

Christian Hoffstadt – Michael Nagenborg:

**“You’re too fuckin’ metal for your own good!”**

**Controlled anger and the expression of intensity and authenticity in post-modern Heavy Metal**

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## **0. Introduction**

Heavy Metal is often criticized for its fixation on anger and hatred, while being primitive and anti-intellectual. What a critic in the 1970-ties has said with regards to *Black Sabbath* about the "sophistication of four Cro-Magnon hunters who've stumbled upon a rock band's equipment" (cit. Weinstein 1991, p. 2) might be well accepted by many critics of this particular style today.

In the first part of the paper we will argue that ‘anger’ is one of the elements in Heavy Metal that adds to the impression that Heavy Metal is irrational and primitive, in other words: stupid. As has been noted by Jon Elster in “Ulysses Unbound” (2000), since the time of Aristotle "the most frequent antonym of passion was reason" (p. 7). In this tradition anger is the passion we have to worry about the most in case we want to act reasonable: “*Anger* is perhaps the most important of these blind-and-deaf passions. It may be unique among the emotions in its capacity to make us forget even our most vital interests” (ibd., p. 12). But anger might also be seen as an instrument of self-binding by being instrumental to overcome time-inconsistency (Elster 2000: p. 45ff.). Hence, we will argue that staying and becoming angry as well as expressing and living out anger are important elements of Heavy Metal,

which serve to maintain the identity of the community and its members (which include musicians as well as fans).<sup>1</sup>

Since anger is a “deaf-and-blind emotion” (as Elster puts it) the experience of anger adds to the intensity that members of the Heavy Metal community strive to experience. Again, this is true for fans as well as for the musicians<sup>2</sup> and does add another anti-intellectual element to Heavy Metal. What has been said on Hardcore by Katharina Inhetveen (2004, p. 51) might also be valid for Heavy Metal: The community members are not to be described as ‘experts’ in the sense of Adorno. Being part of a Heavy Metal concert is not about the rational processing of an audio signal. As Robert Fudge (2007, p. 5) notes: “You don’t just *listen* to Metallica’s music – you *experience* it, and the music’s sheer power can simultaneously stimulate and drain you.” In short, we argue, that Heavy Metal is about providing a distinctive bodily experience to the ones participating, which includes building up and releasing the emotion of anger.

In the second part of the paper we will focus on what we call ‘controlled anger’, which refers to the fact that Heavy Metal since the 1990-ties has turned towards an elaborated form of ‘anger management’ for musicians and fans alike. Hence, we will focus on the form of social control to be observed at Heavy Metal concerts, which at times seems to contradict the fundamental experience of freedom and even chaos one would expect.

## 1. Emotions and Morality

Although Jack Harrell (1994, p. 93) mentioned ‘freedom’ in his list of “subjects typical to most rock music [that] are absent in death metal [as well as in other extreme forms of Metal]”,<sup>3</sup> we hold the ‘freedom to express anger’ to be fundamental to Heavy Metal. „Extreme metal's vitality 'stirs up' the body”, Keith Kahn-Harris writes in his book on “Extreme Metal” (2007, p. 52): “This process allows the expression of what are seen to be negative emotions. Aggression, anger, violence and brutality are seen as the essential elements of extreme metal and the source of its vitality [...]”

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, we recognize that to certain subgenres of Heavy Metal like ‘Glammetal’ and ‘Sleazemetal’ the element of anger is not as important as in more extreme forms, which we focus on in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Robert Walser (1993, p. 19) quotes a fan stating: Heavy Metal is “the most powerful kind of music; it makes me feel powerful. It's intense; it helps me work off my frustrations.”

<sup>3</sup> Harrell states in his article that he prefers “death metal” to “speed metal” or “thrash metal”, thus using “death metal” as an umbrella term for more extreme forms of Heavy Metal (Harrel 1994, p. 91).

Writing on “Metallica, Emotion, and Morality” (2007), Robert Fudge points to the tradition already mentioned in the introduction: Philosophers “... have long worried about the potentially corrosive effects of certain styles of music on the listener’s moral character. If listening to, say, angry Metallica songs makes us angry, and if feeling angry makes us act in less than desirable ways, then it follows that angry Metallica songs have a negative effect on our morals” (Fudge 2007, p. 5).

