

# SENSUOUS ENTANGLEMENTS, ASSEMBLAGES AND CONVERGENCES: EXTREME METAL SCENES AS ‘SENSORY COMMUNITIES’

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## **Abstract**

Extreme metal scenes can be considered ‘sensory communities’ (Vannini, Waskul, & Gottschalk, 2014) where fans share ways of engaging their senses and making sense of sensations. Embodied practices such as moshing, head-banging, and drinking are taken-for-granted corporeal acts within a scene; as a result, their experiences are often difficult to articulate. Informed by a feminist poststructuralist (Grosz, 1994) and non-representational perspective (Thrift, 2007), the research reveals how gendered, subcultural subjectivities are produced through embodied practices. Taking the senses seriously in heavy metal scholarship offers ways of reconceptualising and reimagining the importance extreme metal and its embodied practices have for fans.

## **Introduction: Re-thinking the significance of extreme metal and its practices**

With the increasing interest in metal music studies scholars have explored, from various theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, the ways in which metal music plays a meaningful role in the everyday lives of musicians and fans (Berger, 2009; Kahn-Harris, 2007; Wallach, Berger, & Greene, 2011). Hecker (2012) ascertains that metal fans cultivate a sense of community that is closely related to the availability of shared meanings. In other words ‘being metal’ within the scene means not having to explain oneself, not being questioned about embodying a particular style of dress and engaging in transgressive bodily practices without the threat of provocation. In their study of a heavy metal bar in New Zealand, Snell and Hodgetts (2007) posit that communities of heavy metal are spatially constructed and a sense of community is materially manifested through collective gestures, stylizations of the body, meanings, and the presentation of collective symbols (i.e. metal band t-shirts, tattoos, artefacts in metal venues). Other metal scholars have focused on the meanings that metal fans ascribe to the intense feelings and emotions expressed by metal music songs and performances. For Wallach et al. (2011), metal offers a broad “palette of affective valences” which are derived from and shaped by the realities of everyday life (p. 14). Although metal fans are enthusiastic to discuss the sonic and affective intensities evoked by the music Kahn-Harris (2007) argues that the linguistic tools available within the scene to talk about musical attraction, pleasure, preference and how scene members experience the music is limited. The notion that there are limited linguistic tools available within extreme metal scenes reflects an on-going preoccupation by popular music academics with the discursive, representational and symbolic values of metal. This paper seeks to address this lingering gap between the experiential qualities of metal and the means of articulating its significance by

focusing on embodiment and the senses in relation to women's participation in moshpit practices.

In his discussion about embodiment and subcultural authenticity, Driver (2011) contends that metal identities and subcultural practices are not merely *expressive* modes of engagement but are “embodiments of knowledge in-context” (p. 981). In other words the knowledge required to participate in scenic practices and perform an intelligible metal identity is something which is “*experientially* ‘earned’ or ‘learned’, something requiring a particular understanding or mode of engaging with the music that is borne of a sensual competence, rather than a cognitive or discursive one” (p. 981). This discursive shift from examining the meanings derived from metal music to the ways in which subcultural life is felt is illustrative of two influential paradigm shifts that have occurred within cultural studies, feminist theory, human geography and popular music. The ‘affective turn’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and ‘sensorial revolution’ (Howe, 2006), both of which have yet to make a real impression within metal music studies, has prompted scholars to acknowledge the multisensory and complex nature of lived experience, subjectivities and subcultures. Paralleling these shifts, I argue that extreme metal scenes can be considered ‘sensory communities’ (Vannini et al., 2014) where fans share common ways of engaging their senses and making sense of sensations. This is not to suggest that metal audiences are homogenous, but that the subcultural norms that have come to define extreme metal, its fans and its practices are constructed by and fostered through shared ‘sensory rituals’. Within the context of an extreme metal gig touching and gesturing are important ways of defining and enhancing social relations within moshpit spaces. The smells of stale beer, sweat, cigarette smoke, the invigorating feeling of your long hair whipping around your neck, the feel of a new metal band t-shirt, the triggering of blast beats rattling your insides, and the adrenaline pumping through your veins after a positive moshpit experience are all complex sensations that constitute and shape metal identities and spaces. Despite the recent advancements in metal music studies that focus on the pleasurable and affective characteristics of extreme metal and its practices (Berger, 1999; Overell, 2014), little attention has been paid to the ways in female metal fans’ subjectivities are constituted and reconstructed through corporeal practices. By taking embodiment and the senses seriously in heavy metal scholarship offers ways of reconceptualising and reimagining the importance extreme metal and its sensorial practices have for fans, particularly female fans.

