is that which is established as immanent with the divine and the audience sacrifices its own energies (that which keeps us alive) in order to ascent to the level of the band. The dramatic interactions between band and audience in a concert are the act of sacrifice: with each motion from the band members, such as raising a fist to keep a chant in time with the song, the band cuts a deeper gash into the audience's collective body, thereby firstly reducing the audience to a thing that must be sacrificed and later elevating it to the level of immanence.

Already having established the element of festival and sacrifice that operates in a Heavy Metal concert, how do we go about the characterization inside the concert itself? Phrased another way, how do we know who is who, what is what, and in what direction the sacrifice is going? Nietzsche's dichotomy of the Apollonian and Dionysian (1995, pp. 5-7) spirit helps us to better understand the processes inside the concert itself. Following Nietzsche's arguments, one notices that the great chaos inside a Heavy Metal concert is due to the fervor and excitement caused by Heavy Metal music. This music is chaotic, loud, and brash, which helps us establish that Heavy Metal as a genre could be considered as Dionysian. The crowd's and band's movements are also chaotic, but there is something more important: they are also amorphous. If we, for the sake of argument, eliminate the stage and place the band and the audience in

the same space, then we as outside observers would be hard-pressed to differentiate between the two. A counter-argument would be “One could easily find the instruments that play music and still differentiate between the two without needing the stage.” This may be true, but what of the scenarios that have the audience singing as well? Where would the instruments be? Would the audience’s voice not count as an instrument? In the festival that is a Heavy Metal concert, is sound and music not coming from all sides and therefore, in a Dionysian sense, both the band and the audience are themselves the song itself?

Just as these issues begin to rise is when Apollo shoots his mighty arrow that traces a border into the mass in order to individuate it. The Apollonian spirit in the Heavy Metal concert is what helps us divide between one person and another, between band and audience, one instrument from another. The rationalizing and individuating principle is what gives order in the concert. Individual notes, songs, words, and actions are the product of the Apollonian that seeks to conquer the Dionysian by forcing order where chaos reigns. In other words, Apollo and Dionysus are in constant battle with each other for the control of human existence and experience. Apollo attempts to force order and structure in the chaotic existence of Dionysus. Just like in the Greek tragedy where Nietzsche develops his analysis, the Apollonian spirit in Heavy Metal concerts appears to nearly conquer the Dionysian, but in the end requires the language (and even speaks it!) of Dionysus in order to preserve itself. A celebration of life through music is complete: Apollo and Dionysus flow back and forth and are mutually dependent on one another. The festival is done, the results are unquestioned, but they are definitely exalted and celebrated. The purge is complete, a catharsis experienced, and both the audience and band have elevated themselves to divine immanence in the concert. The experiences in the concert are flowing between chaotic and organized, and in those experience something new lies. This refers to a possibility of transgression of the current social discourse on things like gender construction, social classes, racial identity, etc.

The type of transgression is, of course, one that is referring to a stance against the social system in a particular society. In other words, much like Apollo and Dionysus, transgression cannot exist if there is nothing to transgress against. This being said, one must be careful when dealing with supposed “transgressive” acts: that which is thought as transgressive usually ends up affirming the established order, much like Foucault’s example of homosexuality in *History of Sexuality* or his considerations of transgression (1980, pp. 29-53). The chaotic darkness in Heavy Metal does indeed reinforce the ordered and rationalized light of the rest of the society in which it exists, for one cannot exist without the other. Western society today is guided by the principle of utility. What is useful is what is good, and a particular focus, in the development of societies, is given to those pragmatic things that work efficiently. As a contrast, Heavy Metal as a social experience does not look for productivity because these concerts are the spaces where non-productive expenditure takes place. This non-productive expenditure is based on destruction: the sacrifice of life energy through moshing, head banging, chanting, etc. clearly counters the productive style of Western capitalist society. If one side represents the good—productive work, increasing individual wealth, clearly defined borders of identification—then Heavy Metal concerts represent the bad: non-productive expenditure of energy, chaotic social structure, and the elimination of traditional barriers to form one amorphous mass of entirely irrational composition.

