

MERCURY MODELS: DISTORTION OF LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN NEW HEAVY METAL

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This paper discusses two heavy metal bands which rose to popularity in the late 1990s: *Korn* and *Deftones*. I have examined qualities of the music which illustrate a reconfiguring, a mistrust, and an abandoning of language, and here I will attempt to explain what these qualities reflect about the society and culture in which the music was created.

What makes this music particularly noteworthy is its popularity. These two groups are part of a relatively new style of popular, chart-topping music which I have chosen to term "new metal". Given that new metal is popular with young people, and that the younger generation is becoming increasingly sensitive to the state of the culture that surrounds them, it is important to examine the unique elements of this music. This I have endeavoured to do with the help of a book written by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard entitled *Simulacra and Simulation*, which discusses many of the same ideas which can be found in new metal.

As North American culture has become more permeated with information and communication technology, the qualities and characteristics associated with postmodernism have become stronger and more common. As information fills our environment — in forms that vary from street billboards and print media through radio and television to the internet and virtual reality—the relationship between culture and media seems to have reversed. Formerly, real-life activities, beliefs, and identities of North American individuals were reflected and reproduced in information-replicas such as advertisements, news programs, and entertainment products like film and television. This has gradually changed so that it seems increasingly that people turn to media representations as a source of identity and the reality of the world is determined by the way it is portrayed in media. New metal reflects this condition and tries to come to grips with it.

There no longer appears to be any distance, direction, or order of operations between real culture and the information contained in communications media. They have become intertwined and are so closely related that they are now inextricable from each other. We have entered what Jean Baudrillard calls "hyperreality," where, as he writes, "the medium and the real are now in a single nebula whose truth is indecipherable" (83). He describes the place of advertising in Western culture in the following way: advertising is not what brightens or decorates the walls, it is what effaces the walls, effaces the streets, the facades, and all the architecture, effaces any support and any depth, and it is this liquidation, this reabsorption of everything into the

surface... that plunges us into this stupefied, hyperreal euphoria... that is the empty and inescapable form of seduction. (91-2) {163-163}

Baudrillard claims that we are given to "[p]anic-stricken production of the real and of the referential," (7). New metal has recognised this condition, experienced it, reacted to it, and given voice to the paradoxes inherent in the evocation of the hyperreal.

New metal seems to reflect Baudrillard's diagnosis of today's hyperreal culture. The lyrics are often about the experience of a fragmented identity unknowable to the self, about the inability to discern reality from illusion, about suspicion and distrust of almost everyone including oneself, about an uncertain and unknowable future, about the role of fame in our culture, and about issues of authenticity.

It should be clear that I do not believe or intend to illustrate that new metal artists are authentic. The concept of authenticity has become extremely difficult for new metal artists to navigate because every image, sign, word, and action is either part of the past lexicon of profit-seeking media imagery or becomes part of that lexicon almost instantaneously.

Because of this process, sincerity is almost impossible for anyone to believe or take seriously; now even the artists themselves are sceptical about their own sincerity. They are experiencing the theft of self-respect, meaning, and identity resulting from hypercapitalism, or what Jean Baudrillard calls "the era of murder by simulation" (24) in which "the form of advertising has imposed itself and developed at the expense of all the other languages as an increasingly neutral, equivalent rhetoric, without affects" (Baudrillard 87, 88). Exemplifying and expressing this, Deftones' vocalist Chino Moreno sings "Somewhere, outside, there are tricks and evil... I don't want to go, but I want it," and "I think too much.... I don't even care... I don't want to listen... If it was mine to say I, wouldn't say it, and if it was mine to say I wouldn't speak."

