

## **Machine Guns and Machine Gun Drums: Heavy Metal's Portrayal of Warfare**

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### Introduction

Warfare is a perennial source of lyrical and visual inspiration for metal artists. In this they are far from alone – from time immemorial composers have been impassioned to write music by the struggles and conflicts of their day. Few other genres, however, are quite as fascinated by the visceral experience of warfare itself. The song titles, subject matters, dress and iconography of the metal genre are heavily coloured by militaristic themes. Nor, it is fair to say, are other musical genres quite as sonically suited to convey themes of warfare. The sheer intensity and sonic violence of metal – especially in its extreme permutations – arguably constitutes as close a mimicking of the cacophony of battle that modern music can offer. That metal can sound so violent makes it a platform well suited to sing about overtly violent themes, which it does so in abundance. Metal's most beloved violent fixations include murderous criminality and fantastical make-believe violence, which blend closely with its portrayals of warfare.

There is no uniformity in metal's portrayal of warfare. Lyrical stances can vary between patriotic veneration of military history to outright criticism of war. They can range in taste too, and for every delicate handling of the undeniable horrors of war, other metal artists or songs seemingly rejoice in the brutal gratuity of battle for nothing more than shock effect. What, therefore, can be said about the relationship between the phenomenon of war and its artistic representation by metal?

This paper inquires into unique properties of metal as a medium through which to portray aspects of warfare. It will inquire into whether warfare is simply a conveniently dark theme that metal repeatedly – and perhaps self-servingly – mines for material, or whether there is a deeper, more fundamental relationship between art and subject. It will do so not merely through the obvious discussion of how portrayals of warfare can vary between metal sub-genres. It will consider metal as a genre beloved by western soldiers in real wars. It will also consider the proximity of metal artists themselves to the phenomenon about which they are writing. Since this

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paper is concerned with the varying ways in which metal musicians represent war, it will pose the question as to whether the (usual) detachment of the metal artist from their subject matter of war impedes or enhances their portrayal of it. Finally, it will inquire into whether metal musicians have a responsibility to their subject matter, which after all is a real phenomenon that scars and ends lives, and that determines the destinies of peoples.

### Metal's tactical palette

Broadly speaking there are three banners under which metal musicians tackle the subject of warfare. The first is the storytellers approach; the second emphasizes the visceral horror of battle; and the third is revulsion at the futility and exploitation inherent in war. The following discussion makes no claim to comprehensively covering the different ways in which metal has covered warfare, but will serve as an introduction to organizing thoughts around the metal catalogue and the subject matter at hand.

### A metallic Bayeux Tapestry

Metal has perfected the art of the musical history lesson. In this category Iron Maiden are undoubtedly masters. Whether it is the clash between RAF and Luftwaffe over skies of southern England, the charge of the Light Brigade, the march of Alexander's armies, or the mud and blood of Paschendale, Maiden are sure to have documented the tale. Bruce Dickinson (himself a history graduate) has even come to don military garb and the British Union Flag during live performances of *The Trooper*. Many metal artists have followed this storytelling mould, varying in the degree of moral neutrality they attach to the tales they recount. For America's Iced Earth, an entire album, *The Glorious Burden*, was comprised of a series of such songs, leaping between military historical theatres, but always bound by distinctly patriotic overtones.

For traditional metal artists of this ilk war is a suitably epic theme, on top of which the epic bombast of their frequently long and intricate compositions comfortably sits. Together, music and lyrics stimulate such passions amongst its listeners as excitement at the clash of arms, veneration of heroism, and the sorrow of loss, in a manner that is quite akin to a cinematic telling of the same tales.

In related fashion bands like Amon Amarth are inspired by history, but with a focal point being the warrior (the Viking, in their case) rather than any particular conflict. This vagueness of specificity is common for a great deal of metal lyrics. Often, lyrics about war are suitably vague so as to evoke themes of honour, loss, courage and suffering. In turn, these are perennial themes

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for metal that appear across the gamut of the genre, cutting across the specific subject in question, but highly effective well when conveyed through a suitably militaristic vernacular. When these themes are suitably abstract so as to not require any specification as to whether the war is real or imagined, it does not especially matter when there is a rollicking tale to tell.

