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## Heavy Metal: Forces of Unification and Fragmentation within a Musical Subculture

Bettina Roccor

### *Abstract*

*The history of heavy metal reaches back to the 1960s. An independent cultural practice developed in the 1970s and experienced its height during the 1980s, declining in popularity in the course of the following decade. Today the heavy metal scene in Germany is a multifaceted cultural landscape in which a diversity of styles that developed over three decades coexists side by side, more or less peacefully. In spite of their many differences, most fans feel themselves to be members of one family because all heavy metal styles are based on the same basic musical patterns, the values supporting their culture have remained predominantly the same and the music's negative image has unified the fans in their indignation.*

### 1. Introduction

Those who want to approach the heavy metal scene with a view towards musical education, without immediately disqualifying themselves by the (probably few) metal music aficionados present in the classroom, should be aware of a few essential things. First of all, the heavy metal scene involves a musically centered sub-culture without ideological commitments in the sense of a political superstructure to which scene members feel themselves committed (Stratmann 2000, Roccor 1996a, Roccor 1996b, Mühlmann 1999). So you should forget the rumors you have heard or read up to now that claim that heavy metal involves a decidedly right-wing cultural practice: heavy metal and *Rechtsrock* (right-wing rock) are two completely different musical phenomena.<sup>1</sup> The kernel of heavy metal is not a special kind of ideology but rather the music of heavy metal. Everything else is subject to the momentary political, local, social and individual conditions within which this kind of music is made and consumed. Thus there are a few heavy metal bands that show a decided political attitude in their lyrics (mostly rather left-wing, but within the black metal scene, some fascistic). But the question arises, to what extent do such groups actually influence the world views of their consumers?

This is indeed one of the most important research questions regarding youth and media: do consumers accept without criticism whatever is presented to them, or are they in a position to distance themselves and to develop a differentiated value system? Skin, the female singer of the band Skunk Anasie, doubts the persuading potential of song lyrics:

I don't believe that music can transform politics, not even the political opinions of the people who listen to it. Music is more commentary on life. Music can be effective when it is bound to an already existing movement/mental attitude or in a milieu as a cultural element, commenting, reflecting and strengthening that movement, etc. But then, the movement is already there. Music didn't create it. Music describes what has happened with a generation, what has happened in the world in which it lives, moves, and which it has to face (Stratmann 2000:30).

The question of whether music or lyrics contribute at all to forming opinions represents a worthwhile general topic for music instruction. In music history there are certainly enough examples of political monopolization of music and the resulting difficulties in dealing with works of art and their creators; one needs only think of Richard Wagner and his role during the period of the National Socialists. We will return later to the problem of politically motivated use of music.

## 2. <sup>abnormal.</sup> The Metal Fans: Deviant Satanists?

The message of heavy metal is—to emphasize this again—not more and not less than the music called heavy metal. And this music reflects the diverse worlds of its fans, of people who feel themselves attracted, for the most varied reasons, to this loud kind of rock music and its symbolism. If you ask a fan why he listens to heavy metal, the first answer is almost always, “Because I like the music.” One can only make statements on the reasons for this instinctive sympathy for heavy metal if one has intensively dealt with the life stories of the fans. Trite assumptions such as that it is factors like “coming from broken families” or “unemployment” which lead consumers to grab for heavy metal CDs only scratch the surface of the situation. The fans are too diverse in general, and too different are the kinds of affinity they feel towards the metal scene. But in the classroom, the central role of music should always be emphasized in order to give students an adequate idea of heavy metal culture.

