

From ‘The Undead will Feast’ to ‘The Time to Kill is Now’: Frankfurt School and Freudian perspectives on Death Metal

Abstract

In this paper, I study 109 online interviews with well known Death Metal scene identities. Drawing on Frankfurt School Critical Social Theory and Freudian and neo-Freudian psychology, I present three alternative, but not mutually exclusive, perspectives by which we can begin to understand the lyrical themes commonly used in Death Metal music. The second perspective utilizes the late-period ‘life and death instincts’ theory of Sigmund Freud to argue that the exploration of themes of violence in Death Metal allows the death instinct to operate rather than represses it. The opposite side of the dialectic, however, is that these lyrical explorations occur within the confines of a supportive fraternal scene of committed insiders whose interactions allow for the life instinct to be reinforced.

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Interviewer: 'Do other kids' parents prevent them from playing with George's and Paul's children, because they're in a band like Cannibal Corpse?'

Alex Webster of Cannibal Corpse (2007): 'They're both so young and their kids are still babies, so they haven't had any problems like that, but I kinda doubt it. First of all, the parents aren't gonna know, so I can't foresee that being a problem... but you never know. There could be some radical Christian families that wouldn't want their children to play with the kids of a person in an extreme band...'

Introduction¹

The term 'Extreme Metal scene', as used by the academic sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris (2007; see also Harris 2000, 2001), is a generally accepted contemporary umbrella term used to refer to Extreme Metal bands, musicians, fans and their associated outlets for publication, meeting points and discourses (now to a large extent conducted online). As a musical category, Extreme Metal refers to Heavy Metal music of the most extreme kind in terms of sound, look, image, CD cover art and song titles/lyrics. It includes several sub-scenes that revolve around Black Metal, Death Metal, Doom, Grindcore and Thrash Metal (Moynihan and S oderlind 2003; Mudrian 2004; Kahn-Harris 2007; Popoff 2007, p. 4).² The term Heavy Metal is used generally and in this paper to refer to the unified scene of the 1980s before the scene became fragmented, splitting into its assorted sub-genres (Walser 1993B, p. 13). The existence of sub-genres of Heavy Metal after around 1987-1988 (Mudrian 2004) tended to impose a limit upon the wider appeal of any one band or sub-genre and in this sense the incredible success of bands such as Metallica, Guns'N'Roses and Megadeth can be viewed as being a unique product of the 1980s unity within Heavy Metal.

Baulch (2003) and Kahn-Harris (2007) characterize today's Extreme Metal scene as being simultaneously both local and global. It is localized to the extent that it revolves around locally-based record labels, music clubs, recording studios and music stores. For example, the Norwegian Black Metal scene of the early 1990s tended to revolve around Mayhem guitarist Euronymous (real name Øystein Aarseth)'s music shop Helvete ('Hell' in Norwegian) in Oslo's Old Town, where fans and bands from the west coast of Norway and especially Bergen would often stay the night before journeying home (see Moynihan and Söderlind 2003, p. 72). Nearly every country in the world presently has one or more localized Extreme Metal scenes with more or less strong or weak connections to the scenic hubs located in Florida, New York, Norway and Sweden. The same legendary bands, mostly American and Swedish in the case of Death Metal and Norwegian in the case of Black Metal, are revered by all local scenes worldwide and are considered 'non-negotiable' if a local scene wants to be recognized globally. Below the legendary bands, each sub-scene has its own "sticky, obedient second tier" (Popoff 2007, p. 249) of performers that gives the sub-scene its critical mass.

Baulch (2003) notes the continued popularity and importance of the first-generation American Death Metal bands Cannibal Corpse and Obituary to the Balinese death/thrash scene. She concludes that these bands are a form of international currency whose sub-cultural capital local scene members can utilize to re-affirm group and individual identities and strengthen group bonds. The Balinese death/thrash scene commands respect locally as a viable outpost of an international movement; the scene represents an important form of Foucauldian localized resistance against the encroachment of the hegemony of international tourism over all facets of Balinese life (since Death Metal bands are not invited to play in front of tourists). As Purcell (2003, p. 192) argues, 'heroes like Alex Webster [bassist and founding member of Cannibal

Corpse] are real. They are not unattainable, media-produced images of perfection. They are a part of the scene that they have created’.

The violence in Death Metal lyrics, especially those of early Cannibal Corpse recordings that involve rape and murder scenes with the perpetrator being the song narrator, has attracted severe criticism from American politicians and from regulators in Europe (Popoff 2007, p. 71). Cannibal Corpse has been banned from performing in at least four countries (Australia, Germany, New Zealand and South Korea) at various times in the past due to its graphic album art and violent song titles and lyrics. As late as 2007 Cannibal Corpse remained banned from performing songs from any of the first three albums live in Germany (Willems 2002; Prindle 2004). Senator Bob Dole in a mid 1990s speech mentioned Cannibal Corpse by name (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 28), claiming that the band ‘violates human decency’ (Wikipedia 2007) by ‘numbing exposure to graphic violence and loveless sex’ (Sharpe-Young 2007). Democrat Senator Joseph Lieberman and the Christian *700 Club* TV program have also been outspoken opponents of the band (Filicetti 1996; Popoff 2007, p. 71; Sharpe-Young 2007).

Nevertheless, in recent years, Cannibal Corpse band members have been able to present a decidedly less shocking image to its fans and the wider community, which seems to have gained widespread acceptance. Members of first-generation Death Metal bands Deicide (post the 2006 firing by Glen Benton of the Hoffman brothers for ill-discipline and steroid-induced mood swings), Immolation, Obituary and Suffocation have also gone through a growth and maturation process that is evident when band interviews and lyrical themes from the bands’ early years are compared with the present.

