

Harder, Faster, Stronger: Representations of Masculinities in Heavy Metal Music

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Abstract

Heavy metal music which is identified with various forms of masculinities has sharply affected its fans throughout the globe. Within the feminist framework, it can be claimed that the female one is systematically excluded from the active participation to such an atmosphere. However, the women are merely portrayed as sexual images. Thus, the female alludes to the male gaze which is a part of the hypermasculine world.

As well as the fit bodies of the musicians, there are other gender distinctive images which underline their masculinity such as the guitars, and the swords which in fact identify with the penis. Apparently, heavy metal as a genre rebellious, yet it also (re)present itself within the dominant ideology. Hence, the well known patriarchal order becomes legitimate via their masculine images and lyrics.

Focusing on the paradigms of gender roles in this genre, this study also illustrates the crisis of masculinity within the heavy metal music. From Lacanian perspectives, the true heterosexual relationship is impossible. Therefore, homosociality reveals as a mechanism in heavy metal. Swearing signifies the heterosexual desire and it is also used to overcome the deficiency related to sexual relationship. As for the spectator, he gets an illusion of wholeness with the musicians which resembles Lacanian mirror stage. Sentimentality and melancholic behaviour are the characteristic qualities of the femininity. Nonetheless, sometimes these features are used which embodies an inappropriateness for the represented male figure.

The hegemonic masculinity is constructed on polarization of gender identities. Not only the musicians but also the male spectators are limited to a few excessive characteristic features of manhood such as consuming alcohol and swearing. This aspect results in the caricaturization of the genre. The representations of masculinities are also illusionary, although men are continuously expected to prove their masculinities via the women.

The analysis of masculinity in heavy metal music points out that there is plurality of masculinities. However, exaggerated depictions of them reveal that the men figures of this genre are also afraid of losing their masculinities.

Key Words: Heavy Metal, masculinity, psychoanalysis, Lacan, Kristeva.

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As a part of the popular culture, heavy metal includes a plurality of masculinities through which the (re)construction of the hegemonic order can be witnessed. However, the analysis of the representations of masculinities cannot be observed clearly without emphasising the social, political and economic spheres. Although there are arguments related to the period and the place where heavy metal has emerged, it can be asserted that it flourished in the late 1960 and early 1970s in England.¹ This period was sharply influenced by economic crises in the USA which also led to the mistrust of the public in the government. The very first performers of heavy metal music were aligned by patriarchy and capitalism which left no room for the men belonged to working class to prove their own masculinities. Due to the economic conditions, their attempts to get a universal definition of masculinity are perennially hindered. Thus, they accentuate violence as a sign for power which might be considered as a counter- attack to the capitalist order. Their macho behaviours, “rebellious” attitudes, misogyny and homosociality reveal a crisis of insecurity that men feel. The question of whether these mechanisms (re)construct the patriarchal order is arguable.

As for the heavy metal bands of our time, the conditions related to masculinities have not altered entirely, yet, the plurality of the bands as well as their own differences within the genre confine this study to a few instances. However, it can be said that the repetitiveness and the sameness of the genre enable us to focus on the common points.

The belief that the patriarchal order renders power, resources and cultural authority on the advantage of men has given way to masculinity studies.² The tendency to give a normative approach to the definition of “man” necessitates men to obey the mechanisms of masculine monopoly. Within the framework of hegemonic ideology, men have to fulfil the musts in order to prove their being “man”. These impositions may differ according to diverse societies, but the emphasis is on heterosexuality, economic independency and rationality. According to Foucault, the understanding of hegemony asserts a misconception on both the weak ones who are exposed to the corrosive power of hegemony and the strong ones that are identified as the ultimate controllers of power. This fundamental relationship between the hegemonic masculinity and the plurality of masculinities functions as the oppressor/ victor dualism. Their integrity is inevitable in that it vagues the possession of power, therefore, both of them compel one another.

The dominant gender in heavy metal music is undoubtedly male. Of course, this male discourse has its own standardizations of the genre.

Before going further, it is better to recall that the audience of any kind of music has a lot of common features with the child in Lacan's mirror stage. The mirror stage is crucial in that it functions as a compensation for the child's sense of lack. Nonetheless, the child yearns for a substitute for his/her lack throughout his/her life. The mirror stage acts as a narcissistic self-idealization via the child's very first illusion of integrity. Since the imagined "real" is never achievable, what is reflected on the mirror remains as a misrecognition. Via this temporal pleasure the child, in this sense the audience, has a chance to participate in an imaginary wholeness. The fact to keep in mind is that the identification with the musicians is one of the mechanisms of heavy metal. This recognition is so dominant that the head bangers assert sharp boundaries within the genre by stating "That's not heavy metal."³ Also, the identification necessitates the simplicity in the lyrics, they are easy to remember. As Iron Maiden guitarist Steve Harris observes: "about 90 % of the fans know the words to every song."⁴