The heavy metal fan refers to a musical tradition that has grown over the course of decades, a tradition from which most of the contemporary scene has created its self-understanding. This fact usually remains <sup>12345</sup>concealed to critics of the heavy metal scene: they interpret the phenomena of heavy metal exclusively on the basis of the symbolism accompanying the music, whether in the form of images, signs, texts or behavior.<sup>2</sup> A result of this is the negative public image of the heavy metal scene, unchanged to the present. To put it simply, this image declares the average “head-banger” to be a latent right-wing radical, sexist, violent, alcoholic, debilitated and, even more, satanically asocial; all must be wary of him (cf. Seifert 1991, *Der Spiegel*

2/1989:152f, *Bravo* 35/1990:52f). This image could only develop because heavy metal has been interpreted without detailed knowledge of its historical development and current stylistic diversity. Further, such interpretations have only paid attention to the expressions of love for heavy metal shown by fans: an exterior that seems rebellious, provocative, often clichéd, and beyond all other fashionable trends (Roccor 1992).

### 3. The Kernel of Metal: Music

The roots of heavy metal lie in the 1960s, when bands like Black Sabbath, Led Zepelin and Deep Purple made popular a loud and guitar-heavy kind of rock called “hard” or “heavy” rock, forming a counterweight to the often politically motivated “hippie music” (Herr 1998, Kühnemund 1997, Roccor 1996a, 1996b, Walser 1993 and Weinstein 1991). From these (commercially quite successful) beginnings, an independent cultural practice developed during the 1970s with bands such as Thin Lizzy, Nazareth, Rush and Rainbow, which reached their height of popularity in the 1980s. Acts such as Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Metallica, Slayer, Saxon and Ozzy Osbourne formed, both on the musical as well as behavioral level, the stylistic foundation for this developmental phase. In retrospect, this is regarded as the golden age of heavy metal and is referred to as such by those who identify themselves with this scene.

This anchoring of the entire heavy metal scene in a common tradition (as is often accentuated to the present) should not obscure the fact that the heavy metal landscape, which presents itself as a uniform subculture to outsiders, has fallen into new, smaller territories since the mid-1980s. Differences between these territories lie on both the musical as well as the stylistic and ideological levels. In addition to the typical heavy metal of the late 1970s and early 1980s, styles developed from the mid-1980s such as thrash metal (fast, raw singing, e.g., Slayer); speed metal (fast, technically difficult, e.g., Metallica, Exciter); death metal (without the classical refrain, “not beautiful” singing, e.g., Death, Obituary) and black metal (stylistically variable, satanist symbolism, e.g., King Diamond, Morbid Angel). Some styles have gained a numerically smaller but very loyal body of fans, such as progressive metal (musically complex, oriented toward classic music, e.g., Blind Guardian, Dream Theater), white metal (Christian lyrics, musically varied, e.g., Stryper, Count Raven) and doom metal (slow, dragging, e.g., St. Vitus, Candlemass). Particularly in the U.S., moderate metal acts such as Ozzy Osbourne, Mötley Crüe and Van Halen conquered the record charts during the 1980s.

In the 1990s heavy metal opened itself up to neighboring styles and allowed elements from grunge, techno, folk, gothic and hardcore to flow into its music. At the same time, new listeners emerged who no longer corresponded to the typical heavy fan; it was no longer a contradiction to listen to first Metallica (a typical metal band) and then Marusha (a popular Techno-Djane). The market changed, which led for ex-

ample to the former representative of the scene, the journal *Metal Hammer*, changing its name to simply *Hammer* in order to draw young readers who wanted to listen to more than just metal. In this context, the worldwide success of the band Metallica was highly important for the scene. Whether in a positive or negative sense, this band still stimulates discussions within the scene as it broke away from many old traditions and thus incited a kind of identity crisis among many fans.

Today the gothic metal scene is particularly popular, a style that contains intense guitars and is tied to dramatics and gloominess typical of the gothic style. Typical gothic metal bands include Atrocity, My Dying Bride and Paradise Lost. This scene formed in tandem with the second generation of the black metal movement (fast, inclusion of sacred music elements, singing that ranges from wheezing to screeching (e.g., Dimmu Borgir, Emperor). A so-called “true metal” revival also took place during the 1990s when many bands harked back to classical heavy metal and used typical stylistic means (as the very successful group Hammerfall) such as high vocalizing, guitar solos, straight rhythms, “sword & sorcery” visual effects and fantasy lyrics.<sup>3</sup> While numerous cult bands of the 1980s such as Destruction, Agent Steel and Metal Church reunited to tie into their earlier success, new bands also tried to gain fresh buyers for their music under the heading “new metal.”

