

# TRANSCENDING THE FORM, ADVANCING THE NORM: QUEER POST-STRUCTURALISM IN POST-METAL

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## Abstract

'Post-Metal' implies that it offers, or even transcends, something beyond heavy metal conventionalities. As such, this paper considers whether Post-Metal can offer a space which sonically and symbolically reconfigures normative gender embodiment that is often embedded within fellow metal sub-genres. This paper will be underpinned by a queer post-structuralist framework, and draws upon empirical interviews, to establish whether Post-Metal can indeed undermine, transcend and subsequently reveal the instability of gender normativity.

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the potentiality for queer practices and spaces through an empirical analysis of the contemporary metal music sub-genre 'Post-Metal'.

The dominant academic accounts that consider the relationship between metal music and gender often suggest that there is an overt reinforcement of heteropatriarchal norms. For instance, Weinstein (1991) and Walser (1993), both suggest metal is a masculine subculture whereby femininity is rejected. Thus, existing metal literature frequently assumes heavy metal attracts alienated young males who seek an outlet from society's normative rules and "feminizing influences" (Hutcherson and Haenfler, 2010; Riches, 2014; Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 1991). However, the normativity these youths attempt to reject is mostly reinforced via the use of hegemonic masculinity as a reference point, which enables the normative embodiment of masculinity to be repeated (Connell, 2005; Sewell, 2012). Furthermore, it is suggested women must always conform to masculine performances to gain entry and authenticity within metal subcultures (Krenske and McKay, 2000; Vasan, 2011; Walser, 1993). Therefore, debates are often focused around how metal music reinforces gender norms and power dynamics.

However, increasingly a queer analysis is being attributed to heavy metal cultures to determine whether alternative gender and sexual practices can emerge (Shvarts, 2014; Shvarts, 2015; Clifford-Napoleone, 2015). For instance, Shvarts (2014, 2015) links the intensity of Sunn O)))'s music, most notably the song 'Black Wedding', to the "cyclical, exhausting, (and) doomed" monotony of heteronormative institutions, especially reproductive labour.

Stemming from this, my paper will make a case for 'queering' the under-researched sub-genre of Post-Metal to determine whether this type of metal, be it reflexively or not, rejects gender-normative embodiment. This includes exploring whether alterations in the sonic of metal can further alter gendered

notions. If this is the case, perhaps by Post-Metal transcending the sonic form, it is further advancing beyond the heteronormativity and masculinity that can emerge within heavy metal.

Firstly, this paper discusses the use of a post-structuralist queer framework and the methodology adopted. Secondly, insights into how the interview participants feel when listening to Post-Metal music shall be explored. Such feelings will then be considered in relation to their views on gender within metal music. Finally, a queer analysis of the participants' experiences and thoughts will be discussed. This includes a discussion of Aaron Turner's concept of Post-Metal being the 'thinking man's metal' and how Post-Metal appears to subvert issues of gender normativity.

It is worth stressing that I am not critiquing the views and experiences expressed by participants in previous studies. Instead, this paper aims to challenge the suggestion that women must conform to hegemonic masculine ideals and/or merely enter a new context of oppression within heavy metal (Krenske and McKay, 2000: 279). This ignores how, as Schippers (2002) and Vasan (2011) rightly point out, women reconfigure their gendered ontology and embodiment in order to reduce and reject sexist binaries. However, I am interested in extending this notion further to understand how men may also reconfigure their gendered ontology too.

Ultimately, the Post-Metal genre is crucial for analysis and consideration. This is because a genre that actively goes beyond metal conventionalities, whilst still firmly rooted within heavy metal origins, can offer fresh and nuanced insights into how the production of musical genres, thus spaces, can offer alternative forms for individual and collective embodiment.

### **Post-structuralism and Queer Theory**

This paper is informed by a queer post-structuralist framework. Post-structuralism is based on the premise that, from a Foucauldian perspective, our culture and perceived reality are discursive constructions. These discourses vary throughout time and space, thus our identities are not fixed and our bodies will be governed by various discursive regimes (1977: 25).

