

LANDFILL METAL: THE IRONIES OF MEDIOCRITY

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Abstract

This paper continues my previous explorations into how metal aesthetics and scene-making might be rethought in the face of what I have called a ‘crisis of abundance’ in metal. Drawing on my own attempts to understand a particular metal text – Morgul’s *Lost in Shadows Grey* (1997) – I explore the nature of ‘mediocrity’ in metal. The paper develops a typology of mediocrity and applies it to the case of metal. Building on this, I discuss how mediocrity might be valorized as a source of aesthetic pleasure. In doing so, a number of ironic or paradoxical elements of mediocrity are highlighted.⁶⁸

Introduction

This paper starts from the place where much of my recent work on ‘metal beyond metal’ has started: the premise that metal is suffering from an unacknowledged ‘crisis of abundance’ (Kahn-Harris 2013a, 2013b). In a world in which making, distributing and consuming music has never been easier, the nature of metal scene-making has been challenged in a fundamental way. A response to this crisis requires an equally fundamental rethinking of the aesthetics of metal.

One interesting response to the crisis of abundance in some quarters, has been an increased sensitivity to and intolerance towards, music as a mass of undifferentiated and dull content. The term ‘Landfill Indie’ has been applied in the UK to what is perceived to be a mass of identikit guitar bands (Reynolds 2010). In certain respects, the term draws on a long-standing elitism that permeates rock discourse and the development of rock canons (Jones 2008), but the scale of the phenomenon it describes is more novel. Similarly, in metal, pejorative descriptions of ‘trends’ and a valorization of ‘eliteness’, which reached their apotheosis in the black metal slogan ‘No Fun, No Mosh, No Trends, No Core’ goes back at least until the 1980s underground, but the extent of the current abundance renews and accentuates the challenge that ‘Landfill Metal’ poses to metal.

In this paper, I want to outline a response to Landfill Metal by exploring the possibility that it might be embraced and valorized. In doing so, I focus on *mediocrity* as an aesthetic category with the intention of re-evaluating its hitherto disregarded importance in metal and as a possible source of re-imagined pleasures.

⁶⁸ I would like to thank members of the IASPM email list for their ideas and suggestions made at an early stage of writing this paper.

The mysteries of mediocrity

My starting point in this paper is my own experience as a metal journalist and scholar. I began writing for *Terrorizer* magazine in 1997, a year after I began my PhD on extreme metal. At that stage, I had a decent knowledge of the canonical metal texts and what counted as good and bad music in metal scenes. As such, I thought I was ready to be a metal journalist. In fact, I was completely unprepared for the aesthetic and critical challenge that awaited me.

This challenge had a name – Morgul. Morgul were a Norwegian black metal band formed in 1991. They released two demos in 1992 and 1994, and then two albums with Napalm Records in 1997 and 1998, two with Century Media in 2000 and 2001, and one with Seasons of Mist in 2005. The one constant member of the band was ‘Jack D. Ripper’, but they never managed to achieve a stable line up and, as far as I can ascertain, never extensively toured. Jack D. Ripper now apparently resides in Detroit but Morgul appears not to be a functioning act any more⁶⁹. There is little information online about the band, save for a Wikipedia entry and a few brief interviews (Anonymous 2008; Chronic 2006; de Haan ND).

Morgul’s significance for me is that I received their debut album *Lost in Shadows Grey* in the very first package of items for review for *Terrorizer*. I knew where to place it generically – as part of the wave of Emperor and Cradle of Filth-influenced keyboard-driven Norwegian black metal that followed in the wake of the scene’s early 1990s notoriety – and I knew roughly how to evaluate it – as decent but unspectacular – but beyond that I didn’t know what to say about it. I struggled to fill the 180 words allotted to me. What was this album? It was ‘okay’, it was one of a crowd of similar releases, it was mildly entertaining, it was competent. The album seemed to offer no purchase on which to grab hold of.

