

Fuck Euphemisms: How Heavy Metal Lyrics Speak the Truth About War

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The first verse of Nine Inch Nail's anti-war anthem "The Good Soldier" describes in unambiguous terms the brutality of combat: "Gunfire in the street/Where we used to meet/Echoes that are beat/When the bass goes 'bomb'/right over my head/step over the dead/Remember what you said/You know a part of my old life."¹ Though written in response to the cruelty of the current Iraq war, from the perspective of an individual soldier, Trent Reznor's uncompromising lyrics level a broader indictment against all wars, plainly exposing the suffering that politician and media doublespeak so often conceals. For this reason, his lyrics belong to a category of heavy metal lyrics that I would like to call "anti-euphemistic" lyrics. These lyrics convey such raw urgency about their subject that they can inspire political action despite their general apoliticalness. Considering the example of Reznor's lyrics and others like his within a broader history of heavy metal, this essay will examine how these "anti-euphemistic" lyrics tell a crucial, and wholly different, story about war than the one fed to the public by politicians and the media who coddle them.

I. The danger of euphemisms

Not all euphemisms are harmful. Some, like those used to describe certain sexual acts or unsavory bodily functions, can actually serve the positive purpose of saving someone from embarrassment or inspiring a good joke. Euphemisms of this kind are typically benign and seldom result in injury or death. Their function is a matter of social grace and nothing else. Other euphemisms, however, are not so harmless. For example, those used in the context of war reporting and general discourse about war are downright dangerous. Euphemisms of this sort are designed to minimize awareness of and empathy for human suffering and unite the public around a cause most reasonable people instinctively know to be

wrong. In her essay *Fuck Euphemisms*, writer and translator Élise Hendrick offers this concise and unforbearing definition of euphemisms.

[Euphemisms] are bloodless, heartless evasions that destroy the truth whilst leaving the underlying facts mostly intact (though they are occasionally outright lies).ⁱⁱ

Hendrick goes on to give examples of some of the more common euphemisms one hears during wartime.

Commentators speak of “the war *in* Iraq. The United States “intervened” in Iraq, they will say, because of “faulty intelligence.” Regrettably, there has been the odd bit of “collateral damage” in the midst of what military experts call “low-intensity conflict” or “counterinsurgency operations,” which often involve “depopulating” large areas, include “village closures,” in order to “neutralize insurgents.” This policy of “shock and awe” “counterinsurgency” sometimes involves “civilian contractors,” who help in the “defense of Iraq.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These are but a few of countless examples of euphemisms that disguise the brutality of war and render its victims, soldiers and civilians alike, alone with the reality of what has happened to them. When the news media abandon their responsibility to use language that accurately describes the brutality of war, what is left is a chasmal physical, psychological and emotional divide between the victims of war and those of us who only read about them. Indeed, euphemistic language turns war crimes into mere abstractions and, contributing to the already impersonal nature of modern warfare, cleverly transfers culpability away from the aggressor and onto the victims themselves. In the introduction to *What Every Person Should Know About War*, former New York Times correspondent and anti-war activist Christopher Hedges writes about how this affects the lives of veterans and civilian survivors.

Modern industrial warfare is largely impersonal. The effects of these powerful weapons and explosives on human bodies are usually not disclosed to the public. The physical and psychological wounds are lifelong crucibles carried by veterans and civilian survivors...Those who suffer from war’s touch are often left to struggle with the awful scars alone or with their families.^{iv}

While it is wholly within the power of the media to generate empathy for the victims of war, this power so often goes untapped. Instead of describing with concrete, visceral language war's effect on human bodies and minds, the media betray war's victims by "prettying up" their experiences. One might wonder, however, how long the major newspapers and television networks would stay in business if they started reporting on the murder of innocent children instead of on that "odd bit of collateral damage."

The primary danger of euphemistic language is not that it will inspire active violence in a public who is repeatedly exposed to it, but rather that it engenders passivity in that public. This, of course, is the path to a kind of violence, itself: the violence of apathy. For example, a person who reads the major mainstream newspapers and magazines and watches the mainstream television news may know at some level when he's being fed a pack of lies, but at another, deeper level he's quite content to accept them as a way to ease his conscience and stave off his feelings of helplessness. Better to accept the fictitious world the euphemism creates than go crazy with images of dead bodies and decimated cities. However, allowing oneself the refuge of this fantasy world is extremely dangerous. As Deans has noted, "people who speak with bland detachment of the random violence that is war have taken a dangerous first step toward accepting that violence."^v

II. Not afraid to bleed: Heavy metal's "anti-euphemistic" lyrics

Euphemisms used to describe the violence of war tell us that suffering is not *really* suffering and that death is not *really* death. They tell us to deny instinct and common sense so that our conscience may remain intact.