### **More-than- expressive: Extreme metal entanglements and affective assemblages**

Similar to the ways in which extreme metal has been theorised, moshpit practices are seen as *expressive* and *symbolic* forms of rebellion, hegemonic masculinity, discontent, subcultural solidarity and resistance. However I consider moshing to be a performative, embodied, and sensual subcultural practice within extreme metal. They are socially constructed spaces in front of the stage where headbanging, crowd surfing, stage diving, body slamming, and aggressive pushing are encouraged and contained. To ‘mosh’ is a distinctive way of using the body to corporeally articulate individual and collective subcultural identities. These sensual practices consist of bodies being touched, pushed, shoved, lifted, caught, picked-up, thrown and carried within disordered, active moving spaces. Influenced by poststructuralism and the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), moshpit practices as conceptualised as relational spaces that are comprised of “a constellation of on-going trajectories” which are always in the process of unfolding and becoming (Massey, 2006, p. 92). Moshpit spaces and

metal venues are affective assemblages of practices, bodies, alcohol, and music. In thinking about extreme metal scenes as ‘sensory communities’, metal venues are also constituted by the experiences of those involved in these sensuous practices, the meanings metal fans bring to these spaces, and the intensities of affect generated by different bodily encounters. When considering the sensuousness of moshpit practices it is important to remember that the senses cannot be so readily separated and that “sight, touch, hearing, and smell function contemporaneously and combine their effects” (Grosz, 1994, p. 99). And each sensuous, bodily encounter within the Leeds’ metal scene generates “unique affective capacities in that no two encounters ever produce the same affective modification” in the body’s capacity to be affected (Duff, 2010, p. 885). In this way moshpits are sensory entanglements that are sensed differently by men and women, and are unable to be experienced the same way twice. Consequently, moshpits are not only affective assemblages but sites of convergence that are *felt* and performed differently. Moshpit practices, like extreme metal scenes, are never static, isolated or durable, and as a variety of metal fans participate in moshpit practices in different spaces to different metal bands moshpits are subcultural convergences that continually dissolve and blur bodily boundaries as they merge and emerge in dynamic, fleeting and visceral ways (Anderson, 2012). Therefore we come to know the social world as multiple and emergent as the senses interlock and mesh together creating heterogeneous ‘sensory worlds’.

As a scholar who is interested in embodied practices and corporeal performances within extreme metal scenes I turned to Thrift’s (2007) non-representational theory which is concerned with everyday life and the forms of embodied practice that we take for granted. Anderson and Harrison (2010) argue that “most of the time in most of our everyday lives there is a huge amount we do, a huge amount that we are involved in, that we *don’t* think about and that, when asked about, we may struggle to explain” (p. 7). Within the context of extreme metal, practices such as moshing, headbanging, drinking, and experiencing a live metal performance are presupposed corporeal acts, and when their experiential qualities are questioned metal fans find it difficult to put them into words. Thrift (1996) claims that this theoretical perspective takes seriously the sensuousness of practice and the spaces which practice opens up. It emphasizes practices that cannot adequately be spoken of, that words cannot capture, that texts cannot convey; on forms of experience and movement that cannot be understood in the moment (Nash, 2000). Thinking non-representationally about extreme metal practices means going beyond the representational, symbolic value of metal by exploring how the physical immersion in corporeal practices requires and produces different ways of ‘doing’, ‘being’, and engaging with metal. By making the connections between poststructuralist thought and non-representational ways of thinking about extreme metal scenes I argue that we come to know ourselves (as metal fans) and the world around us through *our senses* and our relational encounters with *other* bodies. Addressing the gap in research on the role senses play in constructing and defining localised metal scenes, this paper illustrates how the senses and sensual experiences come to shape identities and social relations over time.