Today the metal scene is highly diverse in musical terms, including both melodramatic ballads as well as two-minute-long grind core attacks. In addition to the purely musical differences that mostly remain hidden to the outsider, we also find diverse regional peculiarities. Further, distinctions among the numerous fan groups develop out of different life situations and even between friends. Here I do not only mean the categories that pigeonhole certain bands to their respective countries of origin (for U.S. metal belongs as little to the U.S. alone as the success of the so-called “*Neue Deutsche Härte*” (lit., new German hard) group Rammstein has been limited to Germany (Jeske 1996/1997/1999, Mader & Jeske 1995, 1997 & 1998 and Mühlmann 1999). Also to be considered are issues of instrumentalization of the music and the symbolism that accompanies this process.

#### 4. The Fragmentation of Metal Fans

According to the socio-cultural context, declaring oneself a fan of heavy metal or of a particular band from this spectrum can take on different meanings. The best example of this is the band Slayer, which is controversial within the scene because of its lyrics and the statements they have made in interviews but also highly popular because of its music. The band’s songs hold a completely different significance for a group of right-wing male teenage radicals from the former East Germany than for a clique of intellectual North Korean students or a Brazilian metal fan from the white middle class. It is the context which is decisive, not necessarily the original intentions of the band itself. Thus the fan club logo of the group Slayer, a grinning skull wearing a fireman’s helmet, decorates T-shirts, patches and pins with the words



above it, "*Slatanic Wehrmacht*" ("Slatanic" German armed forces). Right-wing fans interpret this as a declaration of sympathy for the Nazi period, while those from the left-wing, intellectual spectrum take this motive to be a skillful provocation of the bourgeois society that suppresses its memories of the Nazis. Nazi skinheads listen to Slayer to stimulate them to attack foreigners, while North Korean students discuss philosophical and political topics to the sounds of the band. Brazilian fans regard the group, with its two South American members, as a spiritual relative to the "alternative" national heroes of Sepultura, a extremely successful thrash metal band from Rio.

Slayer itself has made superficial, if not to say completely naive, statements in interviews on political topics, and they know about as much about National Socialism as could be written on a single sheet of paper. But this did not prevent the band from writing a song about the concentration camp doctor Josef Mengele. "Angel of Death" goes down the list of his unimaginable acts of cruelty in a choppy cascade of words, without judging or commenting on them. As a prank, the youth radio station of the Bavarian Broadcasting Company once had this text read on the air as though it were a poem by the well-known poet Gottfried Benn. Presented in this way, it created goose pimples among non-metal fans as well, just as when Slayer plays the song in live concerts.

The example of Slayer shows that heavy metal also represents a form of art, which is thus interpretable; each fan interprets the statements, images and lyrics of the band differently. But the large majority is not at all interested in what kind of statement is being made, for example, in the song "Angel of Death." They like the song, the music, the vocal style; they could care less about the contents of the lyrics. This is one reason why many fans are irritated when metal journalists ask uncomfortable questions about controversial musicians like Peter Steele or Slayer and the intentions of their song lyrics. They find the music good, and they don't want to know any more. This is what is also meant by the statement that the metal scene can be described as nonpolitical: the meanings of lyrics and images is of lesser importance compared to a song's musical qualities. In right-wing rock, the situation is the opposite: the lyrics are in the foreground and the very simple, punk-like music forms only an acoustic background to the shouted Nazi slogans.

In view of the many varieties of heavy metal types, as well as the social differences among its fans, whether related to class, gender, age or ethnicity, the question emerges as to why the heavy metal culture still perceives itself as a single culture. The scene continuously presents itself to the outside world with unbroken pride as a unified entity, although those viewing it from the outside can see little commonality between, say, the gothic metal scene and progressive fans, or between traditional "metals" and black metal fans. Both in their clothing as well as in their behavior and musical practices, fans display clear differences among themselves and make clear attempts to set up borders with neighboring substyles and their clienteles.