This being said, the space in which transgression in Heavy Metal is made possible exists in the concert/festival, so we will focus there. In the space where Dionysus and Apollo dance among those who sacrifice their energy, the collective identity opens up a space for re-definition. In that space, those involved in the concert are not of a particular race, gender, sex, social class, etc. Argued another way, the amorphous mass means that individual identity breaks down and opens up the path for a new identity. This identity is forged in a collective and strives to affirm life while expanding their sensory experience above a sense of reason. The screaming or moshing horde in a Heavy Metal concert—be they the audience, band, or both—are transformed entities that float in a space that allows them to define themselves as intensely feeling beings attached to the earth and music.

Heavy metal and Nietzschean ethics: Rise Above

Now that we have described the sacrifice and the festival (with a wonderful duet by Apollo and Dionysus), we can enter the world of ethics to describe what happens in Heavy Metal music and its message. Black Sabbath, widely considered as the fathers of Heavy Metal as we know it, started in Birmingham, England, a poor, industrial city trying to recover from World War II. The social conditions of the English city did help give rise to what we would eventually come to know as Heavy Metal, but how does the message stay prevalent in places that might not exactly mirror the Birmingham—the home of the Sab Four?

If we listen to Heavy Metal, we will notice a few things first: the dark atmosphere, the grandiose yet not narcissistic style, the heavy sound, and, of course, the seemingly negative lyrical content. From Black Sabbath's "War Pigs" (1970) all the way to Finntroll's "Solsagan" (2010), there is a constant dark heaviness that pervades the genre, and both songs denote some sort of struggle. On the one hand, "War Pigs" has as its focus the struggle against wanton war and a possible critique towards Just War Theory (Christiansen, 2013, pp. 171-182). On the other hand, "Solsagan" focuses on another type of struggle: that of the mythical Sun escaping the primordial iced earth and successfully engulfing herself in flames to warm all around her—it should be no surprise, then, that "Solsagan" translates from Swedish to "Sun's Saga" or "Tale of the Sun" in English. However, what is behind all this? More importantly, where is this aiming towards?

As previously stated, the best link that this energy has to an ethical philosophy is through Nietzsche's affirming ethics. The infamous case of the Parent's Music Resource Center (PMRC) and its attempt to classify many Heavy Metal songs as part of its "Filthy Fifteen" list of songs with questionable material during the mid-1980s was an interesting debacle in the music world: the existence of such a group could be considered as immediate evidence of two things. The first of which is a discourse ensuring its position, not by silencing Hard Rock and Heavy Metal, but by placing the genres in a category that labeled through the stigma of "maladaptive and corrupting". Secondly, the existence of the PMRC shows the kind of moral behavior that is expected (at least) in the United States: that of the necessity of purity, of censoring the body from any and all exposure, and, of course, make sure music stays "good" (wholesome and not filled with too much anger, darkness, or overbearing energy—or anything else deemed as "bad").

This is an example of precisely what Nietzsche questions in his *Genealogy of Morals*. As previously exposed, Nietzsche's findings regarding slave morality particularize on the historical point where the conditions of those oppressed are valued above the aristocratic ruling morals in a bid to ensure spiritual salvation and, above all, eternal vengeance (2013, pp. 37-81). Considering that these values have endured all these centuries while simultaneously occupying the dominant value center of Western societies, anything that openly challenges those morals is, by necessity, bad and/or evil. A musical genre that focuses on the body over the mind, that focuses on the earth instead of the heavens, and that focuses on life itself—including the parts that only a brave few do not hesitate to address!