In turn, queer theory's foundations lie within the post-structuralist field via its aims to deconstruct the legitimacy and universality of heteronormative discourse. Thus, queer theory destabilizes gender and sexual binaries by revealing the spectrum of gender and sexual performances. Therefore, this paper uses queer theory to draw attention to the lack of overt heteronormative and gendered discursive structures within Post-Metal.

However, queer theory has most commonly been interested in non-heteronormative practices and the blurring of masculine/feminine performances (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2005). Thus, the attribution of queer theory to music genres often focuses upon individuals who identify as 'queer', rather than the music genre being 'queered' itself (Halberstam, 2011; Clifford-Napoleone, 2015). For instance, Halberstam talks about queercore, queer-punk and riot grrrl when talking about queer music subcultures (2005: 161-67) which actively carve out a queer space in order to reject hegemonic and heteronormative ideals. But queering can also be more subtle. Although, self-identified queer metal fans exist (Clifford-Napoleone, 2015), I am more interested in queering spaces that do not overtly claim to be queer or feminist. The-

refores, this paper aims to explore how queer theory can be extended to practices and spaces within music genres that do not actively identify as 'queer'.

Ultimately then, this paper focuses upon how Post-Metal can potentially offer a space which transcends the gender binary. Thus, the traditional conception that metal is a hegemonic masculine culture is arguably destabilized within Post-Metal music. No academic account has explicitly and fully focused on Post-Metal and thus this could offer new, nuanced and interesting insights into how metal has the potential to transgress gender norms. In turn, this will challenge dominant academic accounts by offering an analysis of a contemporary metal music genre.

However, before I define Post-Metal I will briefly describe my methodology.

### **Methodology**

This paper draws upon the 'initial round' of interviews undertaken (Autumn, 2014). Such data is compiled from three fans of Post-Metal who shared their experiences, thoughts and listening habits. From here, discussion and reflection on how Post-Metal deviates away from hetero-patriarchal and masculinist discourse was considered. All of these interviews were semi-structured and conducted electronically due to locational and schedule differences. In turn, these initial interviews are used in this paper to identify key themes participants often drew upon. However, my research will conduct further interviews with more fans, in addition to Post-Metal bands and musicians, but these are yet to be undertaken.

### **What is 'post-metal'?**

Post-Metal is frequently linked to the sounds of sludge, drone, doom and black metal with common song structures often absent. Sonically, Post-Metal can be identified by long, often ten-minute plus songs (with no indication as to what or where the song is going), which couple slow crushing riffs and harrowing vocals with periods of atmospheric ambience. Guitar solos are rare. Within this genre prominent bands include Neurosis, Isis the band, AMENRA, Cult of Luna and Old Man Gloom. A recent study into black metal has also considered post-black metal (otherwise known as 'blackgaze') which attempts to offer a "transgressive rejection of kvlt" (Hagen, 2014: 232) by being "openly resistant to the much of the ideological glue that binds the rest of the black metal scene" (Ibid; 233).

However, rather than notions of resistance, when participants were asked to define the term 'Post-Metal' and whether it was a concept they approved of, participants spoke about the musical elements of the genre. They all agreed that the musical boundaries of metal were blurred in terms of song structure, instruments used and the prominent use of sound-scapes. Usually, the bands participants associated with Post-Metal were difficult to categorize so 'Post-Metal' was considered an apt description to suggest this genre goes beyond typical metal conventionalities.

Thus, as Post-Metal goes against conventional song structures it can be deemed as offering a sonically queer experience. For example, one participant exclaimed she could not tell whether it was a male or female singing in the bands Oathbreaker and AMENRA. Instead, these emotional, raw and occasionally disconcerting wails and roars offered a sonically queer experience

by creating a disjuncture in what you'd expect to hear from a masculine/feminine voice and not being able to tell who is actually producing the sound.

### **Transcending the form – Experiences of listening to post-metal**

Post-Metal is by no means an autonomous genre that is completely separate from heavy metal conventionalities. The demographic is still predominately white male, the music is still guitar-heavy and it's definitely not centered on an active feminist/queer message. But in comparison to other metal genres, something different is happening within Post-Metal in terms of how the sounds are altering individual *embodiment and experience*.