Each type of heavy metal has developed its own system of signs made of music, symbolism, clothing and behavior. In the black metal scene, for instance, the black,

studded leather clothing introduced in the early 1980s by groups like Judas Priest, Mercyful Fate or Motörhead was revived during the radicalization of black metal; outfits were modified by adding accessories from thematically related subcultures. The black metal outfit includes threateningly long, spiked bracelets, black lederhose, vampire-like capes, heavy black tied-up boots and bizarre black-and-white makeup. Martial arts weapons like battle-axes, maces and outsized swords complete the image of the dangerous knight of darkness. The masquerade of “merciless” represents an optical counterpart to the music. The latter should be more radical and relentless than anything that had previously delighted heavy metal fans. All elements, whether in the lyrics, the self-presentation of the musicians or the stage shows, fit into the sign system of “black metal.” This system is also supported by the music, with its high-speed double bass, storms of riffs and its sometimes overboard hysterics, sometimes choppy singing, which is accompanied by dramatic choruses and chords on the organ. The fans who love this music orient themselves optically to the musicians, but usually choose for themselves a more moderate street version of the rebellious horror outfits.

In case of doubt, wearing long hair and a fan shirt, the uniform of the metal fan, is enough for all outsiders to recognize a person as belonging to the metal scene. Details tell insiders the person’s preferences for a particular heavy style, such as the shirt motive and the particular accessories that are worn. For example a cross worn upside-down with a strongly alienating band logo is an indication for the person’s passion for black metal. Otherwise the individual need for expression decides how many additional clothing elements are taken over from the musicians. A fan could decide to wear martial arts-related silver jewelry (the upside-down cross or pentagram, studs or chains) or makeup—or else can make do without any outside signs of belonging to the scene and simply buy black metal CDs and go to concerts of the bands.

In contrast to the radical black metal scene (which is at the moment particularly popular among younger fans in Germany), the traditionalists’ scene has taken up the fight for the good old “true metal.” This scene, which is also quite active now, proclaims its convictions particularly in fanzines. For the traditionalists, death and black metal do not even belong to heavy metal. Their arguments against death and black metal extend from the quality of the music (too dilettantish) to the lust for commercial success at any cost, to the lyrics, which are said to cross all boundaries of taste in order to increase sales. This traditionalist group wears clothing exactly like that of the fans of the 1980s: tight-fitting jeans, sneakers, band shirts and a kind of monk’s habit, on which patches with the names of particular bands have been sewn. This outfit proclaims, “I am a metal *Urgestein* (lit., original rock, or an original, loyal fan) and I’m not ashamed of it.” This “true metal” faction sees to it that the bands from the 1970s and 80s are not forgotten; they play the role of *Heimatzpflieger* (caretakers of traditional customs, a word usually used in connection with folk culture), who dig up and revive the “old song repertoire.”

Trench warfare within the heavy metal scene is one factor that has marked its development, whether between “black” and “white” communities, between soft rock and death metal fans, or between politically active and disinterested fans. Furthermore, since the late 1980s metal-typical fan culture has experienced a diluting process due to the steadily growing group of listeners who listen to not only heavy metal but also formerly “enemy musics” such as hip hop, techno, independent and related substyles. Thus mass heavy metal musical events held at the end of the 20th century such as the open air concert “Rock am Ring” presented a colorful mixture of musicians of completely different musical types. Ten years ago, it would have been unthinkable for such groups to appear together on one stage. In reaction to this, individual scenes are establishing events that present exclusively their own bands (e.g., the Wacken Open Air or the Dynamo Open Air in Eindhoven for metal fans; the Zillo-Festival or Gothic/Wave-Treffen in Leipzig for the black scene). What is put on display at such events is the “pure doctrine,” whether on a musical, optical or behavioral level. This is for the metal fan a chaotic mud fight, for the waver the skillful presentation of the perfectly styled self. Still, the metal scene fights against inconsistencies resulting from the limitlessness of the market and the no longer existent separation between mainstream and underground (at least on the part of the music industry).

