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METAL BEYOND METAL: WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

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It is a great honour to be giving one of the keynotes at this conference. When I started seriously researching metal in 1996, I could scarcely have imagined that such a gathering would ever take place, let alone that I would be addressing it. Back then, there were but a handful of scholarly publications on metal – thanks to the pioneering work of Deena Weinstein and Robert Walser - and a handful of scholars around the world making use of them. I have known Jeremy Wallach, co-organiser of this conference, since we made contact sometime in 2000. When one metal scholar found another metal scholar during those times it was quite an event. We tried hard to discover each other, to ease some of the loneliness of working in such a tiny scholarly field.

Today, there is no shortage of metal scholars. Indeed, it's even becoming difficult to keep up with the rapidly growing literature. There is no doubt then, that we have arrived – metal studies exists as a sub-discipline and it is in rude health. There has been at least some research done on most of the key aspects of metal. The groundwork has been laid and we can move forward in a serious attempt to develop a profound understanding of metal as a musical, social and cultural form.

But as we proceed, we also need to ask an important and difficult question: What is the purpose of metal studies?

At one level, the answer to this question is obvious. The purpose of metal studies is to engage with metal in a scholarly fashion. This project needs no justification. Any socio-cultural phenomenon can and should be studied as part of the general scholarly effort to understand the world. If ancient Greek vases or the class structure in Sri Lanka are worthy topics for study, then so is metal.

Yet I think that there can be a greater purpose for metal studies than simply the worthy accretion of scholarship. The position of metal studies in relation to metal itself offers the opportunity for *engaged* scholarship. Most metal studies scholars are also engaged with metal as fans and metal scene members. They are part of the phenomenon which they are describing. This is not unique to metal – to give a couple of examples, in the field of popular music studies, punk scholars are often similarly engaged, as are many key scholars in African-American studies – but it is sufficiently rare as to be worthy of note. Metal studies scholars can be and often are Gramscian 'organic intellectuals'.

This isn't just a one-way relationship. Metal scenes are unusually receptive to scholarly ideas. In my own experience, I have lost count of the number of interviews I've done for metal magazines and fanzines. When I wrote for Terrorizer magazine in the late 1990s and early 2000s, both the editor and I, together with a significant portion of the writers were working on Masters degrees and doctorates (although I was the only one studying metal itself). Metal has long been a highly literate culture, with books and mythological canons drawn on extensively in metal lyrics and symbolism. Even apparently Neanderthal metal icons like Lemmy are much better read than is often appreciated. The black metal scene is probably the site where the collision between scholarship and metal is most intense. The various 'black metal theory' symposia and publications have mined a rich seam of philosophical discourse that both dissects and influences the development of black metal itself.

So metal studies is in a position to make an impact on metal itself. The question is, what kind of impact do we want to have?

Four aims for metal studies

I'd like to highlight four aims for metal studies. These aims concern *things that metal studies can do that are difficult to do within the metal scene itself*. What ties these aims together, is *the promotion of reflexivity*. As I argued in my book *Extreme Metal*, metal scenes have developed an odd kind of reflexivity. While scene members demonstrate a considerable sophistication in reflexively managing the complex work of scene-making, it is a reflexivity that is sharply limited. Indeed, it is often turned against itself in the strange phenomenon of reflexive anti-reflexivity in which scene members demonstrate considerable sophistication in appearing incredibly unsophisticated. The end result is that in metal scenes certain questions, issues and challenges are ruled largely out of bounds.

So the four aims that I will outline are all based on nurturing the more thorough kinds of reflexivity that metal often lacks. The promotion of a more thoroughgoing metal reflexivity is actually necessary if metal is to survive. Metal's limited reflexivity may have served it well in the past, but it has left it ill-equipped to face the challenges that it faces now and in the future.

1 Nurturing resilience

The first aim of metal studies should be to nurture metal's resilience. By resilience I do not mean that metal should endure unchanged into the indefinite future. Rather, the aim is to nurture the reflexive tools necessary for metal to confront the challenges it faces.

Metal studies scholars can boost metal's resilience though helping the scene protect itself against external assault. It is sad that metal studies never existed in the heyday of attacks on metal in the US in the 1980s. A body of engaged metal scholars – as opposed to the lonely pioneers that were around at the time – could have helped in countering the often absurd arguments that were levelled against metal. It should certainly be a priority for metal scholars to act when metallers and metal scenes become the target of unjustified assaults and prejudice. When it appears that metal is going to be cited as a factor in a court case, metal scholars should be proactive in offering themselves, either individually or as a group, as expert witnesses. When metal is cited as a 'problem' by governments, official bodies or politicians, metal scholars should be there to push back. When metal is censored and its fans persecuted by undemocratic and fundamentalist regimes, metal scholars should alert the world, as Mark Levine did in his 2010 Freemuse report on the censorship of heavy metal in the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia and China¹. Hopefully, the International Association of Metal Music Studies will play a role here in coordinating and strengthening our individual voices.

Nurturing resilience is about more than simply defending metal against attack. Metal scenes can be threatened by much more than simply outside malicious forces. Metal is part of a fast-changing world in which no institution or cultural practice can never be guaranteed to endure. Metal's complex institutional and aesthetic archipelago was built up in times that were different to the present and while they have proved resilient so far, that does not mean that they will continue to be so indefinitely. I will talk more about this later in my talk but for now I want to emphasise that this is precisely the kind of challenge that scene members find difficult to face. Metal scene members may be exceptionally adept in maintaining and navigating metal's scenic infrastructure, but they don't always have the breadth of vision to understand the wider context within which they act. Indeed, deep involvement in metal can, in those instances when it is based on a reduction of involvement in the non-metal world, actually endanger scenic reflexivity through maintaining the illusion that life can be lived through metal alone. Here again, metal scholars, through placing metal in the context of wider social change, can make a real contribution.

