

REVIEW | Heavy Metal at the Movies

Gerd Bayer Ed.

Abingdon: Routledge, 2019

ISBN: 9781138571594 (HB)

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In her canonical 1991 work, *Heavy Metal – The Music and Its Culture*, sociologist Deena Weinstein assessed, “Of the various visual media, movies have had the least engagement with heavy metal” (Weinstein 2000: 172). Nevertheless, in 2019, with an appreciatory nod to the “illustrious relationship between metal and cinema” (Conterio 2019), the British Film Institute was able to assemble a list of ten iconic metal films. As a ‘Best Of’ of sorts, it was based on the works of “countless directors [who] have successfully harnessed the music’s debauched energy, scary theatrics and avowed Dionysian spirit for the screen” (ibid.). This selection ranged from the 1981 cult animation film *Heavy Metal* (Gerald Potterton and Jimmy T. Murakami 1981), over horror films such as *Trick Or Treat* (Charles Martin Smith 1986), to rockumentaries such as *Anvil – The Story of Anvil* (Sacha Gervasi 2008).

Since its emergence in the late 1970s, heavy metal has slowly but steadily seeped into the edges of cinema’s fabric, but this corpus of works has elicited little reaction in academia, in part because of its incoherent nature. Aside from Mike McPadden’s extensive, popular scientific encyclopedia, *Heavy Metal Movies* (2014) and occasional articles about heavy metal and horror films (Barron and Inglis 2009, Konecny 2014, Krautkrämer and Petri 2012, Tompkins 2009), the greater field of metal music film is mostly a scholarly blank page. *Heavy Metal At The Movies* is the first collection of scholarly writings to address this void.

Published as part of the Ashgate Screen Music Series, this anthology is aimed at the broader research area of popular music and the screen, and the comparatively young, albeit rapidly growing field of Metal Music Studies. Editor Gerd Bayer has made a considerable contribution to the research of heavy metal documentaries in recent years (including contributions to *Connecting Metal to Culture* (2017: 143-161) and *Heavy Metal Studies and Popular Culture* (2016: 36-57)), but in this anthology he purposefully widens this scope to include fiction film.

Bayer’s comprehensive introductory chapter provides an overview of the research approaches to popular music and film, visual culture, and to metal film’s

historic moments, such as the initial success of metal music on television in series such as MTV's famous video shows *Heavy Metal Mania* (1985-1986) and *Headbanger's Ball* (1987-1995). The book approaches its topic in three sections and eleven chapters. The first section deals with cinematic metal bodies (addressing subjects such as youth, performance and sexuality), the second with representational aspects of metal culture in factual and fictional films (covering authenticity, nostalgia and film genres), while the third widens the perspective to national and global discourses (considering themes such as hegemonic structures and logics of circulation). This structure might seem unconventional compared to other handbooks, but it is an astute circumvention of the permeable boundary lines of both metal music and its corresponding cinematic landscape. To understand "the particularities of how this audio-visual medium engages with heavy metal" (2), the chapters cover a diverse array of films, from Hollywood to arthouse, and a similarly diverse array of performers, from big stage artists to underground bands. The musicians are drawn from metal scenes in Anglo-American countries, Europe and Africa.

Each of the chapters consists of a case study, with most focusing on the aesthetic and narrative features of one or more metal films, as well as a broader cultural framework of the metal scene itself. This approach to "the way cinema and metal relate to each other" (4) utilizes tools of sound film analysis in literary and film studies. Despite its concentration on case studies, this book vastly exceeds the list of films assembled by the BFI, addressing over a hundred movies and series depicting metal or relating to its history in some way. This combination of close reading and synoptic view provides a useful framework within which to examine metal music's complex changing status on-screen as a narrative device, as a soundtrack and – particularly – as a documentary subject. Noteworthy chapters are Niall Scott's attempt to frame the narratives of modern metal documentaries by reading three films as a triptych of modern metal filmmaking; Andy R. Brown's examination of the changed perception of the bootleg VHS documentary short *Heavy Metal Parking Lot* (Jeff Krulik and John Hayne 1986) and Deena Weinstein's re-assessment of *This Is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner 1984), which not only gives a concise reading of the way this rock-mockumentary works but also a personalized insight into its reception as a self-confessed metal fan. A common thread of most chapters is metal as a subject. Tai and Genevieve Neilson's 'A band of Northmen' is the only one to exceed this frame, examining the implications of casting a musician like Johann Hegg (Amon Amarth) as a Viking in a historical action movie.

It was due time for an anthology like *Heavy Metal At The Movies* and this collection offers a well-compiled starting point for the research of metal films. While the book could have used more pictures, it comes with a useful index. It also suggests a broad variety of literature for continued reading, and its chapters provide the groundwork required for further studies, particularly in taking up the questions of the global and the national that are raised in the third section of the anthology. There are many films still waiting to be explored, be it outside the Euro-American canon (for instance Japan), in metal's distinct genres and discourses (for instance Norwegian Black Metal and Trveness), or in the history of both cinema and television (for instance Hollywood's metal comedy cycle of the 1990s). But as metal music research keeps expanding one can hope that many others will build on the foundation *Heavy Metal At The Movies* has laid.

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