Cannibal Corpse band members now (c. 2004 to present) claim that the band’s lyrics do not represent actual beliefs and are ‘fiction’ (Prindle 2004; Smith 2006) and

‘entertainment’ (see, for example, Smith 2006; Tracey 2006; Anonymous 2007; Varbanov 2007), the equivalent of a B-grade horror movie (Robyn R. 2006). In response to a question whether it is weird for a vegetarian (such as drummer Paul Mazurkiewicz) to be in band named Cannibal Corpse, bassist and founding member Alex Webster responds, invoking the band’s recent ‘lyrics are entertainment/fiction’ hegemonic mantra: ‘Yeah, a little, but it was the same thing with Carcass – all of them were vegetarians, although they had a lot of gory lyrics, with plenty of slicing and dicing going on, but that’s not really contradictory. I hope everybody knows we’re presenting lyrics that have nothing to do with our personal lives. It’s just something we do for entertainment’ (cited in Varbanov 2007). It is interesting to note that although complaints about the band lyrics occurred in the mid 1990s, my interview analysis does not reveal the ‘lyrics are entertainment/fiction’ hegemonic mantra being used by any member of the band prior to 2004. It seems to be a recent invention. Its use by vocalist George ‘Corpsegrinder’ Fisher, Webster and Mazurkiewicz (the band members that do the bulk of the interviews) but only after 2004 suggests that it is a carefully crafted Public Relations strategy rather than a spontaneous reaction to the original criticisms.

The following 2006 quote from founding member Mazurkiewicz expounds the ‘lyrics are entertainment/fiction’ theme in some depth:

Yeah, we write about some pretty horrific subjects, but yeah, it’s just fiction. We say this every interview, it’s fiction; we’re not out there promoting, we’re not out there preaching to anybody, it’s just horror stories put to music. And I really think yeah exactly, you get to know us for five minutes and we’re all just normal guys, all just nice guys; we don’t wish harm upon anybody, or anything like that. ... They would just realize it, come on, it’s about fiction and entertainment. You can’t take it in the wrong light; unfortunately things have happened like this in the world. I know recently some things have happened in Perth [Australia], where as I understand some girls

were raped and brutally murdered. So then of course the slap back comes to us. 'Oh Cannibal Corpse is coming, and they have songs that talk about this', and it's not the greatest time [for us]. Well yeah, we're sorry that this happens, but we shouldn't be the ones to be punished for it. (cited in Smith 2006).

The interview responses from Death Metal band members (such as those quoted above), and the album review postings from the fans on Amazon.com, are typically calm, considerate and analytical and reflect a deep professionalism and devotion to Death Metal (see also Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 64 who calls this the 'discourse of professionalism' within the Extreme Metal scene). Fans discuss gruesome songs with hideous titles in a calm, intellectual fashion as if they were dissecting Hegel or Weber. Death Metal is a legitimate sub-genre of Extreme Metal in the fans' eyes and Cannibal Corpse band members are now widely regarded as seasoned scene legends (Lomeli 2002) that helped to pioneer the sub-genre and fight its detractors. As Mazurkiewicz said as long ago as 1998, the fans know what they can expect to receive from Cannibal Corpse and are very rarely disappointed: 'I just see us as a band, a metal band, that is doing our own thing and still putting out aggressive music for people to pick up on and enjoy it. We're still Cannibal Corpse doing the same shit we have always done. We aren't going to change now. We've been doing this far too long to change now' (cited in Bromley 1998A). Mazurkiewicz offered similar comments in a 1996 interview, when asked whether he thought Death Metal should become mainstream: 'I think the only way it's going to become more mainstream is if more people start listening to it. That's the only way it's going to happen. It's not going to change to suit the mainstream audience. If it's going to get mainstream it's just because there are a lot of people who are listening to death metal. Other than that, it just wouldn't be the same' (cited in Filicetti 1996).

The research question that I explore in this paper is: Do Cannibal Corpse and other leading bands in the Death Metal sub-genre encourage predatory sexual violence, especially against a female Other (Harris 2001; Mudrian 2004; Phillipov 2006; Kahn-Harris 2007), or can even the most extreme lyrical stances be justified, i.e. could shocking lyrics such as those for ‘Butchered at Birth’, ‘Fucked with a Knife’, ‘I Cum Blood’ and ‘Stripped, Raped and Strangled’ in the early Cannibal Corpse canon, simply acknowledge the repressed death instinct (Marcuse 1966; Klein 1997A, 1997B, 1997C) that we all share, if only we are willing to admit it? Do Death Metal lyrics allow for an exploration of the birth-life-death cycle and the serial predator’s mental state that contemporary discourses of consumer capitalism fail to permit?

This paper presents and analyses three somewhat inter-connected perspectives about Death Metal philosophy that draw upon Frankfurt School Critical Social Theory and Freudian and neo-Freudian psychology. It is hoped that these three perspectives will provide us some insight into Death Metal philosophy and, in particular, the use of predatory sexual violence in the lyrics, and the role that the band image and lyrics have played in creating and fostering a loyal and supportive fan community. The paper uses the theoretical frameworks of (a) Frankfurt School critical social theorist, Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), in particular his critique of the role of sex in Advanced Industrial Society found in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964); and (b) the Freudian theory of life and death instinct.

The paper uses archival interview data from online Extreme Metal publications. The data used in this research are interview transcripts from 109 online interviews with DM scene identities including members of Behemoth (Poland), Cannibal Corpse (USA) (29 interviews out of the 109), Decapitated (Poland), Deceased (USA), Hypocrisy (Sweden), Immolation (USA), Malevolent Creation (USA), Morbid Angel (USA),

Mortification (Australia), Napalm Death (UK), Nile (USA), Obituary (USA), Suffocation (USA) and Visceral Bleeding (Sweden). The interview responses are studied in order to gain a variety of insider perspectives on the complex web of meanings that characterize the scene and the issue of the relative importance of lyrics versus music (see especially Brunner 2006; Phillipov 2006; Kahn-Harris 2007). The interviews were accessed using purposeful sampling, i.e. by accessing well-known online Extreme Metal publications in order of the known size of their interviews archives and the site's prominence. Interviews with Cannibal Corpse members were obtained, by contrast, by a Google search undertaken by the author on 29 May 2007 for 'Cannibal Corpse interviews'. The interview dates range from 1995 to 2007 with the vast majority being from the 2000s.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines in detail key aspects of the theoretical perspectives of Critical Social Theory and Freudianism/neo-Freudianism and then applies them to the Death Metal scene. Section 3 concludes.