2 Nurturing memory

The second aim for metal studies should be to nurture metal's memory. That isn't to say that metal isn't conscious of its history. Deep knowledge of metal's manifold artists and sub-genres is highly prized in metal and so is loyalty to metal artists over time. But metal's memory has its blind spots.

¹ *HEADBANGING AGAINST REPRESSIVE REGIMES – Censorship of heavy metal in the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia and China* <http://freemuse.net/archives/1540>

Canons are always based on exclusion and on the smoothing out of historical complexity. Metal will be in a better place to face the challenges of the future if it is more open about the complexities of its past. Part of what metal studies can do is to raise awkward examples and remember that which some would prefer to forget. One example is the exclusion of black artists and black music from metal's collective memory, in which a figure as pivotal as Jimi Hendrix can be totally marginalised. Another example is the close interplay between extreme metal and indie rock in the late 1980s – something I was closely involved in but which is often forgotten by both metallers and indie fans. The place of women, gays lesbians and minorities in metal history needs to be boosted. Laina Dawes's fine work on black women in metal today should be followed up with studies of black women in metal in the 1970s and 1980s.

3 Nurturing critique

My third aim for metal studies is to nurture critique. This is one area where metal studies has already made a distinctive contribution. Myself and other metal studies scholars have tried to highlight areas where metal can be prejudiced, discriminatory and even abusive. Crucially, we have done this with a spirit of generosity that does not condemn metal in its entirety, but has tried to find ways to make the metal scene more responsive to the needs of minorities within the scene. With the proliferation of metal discourse online, it is no longer so unusual to find unabashed critiques of sexism and racism from metal scene members themselves. Metal studies can be a place where hard questions and difficult issues can be raised with a measure of restraint and nuance. It can be a place from which supportive critiques are disseminated to change metal itself.

4 Looking to the future

My fourth aim for metal studies is the one I will discuss most extensively; that is, metal studies should look to the future. Reflexivity is about 'knowing how to go on', to face the future through an unflinching look at the past and the present. What will metal be like in 10, 20, 50 and 100 years time? Will there be such a thing as metal in 500 years time? And does it matter anyway?

It is this future-orientation that is most absent in the metal scene and largely absent in metal studies too. In fact, it is part of a more general absence in both lay and scholarly reflection on popular music. Serious reflection on popular music tends to be confined to understanding the past and present. Attempts to speculate on the future are largely confined to understanding the short to medium term impact of changes in music technology and the music business. There has been little attempt to predict the longer-term aesthetic, social and cultural shifts that will mark popular music in the future.

In some ways, this ignoring of the future is ironic, given that post-war popular music has been at the forefront of dramatic social changes. Indeed, as Jacques Atalli has influentially argued, music provides both a harbinger and a stimulus to the shifts in socio-cultural tectonic plates. It is hard to imagine the manifold changes that occurred in the west in the 1960s apart from the dramatic changes in the place and the nature of popular music that both catalysed them and signalled their coming. Some popular musicians have been actively interested in the future as a theme in their work; the pre-eminent example of this is Kraftwerk and in metal we can think of the obsession with nuclear war and apocalyptic destruction that marked thrash metal in the late 1980s.

Yet post-war popular musicians have rarely made a conscious, reflexive attempt to grapple with the long-term future of music itself. Even if artists have often sought to push forward the possibilities of music through exploiting new technology, it is much rarer to find artists speculating on what the place of music will be in 50, 100, 1000 years' time. 'Futuristic' music of the Kraftwerk-kind is tinged with a sense of self-parody, a consciousness that nothing dates faster than visions of the future. Futuristic music rarely tries to imagine new possibilities for how music might be embedded institutionally within society.

Critics and scholars play an essential role in tracking change in popular music, but they rarely 'lead' innovation. Developments in popular music are led by musicians and those who run scenic institutions. Critics and scholars, in highlighting some artists and not others, may affect the trajectory that scenes take, but no one either predicted in advanced the ground-breaking innovations that the Beatles, Slayer or Kraftwerk made. This blindness to the future has actually served post-war popular music very well. The shock and surprise that new developments like punk or black metal have caused is part of their power and pleasure.

While future-blindness may have served popular music very well in the past, there is increasing reason to think that it is not serving it well in the present. We have, I would argue, entered a period of fundamental crisis in the condition of popular music – and metal is no exception.

The crisis

What is this crisis? It is a crisis that often doesn't feel like a crisis – quite the reverse in fact. It is a crisis in which we are often unaware that there is a crisis – and that is the crisis.

The crisis is one of *abundance*. New technology has created a situation in which metal, like other music is instantly accessible. A very high percentage of the recorded work of the thousands of past and present metal bands is available online, either for sale or for free and often both. Even the most obscure historical artefacts are now available. Metal discourse is similarly abundant. There is

plentiful information available about even the most obscure band on sites like Metal Archives. Every kind of metallor can now find each other and every shade of metal opinion is catered for. Perhaps not everything is easily available, but most of it is. Only live performance is scarce in some areas and even here live videos can be found easily on youtube.

The effects of this abundance are starting to be felt. I hope that my own experience can be instructive here.

Almost everything that I ever wanted in metal now exists. As a Jew, when I was younger I yearned for Jewish metal bands, for ways of doing metal Jewishly. Now, thanks to artists like Jamie Saft, Orphaned Land and Gevolt, there is Jewish metal (albeit not a great deal of it).

In the past, I yearned for the avant-garde possibilities of extreme metal to be realised, for metal to be recognised so it could take its place within the canons of challenging music. Now, with post-metal artists like Sunn0))) pushing metal in ever more radical directions and with metal regularly featuring in impeccably high art publications as *The Wire*, metal is part of the avant-garde conversation. I also yearned for there to be a broader range of serious, politically progressive forms of metal writing. Now, thanks to blogs like Invisible Oranges and magazines such as Decibel, metal writing has never been more challenging.