### **‘Moshography’: Bringing the sensuous body into metal music scholarship**

‘Moshography’ is a metaphoric, methodological practices and a sensual sub-cultural practice in which metal identities are constituted by and made visible

through particular embodied movements. The absence of sensual, embodied accounts of extreme metal and its practices are symptomatic of what Grosz (1994) calls 'somatophobia' in Western thought which privileges mind and knowledge over the body and experience, and this has not gone unnoticed by music scholars. Wood, Duffy and Smith (2007) argue that music scholars have typically distanced themselves from the sensual, affective and emotional experiences of musical practices and performances. As a result, many ethnomusicologists such as Cooley and Barz (2008) urge researchers to be more actively involved in the music practices and processes that they are studying. A 'moshography' could be considered a form of performance ethnography which attends to the ways in which bodies and sensations reconfigure spaces and time and draws attention to "the excessive parts of life of social practices that happen in the *now*" (Morton, 2005, p. 669). According to Wood (2012) non-representational thinking insists on the *active* engagement with specific, relationally and spatially defined, practices. It encourages an exploration with the emotional and embodied experiences of social encounters. These proposals signal a revolution within the social sciences, provoked by the 'affective turn', which has sought to re-embodiment qualitative research whereby scholars are using their bodies as research tools rather than bodies merely being objects of research. Stoller (1997) identified this approach as sensuous ethnography which is about reawakening the scholar's body by fusing the intelligible and the sensuous in scholarly practices and representations. Put another way sensuous scholarship refers to research, theory and methodology that are "*about the senses, through the senses, and for the senses*" (Vannini et al., 2014, p. 63). It is about incorporating and being attentive to the smells, textures, sensations and tastes that are felt through the body and these sensual experiences are essential facets to our ethnographic understandings within the field. Considering that moshing is a performative, sensual practice I used my female, white, heterosexual, subcultural body as a tool of inquiry to flesh out the ways in which moshpits, as a sense-making practice, produce a sensuous self: "a performative, reflex, perceptive, intentional, indeterminate, emergent, embodied being-in-the-world" (Vannini et al., 2014, p. 85). Being attuned to all the senses has the potential to enrich our understanding of body-space relationships, and the bodily encounters and sensations that occurred throughout the research process were significant and told me more than the transcribed interviews (Longhurst, Ho, & Johnston, 2008).

This paper, drawn from a larger, doctoral ethnographic research project, is based on ethnographic data gathered from February 2012 through August 2013 in Leeds, UK. Throughout my fieldwork I attended over 100 metal gigs in and around Yorkshire, conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews with 13 male scene members and 26 female scene members between the ages of 20-50 years old, and spent extensive time with various metal fans and musicians on nights out in pubs, at metal festivals, and metal venues in Leeds. Because subcultural practices are intricately embedded into the ways in which metal identities are constituted, it was only when I asked the 'difficult' questions such as "what does it feel like to mosh?" or "What are some emotions and feelings that you experience while moshing?" that the female interviewees and myself learned about the sensual qualities that make moshing significant for female metal fans (Vannini et al., 2014). Furthermore by actively participating in moshpit practices alongside my research participants I was able to "learn from the inside" about the visceral and sensuous characteristics of Leeds' metal scene and its practices (ibid., p. 74). The ethnographic material presented here is presented as a form of ethnographic fiction comprised of excerpts from my reflexive field notes, interview data from 12 female moshers (all names have been anonymised), and fictional writing which when merged together aims to

capture the messy, entangled, and ephemeral aspects of scenic life in situ. In order to bring the reader into the sensuous world of moshing I integrate theory throughout the writing which also challenges Cartesian epistemologies that view analyses as separate from the senses and the physical body (Vannini et al., 2014). Additionally, this literary approach is a form of performative writing which aims to get beyond 'representation' by offering the reader an entrance into other worlds that are otherwise intangible and inaccessible (Pollock, 1998). In the following sections I highlight the ways in which moshpit practices are understood through metaphorical discourses, and that a focus on the sensual, affective dimensions of moshpit participation moves us beyond normative understandings of extreme metal practices as merely symbolic and representational.

## **Analysis and discussion**

### ***'You're on that absolute high': New sensations, new embodied metaphors***

The red coloured lights are bathing the audience in an ominous, almost sinister glow. The band emerges on stage and a cacophony of machine-like explosions erupt from the drum kit, along with a thunderous clash of a guitar riff and a stomach churning guttural growl which incite people in the front row start bouncing up and down and side to side along to the music. Devil horns and half empty pint glasses are thrust into the air, whirlwind flurries of long, dark hair assault my face and incessant stomping of feet vibrate the floor. The pulsations echoing from the monitors rattle my ribcage and I feel electrified. The space feels restrictive as all the cool air is relinquished by the stirring of bodies, my skin begins to dampen, and wafts of stale beer, sweat, perfume, cigarette smoke and body odor fill my nostrils. As the music speeds up people reciprocally begin to intensify their movements by pushing and shoving one another sporadically. The excitement and energy is so overwhelming that I throw myself into the vortex of moving bodies that continuously clash and collide abrasively into me. I dance around all the areas of the pit, in between all the excreting, sweating bodies, exploring every spatial contour of the mosh-pit. I plunge towards the stage, I quickly switch my weight from one foot to another and lob myself in the opposite direction; the venue becomes a blur as I'm swallowed up by the maelstrom of black band shirts, leather jackets, and masculine bodies. I crash into Carole. We put our arms around each other, headbang in unison while remaining alert to the bodies being flung in all directions. I turn towards her and ask what it feels like to be in the pit, she pauses briefly and then smiles,