The problem persisted throughout my ‘career’ as a metal journalist. Sometimes I was given exciting, innovative, brilliant albums to review, sometimes I was given poor albums to review. In both those cases the words came flooding out. But more often I was given albums like Morgul’s to review; albums that provided the bulk of the review copies that flooded everyday into the *Terrorizer* office. With these I struggled, beyond situating them, saying something about the band and noting their competent generic nature, what was there left to say?

The challenge of Morgul persists to this day. I have previously suggested (2013a, 2014) that repeated listening to *Lost in Shadows Grey*, or a similar kind of text, could be one of the ways in which the boundaries of metal aesthetics could be pushed. This I have done. I can now report that this challenge hasn’t transformed my appreciation of metal, so much as puzzled me – its mysteries seem to have deepened. What astonishes me is that in 2015, when I am vastly more knowledgeable about metal than I was in 1997, and having listened to the album many times, I still can’t find much to say about *Lost in Shadows Grey*. Nor can I pinpoint exactly what, in musicological terms, makes the album so difficult to talk about. There are other albums produced at the time and since then that sound very similar to this one, but that excite me far more. The line dividing Morgul from acclaimed canonical artists is clearly nar-

⁶⁹ I made considerable efforts to get in touch with him but none of the labels in question had up to date contact information.

row, but I cannot trace it.

In short, *Lost in Shadows Grey* leaves me at an impasse: as a fan I cannot get into it, no matter how hard I try; yet as a scholar and a critic I cannot pinpoint why this is.

This stubborn lack of engagement helps to explain my continuing befuddlement with *Lost in Shadows Grey*. It is a confusion that stems from the oddness of trying to identify an experience that is defined by the absence of experience. In engaging with my lack of engagement I am doing something that is not usually done, hence the ineffable 'unnaturalness.' And by attempting to make this experience speakable, I am engaging in a process that may or may not erase this ineffability.

Making musical distinctions

An inability to engage with *Lost in Shadows Grey* is, of course, a form of aesthetic judgement. In recent decades, developments in a range of disciplines have showed convincingly that aesthetics and taste are intrinsically embedded in the social. There can be no transcendent, asocial and ahistorical standards of good and bad music; as scholars of popular music have shown, judging music is an inescapably social process (e.g. Frith 1996). The formation of canons is the result of social processes, tied in as Bourdieu (1979) noted to flows of capital and power.

While this anti-essentialism does avoid naïve notions of asocial transcendence and, is for most purposes sufficient, it is also a very elegant way of bypassing a major problem. It is hard to believe that distinction is an entirely arbitrary process, that Beethoven, Slayer and Shakespeare have been canonized through a combination of randomness, *habitus*, chance and social practice. But if distinction is not based on arbitrary criteria, then what is it based on?

While a complete accounting of the criteria on which practices of distinction are based may be beyond reach, two criteria that are used to differentiate good and bad music seem to be particularly important.

The first is *competence*. This is the ability to master genre rules and technical requirements (Deliège and Sloboda, 1996.) Competent music is music that has at least the possibility of entering the canon. Competence is of course defined differently within different fields but where there is genre, there is competence.

The second criterion is what I will call *timeliness*. By timeliness I mean the degree to which a work or an artist leads or follows innovation. Innovation is not universally identified as an aesthetic good. Nonetheless, timeliness is usually an important consideration in the identification of good and bad music, whether that identification consist of canonizing innovation or canonizing retro-aesthetics.

Timeliness and competence are certainly not the only criteria drawn upon in processes of aesthetic judgement. But what a consideration of these criteria does help us do much more effectively is *to identify a space within which music is not judged as good nor bad*. This, I argue, is the space within which *Lost In Shadows Grey* resides.

A tentative ideal type of mediocrity

I will call the music that circulates within this space characterized by a lack of judgement 'mediocre music.' This is, to be sure, a value-laden term, rarely used in scholarly discourse except in polemical ways (e.g. Enzensberger 1992). I have chosen it, in part, as a deliberate strategy designed to re-valorise mediocrity as a category. I do not claim that mediocrity is a transcendent, essentialist category. Rather, I use the term mediocrity to identify a musical space that is potentially open to recognition and revalorization.