So these are great days for Jewish, left-wing lovers of radical metal art. But the effects of abundance go even further.

When I started out as a metal fan in the 1980s and, later on, when I embarked on a PhD on extreme metal in 1996, I had one abiding frustration: I could never get my hands on enough metal recordings to satisfy my thirst for metal knowledge. I could never keep up with the progress of the many metal genres. Of course, I bought stuff, but I couldn't afford everything I wanted and in any case metal was never my only interest. Of course, I taped stuff from friends but I never had enough knowledgeable metal friends to cover all the bases. I could have tape traded but it was a practice that involved such a degree of commitment that I found it intimidating. Later on, as a writer for *Terrorizer* I got a fair amount of free CDs, but I didn't get sent 'everything' and in any case this wouldn't help me catch up on metal's history.

The early years of my PhD were tense ones as I wondered how on earth I could accumulate the knowledge that I felt I needed. I remember an intense feeling of delight when, having befriended a fanatical tape trader in 1999, I received in the mail a tape with the early Mayhem demos and rehearsal tapes from the 1980s.

Today, should I care to investigate Mayhem's early career, I can simply find the early demos on youtube in less than 5 seconds. Whenever I hear of a band or recording that looks interesting, I can pretty much always hear it almost instantaneously, via Spotify, Bandcamp, Youtube – or even by paying for it!

The advantages of this abundance are obvious. I, or anyone else, can develop a deep knowledge of the depth and breadth of metal without any real difficulty. You don't have to be a rabid tape trader with a massive address book to hear metal's most mouth-watering rarities. You don't have to be willing to spend a huge amount of time and/or money to keep up with metal's progress.

But while this abundance has fulfilled my metal dreams it has been accompanied by a strange sense of deflation. Perhaps dreams fulfilled will always be disappointing in some way. There are good reasons though why abundance does not necessarily satisfy.

The ease of finding what was once obscure takes away the pleasures of anticipation, of discovery, of searching things out. The fact that metal music is no longer found exclusively in physical media, removes much of that precious 'aura' that accompanies physical art objects. Demo tapes were exciting and mysterious objects because one had to 'work' to track them down. I remember in the 1990s hearing rumours that there was a Pakistani metal band who had released a demo, something that seemed impossibly obscure and exotic at the time. I tried and failed to track down their tape. But I did track down others from faraway metal lands like the Phillipines and Peru and there was always a frisson when tape's from distant lands finally arrived in the mail

Today, there isn't much frisson to googling something and finding it. Stripped of the aura, rare and obscure metal tapes and artefacts become much more mundane.

The same sense of disappointment has also clouded my experience of the proliferation of metal studies and the development of a more critical, politically-engaged metal discourse. In the 1990s and even for much of the 2000s, discovering a new paper or book on metal, or meeting another scholar of metal was enormously exciting. While I love the emerging metal studies community and am learning a huge amount from the growing amount of metal research, the pleasures of discovery and of being one of only a few have been replaced by the slow hard work of reading and integrating the substantial new scholarship that has emerged. Similarly, as a critic, the fact that metal is developing a more critical voice – thanks in part to people like Laina Dawes – has removed some of the invigorating discontent and discomfort that I once felt at being part of the metal scene. The only critical task left is to keep going with encourage that which already exists to blossom further – an important task, but not one that puts fire in the belly.

These disappointments are not enough to make me abandon metal. Indeed, some new pleasures have partially replaced the old, such as the pleasures of losing oneself in the sea of instantly available metal. Yet metal's contemporary abundance has made me realise how important *scarcity* used to be in the pleasure I found in metal.

I don't think that this is just my own experience. Scarcity has played a crucial role in metal, particularly in underground extreme metal. Until recently and even today to a certain extent, there were considerable logistical barriers to recording, releasing, circulating and publicising metal recordings. It took considerable time, money and commitment to make a demo, to trade it and publicise it. Copying tapes, printing flyers and hand-answering fanzine interviews required a certain degree of determination. Information was also difficult to come by. It took time to accumulate knowledge about how the scene worked and who the key people and institutions were in it.

These logistical challenges acted as a kind of filter that ensured that not everyone who might have aspired to release their own music could actually do so. That doesn't mean that only quality acts got through the filtering process. To the extent that artists with less capital and other resources could make it through, the process was unfair. Who knows how many exciting and innovative artists who didn't want to spend their lives addressing envelopes were lost to metal? But at the very least, the filtering process did ensure that the number of releases was much more manageable than today. It also slowed the scene down, ensuring that innovation and new sounds took time to spread. The work it used to take to develop scenic knowledge ensured that there were identifiable scenic 'careers' and trajectories, with the rewards of subcultural capital at the end of them. The pleasures of the underground awaited those who were willing to take the time and effort to discover them.

Metal scenes also used to have processes of obsolescence built in, in which some sounds and practices went out of fashion while others were taken up. These processes were never as pronounced in metal as in some other music scenes, such as dance music, that have always eaten their own young at a frenzied pace, but they were still important in refreshing and renewing metal. The early 1990s were a significant period in this regard. In mainstream metal there was something of a 'mass extinction event' in which best-selling bands of the 1980s were hit hard by grunge. At the same time in the underground, death metal peaked as a force for innovation and black metal started to take centre stage. Of course, 1980s-style heavy metal never completely died out and nor did death metal, but their eclipse in the early 1990s at least did allow for them to be reborn and reworked in new ways later in the 1990s and in the 2000s.

In the past then, metal scenes had shape and movement, they changed and evolved at a pace that was manageable and discernible. All this was predicated on scarcity, on shifting patterns of availability of certain kinds of sounds.

