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Metal Studies: Intellectual Fragmentation or Organic Intellectualism?

Keith Kahn-Harris

Like Deena Weinstein, I started researching metal at a time when the notion of “metal studies” as a discipline was inconceivable. Having conducted MA and PhD research between 1995 and 2001, there was little specialist literature on metal even by the time I finished my thesis. What literature there was had huge gaps in coverage that was intoxicating for a graduate student keen to make a mark in a largely unexplored field. In the 2000s then, a more substantial body of metal scholarship had begun to emerge and at least some of the many gaps I had identified as a PhD student were being addressed, by me and by others. As the scope of Andy Brown’s article demonstrates, while there are still many issues that need to be addressed, the time has long gone when it was possible to review the complete literature on metal within a week (as I did when I started my PhD).

The idea of metal studies as a serious proposition dates to the end of the 2000s. I do recall its previous use in a wistful, semi-ironic sense on those rare occasions when I would meet or correspond with other metal scholars. But the notion of a metal studies discipline was never seriously entertained until 2008, when a number of initiatives began to bring metal scholars together, such as the first Heavy Fundamentals conference in Salzburg in October. What brought the possibility of metal studies into being then was the act of meeting. As so often in academia, the conferences catalysed a kind of self-consciousness among previously isolated scholars. The simple fact of having the opportunity to get to know others with similar interests created new possibilities and new enthusiasms. Clearly, the developing self-consciousness of metal studies as a field has helped engender greater scholarly attention to metal, a field of research that had long been underexplored. But a look at metal studies as a whole raises some important questions and issues that suggest more difficult questions about the nature of this emerging discipline.

One of the most striking aspects about metal studies is how far it seems to be developing without reference to popular music studies. Popular music

studies is now at least three decades old as a discipline and it has developed a substantial and sophisticated literature. Much of the pre-metal studies literature on metal was rooted in popular music studies or related fields, including my own work. Many of the works that I have read in the new metal studies seem to pay little or only passing reference to this literature. Metal studies scholars seem to come from many disciplines and, while this interdisciplinarity is to be welcomed, the relative neglect of popular music studies can lead to ignorance and naivety regarding some of the key methodological issues in studying popular music. Popular music is not as simple a matter to study as it sometimes appears, and the question of how to relate musical sounds to social practice is extremely complex. Such issues and others – such as how to analyse music lyrics – are routinely neglected in metal studies or, if they are addressed, are approached with little knowledge of previous work. The neglect of popular music studies is also manifested in a frequent failure to compare metal to other music scenes. Some of the most important works of metal scholarship – Harris Berger's *Metal, Rock and Jazz* (1999) and Jeremy Wallyach's *Modern Noise, Fluid Genres* (2008) – are incisive precisely because they set metal in a comparative context.

This increasing distance from other forms of music scholarship is manifested in what is undoubtedly the most critical weakness in metal studies as it stands: the relative paucity of detailed musicological analyses on metal. There have been very few studies of metal that have anywhere near the same level of musicological detail as appears in Robert Walser's now quite dated work (1993). This is not to argue that "the sounds themselves" should have any necessary methodological primacy in metal scholarship. But without some widely accepted vocabulary for identifying the constituent musical features of metal, there is a danger that metal studies will be founded on a tacit assumption that "we all know" what metal sounds like.

The "nightmare scenario" for metal studies could be that it becomes a tiny, insulated field that talks to itself, allowing certain theoretical and methodological tendencies to become orthodoxies that are difficult to contest. This is the fate of many academic subdisciplines that become excessively interested in their own subjects to the exclusion of all else. New scholarly fields or disciplines often simply become just another node in a constantly fragmenting scholarly landscape. If that is what metal studies is fated to become, then it is far better for metal scholarship to be conducted by isolated scholars – at least then they could enrich a range of different disciplinary fields. It is possible, though, that emergent within metal studies, there are ways of engaging with metal that offer striking new approaches to old problems. For me, the most innovative form of the new metal studies is the circle of philosophers, centred on Niall Scott, Scott Wilson and Nicola Masciandaro, who have pioneered "black metal theory". According to this group, black metal theory aims at nothing less than "enblackening" theory; at creating a productive symbiosis between black metal and philosophy (Masciandaro 2010). Their work is wildly creative, often impenetrable and sits uncomfortably with the more mundane

substantive concerns of other forms of metal studies. Its potential lies in its developing a kind of “organic intellectualism” in which the simultaneous situation of the scholar within the black metal scene and within the philosophical academy is designed to effect a mutually productive conversation.

It is the possibility of the engaged metal intellectual that offers metal studies’ greatest potential and greatest danger. One of the striking aspects of metal studies is that most of its scholars are engaged in metal at least as fans, and often as more than that. Metal has – particularly in black metal – an intellectual tendency that few other music scenes can match; one rooted in reading, in research on mythology, in finding new sources for metal creativity. While this intellectual strain is too often resistant to the kinds of reflexivity that academic scholarship engenders, there is at least a space within metal for some kind of scholarly reflection. Metal studies scholars are ideally placed to stimulate spaces of reflection within metal and to forestall the kind of parochial anti-intellectualism that is prevalent within many music scenes.

The danger is that metal studies could simply become a sophisticated method of legitimating metal. While I agree with Deena Weinstein’s emphasis on the importance of legitimation of metal scholarship, the study of metal should never become simply a way to defend and justify metal. A major impetus within metal scholarship, as Andy Brown notes, was the perfectly reasonable desire to ensure that metal and its fans were not demonised and suppressed, as was certainly a danger in the USA in the 1980s. But a desire to treat metal and its fans with respect and nuance should never become a desire for metal studies to be metal’s defenders.

Reference

- Masciandaro, N. (ed.) (2010) *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium 1*, CreateSpace, New York.