Regardless of the specificity of its pronouncements, metal's historical storytelling function is valuable one. Few genres take the trouble to sing their way through a history lesson with such theatric aplomb as metal. In this realm at least, metal ought to be applauded for the manner in which it both provokes and reflects an interest in history amongst its audience.

### War Ensemble

As metal got nastier so did its lyrical treatment of its favourite subjects. For the thrash metal bands of the 1980s who created the sonic bridge from traditional to more extreme forms of metal, helped escalate metal's treatment of war. The jarring musical device of machine gun drumming, the terminology is almost more than mere analogy – titles such as Slayer's *War Ensemble* and Megadeth's *Symphony of Destruction* proving quite clever plays on words. As metal music began to sound ever more extreme, it seemingly drew closer to the subject of war. The generational impact of being born into the renewed superpower tension of the 1980s is stark, and thermonuclear war ranked amongst the most revisited themes for thrash metal artists. Megadeth derived their name from a misspelling of the unit of one million deaths coined by RAND strategist Herman Kahn.<sup>1</sup> Nuclear war is humanity's most instantly apocalyptic a theme, and arguably, metal is the music world's most apocalyptic sounding music – the association has proved to be a closely bound one, with numerous artists revisiting the theme.

A theme common to nuclear war theorists is that of escalation. The intellectual basis of the Mutually Assured Destruction theorem posited its horrific strategy because limited nuclear exchange could never be assured (in the eyes of the adversary any attack could not be persuasively contained within bounded sets of targets, such as battlefields or allied countries, resulting retribution not necessarily in kind by the other side). From the mid 1980s onwards metal as a genre seemed to experience escalation logic of its own, as increasingly ferocious sub genres sought to out do each other in lyrical and visual grotesqueness and in sonic power.

Extreme metal has tended to particular emphasis on the bloody reality of war. Good taste has never bothered extreme metal – much of its *raison d'être* is to provoke – but extreme metal's portrayal of warfare deserves consideration for the sheer gratuity that can grace its lyrics. For

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton University Press, 1960). Kahn also coined the term "wargasm", later used by Cradle of Filth to entitle their *Lustmord And Wargasm* track.

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death metal artists, the overt violence of their lyrical slant is inseparable from their music, taking it to a gore obsessed extent. For example, Dismember's *To End It All*:

Body split in two, trembling hands / Touch what is left of me / Try to force back, guts where they belong / ... To end it all is the only option / I reach for my weapon so close but so far / I lift up my intestines, examine them closely / What has come of me, where is the rest of me / ... Forgotten soldier left to rot / Among other corpses / A nameless causality / In mankind's bloody history.

There is – quite simply – no other genre in the world that would write lyrics about the dying moments of an eviscerated soldier on the field of battle. If it's a purposefully shocking theme then the battlefield contains abundant examples. If metal is a genre that attracts a niche following, then death metal exists in an even smaller niche. For all the nastiness of such a lyric, it is difficult to deflect the obvious parallel of the nastiness inherent in the act of violent conflict. This theme of metal depicting life in quite such a direct fashion will be addressed at the close of this paper.

As metal entered the twenty first century, it has mainstreamed its sonic brutality away from the previous limited niche of extreme metal. Not all sonically offensive attempts by metal to portray war are gratuitous, and this is especially the case in those instances when injected with a deal of contemporary awareness. To take an example of popular but very aggressive modern metal, Lamb of God's *Contractor* specifically addresses the burgeoning industry of the private military firms in contemporary theatres of war. Its lyrics cleverly name check a "black water rising", "Route Irish" to Baghdad, and the dreaded Improvised Explosive Devices, all to a rhythm that has enough momentum to create the sensation of a speeding convoy that could at any second end in limb-severing conflagration. Blending thrill with the horror of rolling the dice for your life, such a track manages to correlate the velocity of its music with the velocity of its theme. This isn't just metal as storytelling – this is metal as a kind of sonic simulator. The politically aware edge moves us towards the third permutation of metal and its portrayal of war.