In today's age of abundance, nothing ever becomes truly obsolete. Artists and styles that would once have faded away can survive and thrive in niches. The lack of barriers to entry into the scene have resulted in an endless flood of new releases that even the most assiduous critics find difficult to organise. Where end of year reviews in metal publications used to discern some kind of pattern to the previous twelve months, today's end of year reviews highlight great releases, but rarely find a broader narrative to put them into. None of this means that there isn't still great music being made or that metal is artistically dead – metal seems as musically vital as ever. The problem is that without a discernible shape or movement to metal, the impact of new releases becomes dissipated. Many of the canonical works of metal - let's take Slayer's *Reign in Blood* as an example - were canonised because they appeared at the crest of a stylistic wave, because they both exemplified and catalysed something that was emergent.

Even if, as I argue, metal is in crisis, metal's scenic infrastructure is outwardly not too dissimilar to that of twenty years ago. There are still countless metal labels and some of the biggest, such as Metal Blade, now have a very long history. Even if demo tapes are mostly extinct, replaced by Myspace, Bandcamp and the like, getting a record deal is still the dream of most metal bands starting out. The primary career cycle of any halfway successful band remains write-record-tour. Metal publications, whether online or in print, are still focused on reviews and interviews with bands who have just released something.

This doesn't mean that nothing has really changed though. Rather, the persistence of metal institutions is a striking demonstration how attached metal scenes are to the traditional practices of metal. Metal bands have not shown great enthusiasm for developing alternative models of distribution. Even acts that in part owe their success to social media – such as Job For A Cowboy who achieved prominence via Myspace – have gone on to sign to record labels and tour and record in the conventional manner. I was struck in the late 1990s and early 2000s that underground scene members did not switch to e-mail communication as soon as it became widely available. Hand written letters, flyers, demo tapes and the like remained standard well into the 2000s. Even today, there is a determined effort to revive previously old formats. Limited edition vinyl and cassette releases are more and more common, thanks to labels and distros such as Nuclear War Now and Teutonic Satan. In the last year, Terrorizer magazine bundled a tape by Electric Wizard with one of

their issues and Decibel magazine has released a number of flexi-discs – and note that the paper copies of these magazines are still surviving.

This attachment to old formats and practices is not simply due to nostalgia and it doesn't represent a reactionary failure to adapt to a new reality. Rather, it is the product of an implicit sense that if metal scenes simply transferred production and circulation to virtual spaces, something important would be lost. Without the paraphernalia of scenic infrastructure and meat-space production the scene would abandon itself to abundance, losing any means of slowing down and organising the flood of metal. Much of the metal scene today is therefore reacting to a crisis of abundance with a desperate rear-guard action to preserve scarcity and structure.

This rear-guard action cannot keep the crisis at bay. The new abundance means that metal no longer has much of a 'shape', a dynamic, a purpose. Everything coexists simultaneously. Metal is everywhere – and it is nowhere.

This development is not confined to metal. We are witnessing, I believe, a significant transformation in the nature of music scenes. The concept of scene that I have used in my work, and that appears in the work of other writers on popular music and cultural studies, emphasises their fuzzy boundaries, their fluidity, diversity and multiplicity. I have argued that scenes do not necessarily have to be identifiable to their members of scene, that individuals could be members of a multiplicity of scenes and that membership in scenes is simply a matter of producing effects within them. This is in contrast with earlier concepts of subculture that implied homogeneity and firm boundaries

The concept of scene remains fit for purpose in researching metal in an age of abundance. Indeed, the flexibility of the concept may be especially appropriate for a period in which the boundaries of metal are ever more porous and its trajectory ever more complex. However, it is worth making a distinction between those scenes that have firmer boundaries, that are difficult to access and within which members identify with the scene, and looser, fuzzier entities. Popular music scenes today are much more likely to fall into the latter rather than the former camp. For example, compared to the 1980s when it was a distinct entity with a strong identity, indie music in the UK has a much sketchier existence. Metal is certainly one of the more bounded and identifiable of contemporary music scenes, but it lacks the firm identity of the 1980s.

Scenes act as incubators for strongly identifiable styles and genres, for distinctive ways of being. The slow pace at which scenes used to be 'discovered' by the outside world meant that they had time to develop with a relative degree of isolation. It is no accident that some of the most distinctive metal style's were initially developed in local scenes – Bay Area thrash, Tampa death metal, Norwegian

black metal to name the most obvious examples. Today, the boundaries between scenes are so porous that distinctive scenes within metal are much less coherent than previously. It is much harder to 'map' metal and to understand its trajectory.

This simultaneity and shapelessness seems to be a defining feature of today's music scenes. In an interview with *Wired* magazine in 2012, the author William Gibson reflected on what the fate of punk would be today²:

You'd pull it up on YouTube, as soon as it was played. It would go up on YouTube among the kazillion other things that went up on YouTube that day. And then how would you find it? How would it become a *thing*, as we used to say? I think that's one of the ways in which things are really different today. How can you distinguish your communal new thing — how can that happen? Bohemia used to be self-imposed backwaters of a sort. They were other countries within the landscape of Western industrial civilization. They were countries that most people would never see — mysterious places. You'd pay a price, potentially, for going there. That's always cool and exciting. Now, where are they? Where can you do that? How are people transacting that today?

It may be that we are seeing a significant shift in the role that music scenes play within society. In the post-war period, popular music was at the forefront of social change, in pioneering new identities, new ideas and new ways of being. In metal we can see this in at least two areas. First, metal scenes provided a space within which new forms of transgression could be developed and played with. Second, metal scenes (and allied scenes such as punk) developing a sophisticated, globalised infrastructure that allowed participants to develop new ways of organising and cooperating.

