Power and Authenticity: Tradition and Transgression in Extreme Metal

Steve Barnard (2020)

Extreme metal music can be defined as a separate but inter-related set of sub-genres (namely thrash metal, black metal and death metal and their respective derivatives) that share a common set of musical traits (highly distorted guitars, modal riffs, frenetic tempos and guttural vocalisations) but vary subtly by aesthetic, tone and historical and geographical contexts. The music emerged in the early 1980s as both a breakaway from the traditional British based heavy metal and in polarity to the proliferation of much more commercial styles of metal like ‘glam’ (Walser, 1993, 15). The wider social subculture culture that evolved from this was self-consciously underground and informed by a greater punk rock sensibility than other styles of metal in its transgressive level of subject matter and aggressive musical interpretations.

Extreme metal culture has been previously noted as having fundamentalist principles which pertain to whether performers or individual participants are ‘true’ (Khan Harris, 2007, 2). Being ‘true’ is itself a by-word for perceived authenticity, seeking a type of truth or purity of an idea – in this case the idea simply being the music itself (Roccor, 2000, 84). Rather than understanding the concept of ‘true’ or authentic in extreme metal culture simply just in the historically traditional existentialist notions of free thought and actions, it is perhaps also equally useful to think of authenticity as a social construction. Beehler (1990, 39-44) has previously argued that choice and sincerity are at the core of authentic existence, whilst Pierce (2015, 435-457) has examined social constructions of authenticity as an intersubjective concept.

Though metal music has often been observed as being overwhelmingly apolitical and without a clear ideological motive (Morris, 2015, 292), there clearly has to be some sort of
ideological markers so as to set the boundaries of conduct regarding concepts of truth and authenticity inherent in the subculture. This essay will attempt to argue the concept of authenticity in extreme metal is intrinsically linked to the concept of power, and that that is represented in the cyclical relationship between seemingly contradictory notions of both tradition and transgression. Khan Harris has previously detailed how through displays of engagement, contribution and cultural and historical awareness, individual ‘participants’ within the extreme metal scene (broadly meaning performers, journalists, regular fans etc.) can acquire power and influence through means of sub-cultural capital, of which there are two main types: Mundane subcultural capital (collective, tradition) and Transgressive (individualist, radical) (2007, 121-130). Mundane subcultural capital is commonplace as a function in most traditional heavy metal cultures and acts as a safe means of reinforcing the group identity and perceived purity of the music (Khan Harris, 2007, 122). Though mundane subcultural capital does circulate widely in extreme metal due to the culture’s historical links to traditional metal, it is transgressive subcultural capital that is of greater value within the scene, reflected in the implicit ‘extreme’ notions of the music and symbolism and has in many ways been the engine of innovation in the musical development of extreme metal itself.

The essay will explore how traditional notions relating to power in heavy metal culture have become amplified and arguably deformed within the extreme metal movement because its value for transgressive practices. Firstly, power of masculinity in extreme metal performance practice that traditionally has been observed of equating authenticity with machismo and sonic brutality. Secondly, the power of tribalistic belonging in the demonstration of sincere commitment to the culture. Thirdly, the power of resistance - to religion, modernity and commercial capitalism, all of which are seen as corrupting influences. Individuals, but
particularly performers that ‘betray’ these principles of power are denounced as ‘false’ (inauthentic) (Sturm, 2015). It may be the case that authenticity in extreme metal is a concept that constantly shifts between the conservative and the radical due to its mixed musical ancestry.

**Masculine Authenticity**

On the surface, extreme metal would appear to share much of the same macho gesturing and imagery as projected by other traditional metal styles. Much of this inherent masculinity is possibly due to metal’s original attachment to British white working-class culture (Weinstein, 2009, 19). The stage apparel of performers can range from casual street clothes in thrash metal to a far more theatrical pseudo-Viking based image in black metal. The lyrics of performers often explore themes of destruction, evil and conflict, but in some cases have expressed extreme misogyny and sexual violence towards women (most famously the band Cannibal Corpse). How actually present is a link between masculinity, brutality and authenticity? Does this actively imply sexism or does the concept of masculine authenticity operate more sub-consciously as an ingrained tradition in extreme metal?