What made Philosophers worried is the fact that anger makes us ignore even our most vital interests, as has been already pointed out by referring to Jon Elster’s book on self-binding.

In “Ulysses unbound” he deals with the question why individuals may want to restrict their freedom of choice: “Prima facie it would seem that nobody could have a motivation for discarding options, delaying rewards, or imposing cost on themselves” (Elster 2000, p. 1). As he points out early in his book, one reason to discard future options is to protect oneself against passions, which “may cause us to deviate from plans laid in a cooler moment” (ibid., p. 7). Thus, a “person who fears that anger might cause him to act in ways contrary to his self-interest would do well to avoid occasions on which this emotion might be triggered” (ibid., p. 8). Taking the writing of Seneca, Hume and Montaigne as a starting point (ibid., p. 12), Elster argues in favour of a concept of rationality that avoids being ruled by one’s own passions.

However, Elster also discusses findings that in contrast to Seneca and Montaigne, to which he refers himself, view passions as “precommitment devices that enable agents to overcome time-inconsistency problems” (Elster 2000, p. 45). Although, he disagrees, because he views persons know to become angry to be less attractive as partners for interaction (p. 56),<sup>4</sup> he has to admit that “anger and envy affect the credibility of threats” (p. 47).

We would also like to add that becoming, being and staying angry may also help to remember who we are. When we are still angry about something or something still makes us agree, it is reasonable that we still identify ourselves as the same persons in the future as we are now. Thus, passions may be instrumental to overcome a certain kind of time-inconsistency

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<sup>4</sup> „People will learn to recognize irascible and envious people, and walk around them rather than have dealings with them. ... Irascible and vindictive people ... may gain in each interaction, but have fewer interactions” (Elster 2000, p. 56).

problem, which arises from regretting our precommitment of the past, since we have become another person.<sup>5</sup>

It's interesting to note that Elster refers to Seneca, since the Stoic position which rejects anger as a self-destructive emotion is in stark contrast to the Aristotelian view "that anger can be appropriate and useful in certain circumstances and to certain degrees" (Braund and Gilbert 2003, p. 285). And it is worth mentioning the Aristotelian position here, because Robert Fudge's reflections on "Metallica, Emotion, and Morality" are built on Aristotle's view, that "too little anger is ... unhealthy" (Fudge 2007, p. 9) and "[by] arousing our anger, our anguish, or our resentment, music helps us deal with our emotions and get over them sooner" (p. 10). Thus, he regards Metallica's music as morally beneficial "insofar as it helps purge us of destructive emotions" (p. 15).

Hence, other than Elster suggested the sharp contrast between passions – especially 'anger' – and rationality is part of a specific stoic tradition, which might still be dominated today, however, not all philosophers did and do reject anger as purely self-destructive notion. Thus, there is no need to judge Heavy Metal being 'stupid' or being morally destructive because of its fixation of anger and other negative emotions.

Now, let us return to 'anger' as an instrument of self-binding to overcome time-inconsistencies. As being stated above anger adds to the credibility of threats, but the fact that someone is still angry about something might also prove that the feelings of the person has been authentic in the first time and the person is still the same. However, as Fudge following Aristotle also points out, Heavy Metal music might also be morally damaging since "it has the potential to arouse negative emotions that lead to destructive behaviour" (Fudge 2007, p. 15). By doing so Fudge argues that moral virtue, is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency" (Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, 1107a). Hence, even when anger is to be viewed as being appropriate and useful at times from an Aristotelian position, excess is to be avoided. In the second part of our paper we will study the way that Heavy Metal tries to define the "mean between the two vices."

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<sup>5</sup> This might be seen as an example of a "rational and self-interested agent... who precommits himself against his own rationality" (Elster 2000, p. 8).

## 2. Controlled Anger

When at a live gig in the early 90-ties Metallica's former bass player Jason Newsted was seemingly “acting like a maniac” and getting caught up with the energy of a song, James Hetfield told him: “Jason, you’re too fuckin’ metal, you’re too fuckin’ metal for your own good!”

