

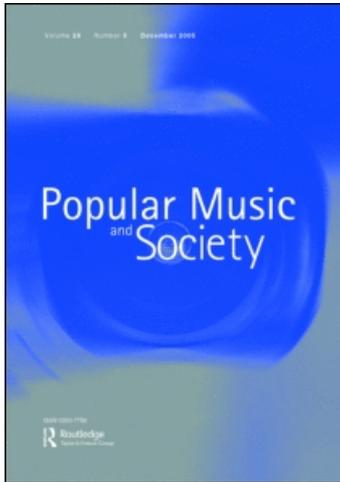
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Publisher Routledge

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## Popular Music and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713689465>

### Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge

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Online Publication Date: 01 May 2009

**To cite this Article** Floeckher, Richard J.(2009)'Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge',Popular Music and Society,32:2,286 — 288

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/03007760802703302

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007760802703302>

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### **Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge**

KEITH KAHN-HARRIS

Oxford: Berg, 2007

ISBN 978-1-8452-0398-6

194 pp., \$29.95

*Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* by Keith Kahn-Harris is a smart, meticulously detailed study of the underground extreme metal music culture. A welcomed contribution to the field of subcultural studies, it brings due critical attention to this obscure, fascinating, and largely unexamined music genre. *Extreme Metal* developed out of the author's PhD dissertation and employs a mix of critical theory and personal interviews with members (both musicians and fans) of the global extreme metal scene. But, not unlike many a dissertation, it is often an exhausting read, largely due to the author's liberal and wholly unnecessary use of academic jargon. Nevertheless, if readers are willing to trudge through the polysyllabic muck, there is much to learn from Kahn-Harris's sharp analysis, which "seeks not to elevate extreme metal artistically or reify its culture, but to recover its complexity in a world that tends to ignore it" (26). Indeed, the author may not be an exceptional stylist, but he's one hell of a scholar.

Divided into eight chapters, the book draws on the author's research of extreme metal scenes across the globe—from the UK to the USA to Scandinavia to Israel—

and focuses on three major themes: the music itself, the transgressive freedom the scene affords its members, and the power dynamic between extreme metal scene members on both a local and global level.

### The Music

“Extreme metal” is a term that encompasses various underground musical genres, such as death metal, thrash metal, grindcore, doom metal, and black metal. Although extreme metal has its roots in traditional heavy metal, extreme metal bands “all share a musical radicalism that marks them out as different from other forms of heavy metal” (5). For example, while rhythm and blues influences are recognizable in much traditional heavy metal, they are totally absent from extreme metal. Lyricism is also foreign to the extreme metal aesthetic, as its music “frequently teeters on the edge of formless noise” (5). Although both extreme metal and traditional heavy metal make frequent use of the demonic sounding tritone, extreme metal ups the evil ante with down-tuned guitars and basses and almost unintelligible, growling vocals. Incredibly fast tempos are also central to the extreme metal aesthetic.

### Transgression

“Transgression,” the buzzword *du jour* of university English and philosophy departments, is a term that can make an author look like either a serious scholar with something important to say or, conversely, a pretentious trend follower, depending on the context. Kahn-Harris no doubt falls into the first category, partly because he proves his subject worthy of being called transgressive and partly because he treats it with sensitivity and respect. Indeed, his analysis of the transgressive elements of extreme metal draws the reader in, making palpable the inherent danger within the scene.

Transgression is central to the life of the extreme metal scene, and, according to Kahn-Harris, comes in three key types: sonic transgression, discursive transgression, and bodily transgression. Sonic transgression involves some of the musical elements mentioned above, but can be described more generally as a rebellion against a dominant Western musical aesthetic: “Far from being a chaotic noise, extreme metal systematically offers transgressive alternatives to the principal elements of Western music” (31). Discursive transgression refers to the content of extreme metal lyrics, fanzines, and other printed media. Satanism and the occult, war and mayhem, violence and decay are all dominant themes in extreme metal lyrics and, as Kahn-Harris notes, are accorded far more attention here than in traditional heavy metal. Kahn-Harris claims that extreme metal’s preoccupation with such themes stems from a fear and desire to control the abject, i.e. that which is “uncontrollable and limitless” (34). Bodily transgression is also based on control of the abject; it reveals the human body as “ludicrous and revolting but endlessly fascinating” (36). In the extreme metal scene, the human body is both a symbol of and vehicle for transgression. Extreme

metal lyrics give considerable attention to its repugnant functions and overall vulnerability, but the body is nevertheless considered a site of strength in which weakness and vulnerability must be suppressed.

Transgression in the extreme metal scene is ritualized and theatrical. And, while there are terribly disturbing examples (primarily in the Swedish and Norwegian extreme metal scenes) of ritualized transgression turning into very real violence against people both inside and outside the scene, extreme metal remains, in most cases, a safe, viable, and often cathartic form of lived theater. As Kahn-Harris notes, “scene members frequently explain this pleasure in terms of catharsis. Listening to extreme metal is seen as giving voice to aggressive emotions and, in the process, reduces depression and frustration in exhilarating ways” (52). Kahn-Harris is careful not to overlook the potential for real violence and bigotry that transgressive practices carry with them, but he is firm in his belief that extreme metal transgression provides a creative and often philosophical alternative to the tedium of modern life: “While modernity disempowers individuals within alienating systems and structures, transgression allows individuals to feel utterly in control, utterly ‘sovereign’ (Bataille 1993) over their being through practices that resist instrumental rationality” (158).

### **The Power Dynamic between Scene Members**

Kahn-Harris exposes the many inequalities that exist within the scene. Marginalized groups such as women, homosexuals, and racial minorities have difficulty climbing through the ranks of the extreme metal hierarchy. As with the forms transgression takes within the extreme metal scene, Kahn-Harris rightly argues that much of this inequality is rooted in the suppression of the abject, as the abject is often associated with femininity and (forgive the jargon this review has set out to scorn) “otherness.” If there is work to be done within the extreme metal scene it is to become more inclusive of the said minorities. Such an improvement will surely make the scene stronger, more diverse, and generally richer.

To reiterate the original point: *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* is a masterful analysis of an unfairly ignored subculture and musical genre; the book is sure to become standard reading for those interested in the scene. While its heavy-handed jargon may make readers’ heads spin, it is well worth the effort to reach the end. Furthermore, it should be remarked that it takes courage to write about such an utterly non-academic, indeed anti-academic topic within an academic context. Should Kahn-Harris want a larger and possibly more receptive audience for his splendid scholarship, however, his next book (and this reviewer, for one, hopes there *will* be a next book) needs to jettison the jargon as extreme metal jettisons melody (33).

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