To be a head banger requires certain features which, of course, ensure the generalization of the genre. Due to the fact that there are merely a few distinctive images for the fans in order to identify with the musicians, the identification process becomes easier. Since the imposition of being a "powerful man" reflects the collective consciousness of the patriarchal society, the dependence of binary oppositions on it seems obvious. Pairs such as death / life and man / woman constitute a structure in which each unit is defined against what it is not. Musicians' excessive characteristic features make them stuck in caricaturization. Long hair, excessive swearing, consuming alcohol become strong indicators that give a sense of belonging to this "aggressive" world. This aggression reveals itself in each style of the genre, including albums and concert shows. In the heavy metal concerts the direct dialogue with the audience is common: "How is your drink today?", "Fucking this... fucking that..."

Distorted sound of the electric guitars and the loud music are highlighted via listeners' expectations. Loudness signifies the fans' experience of power and aggression which also render a consensus among them. As the loudness enables the genre to constitute a polarization in the (pop)ular culture, it can be asserted that heavy metal is based upon binary oppositions.

The devotion to the excessive swearing reveals itself through homosocial bounding between men. This harsh attitude can be interpreted as the justification of their heterosexual desire. As Foucault states, in order to disguise their desire-in-uneasiness, homosociality becomes a significant necessity for men. Keen on the humiliation of women, swearing has a tendency to silence women. Also the lyrics of heavy metal include excessive

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swearing which highlights a revelation of the crisis of masculinity. Accept give a good example of this:

Now listen to what I think of you
Son of a bitch
Kiss my ass
Son of a bitch
You asshole
Son of a bitch
Cock suckin' motherfucker
I was right – take this: uuaah
Son of a bitch, ...
Cut you three times below the ass to short to shit
Two timing son of a dog⁵

Silencing the women can also be accomplished through physical homosociality which excludes women from male hegemony. The most common milestones of homosociality are excessive swearing and the fantasy of the woman which are intensified by the collective male fantasy. Although swearing illustrates the heterosexual desire, it merely functions via the humiliation of women. This aspect recalls the Lacanian thoughts related to the impossibility of the heterosexual relationship. In some lyrics, the vocalist tells “his” intercourse with a woman. This fantasy of the musician leads to the arousal of the male audience. Thus, collective fantasizing the woman via songs is realized in a homosocial environment. As aforementioned, the sexual desire cannot be fulfilled; therefore it turns into something consumable between the male bounding. A W.A.S.P. song that is called Animal (Fuck Like A Beast) depicts such a violent lust towards the female body, yet it only remains as a fantasy:

I'm on the prowl and I watch you closely
I lie waiting for you
I'm the wolf with the sheepskins clothing
I lick my chops and your tasting good
I do whatever I want to, to ya
I'll nail your ass to the sheets
A pelvic thrust and the sweat starts to sting ya
I fuck like a beast

I come round, round I come feel your love

Tie you down, down I come steal your love

...

Come ride, savage seduction

Ride, ride, ride.⁶

Apparently unambiguous sex-gender system within heavy metal (re)creates exclusive categories of masculinity and femininity. The female other is subject/ed to a passive role in the hypermasculine world of heavy metal. From the psychological perspective, the female body must be annihilated so that a male body can live.

The concept of a feminine new land represents a desire to conquer it by instruments such as sword and flag. The land seems dangerously attractive and this aspect leads to the purification of it via de-sexing. The efforts to defeminize the land can also be seen as the praxis for Manowar. In order to establish a pure male centrality, the sexually dangerous feminine should be tamed. Thus Manowar impose a masculine subjectivity over the female other. This masculocentric behaviour is stressed through the phallic images which are also the fetish instruments of male mastery. Furthermore, their symbolic practices necessitate a male bounding against the treacherous female:

Raise your hands

Swords in the wind

Brothers of metal together again

With the blood in our voices we ride

We'll fight until we win

Or we'll fight until we die⁷

Despite the strenuous efforts to conquer “her”, annihilating the symbolic other results in the exhaustion of her usefulness. Hence, the female body must be discarded and the male bounding is again ready to conquer. This penetration into a female virgin land acts like a rape scene with the “blood upon (their) steel”. This repetitive theme also signifies the collective conscious of Western man. Furthermore, heavy metal is, no doubt, a racist genre. Drawing on the recurring concept on barbarous new land, the performers of heavy metal also illustrate the Western imagination in which not only the sexual desires but also the fears are projected.

