

Is Thrash Metal Music Artistic?

Whenever someone poses the question of what my favorite type of music is, and I respond Thrash Metal, the person's eyes usually squint in discomfort and I receive an awkward stare. Most people who witness me listening to Thrash Metal bands like Testament, Slayer and Kreator consider my interest in such bands as an inability to appreciate good music. Thrash Metal music has been viewed as requiring no musical skill, lacking in sensibility, complexity or musicianship and consisting of only lyrics that have negative influences on behavior. In Heavy Metal the Music and its Culture, Deena Weinstein quotes Rock critic Robert Duncan's description of Metal music as "pimply, prole, putrid, unchic, unsophisticated, anti-intellectual (but impossibly pretentious), dismal, abysmal, terrible, horrible, and stupid music, barely music at all?" (1). Weinstein also quotes a journalist who states that Metal music is stereotyped by most people as "a musical moron joke, fodder for frustrated teens and dominion of dim-witted devil-worshippers" (2).

In addition to the criticism of how harsh and noisy the music sounds, Heavy Metal detractors have also blamed the lyrics found in Thrash Metal music as being too graphic and ultimately a primary source in corrupting the youth. In the journal of Genetic Psychology, Mary E. Ballard and colleagues express that "Many people believe that listening to Rock (especially Heavy Metal and Rap) results in antisocial behavior" (160: 476). Although people are quick to view Thrash Metal music as senseless noise and its lyrical content to be superfluously explicit, in actuality Thrash Metal is a style of music that incorporates several compositionally aesthetic elements and contains lyrics that have creative, insightful messages about society, while being relevant to an audience. Thus, Thrash Metal music, taken as a whole, is an artistic type of music that is worth acknowledging and appreciating.

It is first important to understand that Thrash Metal music originated due to several historically musical influences. The musical influences in Thrash Metal can be traced as far back as bands of the 1960's such as Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and Jimmy Hendrix. These bands took advantage of the fact that technology allowed the guitar to make louder, impressive sounds which are important because they paved the way to a popular musical genre called "Heavy Metal". Apart from the technological influences, composition wise, Heavy Metal music is influenced by classical and blues music, suggesting that the genre is musically diverse. During the early seventies although concepts of Heavy Metal music were evident, it diminished in popularity due to a wide interest in punk rock. Heavy Metal was then later revived by bands such as Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, Def Leppard and Motorhead. These musicians were said to have started "The New wave of British Heavy Metal" (Weinstein 44). Finally, in the early 1980's Heavy Metal began to evolve rapidly, and several subgenres branched out, diversified and expanded the musical boundaries of the genre. Heavy Metal was divided and went into two separate directions. Some bands would lean towards a softer approach of playing and focused on themes of love and heroism such as Van Halen, Twisted sisters, AC/DC and W.A.S.P. but other bands would go down a heavier and faster route and would form the subgenre "Thrash Metal". Examples of such bands are Metallica, Megadeth, Slayer, Kreator, Overkill, Testament, Exodus, Sodom, Destruction and many more. In the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, Thrash Metal music is described as "Vehement singing and precise playing through violent stops and sprints are the attributes of thrash, a sound that marked metal's evolution in the early 1980s from Heavy Metal such as Black Sabbath". Thrash Metal became and still is one of the most controversial types of music. As a result it became one of the subgenre's in Heavy Metal most criticized and unappreciated by the majority of people.

A major element that Thrash Metal music is comprised of is the lyrics. The lyrics are the written text that the vocalist of the band usually shouts in order to convey a theme. The artistic value of the lyrics can be analyzed separately from the composition of the music, and can be

measured by whether or not the theme accurately depicts human sentiments and experiences. According to Jeffery Jensen Arnett “Another criterion for art in the classical, traditional sense is that it represents certain essential truths about the human condition” (Arnett 56). Such truths are found in Thrash Metal music because the lyrics revolve around themes about human suffering and as a result, usually convey emotions about social and intrapersonal dilemmas.