New metal demonstrates that advertising and communication technology are affecting mass cultural expression in ways described by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, provoking doubts about everything including doubt itself which results in irresolvable paradoxes in the belief systems and world views of the musicians and their audiences. What I describe has already been observed by Jean Baudrillard as: "[a] sociality everywhere present, an absolute sociality finally realised in absolute advertising... The social as a script, whose bewildered audience we are" (88). As Nietzsche put it: 'to build a new sanctuary the old sanctuary must be first destroyed.' (quoted in Reynolds and Press 2) New metal is responding to the disappearance of "the new sanctuary" from visibility. Rock rebellion has not found a new sanctuary which is satisfying to new metal artists, and thus their music is expressing anxiety about this spiritual and literal "homelessness." New metal artists are aware that rock has been rebelling against controlling discourses, seeking freedom and autonomy. They have also realised, in a seriously postmodern turn, that this rebellion is itself a controlling discourse. Thus, what new metal artists are revolting against is not "the system," but systems. New metal artists are realising that systems are ubiquitous, and thus inescapable. They are seeing that no matter what route they choose, their identity will always already be or have been constructed for them. They are therefore not tangibly focusing their energies on reversing an identified evil. Panicked, new metal is screaming for lack of other routes of action.

Much new metal music is characterised by elements of shock, excess, intensity, and incomprehensibility. These elements are techniques used by new metal artists to come to grips with a culture overloaded with information and drained of meaning. The {163-164} media-savvy generation knows unhappily that “[no-one would grant the least consent, the least devotion to a real person. It is to his double, he being always already dead, to which allegiance is given” (Baudrillard 26) and thus this generation exists in the “[h]ell of simulation, which is no longer one of torture, but of the subtle, maleficent, elusive twisting of meaning” (Baudrillard 18). In the songs by Deftones, Moreno increases the intensity of his utterances to the point of incoherence. His lyrics are at times indecipherable because of the hysteria of his emotion, or because the sounds he makes blend into the overwhelming sounds of the guitars. In the song “7 Words,” Moreno shrieks repeatedly “Suck! Suck! Suck! Suck! Suck!” until all meaning has been “sucked” out of the word. [Play sample of “7 Words” — 1:38 to 2:05] Korn’s vocalist Jonathan Davis does something similar in their song “Reclaim My Place,” in which he repeats the refrain “What the fuck?” [Play sample of “Reclaim My Place” — 3:30 to 3:53] The expletive has no obvious referent and fully embodies not only the absence of answers to his questions, but the larger absence of questions to ask, of frameworks of understanding, and of points of departure. Also, the performances of Davis and Moreno are soaked in what Roland Barthes calls “grain.” To summarise, Barthes defines this as the corporeal dimension of the human voice which gives it its individuality (Barthes 45). The more grain is present in an utterance, the more one can hear the presence of the speaker’s or singer’s physical body.

There is no erasure of the physical and spatial specificity, or of the grain, in new metal recordings. Human limitation is made instrumental in the form of vocal distortion and the sounds of lips, teeth, throat, tongue, mouth, and breath. Even the intonation of the vocals is too-human: whining, pleading, raging, crying, and laughing. This can be heard in another song by Deftones, where Moreno’s performance is incomprehensible, and blends with the other instruments. [Play sample of track #2 — 0:23 to 0:44]

The intentional unintelligibility of the vocal performance seems to indicate that the vocalists feel they have no language of their own over which they are master, and, simultaneously, feel that they are being forced into usage of the languages used by the forces that have robbed them of their identity and authenticity. Thus they use language in their own ways to push against the semantic walls that are imprisoning them. The most striking example of this is a nonsense-utterance technique used by Davis.

This technique can be found on Korn’s first three albums, in various songs.

The strongest example is a song called “Twist,” which is characterised by panicked, growling, confused, angry, whining guttural utterance over droning, buzzing, heavily rhythmic music. In this song, the only known-language lyric is the word “twist.” Davis delivers this word on its own between nonsense “verses,” and it implies that he is using his own language because any utterance he makes in any language known to anyone else will be “twisted” into something different from his original intention. [Play sample of “Twist” — 0:00 to 0:32]

The best-known example of this technique is found in Korn’s most popular song, “Freak on a Leash.” In this song, fragments of English-language words can be perceived in the midst of Davis’ gibberish, such as “boy,” “some

things," and "they." By effectively "speaking in tongues," Davis is giving voice to his inner basic feelings which are trying to resist being shaped or conditioned by utterances of others. This results in {164-165} most other people being unable to reproduce what he is uttering, and thus being unable to "twist" his "words" back against him.