## 5. Forces of Unification

As mentioned earlier, heavy metal continues to represent itself to the outside world as a closed cultural system, a system in which the same laws apply as twenty years ago. The foundation of this proudly proclaimed self-understanding seems to be a continuing consensus on what makes heavy metal independent from other styles. By means of diverse strategies, the readership of magazines and fanzines, for example, swear to a common denominator that is supposed to maintain the spirit of heavy metal over and above all stylistic boundaries. In my opinion there are in particular three such factors that allegedly ensure that heavy metal remains “a beast that refuses to die.”<sup>4</sup>

- Firm ties to a common musical tradition.
- Recognition of fundamental heavy metal values.
- Negative evaluation by outsiders.

As soon as a new style (or the reaction to it) coincides at least partially with these three factors, it can be integrated into the heavy metal culture as a whole. Before this happens, a certain phase of uncertainty may also emerge, during which much discussion and polemicizing take place. Generational conflicts play an essential role in this integration process. The older fans usually react first in a way that rejects that which is produced and favored by the younger generation because often the new style questions the existing tradition and produces new ways of measuring musical, lyrical and behavioral provocation. A good example of this is the group Deathmetal, which instigated both indignation as well as enthusiasm. Their music contained wheezing



voices instead of high, clear vocalization, a storm of riffs instead of guitar solos, and morbid lyrics instead of hymns to the peacefulness of the rock 'n roll lifestyle. In the end, though, the many critics from the heavy metal scene had to grudgingly acknowledge that this generation of metal fans and musicians are doing nothing more than what they themselves had done five or ten years earlier. The younger generation is shocking the "old guys" and showing them that the extremes have not yet been reached by any stretch of the imagination. Even if under protest, Deathmetal was finally accepted, and there was peace until the next new style emerged. The new style that caused a stir—meaning that it delighted some endlessly and made others shake their heads with horror—was the radical style of black metal. In this way, the cultural spectrum of heavy metal has been continually broadened anew without having to give up that which already existed. (After all, the younger, rebellious bands also emphasize repeatedly the influence and inspiration they have received from their predecessors.) The independence of the subscenes thus forms only a superficial contrast to the propagated unity of the culture as a whole. The musical foundation, that is, the collective heroes and the musical heritage, enjoys uninterrupted respect both from the younger as well as the older fan generations, and this creates ties between them. Today the scene has the major problem that nothing new or provocative has appeared on the horizon for quite a while. Musicians are quoting themselves and stewing in their own juices, which causes many fans to predict the end of heavy metal.

In spite of all their differences, what contributes considerably to the "we feeling" of the scene is the negative perception among outsiders of the heavy metal culture. The heavy metal scene is a conglomerate of numerous clichés, not only for the ignorant amateur but also for many professionals who give scholarly, philosophical or journalistic commentary on heavy metal. The long-haired figure wearing a monk's habit has become a symbol for the dull, ethically disoriented cattle-like masses who can only be shaken out of their lethargy by means of brainless, mercilessly loud, stamping music without any kind of meaningful contents. Simply the fact that someone "belongs" to a certain musical genre becomes evidence for a whole string of characteristics that are attached to that declared fan. The reaction to this negative labeling is on the one hand a collective, more-or-less justified indignation, as well as the emergence of a "we feeling"—that is, the perception of "we who are unjustifiably attacked." This "martyr consciousness" has been driven to new heights by the group Die Böhsen Onkelz. This group strained its image as an unjustifiably attacked victim of the media to the limit. Due to the group's never contested past as skinheads, the media accused them of having some responsibility for the series of anti-foreigner attacks made in Germany during the early 1990s. Some of the arsonists who set fire to houses where asylum-seekers lived had worn Onkelz shirts, and in the early 1980s the band had a song in its repertoire with the title "*Türken Raus*" (Turks Go Home) which was however never published. On the basis of these facts, the press concluded that Die Böhsen Onkelz was an ideological predecessor of growing right-wing radicalism. Even though the band repeatedly distanced itself from the right-wing radical scene, and even organized "Rock Against the Right-wing" festivals, many media

representatives insisted on this view. Indignation over the unjustified treatment brought together the band and its fans, which is why Onkelz fans can count on at least one song on each new recording with the theme “We are the scapegoats of the nation.”<sup>5</sup>