Theoretical perspectives and discussion

A rejection of mainstream, capitalistic use of sex appeal to sell products and secure personal benefits in the workplace (Marcuse, 1964)

Frankfurt School sociologist Herbert Marcuse (1964) is especially scathing about one feature of Advanced Industrial Society: the use of sex appeal, charm and charisma to further the purposes of capitalism and one's own personal interests within the capitalist system. He regards the harnessing of natural gifts and talents in the cause of exchange values as a most extreme and repulsive form of alienation and false consciousness because '[s]ex is integrated into work and public relations [and it] ... is thus made more

susceptible to (controlled) satisfaction' (Marcuse 1964, p. 75), i.e. it adds to the allure of consumer capitalism for even the lowliest ranked of workers. In Marcuse's (1964, p. 74) words:

It has often been noted that advanced industrial civilization operates with a greater degree of sexual freedom – 'operates' in the sense that the latter becomes a market value and a factor of social mores. Without ceasing to be an instrument of labor, the body is allowed to exhibit its sexual features in the everyday work world and in work relations. This is one of the unique achievements of individual society – rendered possible by the reduction of dirty and heavy physical labor; by the availability of cheap, attractive clothing, beauty culture, and physical hygiene; by the requirements of the advertising industry, etc. The sexy office and sales girls, the handsome, virile junior executive and floor worker are highly marketable commodities, and the possession of suitable mistresses – once the prerogative of kings, princes, and lords – facilitates the career of even the less exalted ranks in the business community.

The Death Metal philosophy can be regarded as equally hostile to this form of sex appeal salesmanship in the interests of capitalism (Baulch 2003), although some might claim that the very consistency of the Death Metal look, sound and image is a form of brand marketing to a clearly-defined group of young and mostly male consumers. Nonetheless, on the face of it, Death Metal bands seem utterly opposed to the spirit and manifestations of consumer capitalism (without being Marxists in any orthodox sense). The band members of bands such as Cannibal Corpse, Malevolent Creation and Obituary wear standard uniforms of black tee shirts, featuring their own band's logo or that of other Death Metal bands (thus demonstrating their loyalty to the scene), blue denim jeans and long hair (Baulch 2003; Mudrian 2004, p. 170; Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 132; see also the Cannibal Corpse band photo at Wikipedia 2007). This uniform has

altered little since the sub-genre's formative years in the late 1980s when it first emerged out of the extant Thrash Metal scene. Death Metal lyrics (especially, for example, on the early Cannibal Corpse albums) deliberately violate the standard norms of contemporary society in such an obvious manner that the point cannot be missed. And yet, as mentioned earlier, the loyalty of the fans to the leading bands of the scene and the life-affirming nature of the fan community suggest that the fans appreciate the scene's counter-cultural and anti-consumerism stance.

Suffocation's Mike Smith identifies with the unwritten 'code of ethics' that he has seen and experienced in other parts of the world, an inner code that he feels that the USA, with its worship of consumer capitalism, has long ago lost: 'The funny thing is we are more dazed and confused in the US than any country I've ever been and Suffocation has been to many lands recently. No matter if they are rich or poor, they follow a code of ethics that's been lost a long time ago in the US if it ever existed at all' (cited in Fishermane 2006). Smith goes on to explain how his ideal world would operate: 'Democrat [Party rule], if any at all, would be my side since we have to choose. Common sense rules all. The wealthy would fear me worse than any stock market crash. ... And the common sense hard working folk will laugh in glee because it just made sense to'.³ Harrel (1994, p. 96, cited in Beckwith 2006, p. 19, emphasis added) also emphasizes, consistent with Perspective (a), the anti-commercialism stance of Death Metal which he argues can be gleaned from the Death Metal album cover photos:

...significant to death metal album art is the fact that the musicians are never pictured on the front cover. If they appear at all in the package, it is usually in smaller black and white photos showing them in street-like settings, not in flashy on-stage antics. This serves to de-emphasize the importance of musicians – *since [death] metal ideology involves a strict avoidance of overt commercialism.*⁴

The most obvious point of comparison is Metallica, the former Thrash Metal band and now mainstream hard rock act and, to a lesser extent, former Cannibal Corpse vocalist Chris Barnes' generally despised new outfit Six Feet Under (SFU).⁵ The majority of internet postings on Amazon for the recent albums of both bands are hostile, with the bands being declared to have 'sold out' in order to make more money (in Metallica's case) and to be incoherent, lazy and drug-addled (in SFU's case).⁶ Cannibal Corpse fans' collective desire to reject SFU could also represent an attempt to purge past sins given that the lyrics of the 1990-1994 Barnes-era recordings were much more obnoxious than are those of the modern 1995-to-present Fisher-era.

As an alternative to standard capitalistic notions of success, Peter Tagtgren of Sweden's Hypocrisy defines success simply in terms of gaining respect from knowledgeable and discerning others within the scene:

All I am looking for in this industry is respect. Respect is success for me. ... Respect can be measured by several things; most notably album sales and positive reviews too. Those give you respect in this industry and you can continue to work on that success if you are true to what you do. We believe in the band and where we are headed. I don't really care much about album sales. I like to read the reviews and see how people interpret our music. ... I think people should just go out and create music, and if it makes the creator of the music happy, then keep it that way. Keep it simple folks and don't follow trends (cited in Bromley 1998B).

Dallas Toller Wade of Nile makes similar comments when discussing his admiration for the values of legendary New York band Immolation: 'Getting popular is not what they [Immolation] care about, they care about making the music that moves them as musicians, making themselves and the people that do listen to them happy. That's all

that really matters' (cited in Schwarz 2001A). In another interview, Toller Wade's bandmate at Nile, Karl Sanders, elaborates on his perspective on practical *lived* ethics, a perspective which guides every part of his band's operations: 'Nile material is pretty challenging and difficult to play. Trying to do it under too much influence would be disastrous, and it wouldn't be fair to the fans either. I mean, fans pay a lot of money to come out and see you play, and getting up there and doing a half-assed show is unacceptably disrespectful' (cited in Smit 2007). Significantly, Kahn-Harris (2007, p. 126, emphasis added) echoes the above quotes from band members when he comments that '[l]ong-standing scene members who have a reputation for ethical dealing and a commitment to the scene gain sub-cultural capital in the form of *respect* and fame'.