The use of sound-scapes was a “major element” (Male, Student) to the participants interviewed in differentiating Post-Metal from other metal genres. They agreed sound-scapes played a key part in a therapeutic listening experience. For instance, one participant claimed sound-scapes enabled him to “feel like (I'm) in another place” (Ibid.) and subsequently transcend beyond the life he was currently bound to.

Similarly, all interview participants stated that Post-Metal offered a therapeutic escape from emotional and personal problems, including existential crises:

*[Post-Metal offers an] 'emotional plane' that's almost disconnected from reality...I would agree with it being 'beyond' the material world (Male, Student).*

This was met with agreement by another participant who stated she had “spent many nights clearing my head” with the aid of Post-Metal bands, especially Neurosis (Female, Student). Another participant said he listened to Post-Metal when he went for walks and runs—the “gloomy sound... helps me to process personal problems whilst listening to it” (Male, Bank Employee).

As such, a certain realm of contemplation and escapism seems to be provoked by the Post-Metal listening experience which further enabled individuals to escape normative notions and the drudgery of everyday life:

*[Post-Metal is]...very bleak sounding, and I tend to listen to it in a really engaged way...whenever I feel completely 'down in the mud'. It somehow helps me to cope with it (Male, Student).*

*It's an odd thing to say, but when life is tough the music completely reflects everything you could be feeling – the anger and upset [reflected in the riffs]... the calm, attempts to make sense of things and relief [reflected in the ambience] (Female, Student).*

Therefore, the idea that Post-Metal can alleviate the body of normative rituals and rules suggests new forms of listening experience, and subsequent embodiment, can formulate due to the sonic of this particular genre. Participants kept referring to how the mind, body and soul returned back to a state of ‘calmness’ when listening to Post-Metal. Although this did not occur on every listening, when it did occur it was always bound to this genre (participants also listened extensively to black, extreme and sludge metal).

In turn, because Post-Metal is actively attempting to offer something more sonically, this will ultimately impact upon the experiences and relations indi-

viduals have with the music. For instance, when metal begins to merge with atmospheric ambience and sound-scapes (which often find inspiration in psychological, philosophical and social themes – such as Neurosis' album 'Through Silver in Blood' drawing upon Jungian psychology) this invoked new emotions:

*Definitely! I think that is 'the' major element of the music that makes it therapeutic... it is also one of the most important things that really differentiates 'Post-Metal' from others in metal, the sound-scapes" (Male, Student).*

Thus, heavy metal has always invoked emotional responses such as the mosh pit, headbanging and fist clenching. Yet, although Post-Metal remains immersed in the heavy sonic, the atmospheric periods and sound-scapes tend to invoke a more individual and therapeutic response. For instance, although this paper focuses upon interviews it is worth mentioning that during an AMENRA performance, I observed the majority of fans standing solitary, with their eyes either closed or looking up to the ceiling.

As such, rather than Post-Metal being produced by a marginalized group who want to actively carve out a more encompassing space, it is instead the white heterosexual man/men who have experimented with the sonic. In turn, this has invoked feelings of transcendence that has been welcoming to many individuals who have become disillusioned with, or merely want a periodic escape from, the toil of everyday life.

Ultimately then, regardless of the gender of the participant in question (or age, occupation, nationality) each individual had shared a similar relationship with the sounds of Post-Metal. They all experienced a sense of therapeutic outlet that was necessary for them to escape normative rituals and discourses. Although, this was commonly bound up with speaking of the drudgery of employment and personal problems, this paper is interested in whether Post-Metal can offer a further alleviation to gender norms that are impinged onto our bodies. Thus, further research could probe into how Post-Metal music offers alleviation from further normative discourses.

## **Advancing the norm – Post-metal and gender**

### ***Thinking man's metal***

Post-Metal bands often draw upon social and philosophical themes within their music, which is by no means nothing new in heavy metal, but the sonic experience and the lack of thematic undertones (when compared to death metal's themes of violence and anti-Christian ideology (Vasan, 2011: 333-334)) suggests there is a possibility for this space to offer new insights into how people use and listen to heavy metal. Aaron Turner (from the bands Isis, Old Man Gloom, Mamiffer) has even used the term 'thinking man's metal' to describe what Post-Metal is (Turner, 2005).