The overall structure of heavy metal is mostly the existence of a man-to-man relationship. Foucault thinks that this kind of a bounding is strongly depended upon homosexuality and homosexual desires yet, this particular combination also functions as a matter of existence:

Not necessarily in the form of a couple, but as a matter of

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Existence: how is it possible for men to be together? To live together, to share their time, their meals, their room, their leisure, their grief, their knowledge, their confidences? What is it, to be “naked” among men, outside of institutional relations, family profession and obligatory camaraderie? It’s a desire, an uneasiness, a desire-in-uneasiness that exists among a lot of people.⁸

These homosocial relationships give way to the legitimization of the heterosexual desire. In order to prove their masculinities they should obey the accepted social values. Enslaved in excessive masculine features, some musicians embody their repressed sexualities. The expectation of a powerful male image becomes a driving force for the fans which also reflects an identification process with the musicians. The exaggerated portraits of masculinity are established via features such as muscle bodies, oiled skins, masculine walk, macho breast-beatings, leather jackets, swords and also the guitar and microphone stands which are phallic images. The basis of the genre is confined to the borders set by the fans’ expectations. Therefore, this aspect renders the genre stuck in repetition. In order to overcome the fear of losing their masculinities, they target their anger towards women and homosexuals by the emphasis on the powerful male image. Expressing masculinities as a way of hyperbole signifies a reality beyond the surface. The multilayered structure consists of polarized, exaggerated and repetitive styles. This repetitiveness and sameness enable the audience to experience common points identically. The excessive significations reveal the repressed one that has a tendency to return. Considering the uncanny nature of heavy metal, it can be asserted that the powerful male images can be more than what they seem to be. In fact, the more one attempts to mask the repressed, the more he signifies to it. Needless to say that this condition highlights the fear of losing their masculinities. By constantly repeating themselves, the signifiers belonging to heavy metal transform into fetish objects. Manowar give a good example of how the exaggerated depictions of masculinities force men to be placed in an opposite site which is followed by a certain degree of homophobia. The homophobia which occurs in the pre-oedipal stage functions as a repression mechanism. In this sense, homophobia hints at the anxieties of men related to the concept of heterosexual man. The reason why the homosocial enactment combines with the homophobia is that only through the homosocial relationship this fear can be challenged. As masculinity cannot be thought without heterosexuality, the homoerotic desire must be masked under the collective attitude of homosociality.

According to Lacan, the Name of the Father internalizes social and cultural discourses. This highly masculine realm has an effect that imprisons the subjects to the designated sexual roles.

Femininity, which is differentiated by its negative entry into the patriarchal order, also remains inexpressible as a result of its unreadability in the symbolic order. Lacan asserts a “subject in progress” instead of the Cartesian *cogito*. He also denounces that the subject can only be defined by and in language. According to him, the concept of woman is a lack which is also related to the child’s relationship with the mother. Accordingly, via language each subject tries to fulfil this lack. Nevertheless, in the very nature of language meaning remains as ambiguous. Freud also expresses his comments on the woman’s dreadfulness as a result of her being castrated. The premise that the woman is castrated interrelates the concept of woman as the agent of chaos and also the biggest horror (un)known to men.

The structure of heavy metal is very convenient to be discussed in the psychoanalytic feminist framework. Indeed the key role appointed to the female one is highly functional in that she can only exist as a sexual image. No surprise then if it is asserted that the masculocentric atmosphere of the genre does not differ from the other symbolic ideologies as it allows the marginalization of women. Presented as the negative other, woman as the inextricable element of disorder is subjected to a very specific position in the hypermasculine world of heavy metal.

The female figures on the heavy metal scene can be named as femme-fatals. The obsession adhere to women is not about the women themselves, but rather the women’s image. This image animated by seductiveness has a hazardous aspect that can spoil man’s existence. Thus woman’s body as well as the bodily wastes, death, blood and decay illustrate Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. Interpreted in Kristevan insights, the female other functions as a threat to man’s subjectivity. As the integrity of the self is in danger, the other has to be repudiated. Addressing the alluring female, Alice Cooper in his song “Poison” depicts such a woman:

Your cruel device
Your blood like ice
One look could kill
My pain, your thrill
I want to love you, but I better not touch
I want to hold you but my senses tell me to stop
I want to taste you but your lips are venomous poison
Your poison runnin’ thru my veins
You’re poison, I don’t want to break these chains
Your mouth, so hot
Your web, I’m caught

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Your skin, so wet
Black lace on sweat⁹

Seemingly such cases in heavy metal lyrics point out the subject's struggle to exclude the abject yet it endures to exist. Since the meaning collapses in the abject, the subject loses his control over his body accordingly. The misogyny originating from man's fear of female genitals also signifies woman's power to castrate. Moreover, Iron Maiden whose name is an adaptation of a torture device summons up a metaphorical connection between the womb and the tomb. Obviously such a device as the generator of destruction is imbued with the concept of the dreadful female.

By the late 1980s the growing number of the female audience began to come up. Actually the inclusion of female musicians into the genre made the heavy metal more appealing to female fans.