Identification of shared Freudian repressed destructive (death) instincts which form the basis for community

In my opinion, this perspective and the next one, Perspective (c), provide the best hope for a realistic and yet sympathetic theory-based understanding of the Death Metal philosophy, including both the lyrical themes utilized and the life-affirming nature of the fan community. Perspectives (b) and (c) do not appear mutually exclusive and so may be mutually reinforcing in practice. It is argued that any attempt to see the Death Metal scene, including Cannibal Corpse, as presenting an orthodox anti-capitalist or Marxist message, using alternative imagery, seems to be a case of squeezing the reality into an ideological grid (Phillipov 2006). I think that we can be better served in this instance by attempting to gain insight about Death Metal philosophy as it actually exists. Using the term coined by Harris (2001; see also Phillipov 2006), the Death Metal scene appears to be characterized by a 'reflective anti-reflexivity' and hence a theory that is based in the instincts holds more promise than one that requires mental adherence by the

fans to a particular schematic ideology (e.g. orthodox Marxism).⁷ Because of this it is preferable to separate Marxism from Freudianism, and it is with this separation in mind that we should read and apply Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1966). We must, therefore, for the purposes of our exposition of Perspective (c), separate out what Marcuse hoped to join.

Many commentators allege an inconsistency between Freud's early model of the ego, the id and the superego and his later paradigm of the life (Eros) and death instincts (Marcuse 1966; Klein 1997A, 1997B, 1997C). However, Marcuse sees no such inconsistency. In his early model, Freud presented the id as the source of sexual drive and creativity. The id is home to the two primary instincts, i.e. the sexual and ego-preservation instincts, or in Freud's words Sex and Hunger (Marcuse 1966, p. 82). 'The id is free from the forms and principles which constitute the conscious, social individual. It is neither affected by time nor troubled by contradictions; it knows "no values, no good and evil, no morality"' (Freud 1933, p. 105, cited in Marcuse 1966, p. 29). Since work is not a primary instinct, the energy required for work must be diverted from one of the primary instincts. Because 'civilization is mainly the work of Eros' (Marcuse 1966, p. 82), culture 'obtains a great part of the mental energy it needs by subtracting it from sexuality' (Freud 1949, p. 74, cited in Marcuse 1966, p. 82). Both 'work impulses' and 'social instincts' are 'thus fed by aim-inhibited sexuality'.

Freud's view is that the id's primary instincts must be continually subjected to the ego so that civilized society can function; he views a non-repressive civilization as an impossibility (Marcuse 1966, pp. 13, 17-18). The ego is the part of the person that relates to the world around her/him and makes sure that the desires of the id are re-channelled and transformed into socially acceptable and productive forms of expression, such as friendship and controlling nature and other people through work (Marcuse 1966,

p. 30). The ego is also important in its ability to handle common anxieties and a weak and fragmented ego in children is known to hinder development (Klein 1997A, 1997B).

The superego, for its part, is the conscience that imposes additional restraints upon both the id and the ego (Marcuse 1966, pp. 31-33, 53). The thoughts of the superego are created and reinforced by socialization agencies such as the family, schools and mass media. 'However, the repressions soon become unconscious, automatic as it were, and a "great part" of the sense of guilt remains unconscious'. Integral to Freud is the '*primal horde hypothesis*' whereby the brothers of early man killed their dominating father so as to create first matriarchy and then the rule of the brothers (Marcuse 1966, pp. 15, 63-77). Freud argued that the residual guilt of murdering the father is part of the memory ('memory traces' remain; Marcuse 1966, p. 73) and hence part of the experiences of modern-day humans (Marcuse 1966, p. 68, 73, 78). Death Metal lyrics seem to represent a deliberate attempt to bypass or block out the (possibly excessively repressive) operations of the superego, at least for those short periods of time when the fan is listening to the music and attending concerts. In recent interviews, Cannibal Corpse band members continually re-emphasize their maintained position or hegemony that the lyrics are in no way to be taken seriously or literally (i.e. as some normative call to action). Cannibal Corpse lyrics are a release valve for the repressed destructive instinct and/or they are simply 'fiction' and 'entertainment' (much like the *Saw* horror films as Mazurkiewicz and Webster have argued in *Terrorizer* magazine; Tracey 2006).

The later (post-1920) Freudian theory of life (Eros) and death instincts claims that these two instincts are primary. One affirms life while the other affirms death and hence they are 'eternal[ly]' opposed in 'struggle' (Marcuse 1966, p. 79; Klein 1997A, 1997B, 1997C). However, the destructive or death instinct is not, for Freud, destruction without a purpose; it is destruction for the express purpose of self-defence against actual or

perceived harm. The death instinct is best seen as a wish to avoid pain and return to the peaceful state of the womb; it is ‘an unconscious flight from pain and want’ (Marcuse 1966, p. 29). For the neo-Freudian child psychologist, Melanie Klein, the fear of the annihilation of life is an integral aspect of the death instinct.

In the context of Death Metal, and especially early Cannibal Corpse, the focus on predatory sexual violence, especially personalized violence administered against a usually female Other (Mudrian 2004, pp. 161, 251; Phillipov 2006; Kahn-Harris 2007), could represent an acknowledgement and acceptance of our primary destructive instinct. According to Kleinian theory, these lyrics may represent a temporary regression to an earlier stage of childhood development, which she terms the ‘paranoid-schizoid position’ (Klein 1997A, 1997B). In this stage, the infant projects outwards the bad parts of herself/himself on to the bad object (bad breast) and as a result introjects (receives back into herself/himself) a world that she/he perceives as extremely hostile. The sexualised violence being usually against a female is consistent with Kleinian theory since the infant’s most important early relationship is with the mother. The sexual violence lyrics could possibly also reflect a Foucauldian form of localized resistance (Foucault 1980A, 1980B, 1980C) to patriarchy in the contemporary West, reflected in the fact that our contemporary post-modern discourses tend to permit the feminine but reject the masculine; the percentage of female-led households is on the rise in the UK, USA and Australia and the school system has become increasingly feminized especially at the primary level.