Yet, Turner's conceptualisation of post-metal was met with a little hostility and disagreement amongst participants. Firstly, as all the participants interviewed did not exclusively listen to Post-Metal, the idea that Post-Metal is *the* thinking man's metal was met with discomfort:

*I definitely think it is interesting music, I really do love listening to it, however labelling it as the 'thinking man's metal', and implying that anything be-*

*fore that was somehow intellectually less superior does not really have any basis. I guess that may be a problem of the 'avant-garde' musicians, considering their music superior, because they are generally born out of resistive movements to contemporary trends" (Male, Student).*

Therefore, although participants enjoyed, and are attracted to, how Post-Metal goes beyond metal conventionalities (thus portraying a kind of resistance towards contemporary metal trends), there was no agreement that Post-Metal is only the 'thinking metal' in existence. For instance, social and philosophical themes are evident within other genres of metal, such as death metal and black metal (e.g. Wolves in the Throne Room's views on environmentalism and spiritualism).

Interestingly, the male participants did not muse on the use of the word 'man' in Turner's conceptualisation of Post-Metal. In comparison, the female participant did offer a reflection whereby she expressed her discomfort of Turner's use of the word 'man' (rather than the word 'human'):

*I hope he means 'man' as in the 'human'. I try to take it to mean that anyway...Regardless, Post-Metal helps me escape the constraints of being a 'human' in everyday life so it's a transcendental/therapeutic metal to me, rather than a 'thinking' one (Female, Student).*

Here, although the female participant appears disconcerted by the idea that Turner may be referring to the gendered 'man', she quickly alters and reconfigures this discourse to represent something more encompassing (here 'man' is seen to represent the human). Although, at the time of writing I do not know whether Turner meant man as in the 'human', it is evident the female participant attributes a collective, rather than gendered, understanding to this concept. This may be because she found Post-Metal as a genderless space, thus any discourse that may be construed as gendered was quickly manoeuvred to represent a collective notion, rather than an androcentric one. In turn, this is similar to Vasan's finding of female death metal fans altering their personal values attributed to gender to decrease any harm that emerged from the sexist attitudes within the subculture (2011: 340).

Holistically speaking, although Turner suggests Post-Metal is for the 'thinking man', ultimately participants disagreed with this conceptualisation (on both a musical and gendered level) by making a distinction between 'thinking' and 'emotionality'; whereby Post-Metal was considered to be more in conjunction with the latter. In turn, there seems to be a constant reiteration of participants using Post-Metal to escape normative ideals. Therefore, although there was a consensus amongst participants as to why there were attracted to Post-Metal, the female participant was much more conscious of her gender identity and her use of Post-Metal to destabilise normative gender ideals that she found in commonplace in other metal genres, and society more widely.

Thus, although there was not much consideration as to how gender plays a role within the idea of a 'thinking man's metal', participants were asked to reflect on this further both within Post-Metal and heavy metal more widely, which shall be discussed now.

### ***Post-gender post-metal***

Generally, participants did not believe Post-Metal reinforced normative gender performances or discourses. However, interestingly the male participants

had not really given much thought to the enactment of gender within metal music prior to the interviews, with many instances of them excusing their lack of thought to the topic. This is demonstrative of metal music being constructed mostly by, and for, white men to the point where their gender becomes invisible within this genre. Therefore, undercurrents of normative gender privileging and normalising of the white male is still very much apparent within Post-Metal as well as wider metal genres.