Ben Hutcherson and Ross Haenfler have previously presented the idea of musical genre as a gendered process with regard to extreme metal and masculine authenticity. The authors argue that extreme metal equates authenticity with brutality (2010, 107), has evolved an outlook that frames mainstream metal bands as ‘feminine’ and thus inauthentic to this day (ibid, 118) and is illustrated by the interviewed sample group of fans use of sexist and homophobic language to describe and denounce such bands (ibid, 115). Hutcherson and Haenflers’ observations are at times quite problematic, the fans interviewed for the article were a sample group of 16 people
ranging from 19 to 37 years old, all based within a single urban area of the southwestern united states (ibid, 105). Though there is some merit in the authors initial premise of the construction of masculine authenticity and gender stereotyping in conjunction with sexist and homophobic language as derogative descriptions of ‘false’ bands, the research is too narrowly conducted in every respect regarding any sort of valid representation of the overall culture of extreme metal.

Rather than the outright perpetuation of gender equalities that Hutcherson and Haenfler infer, it could be possible that the notion of masculine authenticity in extreme metal operates more sub-consciously in extreme metal culture. As well as its historical attachments to British working-class culture and conservative notions of masculinity, it is also worth noting the relationship between extreme metals rejection of the feminine and its development in both parallel and opposition to glam metal in the 1980s (Walser, 1993, 130). The enormous popularity of commercialized metal bands like Bon Jovi and Def Leppard throughout the 1980s, with lyrical subject matter pertaining to teenage exploits and human relationships, was widely met with disdain from heavy metal purists. Though feminine characteristics did probably play a part in offending traditional working-class notions of masculinity in heavy metal culture, there are other fundamental conflicts between the extreme and commercial/glam metal styles that contribute. One of the most notable is that lyrically, traditional metal had mostly forgone writing songs about human feelings or relationships in favour of more abstract and escapist themes. For all intents and purposes, in ‘true’ heavy metal, women are almost entirely absent from the genre discourse (Khan Harris, 2007, 76). The virtual absence of women thematically in traditional and extreme metal however does not simply imply sexism by itself, for it is within the themes of human feelings and frailty that fundamentalists will more likely take issue – because vulnerability and weakness are completely at odds with the concepts of strength and power that
underline masculine authenticity. Also heavily associated with glam metal is the celebration of debauchery, shallow self-gratification and a much greater projection of misogynistic values than present in most extreme metal bands, Khan Harris observed that ‘Fundamentalism implies a disgust at decadence (in this case the decadence of pop metal) and a desire to return to a perceived state of purity.’ (2007, 2). Overwhelmingly the principle would seem to be that ‘true’ metal can’t be seen to be sensitive or self-indulgent more so than effeminate.

The concept of masculine authenticity is more complexly represented in extreme metal than would initially be apparent. The culture remains overwhelmingly male dominated to this day and there are apparent underlying conservative notions of masculinity and its relationship to power and control present in the performance and aesthetic, but these are possibly an inheritance from the heavy metal’s historical origins in the British working classes. At times the descriptive language used by extreme metal participants to deride ‘inauthentic’ commercial bands is notable for its sometimes homophobic or sexist equations with weakness or vulnerability, but also androgyny and debauchery are equally at odds with masculine authenticity. Perhaps it could be the absence of women, feelings and human relationships within the discourse of extreme metal that point towards expressions of the sub-human or the animalistic in both sonic and visual expression.

The Politics of Belonging

When examining the concept of authenticity in extreme metal, the subtly fragmented nature of both the music and its global geographical dispersal must be considered in their subsequent effects on both the social attitudes and cultural practices of the participants (Roccor, 2000, 84).
As well geo-cultural considerations, there is also the underlying beliefs and motivations of the individual participants themselves and the balancing personal and social interests. Andrew Pierce argues that ‘authenticity is not be found in either the individual or the group, but lies in fact in the relation’ (2015, 442). This is referred to as an intersubjective interpretation of the construction of authenticity, as a perpetually shifting dialogue between individual influence and entrenched social traditions. With regard to intersubjective dialogue and its application to the circulation of mundane and transgressive subcultural capital in extreme metal culture, it is worthy to explore both the superficial angles (dress code, symbolism) as well as the more substantial dimensions (knowledge, commitment) of its social construction, and just how essential these practices might be the perception of ‘true’ and how this might spill over into exclusionary elitism.