The ‘acknowledgement of the death instinct’ perspective explains Cannibal Corpse’s personalized sexual predator lyrics and, notwithstanding Harris’ (2001) assertion that Cannibal Corpse’s lyrics are ‘problematic in a way that Carcass’s are not’ (Phillipov 2006, p. 76; see also Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 36), explains why Cannibal Corpse felt a

perceived need to modify or go beyond Carcass's depersonalized degendered lyrical approach. As Popoff (2007, p. 71) writes, Cannibal Corpse 'deliberately set out day one to write the most offensive and brutal lyrics in recorded music'. This suggests purpose and intent. Under this Perspective (b), early Cannibal Corpse lyrics ('Fucked with a Knife', anyone?) may communicate an honesty that the conventional mainstream dominant ideology has not attained and does not accept. This is despite Foucault's (1981) claim that historically the importance attached to sexual issues began with the bourgeoisie and was imposed by that class first upon its own members. According to this perspective, the Moral Majority, including Senator Bob Dole, may condemn early Cannibal Corpse because they feel threatened by both the band's honesty and the reality of their own (unacknowledged) destructive instinct. As Pataki (2006, p. 104, 2007, p. 101) comments, '[m]any people try to suppress their homosexual impulses by combating them in others'. Karl Sanders of Nile offers some support for this Perspective (b) when he mentions that one major factor influencing his band's lyrical emphasis on the warfare aspects of Ancient Egyptian religion was the desire to fight the effects of repression experienced living life every day in an American town:

We live in a very religiously oppressive part of the country. In, say, Berlin, there's a bar, a pub, on every single corner, alright? Where we live there's a fucking church on every corner. There's a church across the street from where we practice. You can walk out the door of our rehearsal room, pick up a rock, and hit the church with it. So, that's what we do, literally and figuratively (cited in Schwarz and Rocher 1999).

As an anonymous reviewer for this paper points out, this perspective does not require that key members of the scene are or have ever been students of the work of Freud, Klein or Marcuse. This is because, for this perspective, it is the fans' unconscious id (as

‘allowed’ by the ego at certain prescribed occasions, e.g. when listening to the music and attending concerts) which ‘connects with’ Death Metal philosophy. Since the fans prefer to immerse themselves completely in the experience of the music, and appear to use ‘reflective anti-reflexivity’ (Harris 2001; Phillipov 2006; Kahn-Harris 2007) in regards to Death Metal lyrics, this explanation appears compatible with the facts. A theory of the instincts holds promise for explaining Death Metal philosophy since only the fans’ (non-judgemental) instincts appear to remain connected with the music (at least during the listening experience) i.e. the listening and concert experiences allow for and encourage non-utilization of the restraining influences of the ego and superego. However, *in community* (i.e. outside the actual listening and concert experience), the ego and superego of band members and fans seem very much in control of the id, and so there is an agreed-upon unstated compromise between id and ego/superego. In Beckwith’s (2006, p. 14) words, lyrics of bands such as Carcass and Cannibal Corpse ‘all produce the desired effect... that of disgust and delight’. ‘Delight’ reflects the revelling in and the (at least partial) identification with the psyche of the serial-killer (paranoia and narcissism) while ‘disgust’ represents the reaction of the restraining ego and superego. In the world of early Cannibal Corpse, both reactions must be acknowledged as real and genuine, and the bands and fans are willing to live with the contradiction. Original Cannibal Corpse vocalist Chris Barnes it seems felt no need to ‘restrain himself’ when writing his lyrics.

Death Metal lyrics may also reflect an acceptance of our human frailty (although the predominant theme of most of the early Cannibal Corpse material *appears to be* domination of the female Other; Mudrian 2004, pp. 161, 251; Phillipov 2006; Kahn-Harris 2007). The reason for this is that any fan who is honest with her/himself will realize that real-life sexual predators are not free but are a slave to their own paranoia,

narcissism and destructive instinct. This argument is consistent with Foucault's (1987, pp. 78-91, 211-212) understanding of sexual ethics in Ancient Greece which he felt to revolve around the man's mastery and self-control. This can be contrasted with sexual ethics in the medieval Christian world which, for Foucault, was primarily a list of acceptable and unacceptable practices. This point is made clearer if we consider the lyrics of Suffocation, which are not only less perverse than those of early Cannibal Corpse's but much more balanced: the psychopathic first-person narrator feels empowerment through violent crime but this is tinged with both regret and appeals for help (see, for example, lyrics to the Suffocation songs 'Bind Torture Kill', 'Translucent Patterns of Delirium' and 'Regret' on the band's 2006 self-titled album available at darklyrics.com). In his review of Suffocation's 2006 album, Montague (2006) explains that '[t]he band consistently finds a language that really makes you think you're dealing with a bunch of schizo/psycho serial killers. People talk about the "devil's interval" being used pervasively in heavy metal -- well, Suffocation must use the "Dahmer interval", because there is something seriously deranged going on here. This sensation is enhanced by the often sprawling lyrical arrangement, which make Frank Mullen's vocal assaults so much more relentless and damaging'. Likewise, Jon Levasseur of Canada's Cryptopsy made the following statements about former lead vocalist and lyricist Lord Worm: 'Yes, Lord Worm was passionate by real fucked up people: serial killers, serial rapists. That's what he wrote about and it's not that he's all for that; it's just that he tried to explain the mental and physical procedures of a sick person like that. What he would go through before doing that, because he [Worm] studied in Psychology in University' (cited in Schwarz 1998).

This perspective explains the remarkable long-term loyalty (Lomeli 2002) that Cannibal Corpse and other legendary Death Metal bands engender in the fans. Band

members and fans are aware, and are aware that the other is aware, that true real-life sexual predators are slaves to their own unrestrained destructive instinct. This is especially apparent from recent Cannibal Corpse interviews. For Klein (1997C), the destructive instinct is linked closely to envy since it essentially is an effort to spoil and harm the good object (good breast) which the envious infant perceives wilfully deprives the infant of good things that it is really able to give. As Foucault (1987) would no doubt maintain, Death Metal band members and fans have possibly felt the power of their destructive instinct, and know that it must be re-channelled and not allowed to be heated up excessively. Palmolive, a UK 1970s punk scene identity, member of the Slits and one time girlfriend of the Clash's Joe Strummer, when commenting on the heroin death of the Sex Pistols' Sid Vicious, articulated this perspective as follows: 'I think the whole thing with the hate and anger of punk was it took him [Vicious] further than he wanted to go. There was a dark force there that was pushing him on. We were all playing with it, we liked to show off and look mean, but you have to be careful you're not taken in by it' (cited in Antonia et al. 2006, p. 135).