In what follows, I suggest a tentative 'ideal type' of mediocre music, in the Weberian sense. Like other ideal types, it is a kind of 'fiction', nowhere present in its entirety, but one which forces attention to be paid to otherwise disparate phenomena.

Mediocre music is competent but not timely.

Mediocre music achieves competence through following generic rules once those generic rules have been set. Mediocre music is not innovative, but follows in the wake of innovation.

Mediocre music represents the exhaustion of the possibilities of a genre

The very existence of mediocre music is a sign that the possibilities inherent in a genre have become fixed. When mediocre music starts to be produced, innovation requires the breaking rather than the further exploration of generic rules.

Mediocre music represents mimesis but not pastiche

Mediocre music is not an affectionate tribute, a jokey pastiche or even a reverential hymn to one's aesthetic ancestors. Rather it is a kind of mimesis that fails to achieve anything other than technical mastery of a genre.

Mediocre music is untimely but not nostalgic

Mediocre music appears during a phase of generic exhaustion but before enough time has elapsed for the genre to be rediscoverable as nostalgia.

Mediocrity provisional

Mediocre music can be revalorized and repositioned, either within the same field or in others. Nostalgia may retrospectively sweep away the mediocrity within an entire genre.

'Good' artists rarely make mediocre music

Even when canonical artists produce music identical to the mediocre music being produced at the same time by more obscure acts, their canonical status usually 'protects' them from mediocrity.

Very little is always mediocre to everyone

The producers of mediocre music may be passionate about their music and convinced of its innovation, timeliness and exceptionalness. Even mediocre music may have its strong supporters.

Mediocre music is rarely spoken of

While good and bad music provoke talk and passion, mediocre music provokes silence, apathy and indifference. When attention is drawn to mediocrity, it is frequently destabilized in the process, turning it into good or bad music.

Mediocrity is not the same as obscurity

Mediocre music is often obscure, but obscure music is not always mediocre in that it can be innovative.

Mediocre music is hard for neophytes to identify

Identifying mediocre music is the last skill to be learned by entrants into music scenes. The recognition of mediocre music as mediocre requires not only a detailed knowledge of genre rules, but the subtlety to understand what differentiates mediocre music from the canon.

Mediocrity is an accomplishment

The production of mediocrity requires complex mimetic skills and detailed generic knowledge. As such, the term mediocrity needs to be reclaimed from its negative connotations.

Mediocrity in metal⁷⁰

As I define it, mediocrity only exists in relation to innovation. In modern western popular musics – at the very least – mediocrity is a function of the constant ‘churn’ of innovation and genre-formation that has driven this music forward. Metal is of course no exception to this.

There are though, some elements of metal mediocrity that are, if not unique then at least distinctively unusual compared to other genres. The most important of these distinctive elements is the difficulty of learning, playing and producing metal. Most metal genres are intricate and complex to play – some of them exceptionally, and controversially, so (Smialek 2010) – and even those that require less technical proficiency in playing instruments still require an often laborious process of learning to produce the music so that its overdriven sound is appropriately controlled. Ensuring the intelligibility of metal as a sound often bumps up against the limit of technical competence (Mynett 2012). Mediocrity is therefore *perhaps* more of an achievement in metal than it is in other scenes. This is particularly the case in non-western settings, where local conditions may make reproduction of metal difficult and even the transformation of metal that inevitably occurs in such situations may be accompanied by a desire to do things the same way as they are done in the west (Knopke 2014).

⁷⁰ The analyses in this sub-section are based on a reframing of the arguments presented in Kahn-Harris (2007).

Mediocrity is not a stable category. There have been two particular periods in metal history during which mediocrity has threatened to become something else.