Today it is much less clear that popular music and music scenes are in the vanguard of social change in this way. Contemporary society is so diverse and so liberalised, at least in the 'west', that the challenge that popular music represents has become routinized. That isn't to say that Anal Cunt for example, are totally acceptable, even within the metal scene, but that doesn't mean that metal is the only place where one can find such transgression. Music scenes are also no longer the principle site of innovation in social organisation. The huge growth in technologically-aided social innovation and entrepreneurship is happening without the need of music scenes as a vehicle. Of course in non-western societies, particularly those with authoritarian regimes, popular music retains its power to shock and to organise. Even here though, it is no longer the only place where people can find

² <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2012/09/william-gibson-part-3-punk-memes/all/>

liberation and transgression. For example, music has played a modest role in the 'Arab Spring', but it was possible to mobilise dissent without it – there was no particular need to look to music scenes for lessons on how to challenge oppression.

What we seem to be losing is a sense that popular music and music scenes prefigure the future and drive us forward to meet it. Instead we seem to have a kind of continuous musical present, in which the boundaries between past and present have become increasingly blurred. This is the theme of Simon Reynolds' magisterial 2011 work *Retromania* which dissected the ways contemporary pop culture, and popular music above all, has become increasingly obsessed with reworking and resurrecting the past. It is not just that nostalgia has become prevalent – although we can certainly see that in the case of metal for example with the continuous stream of re-releases and reunions from even the most insignificant 1980s bands – but the potential of music to surprise, shock and motivate us has been eroded. As Reynolds reflects:

During the writing of this book I came up with my own glass-half-empty concept to describe the conditions that other gesture at with buzzed-up words like 'atemporality' and 'postproduction'. The term is *hyper-stasis*. It popped into my head after too many encounters with hotly touted records by new artists that induced a frustrating mix of emotions: feeling impressed by the restless intelligence at work in the music, but missing that sensation of absolute newness, the sorely craved 'never heard anything like *this* before.' Hyper-stasis can apply to particular works by individual artists, but also to entire fields of music. It describes situations in which potent musical intellects engage in a restless shuttling back and forth within a grid-space of influences and sources, striving frenetically to locate exist routes to the beyond³. (427)

Cynics might say that the feeling that Reynolds describes is limited to middle aged critics with an encyclopedic knowledge of music. It is still likely that when a 10 year old in 2013 hears Slayer for the first time, it will be as shocking and exhilarating than for a 10 year old in 1986. There are still forms of metal that are being developed primarily by and for young people, such as various versions of emo, scream and djent. But their context is crucially different though. Teenage metal in 2013 may offer a new kind of assemblage of metal and non-metal elements, but it does not provide substantially new sounds. Moreover the accumulated weight of over 40 years of metal history looms over new entrants to metal.

³ Reynolds, Simon. *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*. London: Faber and Faber, 2011: 427

It is still possible to innovate in metal, but innovation has been atomised among hundreds of different artists that do not cohere into an overwhelming new direction. We are unlikely to see in metal again the kind of ‘mass extinction event’ that occurred in the early 1990s, that rendered entire genres all but obsolete.

Why this matters

The question is why any of this matters. Even if metal no longer has the kind of coherence that it once might have done, there is little sign that metal is dying. Or is there? I have argued that there is a crisis for a reason. There is a crisis because metal scenes and their members have not come to terms with the looming challenges they face. There are two principle dangers.

The first is that metal gradually dissipates. Metal moves gradually in a thousand different directions by a thousand different artists. Any sense of metal as an overarching category and identity is lost along with any sense of a metal scene as a coherent space. Metal’s constituent musical characteristics are spread widely throughout music, decoupled from a distinctive sense of metalness, to become one set of musical possibilities among many others. This is the usual fate of musical genres. They don’t usually die; their constituent elements simply become incorporated into one or a number of successor genres. The baroque music of Bach became obsolete by the end of the eighteenth century, but you can trace its influence into multiple streams of music, heavy metal included.

The second danger is that metal becomes a static, ossified music scene, dedicated only to the repetition of earlier sounds. Metal becomes like ‘classical’ music, a fixed unchanging canon with new works being produced all the time, but never entering the canon itself. Metal never quite dies, it just repeats itself. Eventually metal will not survive as anything other than a fringe collection of archivists and obsessives. This is the definition of genre death given in a blog post by Doug Moore on the Invisible Oranges blog in October 2012⁴: ‘A genre dies when so few musicians write music that they identify as a part of said genre that its canon ceases to meaningfully expand.’

There is a real dilemma here: if metal continues to innovate but without an overarching scenic structure, then it risks dissolution, but if it focuses on protecting its boundaries and distinctiveness then it risks ossification. Metal’s future depends on picking out a way forward that avoids either of these dangers. The crisis is that so far there are few signs that the scale of this challenge has been recognised.

⁴ <http://www.invisibleoranges.com/2012/10/when-will-metal-die/>

But does it matter anyway if metal has a long-term future? Does metal need to survive in perpetuity? Maybe it is healthy for scenes and genres to disappear after a while. While many of today's metalheads would certainly be distressed if metal didn't survive into their old age, do they really care if there is metal around 500 years after they die?

There are certainly elements of metal we could point to that should have a long-term future. Distorted guitar sounds, tritones, transgression and fellowship are all aspects of metal we might want to preserve long-term. If metal's future is to repeat itself as it slides into irrelevance, then we might fear for the future of these things. If metal's future is to dissolve, we could see metal preserved in its constituent parts. The question then becomes if it is desirable for metal survive as an identifiable, overarching framework.

My answer to this is that it doesn't necessary matter what happens to metal so long as those who are emotionally committed to it are provided for. If no one wants metal to continue, then there is no need for it to continue. Metal should survive as long as people want it to survive. And metal's survival can become even more desirable if the processes that will ensure its survival grapple with the significant challenges of our age. In order to survive long into the future, metal needs to face to this new age of abundance. No music scene has yet done this. Metal's future then, can only be through forging a new path towards the as yet unimagined post-abundance music scene

So what is to be done?