Besides the affirmative style of Heavy Metal music, the creation of morals is also present during the communal experience in Heavy Metal. Building on the previous section's argument that the blank slate serves as a space for the breakdown of the socially constructed Self, this space is also allowed for the creation of a new kind of morality. This morality can be seen as something that centers on the concept of self-overcoming (*Selbst-Überwindung*) and is reminiscent of Zarathustra's urging to build our own table of virtuous goals (Nietzsche, 2013, pg. 268). In the Heavy Metal communal experience a new morality is set. Those in the concert/festival experience a loss of self that allows them to exist in a bonded being that maintains an illusory self. This therefore supposes a "one and all" mentality where what is good for one person is necessarily good for all because, at that time, one person and all people are the same thing. Morality is not fixated on reason, but rather on the irrational. Much like Bataille's surreal transgressions in the essays contained in *Visions of Excess*, the sensorial and the immediate is posited as good and absolute. In other words, there occurs a transvaluation of values in that what is seen as bad or evil in Western society is placed as good because they are the results of the placement of emotion and sensation in the forefront of human experience, contrary to traditional efforts of placing reason and the mind.

Given this, Heavy Metal is never under attack from those that would try to silence it. Heavy Metal's communal experience and music ensure that the life affirmation and the transvaluation of values found here will remain the strong bulwarks of this genre. However, Foucault's repressive hypothesis holds sway over what happens when the discourse is challenged (1990, pp. 17-36). Heavy Metal is placed in the category with the prostitutes and the insane: the maladjusted, the inconsolable, and the weird. Sam Dunn, in his documentary titled *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* (2005), provides the proper answer when confronted with rejection. He reflects about those that shun the music and the communal experience and closes with the remark while in Wacken Open Air Festival in Germany, "Judging from the fans around me, we're doing just fine without you."

Final considerations: Apollo and business

Despite what has been established throughout this paper, one cannot be so innocent so as to lose sight of the social context in which the Heavy Metal experience occurs. Global capitalist tendencies permeate the methods in which Heavy Metal presents itself and consumed. Let us not forget that there is still a business aspect to the communal experience of Heavy Metal. How might we contend with this? There are two main angles that follow from what has been previously exposed here.

The first is considering the danger of transgression as previously mentioned by Foucault (1972). By continually affirming a space in which the mass lets go of utilitarian capitalistic tendencies, the opposite affinity for cost-benefit is conversely re-affirmed through the separation of space. In other words, the fact that Heavy Metal concerts and festivals need venues, stages, or at least some separated space sanctioned by the State or a private group means that the requirement for shapely order stays prevalent. By establishing a need for formless discourse, the existence and pervasiveness of structural discourse is also cemented.

Secondly, we might consider business as part of the Apollonian device. The rational statement that seeks a definite area with empirical borders necessitates a strict pattern. That pattern flows between permits, venue rentals, ticket sales, and any other economically-dependent facet that seeks to define a precise *who, where, when, and what*. The god Apollo needs reason, structure, and individual order, and all these are achieved through a systemic process that depends on currency, even if such a thing can be considered irrational or arbitrary.

Lastly, we must consider whether these attentions regarding economics are of any import when the festival is underway. The necessity for a space with which to actually begin and maintain the festival is almost absolute: people must gather somewhere in order to appropriately begin. However, further research could focus on whether the separation of space in terms of concert or festival venue stays as just a geographical footnote, or, alternatively, whether the space itself is raised as sacred in order to reach divine immanence. From the middle of the mosh pit to the outer edges where some may stand with their arms crossed, each part of the separated space should be examined through diverse forms of research in order to paint a more detailed picture.