The story heavy metal lyrics tell about war, however, is wholly different. Blunt, confrontational, visceral and often as obscene as the suffering they describe, heavy metal lyrics look war in the face. They are the camera rolling in the middle of combat—an honest, fearless witness.

If euphemistic language can be called the “language of passivity,” “anti-euphemistic” heavy metal lyrics should be called the “language of anger.” Far from describing war with “bland detachment,” heavy metal lyrics drop the listener in the middle of it, an experience that is intensified by the music itself. In this way, heavy metal lyrics (as a whole) function less as an explicit protest against war in the way that much folk rock (of both the past and present) does, and more as an “exposing” of war’s cruelties. The conscious goal is not to promote political reform, though heavy metal lyrics do hold the power to inspire political action. As Deena Weinstein has noted, “Heavy Metal’s tendency is to hold that the deepest conflicts and frustrations in life cannot be resolved by political reform or revolution.”^{vi} Still, one detects in heavy metal lyrics a deep concern and respect for the victims of war that is expressed through the blunt-honest descriptions of the physical and psychological wounds inflicted upon them.

There are several examples of such “anti-euphemistic” lyrics that long-standing metal fans could cite off the top of their heads, but for the purposes of this presentation, I have decided to limit myself to five examples that I think best illustrate my point. Being concerned more with lyrical content than stylistic unity, I have chosen examples from several genres of metal spanning almost four decades, from 1970 to the present. These I have divided into two groups. The first group includes two songs: Black Sabbath’s “War Pigs,” from 1970, and Guns N’ Roses’ “Civil War,” from 1990 that address with broad strokes the phenomenon of war itself. The second group includes songs that tell the story of combat from a soldier’s perspective. Included here are Metallica’s “One” from 1989, “Rooster,” from 1992, by Alice In Chains, and “The Good Soldier,” from 2007, by Nine Inch Nails.

“War Pigs,” doubtless the most famous song from Black Sabbath’s 1970 album *Paranoid* was originally titled “Walpurgis,” and was intended to describe the witches’ sabbath. The recorded version retains the original concept’s sense of place and progression of time—events seem to unfold over the course of a single night. But what we witness here is not a pagan celebration but an apocalyptic battle. Black Sabbath’s bleak, graphic lyrics place us immediately into the middle of the fighting, where we are introduced to the generals of death and destruction.

Generals gathered in their masses/ Just like witches at black masses/ Evil minds that plot destruction/ Sorcerers of deaths construction/ In the fields the bodies burning/As the war machine keeps turning/ Death and hatred to mankind/ Poisoning their brainwashed minds, oh lord yeah!^{vii}

The opening lines of “Civil war” by Guns N Roses have the similar effect of placing the listener in the middle of war’s destruction. The song begins with the spoken lines

What we've got here is failure to communicate./Some men you just can't reach.../So, you get what we had here last week,/which is the way he wants it!/Well, he gets it!/N' I don't like it any more than you men^{viii}

Listening to the opening of “Civil War,” we have the feeling of being guided across a body strewn battlefield, shortly after the fighting has ended. Though we are left to imagine what the scene actually looks like, we can’t help but reflect with the speaker on its brutal meaninglessness. We are denied the comfortable illusions euphemisms provide, which, as Hendrick points out, “seek to anaesthetize mind and conscience alike.”^{ix} Instead, these “anti-euphemistic” lyrics bring us face to face with the concrete physical reality of death and destruction, a reality seldom revealed in sanitized media reports of war.

The class dimension of war, so often concealed or trivialized by the media, is also exposed in these two songs. While most intelligent, well-informed people understand that it is typically the children of the lower classes who are dispatched to their death at the front lines of a war, it’s frightening to ponder how little outrage this inspires in the public at large—outrage, for example, at the despicable, exploitive Floeckher 5

practice of “stop-lossing” by the United States military of typically lower middle class and poor soldiers. How often do we hear, either from the mouths of politicians themselves or in the filtered sound bites of the dominant media, the class dimension of war presented in such unequivocal terms as those of Black Sabbath?

Politicians hide themselves away/They only started the war/Why should they go out to fight?
They leave that role to the poor^x

Or as it’s portrayed in the scathingly simple rhyme of the chorus to “Civil War”?

And/ I don't need your civil war/ It feeds the rich while it buries the poor/ Your power hungry
sellin' soldiers/ In a human grocery store/Ain't that fresh/ I don't need your civil war^{xi}

One can easily imagine Ozzy Osbourne and Axl Rose standing before the United States Congress, echoing in song 2004 Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry’s no-bullshit stance on “stop-lossing,” calling it precisely what it is: a back-door draft.