Rethinking metal

Metal studies has emerged against this backdrop of a looming, largely unrecognised crisis. As I stated earlier in this talk, metal studies can be the space in which questions about metal's future are addressed. This involves metal scholars acting as communally engaged critics; critics that make strategic interventions in metal discourse designed to open up possibilities for new kinds of aesthetics, practices and sounds.

Part of this project involves redefining what music criticism means in an age of abundance. In a piece published 1969, the US rock critic Robert Christgau reflected on the peculiar status of the critic⁵:

⁵ <http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/cg1.php> I discovered this quotation through an excellent article by Charlie Bertsch reflecting on criticism in an age of abundance: http://souciant.com/2012/12/nowyourculture/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=nowyourculture

Unless you are very rich and very freaky, your relationship to rock is nothing like mine. By profession, I am surfeited with records and live music. Virtually every rock LP produced in this country is mailed to me automatically, and I'm asked to go to more concerts than I can bear. I own about 90 percent of the worthwhile rock albums released since the start of the Beatles era, and occasionally I play every one of them.

Rock critics, and metal critics too, used to owe their status to their access to and mastery of a huge number of music releases. 'Regular' individuals who were not sent review copies, found it very difficult to attain the knowledge that critics had. This access meant that critics were able to define genres and contextualise artists within them. While in metal, tape trading meant that non-critics were able, with difficulty, to attain this vast knowledge, most metal fans were still dependant on metal publications to make sense of the genre.

Today, the unique status of critics has been eroded. Not only have outlets for criticism proliferated, but it is easier than ever for anyone to develop what was once a hard to achieve mastery of metal or any other genre. In any case, the flood of releases and the breadth of metal means that even the most assiduous critic cannot keep track of everything anymore.

Metal criticism, like other forms of rock criticism, is not redundant – there is still a need to critics to pick out pathways through the metal forest. But in an age of abundance criticism is also a contributor to the crisis in that discourse on metal, like metal music itself, is so accessible and available that it itself is a part of the diffuseness that threatens metal's identity and coherence.

Metal criticism and metal studies can help metal to confront the challenges it faces by doing something that is not ordinarily done in metal scenes. That is, not just commenting on music as it is released, but imagining music that *could* be made; not just trying to understand the metal scene as it is and as it was, but actively imagining what it could be. Why should metal musicians be the only ones working on what metal be in the future? Why can't critics and scholars set musicians challenges to make music that doesn't currently exist?

In the remaining time I have, I want to sketch out three strategies through which we might find ways through the crisis of abundance.

1. Artificial scarcity

One way of tackling the crisis of abundance is to reintroduce scarcity. As I've argued, this is the reason behind the stubborn persistence of vinyl and cassettes in metal. This is too limited though as, not only are many such releases simultaneously released digitally, they are still part of the logic that

still maintains the need and desire to release more and more metal in perpetuity. The kind of scarcity that I am imagining here is one that relies on a certain kind of disciplining of listening to and making music. This is an 'artificial' form of scarcity as it does not and cannot pretend that we can return to a time when metal releases were genuinely scarce. Instead it puts the onus on the listener and/or musician to submit themselves to a discipline that produces its own scarcity.

A key figure in thinking along these lines is the musician, writer and artist Bill Drummond. Most famous for the huge hits he achieved as part of the trance act the KLF in the early 1990s, much of Drummond's subsequent work has involved attempts to respond to his belief that 'recorded music has run its course.' In an interview in 2008 he explained⁶:

Music as a whole cannot run its course and art cannot run its course either. As a medium recorded music has run its course in the same way that certain forms of art that were very popular in the 20th Century have run their course. You will always get people coming along saying that 'No, no, painting still has more life left in it.' But really they mean that there is still money left in it because people still want paintings to hang on their walls. So some people will still do some interesting things with paintings but that is not really where the ideas are. That is not where the emotions are happening. So painting has run its course but art hasn't. Really the possibilities are endless when you have a canvass but after a while you just start seeing a painting. With a recording the possibilities are endless but after a while you start hearing just another album. And there is so much more to art than painting by numbers.

Drummond has developed a number of responses designed to respond to his sense of the end of recorded music as a medium. As a listener, he has resolved every year to only listen to artists whose name starts with a particular letter – starting with 'A'. In 2005, he instituted 'No Music Day' for 21 November every year⁷:

ON NO MUSIC DAY:

NO HYMNS WILL BE SUNG.

NO RECORDS WILL BE PLAYED ON THE RADIO.

iPODS WILL BE LEFT AT HOME.

ROCK BANDS WILL NOT ROCK.

⁶ <http://thequietus.com/articles/00355-bill-drummond-interviewed-recorded-music-has-run-it-s-course>

⁷ <http://www.penkilnburn.com/catalogue/#5>

CONDUCTORS WILL NOT TAKE THE PODIUM.
DECKS WILL NOT SPIN.
THE NEEDLE WILL NOT DROP.
THE PIANO LID WILL NOT BE LIFTED.
FILMS WILL HAVE NO SOUNDTRACK.
JINGLES WILL NOT JANGLE.
MILK MEN WILL NOT WHISTLE.
CHOIRBOYS WILL SHUT THEIR MOUTHS.
RECORDING STUDIOS WILL NOT ROLL.
MCS WILL NOT PASS THE MIC.
BRASS BAND PRACTICE WILL BE POSTPONED.
THE STRINGS WILL NOT SERENADE.
PLECTRUMS WILL NOT PLUCK.
RECORD SHOPS WILL BE CLOSED ALL DAY.
AND YOU WILL NOT TAKE PART IN ANY SORT OF MUSIC MAKING OR LISTENING
WHATSOEVER.