The band Metallica, considered to have been one of the greatest Thrash Metal bands during the 1980’s, wrote a song called “One” in their album “And Justice for All”. The theme of the song is about a soldier who becomes brutally maimed by a landmine while serving his country at war. The graphic imagery clearly shows the cruelties of war in the lines

Landmine
 Has taken my sight
 Taken my speech
 Taken my hearing
 Taken my arms
 Taken my legs
 Taken my soul
 Left me with life in hell

These lyrics are an example of how Thrash Metal artists write about a human beings tragic experience in order to protest against social institutions that promote war. Such a theme is socially relevant because it promotes the audience to question social standards. A related theme usually found being sang by Thrash Metal bands is the criticism of violence found in human nature. The Thrash Metal band Slayer illustrates this human condition by addressing the violence prevalent in our youth. This effort is evident when the chorus reads

Trying to survive, this drug induced warfare
 Expendable youth, fighting for possession
 Having control a principle obsession

Violence is only a friend

Another theme prevalent in Thrash Metal lyrics is the anthropogenic influence on the environment. The song “When the sun turns red” by the Thrash Metal band Kreator criticizes human beings for not realizing the damage being done to the world.

Forest fires are raging

While the rivers turn to ice

Foolish man creating

Mother nature’s cruel demise

The hypocrisy and corruption evident in a country is another theme commonly found among Thrash Metal artist. The Thrash Metal band Exodus exemplifies the overwhelming sentiments of this theme in their song “Scar spangle banner” with the lines

America - the arrogant

The belligerent

Will live in infamy

We the people, for no people

Secure the blessings of tragedy

Do or dain we have established

The scar spangled banner

Besides the fact that these lyrics criticizes the way society functions by appealing to human suffering, a corresponding artistic factor that the lyrics achieve is opening the audiences mind to the realities of the world and promoting the audience to think independently from politics and other social institutions. According to the book Metal Heads Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation, Barry, a heavy metal fan, enjoys the music because “The songs serve an important function, exposing the corruptions of society that people need to hear about, whether they like it or not” (69). The book Heavy Metal the Music and It’s Culture also support the notion that the lyrics “focus on the bleak concrete horrors of the real or possibly real world: the isolation

of individuals, the corruption of those in power and the horrors done by people to one another and to the environment” (50). Although the lyrics found in Thrash Metal are vulgar they are still highly artistic lyrics because they appeal to the audience’s emotions by allowing people to sympathize with the human suffering found in the world and because intellectually, the lyrics criticize the social institutions that cause human suffering. Similarly, the role of great literature is a criticism on social institutions that cause human suffering, such as the Epic Poem “The Divine Comedy” by Dante Alighieri. In the epic poem, Dante uses vulgar language to describe the human suffering he sees in hell, in order to alert the people of Florence of their corrupt churches and politics.

The second element that Thrash Metal music is composed of is the different sounds. According to any musical scholar, music is defined as the organization of sounds. Sounds have different qualities that can be combined to create different styles of music. When I asked Chris Bair, a Heavy Metal fan who often listened to Thrash Metal music, what it was about the music that appealed to him most, he responded “I enjoy the loudness and the speed but what attracts me the most is that the music isn’t just repetitive like other types of music” (69). What Chris mentioned to be the most appealing element of Thrash Metal music are the qualities of the sound instead of the lyrics. The quality of sounds that define and distinguish Thrash Metal music, like all other types of music, is the timbre/loudness, rhythm/tempo and the organizations of tones. The criteria required for the combination of sound qualities, requires the artists to have a high degree of compositional skill and the degree of artistic value in any work depends on the degree of the artist’s compositional skill. Thrash Metal music is artistic because the criteria required for the composition or the manipulation of sound qualities, namely timbre, rhythm/tempo and tone organization, demands the artist to have a high level of compositional skill. Furthermore, the function or role the sound qualities have on impacting the sentiments of an audience also define it as highly artistic.