While the above pair of “anti-euphemistic” lyrics level damning critiques at the phenomenon of war, the next group reveals personal accounts of combat and its aftermath. Deeply personal and chillingly graphic, they map the psychological and physical wounds of the individual soldier. Indeed they put the shellshock back into “posttraumatic stress disorder.”

“One” by Metallica describes the tortured inner world of a World War I veteran (a world surely inhabited by countless other veterans from all wars everywhere). Confined to a hospital bed, the soldier is blind, mute and immobile. His body destroyed, his mind is nevertheless lucid, indeed terribly so. The song’s lyrics emphasize, in no uncertain terms, the reality of war’s effect on the human body. The body is not transformed into an abstraction here—something that can be “neutralized” or offered as “collateral”—but is described as the very vulnerable organism it is, one that can be wounded, burned and dismembered.

At the song's close, we learn that the soldier is the victim of a land mine. Its effect is clear enough:

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^{xii}

The agony of Metallica's bed-ridden soldier is matched by the suffering experienced by combat weary soldiers in "Rooster" by Alice in Chains and Nine Inch Nails' "The Good Soldier." The genius of these two songs lies in their ability to generate understanding of, if not empathy for the dreadfulness of the individual soldier's experience through visceral, penetrating imagery.

"Rooster" was inspired by the Vietnam War experiences of guitarist Jerry Cantrell's father, Jerry Cantrell Sr. Cantrell Sr. was nicknamed "Rooster" as a young boy and the nickname stuck throughout his time in Vietnam. Indeed, the fact of the nickname's origin adds poignancy to its use in the song.

"Rooster's" "anti-euphemistic" lyrics capture the paranoia, distress, home-sickness, regret, terror, exhaustion and physical pain of war. All of this is conveyed in the first verse.

Aint found a way to kill me yet/ Eyes burn with stinging sweat/ Seems every path leads me to nowhere/ Wife and kids household pet/ Army green was no safe bet/ The bullets scream to me from somewhere^{xiii}

And then, in the chorus, we hear the determination to survive laced with paralyzing fear.

Here they come to snuff the rooster/ Yeah here come the rooster, yeah/ You know he aint gonna die/ No, no, no, ya know he aint gonna die^{xiv}

The same kind of lonely anguish is echoed in "The Good Soldier" by Nine Inch Nails. Fifteen years after "Rooster" made the devastation of the Vietnam War clear to a generation of young people once removed from it, Trent Reznor released the uncharacteristically political album Year Zero, whose song lyrics read like a litany of the sins of the Bush administration and their warmongering, religious zealot supporters. "Good Soldier" tells the story of one soldier caught in the middle of the Iraq disaster. Indeed, what is most disturbing about the following lyrics is how, in an effort to console himself, the soldier adopts the very rhetoric that got him there in the first place.

Blood hardens in the sand/ Cold metal in my hand/ Hope you understand the way that things
are gonna be/There's nowhere left to hide/'Cause God is on our side/ I keep telling myself^{xv}

No doubt, Reznor's lyrics unapologetically expose the fusion of American military power and right wing religious fundamentalism. But, more importantly and generally, they underscore the power political doublespeak carries in times of war.

III. Can "anti-euphemistic" heavy metal lyrics inspire anti-war activism?

A good response to this seldom posed, though manifestly important, question might begin with the following quote about the nature of art in general. The quote comes from Pablo Picasso: "Art is the lie that tells the truth." This powerful statement is easy enough to understand. Art is the lie because it is not the world that it depicts. But it tells the truth by depicting that world in terms plain, visceral and honest. Such an honest depiction of the world constitutes nothing less than the very foundation of empowerment and growth.

The aforementioned examples of lyrics from Black Sabbath, Guns 'N Roses, Metallica, Alice in Chains and Nine Inch Nails do indeed describe war in terms plain, visceral and honest. They may not provide a clarion call for political reform, but they do provide all who listen to them an alternative to media and politician doublespeak. We find in these lyrics a very real emphasis on how combat affects the body, mind and soul. The victims whose stories are told in these lyrics are not abstractions or statistics, but real, vulnerable human beings who have families, friends and histories.

It goes without saying that no matter how much euphemistic language and propaganda is used, war can never really be made agreeable. But it is clear to this writer, a citizen of a country whose public has been consistently bullied into an uneasy passivity over the last eight years, that euphemistic language is a powerful, omnipresent and dangerous force. Of course, it would be naïve, unrealistic and perhaps a bit cruel to believe that if more people would just listen to heavy metal, the truth about war would be

revealed to them and that from that point forward, they would consider the support of a war an unconscionable act. But, for those who do listen and do want to hear art speak truth to power, heavy metal's "anti-euphemistic" lyrics provide enough evidence for them to say "fuck war" and "fuck euphemisms."

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