The first period is the extreme metal underground from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. A striking feature of the extreme metal scene in this period was that it came close to a *da facto* (but rarely explicit) valorization of mediocrity. The global expansion of the underground extreme metal scene was, generally speaking, supported by its members for its own sake. The supportiveness and sharing that characterized this scene elevated what I have called 'mundane subcultural capital' to supreme importance. It is striking when looking at fan-zines and other scene publications in the first 10-15 years of the underground, how uncritical reviews and articles often were – the emphasis was on making finely-tuned distinctions between the ever-growing number of bands and recordings, rather than on subjecting them to judgment.

Mediocrity was rarely recognized as mediocrity in the scene during this period, at least in the terms I have outlined. As a consequence, the very supportiveness of the scene ironically endangered the possibility of mediocrity – and of good and bad music – at times coming close to the repetition for its own sake that characterizes some non-western musics.

Had mediocrity been fully embraced, it would have transformed into something else – a scene that would have abandoned aesthetic judgement in favour of self-celebration. This never quite happened though. In part this was because systems of canonization remained strong. But it was also down to the logic of transgressive subcultural capital that still circulated in the scene, even if it was largely confined to the aesthetic, rather than the institutional realm.

It was this transgressive imperative that eventually caused a revolt against mediocrity – and, again, threatened, but did not eliminate, mediocrity in the process. In part, the black metal scene that emerged out of the extreme metal underground in the early 1990s was based on a revolt against mediocrity. Against the values of supportiveness, community and repetition, black metal praised individuality and uniqueness. The critique of 'trends' that became embedded in black metal discourse was a critique of mediocre competence. Had this project succeeded, mediocrity would have been wiped out in a scene given over to elite transgression.

Black metal's revolt against mediocrity was fraught with ironies and paradoxes. Had it succeeded, the black metal scene would have looked like the earlier extreme metal scene would have done if it had been entirely captured by mediocrity – an undifferentiated, if small and elite, mass. In any case, in order to be 'elite' and transgressive, in musical terms at least, there needs to be a mass to define oneself against. Good music requires bad music to define itself against, and in black metal discourse mediocrity *was* bad music. Again, this threatened mediocrity by subsuming it into bad music.

Yet black metal couldn't help become a scene. And where there is a scene, *both* mediocrity and bad music are hard to avoid. So black metal soon developed its own form of mediocrity, which black metal artists struggled to define themselves against by trying to render mediocre music into bad music. As the 1990s progressed, the critical language of black metal turned in on itself as it tried to

deal with its own mediocrity. *Nordic Vision* magazine, for example, soon became full of reviews in which 'boring' was the most common term of abuse⁷¹.

For the most part though, metal scenes have tended to simply live with mediocrity. Sometimes, when metal genres are revisited and revived, previously mediocre music becomes canonical, as with the obsessive reissuing of obscure recordings from the 1980s NWOBHM scene in recent years for example. But these revived genres in turn produce their own mediocrity and do not escape its logic. Most metal scenes consist of a small group of canonical and anti-canonical artists and recordings, and a large mass of mediocrity that is subject to limited attention. This is metal's largely silent hinterland; arguably necessary but difficult to acknowledge.

So while sometimes fierce debates about the relative importance of musical innovation versus conservatism do take place in metal scenes (e.g. Puri 2014), these debates do not necessarily challenge mediocrity *per se*. Rather, such debates are about the appropriate criteria for judging good and bad music – mediocrity itself remains hidden.

Mediocrity in the age of abundance

In an age when, as I have argued, making and circulating music is easier than ever, when, as I have argued, metal scenes are losing their distinctive shapes and trajectories, when metal is expanding in all directions simultaneously without abandoning anything: might mediocrity be more significant than it once was? Might abundance be the same as mediocrity? Certainly, there is ever reason to believe that processes of canonization might be weakening in an age when it is ever more difficult for individual bands and recordings to become heard over the chaotic cacophony.

Yet, once again, this processes is fraught with ironies and paradoxes. A weakened canon may in fact diminish mediocrity – which depends on a distinction from the canon – at the same time as it strengthens it. Perhaps one way of navigating this paradox is through postulating a subtle change in the nature of mediocrity: A shift from a mediocrity produced by strong processes of canonization and anti-canonization, to a mediocrity that increasingly covers all but a small fraction of the genre itself. Even today's canonical artists and recordings may not be able to escape the taint of mediocrity since they find it much more difficult to stand out.