However, when the male participants did reflect on the role of gender within heavy metal, there was an agreement that Post-Metal is not based around normative understandings of gender:

*I think...Post-Metal doesn't promote that [masculinity]...and I wouldn't name it masculinity, more a raw version of loud music...I rather think, there is no sexist handling in Post-Metal. It's purposefully used for these kinds of universal soundscapes, of [understanding] self-experiences" (Male, Bank Employee).*

*I think Post-Metal rejects that idea [masculinism] almost completely...Post-metal feels more beyond the gender binary ... it...seems to be dealing with the problems of being human rather than polarised issues surrounding a single gender.....Post-Metal does not really invoke anything stereotypically masculine when I listen to it, or stereotypically feminine for that matter...." (Male, Student).*

Here, ideas that Post-Metal may offer a 'new' type of masculinity is not even drawn upon – the male participants agreed it provided an inclusive space that is devoid of gendered undercurrents. Therefore, unreflexively Post-Metal appears to deconstruct normative notions of gender by offering a therapeutic and transcendental listening experience. Thus, rather than 'queer identities' coming into fruition, the Post-Metal space overall can be 'queered' due to its destabilization of gendered hierarchies and messages.

In addition, although the above interview excerpts came from the male interviewees, and thus their progressive suggestions could be construed as being ignorant of wider sexist discourses, *all* the participants interviewed stated they are not attracted to metal genres that emphasise overt masculinity or female subordination:

*Personally, I guess I would prefer to listen to a music in which I'm not constantly confronted with ideas that I don't condone. But I don't think that was the reason that attracted me to the genre. It would definitely repel me from it though, if I felt that the case was reversed...Hence, if one does not really connect with it on that level, it would lose most of the meaning, in my opinion"(Male, Student)*

*I think I also enjoy Post-Metal because it doesn't reinforce that hegemonic masculinity/patriarchal bullshit that thrives within, say, death and glam metal. I'd love to know whether I can't get into those genres because of how overtly sexist they are or whether I just really dislike the sound (probably both)!...I don't care that Post-Metal is a predominately white male scene...I identify more closely with metal, not because I want to be masculine or feminine, but because I want to escape the trials and tribulations of life. And one of those trials is gender stereotypes...I guess I desire and thrive within a*

*space that offers me heavy music and acceptance. And Post-Metal gives me that” (Female, Student).*

Ultimately then, although Post-Metal is still comprised mainly of male musicians and audience members, all participants agreed this did not reinforce masculine or heteronormative discourse but permitted a more ‘gender-free’ space and listening experience. As such, this made Post-Metal a more attractive sub-genre, especially for the female participant who was aware of the constant gender norms impinged upon her outside of the Post-Metal genre.

As such, Halberstam’s views relating to her attraction to punk music “precisely because it gave me a language with which to reject... homophobia, gender normativity, and sexism”– (2005: 155), can be further attributed to Post-Metal. Yet, although punk music is often overtly political, Post-Metal unreflexively provides a space that subverts masculinist discourse. Moreover, males predominately produce Post-Metal, and most of the audience are of a similar demographic, but this music is not aimed at the active exclusion of female participation or the presumed dominance of masculinity over the feminine (in comparison to death, extreme, thrash, glam metal).

Subsequently, Post-Metal is not aimed on the premise of carving out an active queer space (most participants would not identify as queer), thus reflexively transforming the hetero-patriarchal discourse of heavy metal, but it is about going against heavy metal conventionalities. In turn, this invokes new relations and understandings within metal. Thus, masculinity and femininity begin to become more fluid, submerged and blurred within the Post-Metal space. As such, I will now offer a summary as to how the subversion of the masculine/feminine binary, and the therapeutic transcendence instilled by Post-Metal music, allows this music genre to be read as a queer space.

### ***Queering post-metal***

Just because white heterosexual men may be performing Post-Metal music, this does not omit the possibility of this being read as a queer space. This is because the music is fundamentally attracting individuals into a space that undermines common heavy metal conventionalities. Although, Crossley, McAndrew and Widdop suggest a music genre is based upon a form of collective action (2014), within Post-Metal there is not so much a collective action but a collective agreement and attraction to a genre of metal. Such attraction is the therapeutic experience which simultaneously, and unreflexively, further subverts gendered discourses.