However the female subjectivity is also conceived through the male gaze. Therefore the female musicians of the genre are generally portrayed as oversexualized women. For example Lita Ford's appearance mostly appeals to male fantasies. Hence she does not project an overpowering image for the female audience. The female fans are requested to associate with this kind of femininity. Lita Ford's lyrics implicate the reflections of romantic relationships:

I know I like dancin' with you
And I know what you like
I know you like dancin' with me
Yeah, yeah
Kiss me once
Kiss me twice
C'mon pretty baby, kiss me deadly¹⁰

In Lacanian psychoanalysis subjectivity is constituted not only through language but also by different genitalia. The Lacanian Real marks a place where the language has not begun therefore there is no sexual difference. As the subject suffers from gender restrictions which are the products of the Symbolic Order she/he makes an attempt in order to get rid of gender fixed boundaries. This aim compels the penetration into androgyny by transgressing the hierarchy of the symbolic. Androgyny exemplified in some glam bands and all-female heavy metal bands takes a prominent place in reflecting the frustration towards the restricted demarcation of gender identities. Glam bands such as Twisted Sister advocate androgyny as a way

to invalidate the dominance about the strict paradigms of gender. The confusion and resentment are transparent in their lyrics:

We've got the right to choose and
There ain't noway we'll lose it
This is our life, this is our song
We'll fight the powers that bu just
Don't pick your destiny 'cause
You don't know us, ypu don't belong
Oh we're not gonna take it
No, we ain't gonna take it
Oh we're gonna take it anymore¹¹

Girlschool seek equality with men via androgyny. In order to overcome the priority of the male over the female within the genre they acknowledge that they can only be admitted by fusing the lineaments of gender dichotomies. The desire to be viewed as equal regardless of sex and gender proposes a change in the *status quo*. But this pursuit does not mean very much as the modification of femininity is arranged according to the imitation of masculine desire.

From a more panoramic view, androgyny constituted in the image of feminine-in-masculine in the heavy metal world is originally accepted as abnormal and liminal among some headbangers. Nonetheless it also hints at the normal features of gender boundaries.

Even though the perception of masculinity alters according to macrosocial and microsocial levels, the fundamental obstacles remain the same for men. As the most significant characteristics of masculinity are the denial of feminine attributes and toughness, the representations of masculinities in heavy metal are mostly based on binary oppositions. The structure of masculinity always emphasizes the element of action through which men can prove that they are "real men." As for the man who cannot be totally integrated to a well established position which is expected from him, the amalgamation of fear, anxiety and rage supersede this lack. This combination also embodies the anger which the audience feels. The rage and hatred stemming from this expectation are always present as a characteristic soul of the genre. The rebellious attitude and the rejection of social musts give birth either to a desperate urge to destroy, or a quest for a new order that is unattainable. The desire to create a new order in which they can establish their own "manhood" leads them to form an anti-discourse. Bands such as Manowar advocate a hypermasculine world with the conception of "brothers of metal". In their fairly masculine world of fiction manhood can only be reached via brute physical power. As the hegemonic ideology belittles them

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into trivial objects they, in a sense, reject this by claiming their own individualities.

Nonetheless, the fantastic world of theirs is in perfect accordance with the hegemonic ideology as they (re)use the elements that are peculiar to it. Moreover heavy metal also alludes to the masculine / feminine hierarchy which is determined in patriarchal cultural codes. In a system which labels them as the “other”, heavy metal bands emerge with the plurality of masculinities. However, this aspect results in the appearance of a vicious circle that leads to an unresolved crises about hegemonic masculinity. Hence, it is evident that the dichotomic structure of heavy metal legitimizes the reconstruction of the hegemonic masculinity.

Notes

¹ See Robert Walser, *Running With The Devil*, Wesleyan University Press, 1993, p. 3.

² For further critical surveys about masculinity studies, see Judith Newton, "Masculinity Studies: The Longed for Profeminist Movement for Academic Men?" in *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory*, Judith Newton (ed), New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 176- 92.

³ This statement forms the main criticism about the heavy metal for its fans.

⁴ Teri Saccone, "Somewhere on the Light Side of the Moon", *Rock Scene*, July 1987, p. 65; quoted in Robert Walser, *Running With The Devil*, Wesleyan University Press, 1993, p. 18.

⁵ Accept, *All Areas – Worldwide*, 1997

⁶ W.A.S.P. , *First Blood... Last Cuts*, 1993

⁷ Manowar, *Warriors of The World*, 2002

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961- 1984*. ed. Sylvere Lotringer; trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnson. New York: Semiotext, 1996, p. 308-309.

⁹ Alice Cooper, *Trash*, 1989

¹⁰ Lita Ford, *Lita*, 1988

¹¹ Twisted Sister, *Stay Hungry*, 1984

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