Here we can see two different views of expressing anger in one band. While James Hetfield had changed in the first 10 years of Metallica from the young, angry and uncontrolled Thrash metal guitarist and singer to a more controlled, charismatic and “cool” band leader, Jason Newsted entered the band 1986 as a thrash metal bassist, who lived music very intensively, and left Metallica 2001 as the same person. Besides the roles of the other two band members, we can see that these two persons portray different views of Metal, of living the anger of the music and controlling this anger. Watching the 1992 San Diego Show of Metallica, we can see Jason singing (shouting?) a lot of the “old Metallica stuff” in a very rough, unpurified manner, putting all his energy and anger into the songs. On the other hand, if we watch James singing and playing guitar, we hear a trained voice and we see a lot of cool and controlled behaviour, reducing emotion to well-formed mimics and gestures, e. g. snarling or using archaic, threatening gestures.

At first sight the later James Hetfield strives for a balanced expression of anger in an Aristotelian sense of finding a mean between two extremes (of having no anger and having too much anger). In contrast Jason Newsted's behaviour on stage shows his striving for the excess, for acting out the feelings and sharing it with the fans.

At this point we are able to define James’ behavior as contained, holding back emotions. Fudge refers to Hetfield's song writing for “St. Anger” (2003), which is documented in the film “Some kind of monster” (2004), to show that James’ retentiveness in acting out may be more civilised, but also has a dark side: James, as he explains himself, was hiding from his real feelings for a long time, not revealing them neither to his band colleagues nor to the audience/environment and finally taking refuge in drugs to cope with his bad feelings. He experienced the clear expression of anger (and connected feelings like fear) in the songs of “St. Anger” as a relief, as a clearing and balancing of his emotional state.

This story about Metallica nicely illustrates the fact that Heavy Metal since the 1990-ties has turned towards a more elaborated form of ‘anger management’ for musicians and fans alike, although precisely then more bands playing very extreme styles of metal appear.<sup>6</sup>

Heavy Metal bands like ‘Slipknot’ seem to have learned the lessons of the crossover years and by now have started to allow the audience to perform rituals of building up and releasing tension. Thus, although Heavy Metal relies on anger as a fundamental expression enabling a distinctive bodily experience, post-modern Metal does not aim to stir up emotions to the excess, beyond the point of control anymore in a way earlier examples of Extreme Metal did. Instead of bands outdoing one another by becoming even louder or faster, post-modern Metal incorporates different kind of expressions within one song.

Besides a more sophisticated mood management in post-modern metal song writing, the fan culture developed several forms of “controlled anger”-interaction. While in the 1980-ties, a concerts’ progress could be endangered by individual outbursts of fury which mostly ended in fights and brawls,<sup>7</sup> postmodern fan culture stages with help from the bands a controlled and rule-based turmoil, we could even say: turmoil of battle. Especially in big concerts and open-air we can observe different forms of interaction for the purpose of acting out anger in a controlled way. Instead of beating each other and wreck the place etc. the fans play different “games” like moshing (which has its own place since the 90ies: the Moshpit), stage-diving, Wall of death, pogo, bouncing and barging, some of these being adopted from other subcultures.

While anger in metal has different reasons and forms, one important is anger as an „essential political emotion“ (Nehring 2003: 107). Harrell states that he was astonished watching a Megadeth-concert, at which the band played a cover of the Sex Pistols song „Anarchy in the UK“ („Anarchy in the USA“). „Death metal rockers say that the appeal of their music is its anger. Rather than naively calling for a utopian peace, it speaks to the frustrations felt by

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<sup>6</sup>Although, most genres of extreme metal emerged during the 1980-ties, doom and death metal have been redefined by bands like “My dying Bride” and “Paradise Lost” and Norwegian bands like Emperor, Mayhem and Burzum started to develop a highly distinctive and influential form of Black Metal (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 2ff.). Also, one should not underestimate the effect of the crossover experience from the late 1980-ties and early 1990-ties, when after a period of disclosure which aimed to define Heavy Metal and all its different subgenres Heavy Metal started to reconnect to other subcultures, allowing experiments with elements from Punk, Hardcore, Industrial, Dark Wave / Gothic, Hip Hop and Techno (c.f. Roccor 1998, pp. 76ff.).