In turn, Post-Metal offers both men and women strategies to resist conventional and mainstream gender norms, found within other metal and mainstream cultures, by creating an embodiment and experience that enables them to escape and be *alive*. Thus, there may be no active feminist or queer strategic maneuvers (Schippers, 2002) but there is an embodiment which transcends the conventionalities of metal. However, what is more crucial is every participant, regardless of their gender, did not feel compelled to adhere to different gender norms or feel ‘gendered’ within Post-Metal. So although Post-Metal continues to be produced by white heterosexual men, this space does not just enable an outlet for subordinated masculinities and alienated young males (Hutcherson and Haenfler, 2010; Riches, 2014; Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 1991), but has the potential for both men and women to experience new outlets and embodiments.



In addition, the interview excerpts inadvertently reflect the idea that gender cannot be placed into a strict binary. The male participants readily opened up about their personal problems and how Post-Metal offered a means of therapy, which goes against the hegemonic masculinist notion that men should hide their emotions (Connell, 1995).

Thus, by 'queering' this genre we are able to reveal how Cartesian binaries are stifling and products of discursive regimes that naturalize hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity. Instead, masculinity and femininity are constructions that are simultaneously experienced or are even completely deconstructed within particular genres of metal:

*I think everyone who connects closely with Post-Metal invests so much emotion into either creating or listening to the music...and our outlet is not to be 'brutal' or mosh around but to transcend to a level that is higher than our normative notion of being" (Female, Student).*

Here, the participant suggests that Post-Metal offers something beyond gender. In turn, the Post-Metal space appears to submerge normative notions of masculinity and femininity. Although, participants did not express distaste towards masculinity or femininity they all suggested Post-Metal was devoid of gendered discourse, which was refreshing when compared to the wider spectrum of heavy metal music.

Therefore, ultimately Post-Metal is neither an attempt to prove masculinity nor is it actively queer or feminist. But it does offer a space within metal for individuals to transcend and escape, even if only for the duration of an album or a gig, everyday normative discursive practices. Thus, Post-Metal can be read as an unreflexively queer space that, to quote Halberstam, offers "a safe alternative to hetero-masculinities" (2005: 179). This is not to say fans of Post-Metal are searching for a 'safe' space within metal music but the attraction towards Post-Metal certainly suggests it enables individuals to transcend further beyond the masculine conventionalities of heavy metal, and more widely, normative life.

Ultimately then, the masculinist values attributed to the wider scope of metal are certainly challenged within Post-Metal. Halberstam claims that "new queer subcultural theory will have to account for non-heterosexual, nonexclusively male, non-white, and non-adolescent subcultural production in all its specificity (2005: 161). Yet, this paper shows that if subcultural practices produced by white heterosexual males reflect a certain queerness within a particular context, then there is no reason not to read them as such.

## **Conclusion**

Halberstam argues that queer subcultures are related to "old-school-subcultures like punk, but they also carve out new territory for a consideration of the overlap of gender, generation, class, race, community and sexuality in relation to minority cultural production" (2011: 155). Post-Metal is still predominately produced by white, heterosexual men but it is not necessarily produced for these men or a white, heterosexual male audience. Although, we should not forget Post-Metal is certainly still rooted into the overall heavy metal genre we must recognize how hetero-patriarchal norms and gendered discourses, which are often entrenched throughout heavy metal, appear to be transgressed within Post-Metal. Therefore, although Post-Metal is not actively

stating to be queer, it can be read as engaging in a queer subcultural politics by removing itself away from the hetero-patriarchal standards that are so common within heavy metal. For instance, participants spoke about how Post-Metal enabled them to feel like they existed and be respected as a 'human' (not as 'masculine' or 'feminine'). Perhaps then, Post-Metal could even be read as going beyond queer notions with participants often speaking about how Post-Metal just enables them to exist as a 'human'.

Ultimately, participants kept stating that the gender of those creating the form, and gender relations within Post-Metal, are subverted. Therefore, Post-Metal offers fresh and nuanced insights into why men and women are attracted to particular areas of metal music and how they use the music in relation to understanding their existence. Here, Post-Metal offers a therapeutic release, albeit mostly unreflexively, from the dominant discursive structures which impose themselves onto our everyday existence. More specifically to this paper, Post-Metal creates a space which is devoid of gendered expectations and thus provides a space for individuals to *be*.

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