So we have a dialectic: Emphasis on control and mastery in Death Metal lyrics and community but also acknowledgement of *potential* weakness and addiction. The intense, note-dense musical soundscapes of technical Death Metal bands, such as Cannibal Corpse, Origin, Suffocation, Visceral Bleeding and Vital Remains, where so much seems to be happening musically that listening is an exhausting experience, seem to echo the troubled chaotic thought-life of the song narrators. This effect is most probably deliberately planned by the music's composers.⁸ In his review of Suffocation's 2006 album, Montague (2006) explains: 'The production is a dream come true: the bass portraying the earthquake on which the unstable mind above struggles to grasp the eroded knife-edges of sanity, the jackhammer drums pounding oppressively

against the inner walls of the skull, the choppy guitar riffs slicing through the cortex with devilish precision'. In the words of Suffocation's Smith: 'When I write lyrics, I let the music I'm writing dictate my mood. If it's aggressive, then I'll pick an aggressive topic, but if it's slow and doomy I'll go down that route. *Either way, the topics all relate to reality – Death Metal is the perfect soundtrack for a world so fucked up*' (cited in Morgan 2006, emphasis added).

Since in the Death Metal listening experience, we only hear the troubled vocals and the musical chaos, the division between 'inside the body' and 'outside the body' is broken down (Bahktin 1984; Beckwith 2006): is the musical chaos inside the narrator's head or is it the sounds of our cruel post-modern world or is it an amalgam of both? Are the chaotic musical soundscapes empowering the narrator (and the listener) or are they crushing and oppressing him?⁹ Both of these aspects are often at work, in much the same way as Walser (1993A) argues that the song 'Electric Eye' by Heavy Metal band Judas Priest *both* invites the listener to share the thrill of power with the electric eye (surveillance camera) and to consider the oppressive nature of that power from the societal perspective. As Walser (1993A, 1993B) argues, against Heavy Metal's critics, Heavy Metal songs often do not have one fixed meaning. For its part, Death Metal, unlike Power Metal and Thrash Metal, departs so far from traditional song structures of verse-chorus-verse that it really should be viewed as one of the genuine sounds of the post-modern.

Consistent with the use of musical soundscapes to echo the troubled thought-life of the narrator, Brunner (2006, p. 45) explains that 'death metal lyrics often function as another sound or instrument in the mix rather than [as] a format for deciphering the content of the song'. Echoing these observations, John Tardy, vocalist for Florida's Obituary and one of the inventors of the 'Cookie monster' vocal style, says: 'I still

won't hesitate to make up a sound instead of an actual word it that is what it takes to make a song feel right. To me it is the sound of my voice that is what it is all about and not the meaning of what I am saying' (cited in Chazz 2005). Peter Tagtgren of Hypocrisy agrees with Tardy especially regarding his band's earlier work: 'For me back then the voice was just another instrument like another guitar' (cited in Brookman 2002). Shane Embury of Napalm Death states that he does not regard the unintelligibility of his band's socio-political lyrics as important in the slightest since fans can always read the lyrics sheet enclosed with the CD: 'And I think people can just go "I can't understand what you're saying" and there you go, read! You just take it in, because you're going to take it in a lot better reading it than you are just singing along with the guy. Anyone can sing along and not realise what the person's singing, really' (cited in Schwarz 2001B).

It is noteworthy that any fan who oversteps the mark by exhibiting actual clear sexual predator tendencies or behaviours, or even just behaviour that looks or 'feels' out of control, is immediately ostracized and mocked by Cannibal Corpse band members (as the online interviews studied as a part of this research demonstrate). Kahn-Harris (2007, p. 44) notes that at Extreme Metal gigs, '[t]hose who do not control themselves and cause too much hurt may be forcibly ejected from the mosh pit'. Thus Death Metal music may represent a form of *controlled group therapy*: it acknowledges the shared destructive instinct, acknowledges its power, and then seeks to place controls upon it (controls accepted by the community).

In the following 2004 quote, Fisher explains how the band's lyrics are not to be taken seriously and that any fan who thinks otherwise must have serious untreated problems which are in no way the band's responsibility (this is a common theme that runs through Fisher's interviews):

Well I'll tell you what when Paul [Mazurkiewicz] first brought the lyrics in [for 'Blunt Force Castration'] and I first started singing it, I laughed. I couldn't sing the first line (laughs!) I mean, they're brutal and I don't want to make it seem like we're fucking joking, *but they're so brutal that if you really take them too seriously, I think there might be something wrong with you (laughs!)* I just fucking remember doing 'smash his scrotum sack' a few times and I couldn't. I'd just do it and laugh! ... When we were doing *Gallery of Suicide* [album] with (producer) Jim Morris, he would just stop and I would see him laughing so hard in the control room and I would start laughing (laughs) (cited in Lord of the Wasteland 2004, emphasis added).

The life-affirming and supportive nature of the Death Metal fan community that online Extreme Metal forums clearly reveal (and which Baulch's 2003 study indicates certainly characterizes the Balinese scene) appears an anomaly given the nature of Death Metal lyrics, look and image. However, this is far from being the case. In reality the fans support and affirm the life instinct in each other and seem to acknowledge that the music allows them to acknowledge, accept and then control and re-channel their own destructive instinct. There are several statements made by Death Metal band members in the studied interviews which speak of directly or hint at the '*cathartic effect*' (Brunner 2006, pp. 33, 35; Kahn-Harris 2007, pp. 52-53) of writing and listening to Death Metal music. For example, Cannibal Corpse's Webster speaks of the music producing a 'calming' and 'mellowing' effect on him as a teenage listener (Robyn R. 2006). Karl Sanders of Nile agrees with Webster, speaking of the courage that metal music gave him when he felt weak: 'I know I'm a worthwhile human being and I know I've got something positive to contribute to this world and I've gotta work hard like anybody else: at my job, at my music, at whatever. You know, and sometimes, metal

will carry you through. If you're feeling a little bit weak, you need a little inspiration from the metal gods' (cited in Schwarz 2001A).