Timbre is defined in Music In Theory and Practice as “the color of a sound” (4). Since Thrash Metal music is based on lyrical themes that criticize the causes of human suffering, there is a criterion of what color the composer must use in order to arouse the overwhelmingly powerful moods of discontent with human suffering. In Thrash Metal music, this color interchangeably implies that the music be loud. The discovery of a loud distorted sound, has allowed artists to convey these sentiments as quoted by Robert Walser “distortion functions as a sign of extreme power and intense expression” (42). However, as Robert Walser later emphasizes not all distortions create the same color and fittingly it demands that the artists use his skill in judgment, to decide which distorted color conveys the mood being expressed most accurately. A similar sound quality that serves an important function is the rhythm and pulse of Thrash Metal. Robert Walser claims that Metal rhythms are “an impression that in fact may be made possible only by considerable skill...to help articulate complex social meanings” (49).

Finally, the organization of tones in Thrash Metal music follows aesthetic criteria known as modal theory. Walser points out that “Mode is, the fact, widely acknowledged by heavy metal musicians as crucial for the musical production of meaning; they know their audiences respond differently to each mode, and they find it useful to think and teach in terms of modal theory” (46). Modal theory can be traced as far back as the 16th century in Joseph Fux’s book, *Gradus Parnassum*. Mann, in his book translation of Fux’s work, *The Study of Counterpoint*, discusses methods for composing within the limits of modes and has been a direct influence on the works of the greatest composers such as J.S. Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. So, with the use of modal theory, Thrash Metal music incorporates harmonies that require a high degree of compositional intelligence to manage. As reinforced by Walser, “Not only is Heavy Metal harmony often complex, but the analytical discourse used by teachers and players is often very sophisticated” (47). Aside from modal theory, Dave Mustaine, from Megadeth also known as one of the greatest Thrash Metal bands, discusses the importance of diversifying the music when he says “Imagine the music they were making 4,000 years ago and the time they've had to evolve it,

how advanced it's got to be. If we can dip into that pool of knowledge in the span of our lifetimes, that's a great gift to the creation of music" (28: 44). As a final point, When I asked Chris Zimmerman, a Metallica fan, to describe Thrash Metal, he retorted "It's a lot like classical music." In that short phrase I believe what Chris intended to say was that Thrash Metal is not just noise; it touches people with its powerful themes, blazing heart thumping sounds and it reminds us that artistic beauty in music, comes in different forms.

Works Cited

- Arnell, Jeffrey Jensen. Metal Heads Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation. Colorado: Westview Press Inc., 1995.
- Bair, Chris. Personal Interview. 19 Mar. 2005.
- Ballard, Mary E., Alan R. Dodson, and Doris G. Bazzini. "Genre of music and lyrical content: expectation effects." Journal of Genetic Psychology Vol. 160 (1999): 476.
- Benward, Bruce and Gary White. Music in Theory and Practice Volume 1. Boston Massachusetts, The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. 1997.
- Exodus. Scar Spangled Banner. Tempo of the damned, 2004.
- Kreator. When the Sun Burns Red. Coma of Souls, 1990.
- Metallica. One. And Justice for All, 1988.
- Rotondi, James. "Loose cannons: Megadeth's Mustaine & Friedman aim higher & wider." Guitar Player Vol. 28 (1994): 44.
- Slayer. Expendable Youth. Seasons in the Abyss. 1990.
- "Sub-genres of extreme metal." South Florida Sun-Sentinel November 24, 2003.
- Walser, Robert. Running with the Devil Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music. Hanover and London: University press of New England, 1993.
- Weinstein, Deena. Heavy Metal The Music and its Culture. United States of America: Da Capo Press, 2000.
- Zimmerman, Chris. Personal interview. 25 March. 2005.