...it's that feeling of you know that point when you've been drinking you get so drunk that you're completely reckless *but* not in a dangerous way. You're care-free, everything's fine but you're still safe it's *just* like that but with the most *brutal* beat inside your ribcage that you can imagine (Carole).

She gives me a gentle shove and I instantly lose her as she is absorbed into the shadows of moving bodies.

During the interviews many of the female moshers, discussing their feelings, emotions and embodied sensations in the pit was difficult, they were 'hard to explain' or difficult to put into words. This difficulty to articulate musical and emotional experiences is echoed by Duffy (2005), "such experiences are ephemeral and difficult to express in words. The emotions we experience in and

through music are done so precisely because they cannot be expressed by any other medium” (p. 678). Hailey, a dedicated power and thrash metal fan and frequently moshes and stage dives at gigs in Leeds, accounts for the non-representational elements of moshing when she struggles to articulate what she feels when immersed in the pit:

It's not really...I don't know. It's just like it's too much energy I gotta get out [raising her fists, squeezes them tightly and shakes them back and forth]. You know like, I don't know it's hard to explain. You find yourself with too much energy, it's like I don't know it's like adrenaline... It's not a fear; I'm not scared, I'm not angry. I'm pretty damn happy! (Hailey)

Accounting for the affective qualities of moshpit practices are further complicated when the rush of intense energies and adrenaline mask the physical impact brought forth through bodily encounters. This is reflected in Allison's comment when she spoke about her most memorable moshpit experience, “I literally didn't like... I can't explain I didn't feel anything like *physically* for the whole time. But it's just like I don't know it was kind of like being extremely kind of hyper in your head but not feeling pain.” Allison's account reflects how the senses messily and complexly interlock and entangle which create an almost dizzying sensual experience.

Yet it became evident that as women engaged in moshpit practices over time they developed metaphoric and embodied discourses and understandings to explain their experiences which contrasts to Kahn-Harris's (2007) assertion that there is a lack of linguistic tools offered to account for affective qualities of music experiences. Thrift (1996) asserts that non-representational theory highlights the ways in which knowledge necessitates an active engagement with the entire body and that practical knowledge is generated from embodied practice and tends to be based upon metaphor. Similarly, in his research on clubbing culture Jackson (2004) maintains that clubbing introduces people to new sensations which then create new embodied metaphors and languages to explicate those experiences. Metaphors are pervasive in everyday life, not just in discourse but in thought and action. Metaphors allow people to make sense of complex, embodied experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Many of the metaphors the female metal fans' used to describe their moshpit experiences are derived from simple physical and spatial experiences such as drinking, feeding, and electrical energy. The aforementioned description of moshpit practices offered by Carole illustrates the explicative power of metaphor. As I ask Sabrina about what it feels like to be in a moshpit she relates it to being roused and nourished,

It's more of if the music is stirring up something inside you and you can't just stand still and listen to it, you have to do something. Yeah it's feeding through and it's getting into your body and you have to have like a release of some sort. Roxy equates a positive moshpit experience to feelings induced by drug use which heightens your senses and alters your bodily disposition,

Like I come away from gigs and I swear to god I'm higher than somebody on a load of ecstasy like you can *feel* it. Your hearts beating faster, everything's brighter and you can hear more and it's just you're more alert and you're on that like absolute high but just from your own energy.

New embodied understandings of moshpit practices are also derived from the fact that women experienced their bodies in radically new ways as they experimented with transgressive, risky bodily compartments that subvert social

and subcultural norms of women's bodily capabilities (Jackson, 2004; Peluso, 2011). This notion of new embodied understandings parallel Casey's explanation of how her moshing engagements enabled her to experience and understand her body differently:

I don't know I think it kind of made me feel powerful. Like I said before I am quite big and I always thought that made me fat but when I was in the moshpit it made me strong, it made me part of something, it made me able to handle myself in a place where you know it would often be that I was the only girl in the moshpit... so yeah I guess that kind of made me happy to be part of that.