The stereotypical attire of the average heavy metal fan (long hair, denim/leather clothing with sown on band patches) is well established in popular culture and as with many aspects of the symbolism of heavy metal, was established in the 1980s and has remained mostly unchanged in traditional and extreme metal since. The seemingly homogenous nature of the dress code has been described as a ‘uniform’ by Roccocor (2000, 88) and interpreted as spiritual and religious undertones by Larsson (2013, 104). The importance of dress code is a typical manifestation of the circulation of mundane sub-cultural capital in its relationship to social belonging and tradition. The overt declaration of reverence and adherence to social practices in metal culture could be seen to have a cultish quality. Is there then not a contradiction in the notion of attaining authenticity through conformist means? Beehler has argued that as long as the intentions of the individual are based in sincerity, then it is perfectly possible to be able to live authentically in subservience to a pre-existing social framework (1990, 40). Perhaps it is more problematic and to
consider if the value placed on tribal uniform might affect a shallow and inflexible attitude that feeds into a type of intolerant elitism that permeates the subculture with collective stipulations paradoxically pertaining to being an ‘authentic individual’. Larsson has previously noted that metal fans do not necessarily have to adhere strictly to uniform dress code in order to be recognised as a sincere participant as the music comes first (2013, 104). This notion is tempered by the authors subsequent argument that the participant who dresses ‘metal’ is more authentic due to the wider importance in maintaining a recognizable symbolism and cultural associations (ibid). Larssons observations are considered and useful in utilizing the prism of intersubjectivity to uncover the nuances of the argument surrounding material uniformity and conformity. The methodology is sample interview based much like with Haenfler and Hutcherson (2010), so again socio-geographic factors and discrepancies may enter the equation when regarding the scope for explicit conclusions. However, the fundamental observations regarding symbolism and authenticity work well, be it as a micro-cosmic representation. The seeming preference for a prescribed set of criteria relating to material uniformity possibly expresses a reverence for cultural traditions, more so than as a pre-condition for social recognition as a participant. It’s through visual representations that participants are often most able to visibly state their cultural identity/allegiance to the wider society. When considering the often fringe status of most heavy metal genres, the powerful projection of collective uniformity and use of symbolism helps to lend the culture a visually striking and unambiguous recognisability that the literal music often does not receive.

Of greater significance than any aesthetic dimension in extreme metal culture is the power of knowledge and cultural awareness in validating a participants perceived ‘trueness’ within the scene. Extreme metal differs from its traditionalist forerunners in its adoption of a punk rock
ethos that would seem to place a greater value on individualism innovation and subversion than traditional metal. This factor may be what has enabled the genre to become so fractured and varied in a relatively short space of time. The emphasis on authenticity in this respect then has shifted back to a more of an individualist understanding permeated by the circulation of transgressive subcultural capital. This creates a cultural imperative amongst an elite minority within the scene to be ‘truer’ than all, this is done through contrarian displays of radical individualism and obscure knowledge that is often both narrow and exclusionary in its construction. Sturm (2015) has previously explored the nature of elitism in extreme metal and observed two overall types of individualist elitist: the connoisseur (concerned with artistic merit) and the scene elitist (exclusionary and intolerant). The connoisseur values traits like virtuosity and compositional prowess above all, sometimes eloquently framing extreme metal as ‘high art’ whilst still maintaining stringent elitist standards regarding authenticity of the music (Sturm, 2015, 21). The relative social savvy, openness and pragmatism of the connoisseur means that they are still heavily reliant on mundane sub-cultural capital despite their individualist credentials. The scene elitist on the other hand is beset by an outlook that must attain ‘trueness’ by means of exclusivity and extreme individualism that is almost entirely dependent on transgressive subcultural capital (Sturm, 2015, 23). Scene elitists may attempt to express their individualism through provocative appearance, focus on ultra-obscure bands and even the daringly transgressive act of being actively dismissive or derisive about revered performers or historical consensus. Though they hold power and wield influence within the scene on a very narrow level in terms of internet forum traffic and visual presence at gigs, scene elitists are often dismissed by other participants for their overbearing displays of self-advertising and self-advancement. Scene elitism may somewhat deform the concept of authenticity into a parody of
itself, but it is simply an extreme representation of the combined values that traditional metal places on ‘trueness’ and that extreme metal places on radical individualism.

The sociological landscape of extreme metal is made up of a contradictory set of both collectivist and individualist values that create an intersubjective dialogue regarding the construction of the authentic individual. Collectivism is present within the visually powerful uniformity of the dress code (though this is not required explicitly) and also in the display of knowledge and cultural awareness, both of which also suggest a conservative value for tradition. On the other hand, radical individualism and the value for transgressive subcultural capital has given rise to elites within the scene that either seek to validate extreme metal music as ‘high art’, or in other cases attempt define ‘true’ metal in only the most exclusive and obscure terms.