Conclusion: Heavy metal is for all and none

The comparisons between Heavy Metal and Existentialism is certainly nothing new. Irwin provides a very precise analysis of Black Sabbath's lyrics from an existentialist standpoint in *Black Sabbath and Philosophy: Mastering Reality* (2013, pp. 3-12). A strong link between various existentialist thinkers and the lyrical content of Black Sabbath was correct to establish, yet this chapter only provided an analysis of only a selection of songs from one band, albeit an enormously important one. Likewise, the references to such a Dionysian genre are teeming in the academic shadows. The best examples of this lie in two chapters of *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music around the World*. The first, titled "Affective Overdrive, Scene Dynamics, and Identity in the Global Metal Scene", is co-authored by Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene and focuses on the rise of Heavy Metal and its studies. The chapter also asserts the concept of "affective overdrive" as one of the fundamental issues of global metal research (2011, pg. 10). The other chapter, titled "Electronic and Affective Overdrive: Tropes of Transgression in Nepal's Heavy Metal Scene", which is written by Paul D. Greene (2011, pg. 120). This chapter presents a practical manifestation of affective overdrive when one Nepalese comments that frustration must be sung in a scream: how can one sing softly when he or she is angry? These two examples provide conceptual support for the development of the Dionysian in the Heavy Metal communal experience.

This paper tried to establish the Nietzschean influences, whether they were done on purpose or they accidentally fit, present in Heavy Metal music and the communal experience. The legacy of Nietzsche present in Bataille and

Foucault all serve to portray the importance of the German 19th Century thinker, yet this paper can be also used to demonstrate the practicality of his philosophy. Granted, his ethical practice is not easy, but metal heads everywhere are in a constant path of self-overcoming. They exist on the fringes of the aesthetic tastes of societies, save for a few countries that openly welcome it. The shunning of the musical style, the open disregard, and, in the more extreme cases, the persecution of Heavy Metal is present in history and our historical present. However, the space open for Heavy Metal is for everyone brave and affirmative enough to take hold of it. In the end, the celebration of life must be an ethically good thing. As Robin James (2012) argues, Nietzsche believed that music, particularly the Mediterranean styles, held the key to glorifying life and staying away from Christianity as a source of spiritual hedonism.

A possible route in which to continue this line of work is to focus fieldwork, whether sociological, anthropological, psychological, and so on, into providing evidence in favor of the arguments previously established. This is not to say that this paper has occurred in a vacuum: personal, anecdotal, and analytical evidence has come together with theory in order to try to explain why a Heavy Metal concert thrashes people in the way it does. These concerts, this communal experience, seems to harken back to a time where our existential anxiety was met with pre-moral divinity that acted as it will. Our goal was, therefore, to influence that divinity in our favor. During these Heavy Metal concerts and festivals, we as humans confront anxieties that have existed for millennia, and so reach toward that which helps us most directly confront our own particular apprehensions.

Finally, the path from *The Birth of Tragedy* towards heavy metal can be considered impossible, given Nietzsche's own essay titled "An Attempt at Self-Criticism". The examination of tragedy through the modern German lens seems, for Nietzsche, an impossible task that is gravely haunted by ghosts and questions that precede such an analysis. In other words, *The Birth of Tragedy* has the danger of it being too German to accurately understand the affirmation of life through the tragic play (Nietzsche, 2008, pg. 5). Even if this holds, we should not be discouraged from using such a text. The dance of Apollo and Dionysus is ever present in such the community-forming experience that is a Heavy Metal concert. Granted, the argument that many—if not all—other genres of music also create a sense of community seems undeniable. However, the sheer focus on the negative or pessimistic factors of life, and purposely *not* a negation but rather an *affirmation* of them, seems almost exclusive to Heavy Metal music. There may be other songs from other genres that contain such a focus, and Blues music is the best example, but only in Heavy Metal do we find such an intense emotional rapture and release that so closely resembles the tragic play. To such a one, however, an aged metal head, looking up to him with the sublime eyes of Tony Iommi, might answer "Say also this, thou curious stranger: what must this people have suffered, that they might become more beautiful! But now follow me to a Heavy Metal concert, and sacrifice with me in the temples of both the deities!" (Adapted from original quote in Nietzsche, 1995, pg. 92)

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