### Lambs to the slaughter

An important distinction to bear in mind is that battle and war are fundamentally different things. The former is the violent clash of arms and the latter is the overall confrontation within which the former occurs. Although outright revulsion or pacifism is uncommon in as masculine and powerful a genre as metal, when it switches attention from singing about fighting to commenting on broader aspects of war, metal can be an equally powerful and surprisingly moral platform.

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In today's politically charged post 9/11 environment, American bands such as the aforementioned Lamb of God write about governmental manipulation of people's sentiments in support of war. A track like *Now You've Got Something To Die For* is much like a politically aware protest song, and fuelled by similar urges to punk ethic inspired bands like System Of A Down or Rage Against the Machine. In this, metal artists are little different to their peers in other genres, albeit ramming the point home with no subtlety needed. Black Sabbath's *War Pigs* is perhaps metal's original statement on the manipulation of ordinary people in times of war. Written in 1970 when Vietnam had energized passions, Sabbath's diversion from their usual occult themes was a simple but powerful statement. It is the same theme illustrated by Metallica's cover artwork for *Master Of Puppets*, with tracks such as the utterly relentless *Disposable Heroes* powerfully conveying the rage of wasted youth. And as war fills today's headlines, it increasingly fills metal lyrics. There is no mistaking where the subject matter for Kreator's *Suicide Terrorist*, Slayer's *Jihad* and Megadeth's *Amerikhastan* comes from.

As a medium to aggressively provoke listener's emotions to themes of warfare, metal must strike a balance with the undoubted euphoric exhilaration that it relies upon. This contradiction is by no means a bad thing. The contradiction at being on the one hand excited at the musical pyromania taking place, but being jarred by themes being addressed, mimics the attraction and repulsion of war itself. War is fascinating and potentially exciting, but is also unsettling and horrible – and metal is well placed to evoke comparable passions. Both are in their own way wrought by quite irreconcilable tensions in the passions they evoke, although metal this loose parallel must not be stretched too far for obvious reasons.

### Music for (real) warriors

A different lens through which to view the relationship between the art and the phenomenon is the use of metal *in* war. Despite the fact that metal artists haven't tended to go to war themselves for inspiration, a great number of soldiers listen to metal. For teenage soldiers, do the apocalyptic, warlike themes of metal resonate more directly when dodging mortar blasts than in the years before when they were dodging the chores at home? The following anecdote from Iron Maiden's Steve Harris contrasts the act and the soundtrack:

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During the first Gulf War, we found out that one of the Queen's regiments were playing 'Run To The Hills' as they were going into battle. I thought that was amazing. Not in a positive way necessarily, and it's kind of scary at the same time, but I was quite proud of that.<sup>2</sup>

In a recently authored study on American soldiers and their musical choices in the Iraq war, the association between lyrics about war and soldiering was not necessarily a straightforward one. Metal – like other forms of popular music – was used as an inspiration for troops preparing to go into combat, and in a manner much as a person might psyche themselves up for sport. Whether the aggressive sound and imagery of metal proved a near perfect fit for the testosterone charged environment of warfare was moot, however. Certainly the parallel between art and life could be a real one:

Soldiers appear to relate these lyrical themes of death, war and violence as reflections of their own combat experiences. They also reinterpret lyrical meanings or phrases within metal songs to suit their specific circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

The tracks *Bodies* by Drowning Pool was cited as an example of when a song not about war, but about power and suffering could by analogy become relevant to the reality of war. However, this also meant that gansta rap was similarly suited – interestingly, its themes of urban violence and survival of the fittest resonated especially strongly amidst the close quarter urban battles of the Iraq insurgency. The study judged that for the US military fighting in Iraq, both metal and rap were used to achieve a psychological transformation, especially amongst the enlisted soldiers. Although in some cases there might be a direct association between lyrics and situation (listening to Metallica's *Seek and Destroy* on patrol, for example), the association was not an exclusive one to metal.<sup>4</sup>