NO MUSIC DAY EXISTS FOR VARIOUS REASONS, YOU MAY HAVE ONE.

The aim here is to reinsert value in music by curtailing its ubiquity for at least one day.

In 2005, Drummond developed 'The 17', a choir that has formed the core of much of his subsequent work:

The17 IS A CHOIR.

THEIR MUSIC HAS NO HISTORY, FOLLOWS NO TRADITIONS,
RECOGNISES NO CONTEMPORARIES.

The17 HAS MANY VOICES.

The17 EXISTS WHERE ANY GROUP OF 17 PEOPLE GATHER TO MAKE
MUSIC USING THEIR MOUTHS, THROATS, LUNGS, EARS AND MIND.

THEY USE NO LIBRETTO, LYRICS OR WORDS;
NEED NO KNOWLEDGE OF TIME SIGNATURES, RHYTHM OR BEATS;
NOR KNOWLEDGE OF MELODY, COUNTERPOINT OR HARMONY.

THEIR MUSIC WILL:

NEVER BE RECORDED FOR POSTERITY,
NEVER BE BROADCAST ON RADIO, TV OR INTERNET,
NEVER BE COMMODIFIED FOR THE MARKET PLACE,
NEVER BE PERFORMED FOR AN AUDIENCE.
IT EXISTS ONLY FOR THE EXPERIENCE OF THOSE PERFORMING IT.

The17 STRUGGLE WITH THE DARK
AND RESPOND TO THE LIGHT.

YOU CAN BE A MEMBER OF The17.

What is significant here is the revalorisation of music by deliberately freeing it of any of the apparatus with which it is currently associated. For Drummond, music becomes precious again when it becomes transient, unrecoverable and unknowable from outside the moment it was produced.

There are other ways in which this kind of artificial scarcity can reinject value into music. Some artists have experimented with producing works that exist only in one location or one copy. The performance John Cage's organ work *As Slow As Possible* began playing in a church in France 2001 and is scheduled to finish in the year 2640. Jean Michelle Jarre's 1983 *Music For Supermarkets* LP was created to accompany an art exhibition, after which the master tapes were destroyed and a single remaining LP was auctioned off.

Such projects may seem gimmicky, but disciplines of scarcity can be adopted by anyone. In 2008, one blogger suggested a 'Slow Listening Movement' in which we deliberately slow down and concentrate harder on few pieces of music⁸. He explained his method as follows:

...from January to November 2009, I'm embarking on a kind of purification rite. In that time, I'm only allowing myself to download one MP3 at a time; the next MP3 can only be downloaded once I listen to the first one. With CDs, if I buy one, I have to listen to it all before I buy another, and before I am allowed to rip any of it to iTunes.

Setting challenges around the principle of artificial scarcity may help make metal precious again. These challenges can be set by scholars and critics as well as artists and for both artists and fans.

Here is one challenge I have set myself and you might like to take up: I am fascinated with mediocrity in metal, about the ways in which some recordings are classed as special, canonical and others are passed over. One of the first black metal albums I ever reviewed was the 1997 album *Lost*

⁸ <http://slowlisteningmovement.blogspot.co.uk/>

in Shadows Grey by the Norwegian black metal band Morgul. Morgul and this particular album are known by few, celebrated by few. They lack either widespread fame and underground 'kult' cache. I have committed myself to listen to this album in full once a month for the indefinite future. I don't know what I will find, but this journey into mediocrity is likely to be an interesting one.

Another possible source of scarcity might be found through a rediscovery and revalorisation of live performance. One of reasons why extreme metal developed its underground infrastructure in the first place was that the low numbers and low density of fans across the world made touring economically unviable. Even today, it is a mark of undergroundness to eschew live performance. However this approach is now anachronistic to the extent that it is now live performance that represents scarcity and recorded music that represents abundance. The uniqueness and site-specific nature of the live offers a rich vein of scarcity that is there to be explored. Perhaps the ultimate underground gesture today would be to reject recorded music and to perform live exclusively.

2. Encouraging broader innovation within metal

The second strategy I want to outline is encouraging broader innovation within metal. At first sight, this would seem to be simply what is happening in metal anyway. Crisis-period metal is metal at its most innovative; artists are taking the genre in many different directions, some of which, as in post-metal, are challenging the very nature of what metal is and could be. But what I am suggesting is something more thoroughgoing and systematic. Innovation on its own is not enough to keep metal alive. As I argued, one possible future scenario is that metal, in innovating forward, may dissipate itself so that the core musical constituents of metal simply become part of the wider musical toolbox. Innovation has to stay within a metal framework if it is to invigorate metal itself.

One of the astonishing aspects of metal is how over its 40+ years of history it has managed to become highly diverse despite having at its core a highly circumscribed set of core elements. Whatever metal is, it always makes use of distorted guitars that make use of a quite limited selection of riffs – this is metal's inner 'core'. To be sure, lite metal at one end and grindcore at the other end differ substantially in song structure, instrumentation, vocals, tempo, lyrics and other aspects, yet the repetition of distorted guitar riffs mobilising augmented fourths and a limited set of other intervals, is common to both. Innovation in metal has included and excluded a huge range of musical elements outside this riff-based core. It has also explored many different ways of structuring, voicing and mobilising these riffs. What is much more rare is questioning and transforming the core itself. The tacit assumption seems to be that metal cannot be metal without this core.

But is this necessarily true? The critic Adam Harper, in his book *Infinite Music*, has shown that if we systematically account for the range of potential musical variables, we can open up near-limitless musical possibilities⁹. In Harper's terms, only a very limited area of 'musical space' has actually been 'colonised'. It would therefore be a fascinating exercise if metal artists were to start exploring what metal might look like if it admitted a wider or a different set of musical variables into its core.