Perspective (b) thus recognizes that it is healthier to acknowledge and accept your own destructive instinct and that of others rather than to repress and deny it (which is what the mainstream dominant hegemony encourages and even demands). Death Metal thus speaks the honest, unpretentious language of the street where instincts are recognized as powerful forces, fires that must be contained, instincts that become doubly potent when repressed; and instincts that should be respected, but never kowtowed to in pathetic fear. When expressing his views on drug addiction, Suffocation's Smith expounds his position that inner strength is vital and that those who fall into addiction demonstrate their own weakness and lack of self-mastery: 'Suffocation is stronger now than ever so be patient with our time taken to do what we do. Drugs have been one of the main sources and outlets for the dummies who can't live or breathe without them. I despise those who aren't strong enough to taste it if curious and then move on with your day and business. When the drugs become.... your day and business, which I know a *close* few who live by that rule. Your health, misfortune and untimely death is your problem. And I wish it upon you as quickly as you wish it upon yourself' (cited in Fishermane 2006, emphasis original).

A way of dealing with the issues of suffering and death which is not denial.

This perspective appears to hold particular promise, especially when it is combined with Perspective (b). Neither perspective *requires* that the Death Metal scene be regarded as expressing orthodox anti-capitalist or Marxist ideas. However, Perspective (c) is *consistent with* Marcuse's (1964) Frankfurt School view that Advanced Industrial Society is characterized by dishonesty because it refuses to deal with, or ascribe value

to, anything that cannot be measured or expressed in terms of ubiquitous exchange values.

This Perspective (c) can be presented as follows. In the Western world, this is one of the first generations not to have been much exposed to gruesome injury and death in the form of war and disease on a large scale. Medical science has progressed to the point where most diseases are treatable and curable; life expectancies in the Industrialised World have now reached record highs. The probability that the ordinary American working in a typical occupation (i.e. excluding members of the Armed Forces and the Anti-riot Police; i.e. the 'hardcore' of the Repressive State Apparatuses in Althusserian theory; Althusser 2006, p. 75) will suffer a premature death or serious disability is now relatively low. Because of these factors and developments, some individuals may therefore feel the need to 'explore' the issues of death and suffering in the arena of popular music so as to gain a more well-balanced and complete understanding of the birth-life-death cycle. Only Cannibal Corpse's music, and that of other Death Metal artists, will be able to provide a person with these 'experiences'. As Kahn-Harris (2007, p. 162) comments, using Carcass's work as an example, '[t]he scene produces truly radical transgressions of musical structures and systematic explorations of the boundaries between death, life and the body'. A person may also be interested in exploring the psyche of a serial killer; this interest is related to but distinct from interest in the birth-life-death cycle and it more directly ties in with Perspective (b). Fascination with sexual predators and serial killers can be seen by the popularity of late-night crime investigation TV drama serials and the rows upon rows of books on the topic one can buy at airport bookstores.

In the more general sense of an interest in the birth-life-death cycle, Death Metal music may help a person to come to grips with her/his own mortality and thus engender

humility, caring for others and a positive attitude to life. As one fan has commented on Amazon.com, Cannibal Corpse lyrics helped her/him to understand 'life must precede death and death must precede life', meaning not only that there is a natural cycle, but that death and life are integral, related aspects of the whole. With one, we can understand and appreciate the other. The very title of Cannibal Corpse's debut album *Eaten Back to Life* (1990) hints at this unity with the words 'eaten' and 'life' being reversed relative to their usual order. Here we move into the realm of Hegelian-Marxian dialectics (Tinker 2005) and the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model. Without the antithesis, we cannot reach the synthesis. Because of this, Death Metal lyrics may bring us closer to the whole of reality than does a shopping expedition at Wal-Mart or a meal at McDonalds. As Sellick (2007, pp. 44-45, 47, emphasis original), writing from a pastoral Anglican perspective, notes about Western consumer capitalist society:

[t]he word *experience* is a giveaway to what is going on here. It is increasingly the case that the self is defined exclusively by the present. We are becoming ahistorical persons. As such, the only thing we trust is the infinitely thin segment of time called the present and, obviously our experience of it. ... We seem, as a society, to suffer from extreme hubris to the extent that we have lost contact with the most basic human reality - that our dying is largely out of our control. ...Despite all of our medical technology our dying is not under our control, indeed it is the final loss of control, and to pretend that it can be managed is nothing less than professional arrogance. ...[M]uch of our society is now but a thin veneer of nihilism, a fragile bridge over the abyss of human non-existence. Many of our social ills may be traced to the inadequacy of this bridge and its eventual failure.

While Cannibal Corpse album covers mostly depict unrealistically and ridiculously grotesque scenes, the album cover of Obituary's debut album *Slowly We Rot* (1989),

depicting a man with a knife in his side lying on the pavement (an album cover that helped to define the emerging scene), represents a reality that many people do face in the contemporary urban world. Thus Death Metal allows a fan, especially a white lower middle-class one from the relatively safe suburban wastelands, to explore a world that she or he might not otherwise explore. In fact, for DePalma (2005), 'death metal impels us to confront mortality, and obviously in the musician's case, to directly express his own thoughts about the inevitable'.