Although only of tangential relevance to this paper, the use of metal as a weapon of psychological warfare cannot pass without mention. Using loudspeakers attached to military vehicles, the US military PSYOPS teams would blast metal into settlements and compounds such as Falluja (which became nicknamed "Lalalafallujah") in advance of a major assault to irritate the

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Harris quoted in Iron Maiden, *A Matter Of Life And Death: World Tour 2006* (European tour programme, 2006), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Pieslak, *Sound targets : American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War* (Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 148.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Pieslak, *Sound targets : American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War* (Indiana University Press, 2009)

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defenders and bolster the morale of the attackers.<sup>5</sup> An even less savory side of this practice of using metal in war was the reported use of metal to torture detainees.

Returning to lyrics, another observation is that aside from a rather small number of seminal examples, metal has tended not to address the after effects of war. Metallica's *One* does so spectacularly. More recently, Slayer's *Eyes Of The Insane* is one of the few metal songs to directly reference what might be post-traumatic stress: its lyric "Shell shock battle fatigue / Devastating insanity / Flashbacks panic attacks" speak directly an individual soldier's horror of emerging from war for. This would be a theme seemingly suited to metal and one that could be explored in a variety of ways, should the genre's artists so desire.

### Metal forged from real war

Despite metal's obsession with war, its leading artists are unlikely to have never been in one. The backbone of metal's European and North American catalogue has sprung from continents that have been free from the scourge of war for more decades than metal has existed. Successive generations of young musicians have congregated in garages and practice rooms in mainly urban surroundings, bonding over guitars, drums and vocals to emulate their rock heroes. They have been escaping pressures of adolescence and from the blandness of commercial mainstream entertainment. In some cases they might have also been escaping from the pressures of urban decline, such as poverty and street violence. Troubled though their lives might be, it is quite unlikely it to have been endangered by an invading army laying waste to all in its path, weapons gleaming in the sun... and yet that is precisely the kind of lyric they might construct.

This is not to say that war is absent from their lives – metal's four-decade long history to date has been book-ended by the two politically and socially divisive conflicts of Vietnam, during metal halcyon years, and Iraq and Afghanistan for the post millennium generation. For these metal musicians theirs is likely to have been a TV war. In contrast, metal musicians writing about war but living under conditions of political hardship have been living under conditions of latent conflict embedded within the socio-political fabric of their countries. For example, a band like Sepultura was raised in a politically constrictive environment, making the lyrics to *Chaos AD* all the more authentic through being borne from actual experience. Taking this line of inquiry to its logical end, what of metal that has actually been forged in conditions of war?

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Dr Dan Kuehl, retired Air Force Lt. Col., teaches Information Operations at Fort McNair's National Defense University. Jonathan Pieslak, *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War*, <http://www.soundtargets.com/>

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Documentaries such as *Heavy metal Baghdad* and *Global Metal* have provided rare illumination of countries and metal scenes in which armed conflict and religious slaughter cease being fanciful themes, becoming instead part of the tapestry of everyday life. For young musicians growing up in environments such as Iraq wracked by sectarian insurgency, or in Israel being convulsed by the second Intifada, a critical divergence from their European and North American counterparts is in evidence – the possibility of an imminent and violent death is real, not imagined. For one interviewee in *Global Metal*:

If you are witness to something and you come to write a song, your song will be more real than somebody who just read about it in a history lesson, because we live in a country where insanity became closer to reality.<sup>6</sup>

War and the presence of latent violence in society often produce quite restrictive and repressive environments, the strangulating social and personal freedoms and creating risk to life. In such desperate circumstances metal's protest function becomes more authentic than ever. According to one study, in Lebanon joining Hezbollah and being a rock fan are the two polls of youth culture:

One thing's for sure: both Hezbollah and Lebanon's hard rockers are expert at reminding people of the 'power of blood.' The difference is that Hezbollah and other political parties and militias use the symbolic power of blood to win support for shedding more of it when they deem necessary, while Lebanon's metalheads and their comrades across the musical spectrum use the symbolic power of blood for the opposite reason: to evoke the futility of violence.<sup>7</sup>

Since metal that has been written in war zones does not tend to receive the exposure of its developed world contemporaries, that metal performs the function of conveying the horrors of war in sound and lyric is as seamless a binding that can possibly be achieved between art and life.

