



REVIEW | Death Metal and Music Criticism: Analysis at the Limits

Michelle Phillipov

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Marco Ferrarese

Monash University, Malaysia

marco.ferrarese@monash.edu

Let's face it: until now, death metal's *grand-guignolesque* aesthetics casted this outlaw sub-genre of heavy metal at the fringe of popular music studies. Such ostracism may have consolidated for obvious reasons of scholarly decorum. In effect, the decaying living corpses and other mischievous brutality glorified by death metal's themes have only helped establish the genre's reputation as a brutal, primitive and highly misunderstood subculture. For this reason, the field of popular music studies reduced the salience of death metal's academic analysis by highlighting its radicalized extremity and escapism from real-life and social problems, rather than strive to understand the genre's subtle dynamics of transgressive pleasure.

With *Death Metal and Music Criticism*, Michelle Phillipov's attempts to subvert previous clichés of academic extreme music criticism based on the assumption that the only popular musics worth investigating are those which portray precise social and political meanings. Phillipov's argument develops from the acknowledgment of death metal music's unquestionable academic "unworthiness" because the genre eschews the tones of "subcultural resistance" much appreciated by popular music scholars since the Birmingham's Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies initiated the study of subcultures in the late 1970s. Arguably, popular music criticism failed to find any positive political value in the long haired, black clad and sonically repulsive death metal bands that glorified

bodily decay, death and murder. In fact, scholars struggled to find valid elements of sociopolitical resistance in death metal's traditionally apolitical contemplation of festering wounds and imaginary walking cannibal corpses.

By writing this book and raising her rigorous academic voice in defense of death metal's critical value, Phillipov's lucid analysis directly aims to glorify and justify death metal's apolitical sonic pleasures. In doing so, the author develops a solid theoretical background. Chapter 1 thoroughly investigates the history and development of subcultural music criticism, setting the grounds for Phillipov's argumentative and unapologetic explanation of death metal's qualities. In Chapters 2 and 3, the author provides a comprehensive review of the reasons why popular music studies have invested genres such as punk, hip hop and electronic dance music with greater values of resistance and political awareness rather than heavy metal.

In this regard, Chapter 4 focuses on the reasons why metal subcultures have been defined by critics as escapist, apolitical and egalitarian responses to the rapid de-industrialization of the Western nations. In the author's opinion, popular music criticism has considered metal more favourably only in those instances of "global metal" arisen from socially and politically oppressed Third World nations, thus once again valuing the genre under a political perspective of resistance (67).

To the contrary, Phillipov eschews the politic-oriented academic approach to subcultural music analysis, and concentrates instead on unearthing death metal genre's conventions in order to clarify the reasons behind its listening pleasure. The book's second part is in fact dedicated to the explanation of "the pleasures of death metal" that are conspicuously different from other forms of popular music, and require the acquisition of a particular sense of hearing and taste. Phillipov clearly conveys this point by analyzing death metal's guttural, larynx-stressing growl as a form of unconventional vocal style which eschews the concept of tuneful singing. In this regard, death metal's vocals definitely represent an initial barrier for listeners attuned to forms of music based on melodic singing. The acquired pleasure for growling vocals underlines the necessity to think through the genre's specific, unique conventions, and to learn how to enjoy them in order to critically understand death metal.

In Chapter 6, this aspect is further explored by analysing the pleasures derived from death metal's horrific imagery and conventions. Phillipov describes the evolution of transgressive lyrical content from heavy metal harmless rebellion to death metal's obsession with extremities. The author further argues that death metal lyrics reproduce the shock value of horror cinema. The volume's final two Chapters 7 and 8 explore case studies of two of the most influential death metal bands, Carcass and Cannibal Corpse. If on one hand Carcass started as a pathological grindcore band and only developed into death metal later in its career, the case of Cannibal Corpse represents the apt choice of an internationally celebrated death metal act. Phillipov literally "dissects" the bands' lyrical content in order to expose the ways in which death metal fans practice "reflexive anti-reflexivity" by choosing not to engage in the interrogation of their listening experiences. In this sense, death metal configures as a cathartic experience that uses gore as an element of play. Phillipov's lucidly explains how horrific images have to be interpreted as extreme examples of death metal's desire for shock value. In order to increase the interest of other music critics, the author suggests

ways to re-evaluate and re-interpret death metal under the distorting lens of its aesthetics.

For the sake of solid argumentation, Phillipov also included a few music transcriptions to highlight how death metal, besides its first impact as an anti-melodic, noisy and chaotic form of popular music, requires instead particular technical skills in order to create its landmark, obnoxious sound. However, *Death Metal and Music Criticism* clearly remains a cultural studies' investigation and does not configure as an ethnomusicological text. In this regard, Phillipov has completed a precise and skillful interpretation of death metal's culture and aesthetics based on pleasure.

Regardless of its excellent critical arguments, I find that this book limits its analytic boundaries to the dimension of fandom. In fact, I argue that the author could have created a much stronger volume if she had included qualitative analysis of death metal musicians and fans' ethnographic observation and interviews, rather than limiting herself to textual analysis. As an extreme metal musician, I argue that the study of the performative dimension of death metal from the perspective of its makers could have been greatly beneficial in reaching a thicker description of the genre's pleasure dynamics. Unfortunately, *Death Metal and Music Criticism* fails to include details on such an important aspect of the death metal subculture, limiting its analysis to recorded artifacts, which merely represent a one-dimensional aspect of the complex process of subcultural and musical identity construction.

The volume's concluding remarks also seem to slightly contradict with Phillipov's defense of death metal as a site of extreme anti-reflexive playfulness where social and moral conventions are drastically turned upside down. When commenting on Cannibal Corpse's female fans who wear the band's t-shirt depicting the strongly misogynist, violent song title "Fucked with a Knife", the author exposes her own confusion in regards to the unorthodox gender politics of death metal. In such a case, the fans' reflexive anti-reflexivity reaches an paradoxical climax that music critics may, once again, use to attack death metal's controversial meanings.

Acknowledging the academic emphasis given to the political significance of punk's resistance, I believe that by writing this book, Phillipov has possibly contributed to the field of cultural studies and the budding dedicated field of metal studies with the "punkest" academic book to date. Thanks to Phillipov, such a particular, unique and difficult-to-approach popular music genre is now supported by a precise and informed scholarly interpretation. Hopefully, Phillipov's lucid and thought-provoking contribution will help the academic world aptly reconsider death metal as a subcultural practice, provided that other scholars, too, will accept the joys of its "hideous pleasures".