How might this be done? The challenge is for metal artists to become aware that there are more possibilities available than they might assume. As I have argued elsewhere, metal scenes value knowledge of metal above all. Perhaps we need a creative exercise in unlearning, in which subcultural capital is decoupled from knowledge of metal's past in favour of according a new status to exploring the future.

What would metal sound like if metal had never existed? What if metal's genre rules were not developed in the late 1960s but in the early 2010s? The musician, producer and theorist Brian Eno has long been fascinated with these kinds of imaginative exercises. In an interview in 2010 he outlined his approach, looking back on how he developed ambient music in the 1970s:

A way to make new music is to imagine looking back at the past from a future and imagine music that could have existed but didn't. Like East African free jazz, which as far as I know does not exist. To some extent, this was how ambient music emerged. My interest in making music has been to create something that does not exist that I would like to listen to, not because I wanted a job as a musician. I wanted to hear music that had not yet happened, by putting together things that suggested a new thing which did not yet exist. It's like having a ready-made formula if you are able to read it. One of the innovations of ambient music was leaving out the idea that there should be melody or words or a beat... so in a way that was music designed by leaving things out – that can be a form of innovation, knowing what to leave out. All the signs were in the air all around with ambient music in the mid 1970s, and other people were doing a similar thing. I just gave it a name. Which is exactly what it needed. A name. A name. Giving something a name can be just the same as inventing it. By naming something you create a difference. You say that this is now real. Names are very important.¹⁰

⁹ Harper, Adam. *Infinite Music: Imagining The Next Millennium of Music-Making*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2011.

¹⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/jan/17/brian-eno-interview-paul-morley>

In Eno's work as a producer he has constantly challenged artists to rethink the basic assumptions behind what they do through the use of gnomic challenges and games in the studio. Play has been one way that contemporary art forms have probed the boundaries of possibility through freeing art from some constraints and developing new ones. The French literary movement Oulipo, has explored different forms of constraint in writing, for example through George Perec's attempt to write his novel *Disparition* without using the letter 'e'. In music, John Cage explored using chance and mathematical formulae to govern new ways of making music.

Such challenges, games and rules do not need to be set in play by musicians. They can be thought up by anyone – and it is here that critics and scholars can perform a central role. As a starting point I offer the following challenge to any musician who might be interested: try making music that was not based on repeated sequences of distorted guitar riffs but still sounded 'metal'.

I'm aware that this challenge is likely to not be taken up. Musicians are not used to taking instructions from writers! The question is how to nurture receptiveness among musicians and fans for such challenges and games. This is part of a broader question: how to nurture receptiveness among musicians and fans for new kinds of experimentation in metal that may confront the very constraints that define metal.

Perhaps a modest starting point would be to highlight those existing innovations that point in an interesting direction, with the goal of seeing them not just as marginal experiments, but as intrinsic parts of metal itself. In other words, putting work that might expand the metal canon into the heart of the canon itself. Here are three brief examples:

- Chord: an American drone collective that produces works that are based on only one chord, voiced and played in many different ways.
- Author and Punisher: An American solo artist that makes industrial metal using entirely home-made instruments and controllers:
- Etnamorte: A London-based group who draw on an extensive set of 'world music' influences that echo, but do not incorporate, metal riffs and styles

3. Imagining 'metal beyond metal'

My final strategy, and the most radical one, is that we should start imagining what I will call 'metal beyond metal'. That is, metal that completely redefines music and/or abandons it altogether. What would it look like if metal culture abandoned music? How necessary in fact is music to metal?

Yes this might seem absurd at first, but there are precedents of a sort. Both goth and punk are only partially dependant on music. Music is one element of goth culture, alongside fashion, literature, visual arts and film. Although music is somewhat more central to punk than goth, even here there is a strong tradition of political and social activism that is not dependant on music for its survival.

Without music, what would metal be? It is certainly harder to imagine this than with goth and punk. Yes there are distinctively metal ways of dressing, but these have become much less central to metal culture in recent decades. Yes metal often draws on particular visual aesthetics and on certain kinds of film, but these seem too inessential to metal to be able to reconstruct metal culture around them. It would certainly be interesting though for metal to move into new artistic territories. Although metal cinema as Rob Zombie has developed it does not seem particularly promising, there might be scope for more interesting work. Metal literature, perhaps built on the more adventurous forms of metal criticism, might also be worth exploring.

It might be that metal beyond metal, if it can exist at all, might be pursued through more ineffable means than simply transferring metal aesthetics elsewhere. One place to start would be through exploring what metal scene members mean when they call something 'metal'. Calling something metal doesn't just mean classifying it as a particular kind of organised sound, it connotes a certain kind of value, at least when metal fans use the term.

What is this value? It cannot be precisely defined. It refers to something that is hard, intractable and resilient. It refers to something that is defiant, inexhaustible and unashamed. To be metal is to be unafraid to explore darkness and transgression, but to do it in such a way that one retains one's boundaries sense of selfhood. To be metal is to possess a certain ebullient wit and playfulness that those outside metal often mistake for crassness. To be metal is to value fellowship, to commit to supporting and celebrating the bonds between like-minded people. And there are downsides to metal too: to be metal all too often is to be deliberately blind to the workings of power and prejudice.

I don't know if metalness is unique to metal culture, but it's certainly highly distinctive within it. Metalness is embodied in metal music and it will continue to be so into the near future at least. But we should at least explore the possibility that there are other ways of keeping it alive and keeping it distinctive.

This might be another thing that metal studies can do. Metal studies could be a way to do scholarship to the highest possible standards and to do it in a distinctively metal way. If we manage

this we can not only keep the study of metal alive, we can not only keep metal itself alive – we can also show scholars in other fields the value of being metal beyond metal.