**Resistance, Violence and Satan**

Heavy metal music has traditionally been observed as an apolitical form of music, unhindered by the complexities of social commentary (Morris, 2015, 292). Though in many cases there is a seeming absence of any explicit political philosophy in heavy metal culture, the underlying themes of the power of resistance, to authority and institutions, create a lyrical and musical discourse that is enacted through metaphor and key in creating an authenticity of resistance within the culture. The early British metal bands utilised futuristic and dystopian themes and imagery inspired by industrialised social environments (Wiebe Taylor, 2009, 100). In its formative years in the early 1980s, extreme metal music had a propensity for provocative lyrical and visual utilisation of satanic themes and imagery, accompanied by a (then) considerably
unpolished D.I.Y approach to instrumentation (Khan Harris, 2007, 3). As these early forms developed into more specific sub-genres, the accompanying themes became slightly more specifically related to specific sub-styles. The dystopian notions of traditional British metal were recast successively in the shape of the apocalyptic (American/European thrash metal), violence (American death metal) and outright nihilism (Norwegian black metal). The Common link in the themes found within most extreme metal music is the idea of rejection of modern and mainstream society, and in some cases viscerally challenging widely held moral values of taste (Morris, 2015, 293). Thus, are notions of authenticity in extreme metal also tied up with an active resistance to mainstream society and self-marginalisation? In examining two geographically specific but closely related sub-styles of extreme metal (American death metal and Norwegian black metal), it is possible to try and understand the subtly differing ideas of resistance relative to the socio-historical environment and how the race for extreme metal practitioners and participants to become ever ‘truer’ has in some cases lead to real world acts of pseudo-political violence and transgression inspired by the extreme discourse within the music. Both sub-styles have their origins in crude satanic expressions and share a similar musical language, but differ in their intent and tone both in terms of musicianship and in the way which they utilise violent, satanic and occult themes to project power and resistance.

The figure of Satan has been a regular presence in heavy metal discourse and symbolism since the self-titled opening track on the Black Sabbaths self-titled debut album in 1970, and was initially portrayed as a figure to be feared us much as embraced in these early musical encounters. The Satan character in heavy metal is as a result of the music’s distant relation to American blues music with its devil-centred lyrics and themes (Moynihan and Soderlind, 1998, 2-5). The advent of punk resistance to authority in the late 1970s influenced extreme metals
development with nihilistic and bleak conclusions about the future of society. But rather than agitating in an explicitly political manner, extreme metal logically adopted the figure of Satan as the ultimate empowering symbol of freedom, rebellion and self-expression. This was taken to the extreme as a metaphorical device in the 1980s by American death metal artists that sprang up (mostly in the state of Florida) against a social back drop of the of politicised Christian evangelism. In this particular context, resistance to modern society and anti-religious sentiment potentially become inseparable notions (Purcell, 2003, 165). Part of the potency and appeal of American death metal lies somewhat in its considered instrumental and compositional techniques with an underlying sense of relative seriousness as a music style, especially when compared to the less sophisticated early extreme metal music. Death metals underlying notions of power are based almost entirely in violence, chaos and pain and this is reflected in music that is both incredibly frantic, but also highly controlled and deceptively sophisticated which itself implies its own sense of power. A combination of social resistance by Satan-as-metaphor or violent subject matter manifested in challenging but highly finessed music, would seem to both feed into the death metal notions of authenticity. Even though the subject matter may not be the actual personal views of artist this does not affect perceived ‘trueness’, as the participants are often able to discern that this sentiment is obviously an embellishment of artistic license and amplified for the sake of entertainment or provocation rather than a literal conviction.