As this example shows, binding together fans beyond stylistic borders is the common knowledge that many of the heavy metal clichés are based on a too literal perception of the scene and that this music actually says much more that is socially relevant than is commonly assumed. Disagreements over individual strategies on how to deal with attacks from the outside do however have a separating effect. While some make efforts toward clarification and dialogue, others draw back into still stronger forms of provocation. The latter pick up the gauntlet thrown down by critics with religious or youth-protection motivations and answer these with still crasser clichés that help themselves to all the signals that serve art. Some even resort to violence, as in the radical black metal scene in Norway, where fanatics went so far as to set fire to churches and to carry out brutal attacks on Christian bands (Roccor 1992, Billerbeck & Nordhausen 1994 and Krull 1993).

Heavy metal is not, as so often asserted, simply loud, primitive rock but rather a form of music that stands for a particular attitude towards life, for values that the fans miss in their normal everyday world and which they not rarely find in the metal scene. I repeat here only the most important catchwords that are repeatedly used by fans and musicians: authenticity, honesty, solidarity, cohesion, community feeling, the plain truth without adornment, directness, loyalty, without compromise, honesty, provocation, being different. Absolute countervalues for the scene are: salability, playing up to norms, commercialization, egomania, posing, censorship. One of the central concepts of the metal scene is that of freedom: freedom to say what one wants, to think what one wants, to look as one wants, without regard of reigning morals. For this reason, the musicians who enjoy the highest degree of admiration are those who practice a heavy metal style of life with the least degree of compromise. These are musicians who have themselves tattooed over their entire bodies, who grow their hair down to their hips, who prefer to wear the same clothes day in and day out and who remain unconditionally true to the deeper meaning of heavy metal in their music and lyrics, regardless of newer trends or sales figures. To do your own thing and to let all kinds of criticism slide off you: this represents the ideal of the metal scene—an ideal, it should be noted, that stands diametrically opposed to the actual lives of most fans.

## 6. Conclusion

For those who want to approach the heavy metal scene, I would recommend first bearing the following in mind (speaking from many years of experience): the largest barrier is the existing cliché in one’s own head. One must learn to perceive the person behind the bloodthirsty looking T-shirt and to comprehend his or her appearance

simply as an expression of being a fan, without rash interpretations about the possible conceptual content. Important is that the fan is always the expert. Secondly, the researchers should at least attempt to get used to the music, for if they have no knowledge of the music, they will be able to find out little about its fans. Third, investigators should abstain from rash categorizations, for the fine differences are precisely what is important to the metal fan. A final word of advice: never make the mistake of describing heavy metal as “noise”—or Bon Jovi as a heavy metal group. That would mean the certain end of any kind of conversation.

## Notes

- 1 The assertion has been made that heavy metal has the tendency towards right-wing radicalism, for example in Lenz 1989 and *Der Spiegel* 44/1998:304; criticism of this view can be found in Helsper 1992, Stock & Mühlberg 1990 and Matthesius 1995. This does not mean that there are no heavy metal fans with a radical right-wing orientation. These do exist, just as the usually overlooked nonpolitical and left-wing-oriented skinhead scenes. See Farin & Seidel-Pielen 1994 and Funk-Hennigs 1995.
- 2 This holds true particularly in the use of satanic or occult symbols in heavy metal. See the literature on opponents of Christian rock, such as Banol 1987, Bäumer 1984 and Glogauer 1992.
- 3 On the styles of heavy metal, see Roccor 1996a and 1996b.
- 4 A formulation of Deena Weinstein 1991:11.
- 5 On the detailed history of Die Böhsen Onkelz, see Hartsch 1997.

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