If language has been entirely occupied and drained of tangible meaning by the music industry, angry music must, in order to continue expressing itself credibly, move towards territory which remains unclaimed by a meaning-draining market. That territory is the body. New metal occupies the ground of the body by fusing dancing body movement with angry music, in the case of Korn, and by injecting more of the body into the sound of the music and the vocal performance, in the case of Deftones. These bands are brutally aware of the drainage of perceived authenticity necessary for successful big business music. Still, they simultaneously express concern about this loss, as well as the loss of innocence involved, and they fight for self-hood, identity, and expression within the framework of corporate capitalist music industry. This, along with the drainage of meaning in symbols, language, images, and experiences, has contributed to an intense anxiety on the part of new metal artists regarding their own identity and their capacity to invest their faith in anything offered by their environment. This paradoxical quality of the postmodern hypermarket is termed by Baudrillard "implosion": "[t]he absorption of one pole into another, the short-circuiting between poles of every differential system of meaning, the erasure of distinct terms and oppositions, including that of the medium and of the real" (Baudrillard 83). New metal resides in the aftermath of mass media over-saturating itself and causing information and expression to lose power because it has flooded its own market. New metal artists express their negotiation of a world in which political action in music has "imploded" into selfish, profiteering leisure, and rage has imploded into partying. Several of Korn's songs are played in dance clubs, such as "A.D.I.D.A.S.". [Play sample of A.D.I.D.A.S. — 0:00 to 0:35] Also, in their song "Got the life" Davis even mentions dancing. [Play sample of "Got the Life" — 2:12 to 2:42]

The final point I'd like to illustrate about this music is its excessive emotion. The discourse of emotion and the body is vague and unformed, unable to be packaged and to concretised into words shared by language-users in a set of conventions. Since emotion and feeling cannot be strictly defined, they cannot be re-defined. Thus the vocalists often let their emotion speak for itself, giving it free reign over their performance. As this quality is somewhat apparent in the examples I've already discussed, I would like to look at just one more example. At the end of Korn's song entitled "Daddy", Davis literally breaks down into uncontrollable sobs. [Play sample of "Daddy" — 6:15 to 6:30 and 7:15 to 7:30] It is difficult to fathom why Korn included this in their recording.

It may represent a desire to inject authenticity into the new virtual world of ubiquitous information and may simultaneously already be unauthentic, the result of a guided, conscious decision to record and sell something.

Here appears an implosion, a paradox which drives new metal: authentic identity is becoming increasingly difficult to negotiate.

New metal is facing a bodily vacuum in the form of the pixel, the photograph, and the word, all of which are becoming arbitrary assemblages which refer to nothing but themselves and each other. These days, as Baudrillard writes,

things are "[m]ore real {165-166} than real, [and] that is how the real is abolished" (81). To new metal artists, all spiritual, social, and political directions are identical and equally meaningless in any terms other than dollars and popularity. Still, in the face of such complete hopelessness, the very presence of new metal indicates a refusal to give up. Faced with the apparent fact that nothing said can possibly have any meaning, new metal continues to speak. Some lyrics, like Korn's, cling to the fact that directionlessness and lack of meaning can be articulated.

Others, such as Deftones, re-appropriate the language stolen by capitalism by explicitly and gradually degenerating it into nonsense or by stringing together words like an abstract jigsaw puzzle, to be arranged and concretised into meaning only by the listener. In any case, these musicians succeed in drawing attention to the problems they perceive in their culture while being heard by hundreds of thousands of people. Contrary to popular belief, all heavy metal musicians are not inarticulate, irrelevant, and lost in their own world. They're just having more and more trouble ascertaining what their world is.

Works Cited

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