The mainstream dominant capitalist hegemony tends to reject and downplay any mentions of death and suffering and creates an illusion that life will always be free from pain and that youth will be eternal. Mainstream popular music, including the hard rock of Bon Jovi, Kiss, Motley Crue and Van Halen, does nothing but reinforce the message of the dominant hegemony. Therefore, someone looking to explore issues of death and suffering can find it only in Death Metal. This Perspective (c), by rejecting denial, therefore has some similarities with Perspective (b) and they should not be regarded as mutually exclusive. Given that it was Chris Barnes' lyrics, written when he was with Cannibal Corpse, which stirred up the controversy that this paper refers to, a comment from Chris Barnes himself might be viewed as an apt way to conclude this section. When responding to a question in a 2007 interview as to whether he perceived SFU to still be a Death Metal band, Barnes' affirmative response and his elaboration are consistent with Perspective (c) and the quote from Sellick above: 'I'd say we are still a death-metal band. We [SFU] deal with the darker side of human existence, and we are against the norm. Death is something we [humanity] all experience at some point, and in a strange way it joins us all together. Everybody dies, but it's how you accept it that matters' (Finley 2007, p. 25).

Conclusions

This paper has studied 109 online interviews with well known Death Metal scene identities. Members of first-generation bands, such as Cannibal Corpse, Hypocrisy, Immolation, Obituary and Suffocation, present calm and mature images in interviews and this seems to have been largely accepted by the Death Metal scene's 30-something fan base that has grown older with the first-generation band members. In addition, Cannibal Corpse has largely moved away from its most objectionable lyrical theme of graphic sexualized violence against a 'female Other' in the six post-1994 studio albums recorded with Fisher on lead vocals. Ridicule of former vocalist Chris Barnes, author of Cannibal Corpse's most objectionable lyrics, seems to be an unconscious move by the band's 30-something fan base to distance itself from past sins. In this paper I have presented three alternative, but not mutually exclusive, perspectives by which we can begin to understand Death Metal philosophy. All appear to add insight but Perspectives (b) and (c) in combination seem to hold the most promise, i.e. Death Metal music and lyrics, such as those of early Cannibal Corpse, accept and acknowledge shared Freudian repressed destructive (death) instincts which form the basis for community. Furthermore, they are a way of dealing with the issues of suffering and death which is not denial.

Endnotes

1. The paper title 'From The Undead will Feast to The Time to Kill is Now' uses song titles from Cannibal Corpse's debut 1990 album *Eaten Back to Life* and its most recent 2006 album *Kill*. To some extent, as the paper will explain, Cannibal Corpse's band philosophy and lyrical themes have changed and matured during its life-time. However, in other ways, the band has remained true to the spirit and philosophy of Death Metal from start to finish thus explaining the scene's long-term devotion and commitment to the band. There is, therefore, both continuity and change in the band Cannibal Corpse.

Its growth and maturation from the young and angry 20-somethings of the early 1990s to the mature family men and dads of today mirrors the lifestyle progression and development of the members of the other first-generation bands as well as many of the scene's fans.

2. Essential characteristics of Death Metal are low 'death growls' also known as 'Cookie Monster vocals', down-tuned guitars and blast-beat drumming (Purcell 2003; Beckwith 2006; Brunner 2006, p. 14; Kahn-Harris 2007). The Death Metal scene has outposts, connected to the key American and/or Swedish scenes in more or less direct ways, in nearly every country in the world (see, for example, Harris (2000); Baulch (2003); Kahn-Harris (2007); Patterson (2007A, 2007B, 2007C, 2007D)).

3. Citing Binder (1993), Brunner (2006, p. 15) notes that the Heavy Metal scene (including the Death Metal scene) is dominated by white musicians and fans whereas the rap scene is dominated by black musicians and fans. Suffocation's Smith is one of the very few black musicians playing with first-division Death Metal acts (Fishermane 2006).

4. I would add here that, in Death Metal philosophy, the stage is simply an extension of the street (street clothes are commonly worn on-stage as well; Mudrian 2004, p. 170). However, the one demarcation that Death Metal generally does maintain is between the lyric content and 'real-life'. Keith Kahn-Harris, like the present author, fails to be '100% convinced' by this demarcation (personal e-mail communication dated 18 June 2007), i.e. surely choosing to write a song called 'Fucked with a Knife' does require that one hold some normative position on issues such as sexualized violence?

5. As an example of an anti-Barnes and anti-Ulrich/ late Metallica stance online, readers are referred to the Swedish Extreme Metal site Globaldomination.se. For example, in the review of SFU's 2007 *Commandment* album, Farlas writes: 'Six Feet Under is a band that in our circle is usually referred to in a negative way. Most people resent the band not necessarily because of their music (although it does play a part), but because of front-man Chris Barnes. He's outspoken in a way that makes people uncomfortable or pissed off, and likes to express his extreme opinions wherever he gets the chance, including in his music'. Similarly, Filicetti (1996) refers to Barnes' 'lack of enthusiasm and down right stubbornness'. Barnes' version of the events that led to his firing from Cannibal Corpse are presented in Mudrian (2004, p. 213).

6. The 'Napster incident', instigated by Ulrich, also helped to highlight the difference in attitude and values of Metallica, once Extreme Metal's favourite sons, and bands such as Cannibal Corpse circa the turn of the millennium. The Napster incident involved Metallica initiating legal action against the rogue

file-sharing service, Napster (see Berlinger 2004; McIver 2006). Such a Public Relations disaster for Metallica only added to the respect that the long-term members of the Extreme Metal community felt for seasoned working-class warriors Cannibal Corpse. However, it should also be noted that Fisher has publicly defended Metallica in interview on the grounds that they opposed Napster in order to aid lesser bands and not for themselves (Brookman 2004).

7. Dr Keith Kahn-Harris's earlier work was authored under the name of Harris.

8. As noted by Walser (1993B) and Brunner (2006, p. 32), we must avoid an analysis of lyrics in isolation which avoids any consideration of the actual musical soundscapes involved (see also personal e-mail communication from Keith Kahn-Harris to the author dated 8 June 2007). Wright (2000, cited in Brunner 2006, p. 103) notes that music can undermine or cancel out lyric content, for example 'when soft acoustic tones accompany violent lyrics' (Wright 2000, p. 367) or in 'Christian' Death Metal.

9. On songs such as 'Terminate Damnation', 'Eternal Lamentation' and 'Inflamed' on Christian band Mortification's *Scrolls of the Megilloth* (1992), the chaotic blast-beaten soundscapes mimic the power of Jehovah and/or the forces of hell that encircle and terrorize the unbeliever and hopefully (in the band's thinking) lead her/him back to God.

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