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Transgressors with their amps turned up to 11

Extreme Metal

March 16, 2007



A sympathetic participant observer provides John Street with insights into a global mosh pit

Imagine a sound so loud, so raw and so venomously played that it seems more like a weapon than a form of entertainment. Imagine vocals that are close to an anguished scream, and a music in which melody has been bleached away. Imagine performers who delight in contemplation of suicide and decay, who adopt names such as Cradle of Filth, Rabies Caste, Pain, Carcass, Sadistick Execution, Impaled Nazarene, Megadeth, and whose records are released on labels called Earache, Relapse and Morbid. Imagine all this, then ask why? Why would people - young and old, men and women, in this country and in the US, South America and Scandinavia, Israel and Saudi Arabia - devote themselves to playing and taking pleasure from such music? And last, imagine why a serious-minded researcher might choose to devote several years of his life to making sense of it all.

This fascinating book does exactly this, and in doing so invites us to think, not only about the manifold forms of cultural pleasure, but the ways in which pleasures of all kinds are made, distributed and derived. Extreme metal is a derivative of heavy metal music, a genre much derided and much neglected by mainstream media and most music scholars. As Keith Kahn-Harris notes, it is music that divides people. Its fans are as passionate as any, but for those outside it is an object of fear and disdain. Kahn-Harris reports on extreme metal as both an insider and outsider. He appreciates its attractions, and writes for one of its journals (*Terrorizer*), but he also stands to one side, deploying the language and literature of social science to unravel the ways in which the music exerts its hold.

He rejects the once-dominant subcultural approach to the study of music. Instead, he adopts the looser notion of the scene, in which there is a constant "shifting, splitting and combining". The scene is both a site of the meanings that the music acquires and evokes, and of the distribution of "capital", the resources that fuel the networks that connect fans and musicians.

For Kahn-Harris, the meanings are those of "transgression", in which "the joys and terrors of formless oblivion within the collective" are combined with "feelings of individual control and potency". Death - and contemplation of death - are central to this. But these sensual extremes are themselves carefully contained by the mundane features of life within the scene, in which relations of power are revealed in attitudes and practices in relation to women and ethnicity, and in which the state finds itself - surprisingly perhaps - implicated in supporting extreme metal through its policies on social security, education and even national service.

With his scene-based approach, Kahn-Harris is able to show how the generically similar sounds can assume entirely different forms and meanings. It is unusual to encounter comparative study of music, and his survey of the extreme metal scenes in the UK and in Israel, in Asia and in the Americas is especially revealing.

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There are weaknesses. Almost perversely, there is surprisingly little on the sound of the music itself, and Kahn-Harris's notion of "reflexive anti-reflexivity" to account for metal's politics may be a little too glib, but for most of the book, Kahn-Harris carefully negotiates his position as sympathetic intermediary and critical observer. Following a quotation from a Danish musician who simultaneously claims antiracist credentials while using racist language, Kahn-Harris notes: "The temptation would be to rely on an easy explanation for this quotation - that (the musician) is a complete idiot." He resists the temptation, and in doing so provides real insights into the margins of our culture.

John Street is professor of politics at the University of East Anglia (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-east-anglia>). He and colleagues have just completed an ESRC-funded research project on music and public action.

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