For this reason, the kind of rethinking of metal aesthetics that I have been attempting still requires an engagement with and a response to mediocrity. This is less because mediocrity is itself a problem, so much that its role may be expanding and changing, impacting on the pleasures and practices of metal in new and unexpected ways.

Speaking of mediocrity

If mediocrity, as I have defined it, is based on silence, what happens when mediocrity is spoken of? Talk about music is central to the sociality of music; its ability to create connections with others (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 136-142). While mediocrity's silence does not mean that mediocre music is asocial, it does

⁷¹ Note, for example, how often the term 'boring' appears in the (undated) reviews on the *Nordic Vision* archive at <http://www.nordicvisionmag.com/cd.html>

mean that speaking of mediocre music re-embeds it into social life in ways that may be hard to predict.

As I have argued, when mediocrity is spoken of, the result is frequently to transform it into bad music or, more rarely, into good music. Given that part of my aim in this paper is to try and investigate the possible benefits and pleasures of mediocrity in metal, the risks of destroying the object of study through drawing attention to it are palpable. If my invitation in my earlier paper, to join me in repeatedly listening to Morgul's *Lost in Shadows Grey*, had ever been taken up (and there is no evidence that it has been!) the delicately achieved silence that preserves its mediocrity would have been destabilized, rendering the album ironically remarkable. There are precedents here: artistic responses to the mediocrity of everyday life often transform that mediocrity into something worthy of remark (Fleming 2008). This kind of destabilization also occurs when 'bad' music is reconsidered. It is now quite common for bad music to be revalorized, sometimes ironically, as good music, or as 'camp', 'cheesy' and 'so bad it's good' (Bennett 2013; Wahburne and Derno, 2004).

What I want to suggest then, is a response to mediocrity that does not destroy it. The aim of this response would be to explore the possibilities that a non-destructive embrace of mediocrity might offer for the development of aesthetic strategies appropriate for an age of abundance. If, as I have argued, the age of abundance has brought about an unacknowledged crisis in metal, then we need to explore the possibilities that previously neglected aspects of metal might afford for stimulating fundamental change in what metal is and could be.

One way in which this could happen is through an engagement with one of the paradoxes at the heart of mediocrity: that music received with silence and indifference may be produced by passion and enthusiasm. I know little about Morgul the band, but I find it hard to believe that the motivating force behind the band was any less strong as was the case for any number of canonical acts. Producing metal is difficult. Even in places like Norway where a supportive infrastructure exists, it does not come easy. One could view the massive disparity behind the passion that produces mediocrity and the indifference that greets it as somehow tragic – and perhaps it is – yet maybe it can also be seen as *heroic*.

Why should it be that musicians require a passionate audience to be validated? Maybe the purest aesthetic gesture of all is to produce music that has only a minimal chance of being heard. Like offerings to a non-interventionist God, mediocre music requires a blind commitment in the face of apparent indifference. There is an excessiveness here, equal to the transcendence that some kinds of religious experience offer (Kahn-Harris and Moberg 2012). In contrast, the canon and anti-canon invite a more worldly instrumental rationality, in which the passion that produces music is 'rewarded' with a response.

So I may not be able to love Morgul's music, but I can honour, respect and marvel at the efforts that produced it – and these can bring me pleasure. There is a joy in appreciating that extraordinary resilience and desire that keeps metal going through the constant production of mediocrity. It is a joy that can be accentuated by reveling in the stories behind the mediocre. While I don't have these stories in Morgul's case, I do have them in others. I have spent time with and listened to the tales of many musicians whose music is largely ignored.

Is this an aesthetic pleasure though? Yes, if we extend the realm of aesthetics more widely from ‘the sounds themselves’. In fact, even the aesthetics of canonical artists can rarely be disengaged from ‘para-musical’ elements– the story of Euronymous’s murder is integral to the pleasures that Mayhem and Burzum offer – and so why should this not be the case with mediocre artists?