### The responsibility of the artist

To conclude, a theme underlying this paper has been that of the responsibility of the artist to their subject matter. Clearly this has been as pertinent a question for so long as arts has reflected human life, which by definition as having been produced by humans, it always has. In a series of

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<sup>6</sup> Yishai Sweartz of Raven Music quoted in *Global Metal* (Banger Films Inc., 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Levine, *Heavy Metal Islam* (Three Rivers Press, 2008), p. 170.

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lectures, the French thinker Jacques Maritain wrested with this exact question, spelling out the terms of the debate:

I have tried to make clear the state of tension, or even of conflict, which naturally exists between Art and Morality, and which proceeds from the basic fact that Art is intent on the good of the work, not on the good of man, whereas Morality is intent on the good of man, not on the good of the work.<sup>8</sup>

Writing before metal ever existed, and not necessarily writing about music, Maritain eloquently expresses the dilemma. As with any moral argument, it is balance that must be carefully struck, avoiding the possibility that the separation between morality and art becomes nothing more than a smokescreen behind which art can ride roughshod over any notion of responsibility. Untimely, Maritain resolves the debate in favour of dispersing this smokescreen:

In other words it is true that Art and Morality are two autonomous worlds, each sovereign in its own sphere, but they cannot ignore or disregard one another, for man belongs in these two worlds, both as intellectual maker and as moral agent, doer of actions which engage his own destiny. And because an artist is a man before being an artist, the autonomous world of morality is simply superior to (and more inclusive than) the autonomous world of art. There is no law against the law of which the destiny of man depends. In other words Art is indirectly and extrinsically subordinate to morality.<sup>9</sup>

Given that metal tends to be a niche strand of art, our common humanity certainly dwarfs the metal fraternity. It might seem absurd to speak of the responsibility when metal, reaches a relatively small audience. Extreme metal reaches an even smaller audience, and attempting to shock its audience is precisely a trait it relies upon heavily. Yet when all is said and done, metal musicians ought carry some awareness that by virtue of the bluntness of the musical instrument they wield, they are uniquely equipped to portray war in manner few others could or perhaps would even dare to.

Art reflects and influences life, and in this symbiosis, the relationship between war and metal is a closely bound one. War provokes, drives, and is driven by humankind's deepest held primeval instincts – the desire to compete, to survive, to uphold honour when affronted, and of intense compassion and intense hatred. Metal music reflects a great many of these passions, albeit

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Maritain, 'The Responsibility of the Artist', lectures delivered to Princeton University, 1951. Available at: <http://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/resart.htm> (accessed August 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Maritain, 'The Responsibility of the Artist', lectures delivered to Princeton University, 1951. Available at: <http://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/resart.htm> (accessed August 2009).

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in the (usually) bombproof sanctity of the recording studio and the gig venue. Metal is well suited towards writing about war, reflecting the passions it provokes, the chaos of violent exchange in battle, and the calamitous futility that ensues.

This being the case, perhaps the most important point to convey is that metal – like any form of art – can portray a phenomenon without necessarily addressing it by name. The most common, unifying theme across all metal sub genres is that of power. The essence of metal is power – sonic power, power over the listener, power over taste, power over convention. This is the case whether metal's power invokes submission and produces order, or whether it speaks of chaos and disorder. Thus, in a quite fundamental fashion, the realms of warfare and metal are matched in that each in own fashion embodies power, meaning that the disturbing aesthetic of metal is well placed to echo the disturbing reality of war.