Despite its initial musical similarities, the style of Black Metal that developed in Norway in the very early 1990s was notable for its regressive revival of D.I.Y musicianship, low-fi production values and striking use of the visual and theatrical. The artistic basis of Norwegian black metal is inspired by a fusion of occultist, Tolkienian and Norse folk themes that relate an extreme version of what Morris has observed as a ‘back to nature philosophy’ within extreme
metal (2015, 293). The concept of being ‘true’ in black metal was even more serious than so in American death metal, wherein the ‘true’ central concerns were more to do musical finesse and taking artistic license with taboo themes to invoke a sense of resistance. Norwegian black metal was primarily permeated by underlying notions of misanthropy, nihilism and joylessness that manifested in bleak, monotonous soundscapes that negated the ostentatious displays of musical virtuosity favoured in American death metal (Christie, 2004, 271). The Norwegian scene was actively resistant to the American scene, which was seen as ‘trendy’, bloated and worst of all - fun. The imagery used within Norwegian black metal culture was originally all in black and white, this is present in the artwork, photography and Kiss inspired ‘corpse paint’ that some performers adorn their faces with (Moynihan and Soderlind, 1998, 36). The black and white colour scheme of the sub-style possibly reflects a simplified outlook that seeks to eliminate any idea of nuance and is at odds with what could be described as the ‘colourfully grotesque’ imagery in American death metal. Problems potentially can arise when transgressive sub-cultural capital becomes amplified and highly sought after, as it can create an ever-increasing upping of the ante that requires ever more radical displays of ‘trueness’, it is in this manner that Norwegian black metal went beyond fundamentalism into militancy (Khan Harris, 2007, 132). High profile practitioners of black metal began this move to militant notions of authenticity by encouraging a revival of Norwegian pagan nationalism that was severely anti-Christian, fascist, intolerant and completely rejected modern multiculturalism (Khan Harris, 2007, 133). The association with far-right extremist ideologies in black metal soon became fused with the fundamental underlying concepts of power in ‘true metal’ (masculinity, tribalism and resistance). The increasing escalation involved with obtaining transgressive subcultural capital in this particular scene ultimately took an inevitably violent turn which resulted in the notorious burning of dozens of
churches, as well as the suicide, murder and imprisonment of several high-profile performers in Norway throughout the 1990s in what could be described as ‘life imitating art’. It could be seen that the concept of ‘trueness’ or authenticity in extreme metal reached its logical (if somewhat absurd) limits in Norwegian black metal and the scene continued on, and like every other scene before it, eventually became codified, mundane and ultimately very popular perhaps in part due to its notoriety. Andrew Pierce, in regard to the appeal of the radical, noted that the standing reserve of social capital in authenticity was of great value to capitalist institutions, looking to exploit innovation or creativity for the purposes of profit (2015, 455).

The authenticity of resistance in extreme metal culture has evolved as the result of ever-increasing value for transgressive subcultural capital. The process of escalation initiated encouraged successive metal music movements to continually push and cross the boundaries of artistic taste both musically and thematically. The central target of disdain shared by many different sub-styles is modern society and its central institutions, in particular organised religion. Satan is symbolically represented as the ultimate icon of resistance to tyranny and notions of power are related with the expression of violence. Practitioners will also often utilise apocalyptic and nihilistic themes to underpin resistant notions. Though it is worthy to note, that for as much as metal culture opposes modern institutions, the culture also practices forms of ritual, symbolism and in some cases violent militant fundamentalism that ironically echo the structure of the organised religions that the music vehemently opposes (Morris, 2015, 301).

Conclusions
The typical notions of power in traditional heavy metal music of masculinity, collectivism and resistance were automatically encoded in extreme metal from its earliest manifestations due the direct relationship between the two genres. The less direct but equally important relationship that extreme metal has with the advent of punk and hardcore is where the two styles parted ways. Extreme metal culture subsequently formed its own sense of ‘trueness’ or authenticity that has attempted to accommodate the somewhat contradictory notions of tradition (from heavy metal) and transgression (from punk). The aspect of transgression has had an effect in mutating and amplifying not just the music, but also its underlying notions of power and authenticity.

A sense of masculine authenticity (standard in traditional metal) is still very much present in extreme metal, but has become obscured by the music’s virtually non-existent discourse with regard to issues of human relationships and gender. The performance etiquette of the practitioners could be simplified as machoistic by some, but in actuality borders on the sub-human or animalistic in the way performers project themselves and has little to do with a conscious sense of sexism. On a social level, tradition and collectivism are still important aspects of extreme metal (particularly regarding ‘uniform’), but the dialogue involved in constructing a social sense of authenticity is complicated by the music’s value for individual radicalism which in turn has fuelled the rise of elitism. In this sense authenticity takes on an intersubjective notion of the balance between the individual and the collective. Resistance is probably the strongest aspect relating to a sense of ‘trueness’ in extreme metal. Themes of resistance are often expressed through metaphors such as the figure of Satan or explicitly violent subject matter that actively pushes the boundaries of taste. The dominance of transgressive subcultural capital with regard to resistance has at times led the music into extreme political ideologies and in some cases of real-world violent crime inspired by the music. Extreme metal started in part as a resistance to
mainstream forms of metal, this sense of resistance was subsequently internally applied to various competing ‘sectarian’ extreme metal scenes, all of which claim to be the representation of ‘true’ metal.

However as previously noted, geographic, ethnic and historical dimensions all contribute towards an individual scenes’ construction of authenticity, thus leading to various discrepancies in how authenticity is projected in extreme metal. What is most significant is how extreme metal music has evolved and fragmented as a result of its quest for ‘purity’ through repeating cycles of innovation (the transgressive) and codification (the mundane) underlined by the concept of power that it aims to project musically, visually and socially.

Bibliography