In a slightly different context, the critic Carl Wilson undertook a similar journey to the one that I am trying to take. In his *Let’s Talk About Love* (2014) he deliberately tried to learn to love Celine Dion’s music, something he had always loathed. While he never learned to love ‘the music itself’, he did find that a sincere attempt to understand Celine’s fans and Celine herself brought unexpected pleasures that made him rethink his assumptions about what it was to be a critic and what it was to love music. As he argues:

What counted in the end was to give *Let’s Talk About Love* a sympathetic hearing, to credit that others find it lovable and ask what that can tell me about music (or globalism, or sentimentality) in general. The kind of contempt that’s mobilized by “cool” taste is inimical to that sympathy, to an aesthetics that might support a good public life. The goal is not that we all end up with the same taste, no matter how broad.

He continues:

You...can love a song for its datedness, for the social history its anachronism reveals. You can love a song for how its sentimentality gives a workout to the emotions. You can love it for its foreignness, for the glimpse it gives of human variability. You can love it for its exemplarity, for being the “ultimate” disco floor filler or schmaltzy mother song. You can love it for representing a place, a community, even.

And I’d add to that – you can love a song for the indifference it stirs within you and for the thrilling contrast between that indifference and the commitment that produced it.

Coda: Are Morgul really mediocre?

A broader consideration of Morgul’s work beyond *Lost in Shadows Grey* raises questions that considerably complicate the discussion of mediocrity in this paper. While the band’s second album *Parody of the Mass* (1998) is quite similar to *Lost in Shadows Grey*, Morgul’s third, fourth and fifth albums are very different. *The Horror Grandeur* (2000), *Sketch of a Supposed Murderer* (2001) and *All Dead Here...* (2005), cannot be classified as mediocre according to my typology to the extent that their predecessors can. Coinciding with Morgul becoming a one-man band (with Jack D. Ripper playing or programming all instruments with occasional use of session musicians), these three albums are more challenging and innovative. The use of the violin is particularly striking as well as instrumental passages that draw on carnivalesque musical themes and complex song structures with frequent time and stylistic changes. The final three Morgul albums are not as obviously mimetic as the first two and certainly do not pose the same challenge to me as a listener that *Lost in Shadows Grey* does – they remain interesting to hear after repeated plays. If the albums are derivative at all, it is that they were part of the process of exploring and expanding the boundaries of black metal that other Norwegian acts such as Arcturus and Ulver were doing around the same time.

So how might these albums cause one to reconsider *Lost in Shadows Grey*? In one of the few interviews with Morgul that I could find online, Jack D Ripper appears to denigrate the first Morgul album (Anonymous 2008):

I hate the Lost in Shadows Grey album. I mean, the songs themselves are ok. Full of clichés though, but the production isn't worth shit.

If one takes the first two Morgul albums out of consideration, Morgul's work might look quite different: the challenging and experimental output of an individualist creative talent. While Morgul's later work never seems to appear in retrospective discussions of metal in the early 2000s (and rarely appeared at the time), it is at least possible to see these albums being rediscovered and accorded a kind of posthumous status. The limited number of comments on Morgul's work on youtube suggest that there are at least a few people who enjoy the band's work. If Morgul were to retrospectively canonized, one could imagine that *Lost in Shadows Grey* could be lifted out of mediocrity as the raw material that demonstrates the promise that was actualized in the later work.

Alternatively, it's possible to view Morgul's early work as a salutary example of the tendency of metal bands to release albums too 'early'. Had they waited, their output could have existed of works that escaped the clutches of mediocrity entirely.

Yet I want to resist the temptations of 'rescuing' Morgul from mediocrity. Indeed, I have deliberately bracketed this discussion in order to ensure that the discussion of mediocrity in this paper did not try to explain or excuse it away. In fact, Morgul – and *Lost in Shadows Grey* – needs no apology and its mediocrity should be embraced. Regardless of Morgul's more challenging later work, the first album remains valid as an accomplishment.

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