<sup>7</sup>The „proxemic rule of metal“ at concerts, as Weinstein (2000, p. 211) puts it, is “Do not touch. If you happen by accident to do so, you give a brief nod of apology.” She also points to the violence of this rule in the 1990-ties and the challenge of integrating “moshing” and “stage-diving” into Heavy Metal concerts which as first was perceived as a violation of the “do not touch”-rule (ibid., pp. 228ff.).

young people as they struggle against the inherent weaknesses of institutional, highly managed societies.“ (Harrell 1994: 97)

Now, imagine an audience of angry individualistic young men, singing with clenched fist “Cause I won't obey! Anarchy!“. The socio-critical and anarchic message becomes paradoxical, because the audience finally obeys the “rule” to sing along with the band and to act together peacefully. The revolutionary anger expressed in the song is tamed and controlled by the conventional forms of interaction.<sup>8</sup>

We can observe the same collective expression of socio-critical and deviant anger at Metallica-concerts, when James Hetfield sings “Am I Evil?” and the crowd responds “Yes I Am!” – Finally the deviant anger becomes the norm, regulated by rules of the (metal) game, forming rituals of “anger management”. Thus, we can observe social control at Heavy Metal concerts, which at times seems to contradict the fundamental experience of freedom and even chaos one would expect.

A fine example of controlled anger is the video clip “Duality” by the extreme metal band Slipknot. The band, as usual wearing their horror-clown-masks and baseball bats, is playing the song in a house surrounded by a horde of fans. The fans try to enter the house and wreck the furniture, obviously their blood is stirred up by the aggressive music and they try to live the anger and self-hatred expressed by the song. At the end, the band performing a more easeful break, the lead singer brings the fan “community” to being calm and motionless by lifting his hand like a priest - but also then the anger finds a loophole in the facial expressions of the fans (the band has no facial expression since they wear masks).

The impact of the music and the social interaction of band and fans lead to a state of barely bearing the intensity, which is expressed in the behaviour of the fans. Nevertheless, the anger and despair (“All I've got...all I've got is insane...“) depicted in music, video and interaction with the fans does not lead to real (self-)destruction: The power excited by the music flows

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<sup>8</sup> Weinstein (2000) refers Ferdinand Tönnies's concept of „*Gemeinschaft*“ to describe the community of comradeship (p. 211) created and experienced among the people at a concert. She also points to different forms of interaction and fans (pp. 223ff.) that are deployed to create this special kind of *Gemeinschaft*. As she stresses rightfully, “... that heavy metal artists can use so many and such direct devices to involve the audience because that audience is already prepared to respond enthusiastically.” (ibid., p. 224) Also, the audience knows how to act in the context of a Heavy Metal concert. Hence, one had to sing a long the well-know lines of “Anarchy in the UK”, while raising the hands.

back into the interaction and gives strength to the band and the fans, and finally prevents the anger becoming (self)destructive, the individual in the crowd becoming “insane”.

Here, the power of anger remains, but is transformed to an intensity and authentic feeling of being angry together, which is much more beneficial for the individual than being angry on his/her own. So the effect of metal - at best - is an equilibrium of feelings or a transformation of destructive anger into beneficial feelings of social cohesion. Shouting out that you are “fucking hostile” is not a hostility in itself or an instigation for it, but one option in a controlled social field that generates norms and rules for itself. As Harrell puts it, Metal and its expression of anger is an important cultural field that deserves scientific observation.

#### **4. Concluding remark**

In this paper we have argued that Heavy Metal is not to be judged as irrational and irresponsible just because it stresses the freedom to express anger and be angry. The stoic rejection of anger might be a dominant thought today, however by following Fudge (2007) we pointed to the Aristotelian tradition of accepting anger as being useful and appropriate in some cases. In the second part of the paper we have explored the elaborated form of “anger management” to be found in Heavy Metal.

We would like to conclude with the remark, that we were not able to address the specific form of anger expressed in Heavy Metal and the specific devices used within Heavy Metal to arouse and release anger. Hence, we suggest to look for differences between different “angry subcultures” like Hardcore, Punk, or Hip Hop to figure out, if there is anything like a specific form of “Heavy Metal anger” or “Punk anger”.

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