***More-than-moshing: The importance of affecting and being affected by others***

People suddenly start to jump on stage as the floor rumbled beneath them. They remain there for a few seconds, singing, dancing while scanning the crowd for a safe leap. I looked over my shoulder and there was still a whirl of moving bodies circling the floor. I saw Roxy, her long brown hair obscuring her face, crawl up on stage. She stood there, her excitement infectious...with no indication she jumps off the platform into the crowd of heaving bodies, moving back and forth. Anonymous hands carry her stomach first across the room then she rolled and twisted her body with each pass. Her hot sweat drips off her arms and face onto my already dampened skin...As bodies collide into me I feel this palpable yet indescribable sense of friendship and camaraderie. I feel more attuned and connected to the people around me by the ways in which I move my body. As I immerse myself in the maelstrom of bodies, the venue feels as though it is transformed, once a dark, hollow almost lifeless venue into a space of visceral intimacy, inclusivity and pleasure. Shortly after Roxy appears near the stage again, I ask her about her love for stage diving, she timidly leans over and states loudly,

'Cause when you're diving off a stage you don't know you're going to get caught and you don't know where you're going to end up and that kind of risk is *really nice* [speaks softly]. And with the music going at the same time it's just [pauses-tears welling up in her eyes]...I'm getting a bit starry-eyed about it, sorry that's kind of sad, but it is it's like the best moments of my life are diving off the stage.

Roxy's emotional account of her love of stage diving speaks to the ways in which affects are not only experienced in bodies but emanate and emerge from diverse encounters. In the context of Leeds' extreme metal scene, female bodies deeply affect and are affected by non-conventional encounters between and among bodies.

Furthermore, the ways in which the female participants describe their moshpit experiences exemplifies the 'more-than-ness' of extreme metal practices (Thrift, 2007). Even though moshing was the focus of the research it became incredibly apparent that its value went beyond the symbolic and representational. It was a visceral space where women could engage with their bodies differently, build meaningful friendships, feel safe within an aggressive, male-dominated terrain, and open themselves up to being physically and emotionally affected by others. Ahmed (2004) puts forth that particular movements connect and affect bodies in idiosyncratic ways. As bodies clash, collide and are aggressively shoved into one another within moshpit spaces it not only creates a sense of sensuous collectivity but leaves an impression that extends

beyond the physical confines of the metal venue. This is exemplified by Kaitlin when she describes how moshing was a sensuous way of building meaningful friendships:

...like you bump into the same people and literally bump into the same people enough times and then like you might have a chat on the way out and you're just sweating and talking and you have a drink together. You know because you might have picked each other up a few times so I guess it's quite a good friendly way to meet people.

Through this sense-making ritual, moshing is central for the continuity and constitution of subcultural identities and the maintenance of social relationships, all of which require the touch of another. Carole elaborates on this point when she explains how moshpits become safe spaces,

Having grown up as such an outsider, that feeling of being part of it, being accepted and not having to explain myself. Because you always had to explain yourself and your relationship with metal... It's that togetherness, and that sense especially in that environment [the moshpit], I feel completely safe and can completely be who I am.

The narratives from the female moshers illustrate that the senses are a way we meaningfully engage with world and a means by which spaces, identities, music scenes and embodied practices are demarcated and structured (Vannini et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

By engaging in moshpit practices alongside my female participants evokes a more nuanced, multi-sensual perspective of extreme metal practices. The practical 'doings' of metal identities are *known* and *felt* to be different from what is knowable. Consequently the significance of extreme metal is not made tangible through shared meanings but through similar ways of engaging with subcultural sensations and sense-making practices. Wood and others (2007) claim that for music scholars to account for the affective and sensual aspects of musical experience requires a framework that is suitable for the study of music, "where meanings and understandings emerge through tacitly known and emotionally experienced processes of becoming" (p. 885). Using moshing as an embodied ethnographic method and sensuous writing captures how moshpit practices are sensory entanglements (Mason & Davies, 2009) that are dynamic, fleeting, complex, visceral, and play a significant role in the lives of female metal fans. The ethnographic data presented here illustrates that the methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks which take the senses seriously enables us to get closer to the lived realities of our research participants. In other words: "we can and we may, as it were, jump with both feet off the ground into or towards a world of which we trust the other parts to meet our jump" (James, 1911/1979, p. 230).

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