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The Speeding Bullet, the Smoking Gun: Tracing Metal Trajectories, from Sabbath to Satyricon

Andy R. Brown

Abstract

Heavy metal has been proclaimed dead and buried at least twice during its 40-year history, only for the corpse to be re-animated, confounding industry experts and music commentators alike. This characteristic of persistence or indestructibility—of the beast that refuses to die or the scary monster that lurches ever-onwards—often leads fans, musicians, journalists and academics to assume a continuity; or to fashion a case for one. It is these acts of theorization, claims to trace the arc or parabola of trajectory of metal music that I want to examine in this paper. How many types of narratives or kinds of models are there? What principles of explanation underpin or organize their unity and in what respects do they differ? I argue there are 3 kinds of recognizable narratives or models of persistence. All of them depend on some sort of claim for continuity but also draw on ideas of discontinuity or rupture; that is, sudden or dramatic change, or a claim for hybridity or ruptural-unity: of re-unification through division. The first is a variety of rockism or the ideology of rock music. Let us call it *The Church of Metal or the Old Testament of Heaviosity*. Its unity is to be found in the values of the metal subculture and the betrayal of those values by commerce and incorporation, which can only be countered by a new revolution or resurgence, which reaffirms the core values and renews the relationship over again. Weinstein's *Heavy Metal* is a classic example of this model. The second is popular musicology's *New testament of rhythm and cultural reading*. This set of perspectives seek or discover continuity in shared musical practices, of how metal musicians conceive and produce metal musical sounds on the guitar, bass and drums and via vocal techniques which articulate a cultural engagement with identity and place. A recent example is Cope's *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music*. The third emanates from post-subcultural theory and scene studies. *The Scenesters or new prophets of sub-genre variation and hybridity*, describe the reconfiguration of the aesthetics and politics of metal music culture in ways which announce a 'break' from the past or an avant-garde re-distillation of the genre in ways which are both exclusionary and purist. A recent example is the AgSIT typology of genre trajectory, by Lena & Peterson.

Key Words: smoking gun, tracer, trajectory, theorization, origin, naming, genre.

1. Introduction

This paper will characterise each of these kinds of very recognizable narratives or models of persistence as *acts of theorization*, which operate according to similar principles. The reason that they are similar in principle, despite the fact that they end up claiming different things, is due in no small measure to the particular problem that they all face. In reference to my title, this is the problem of the ‘smoking gun’. In forensic science parlance and in political media commentary, the term ‘a smoking gun’ refers to the most likely scenario or explanation that links a chain of events to their cause or point of origin. The significance of this procedure or type of commentary is that it must proceed in reverse. In other words, we cannot map the trajectory of the bullet from the barrel of the gun because we are never in a position to see the trigger being pulled. Indeed the problem with smoking guns is that they are often difficult to find or if they can be found, difficult to place in relation to the event, impact or consequence that we seek to explain.

Let us now turn our attention to the bullet! The bullet is travelling at extreme velocity. How far will it go and what is its intended target? We would only know this if we had fired the gun or knew who fired it and why. It is only when the bullet reaches its destination, indeed it is only when the bullet has consequences, that it becomes an important bullet. Once we have consequences – maybe a whole set of them – then we want to know about this particular bullet, what direction it came from, what was the gun that fired it, what were the motives of those that pulled the trigger and so on.

What we are doing when we examine the path followed by a moving object is we are trying to identify or estimate its trajectory: the path or course it took. Derivable from this idea, is the tracer: a bullet or shell whose course is made visible by a trail of flames or smoke. The problem is the battlefield is thick with bullets and shells, smoke and flames: how do we know which tracer is the one that will lead us back to the gun? The answer is we don’t! So, what we actually do is choose one and then attempt to trace it back to a point of origin. But this analysis *in reverse* is not detective work or forensic science: it is guess work. Or rather it is a theoretical hypothesis. What these acts of theorization do – as we will see – is to organise elements (dates, names, events, actions) that are seen *retrospectively* as important, within a plausible theorization of origins, development and subsequent trajectory. But inevitably each much choose what to include and what not to include. So this is almost never an empirical science: of choosing ‘tracers’ at random and then testing them. Rather, such theorizations seek a point of origin; or a point of rupture or resurgence. That is, each one is already informed by an idea of where the smoking gun is to be found and what it looks like.

2. What’s in a Name? Or how are Genres born?

Weinstein argues: ‘Genres begin before they are named.’¹ Now it could be argued that genres can only be genres when they are named and it is the process of naming that constitutes them as such. Conversely, genres can be named before they

exist, as in the case of *Venom* and *Black Metal*. Of course, what Weinstein means is that genres begin to produce the musical practices that will later be identified by their *naming*. This suggests the symbolic practice of naming is important in itself and is almost never a premonitory act.

Returning to the Weinstein's quote:

When several artists working in a new style find a common audience and mediators (such as the rock press, record companies and concert promoters) recognize the genre, it is in a period of crystallization. How long that phase lasts and what succeeds it vary. It may merely disappear from the scene, fragment into several other styles, or become so mannered as to be a parody of its once-vital self.²

The key elements here seems to be (a) how a 'new (genre) style' is to be defined or what musically occurs when 'one or more artists detach themselves from predecessors and create something distinctive'³ and (b) what processes are involved when mediators 'recognise' the genre? For example, to what extent does such recognition involve the invention of categories, definitions, etc. Is one mediator primary within this process, for example, the 'rock press'?

At first sight it seems as if there are many agents involved in such a process, including musicians themselves (responsible, for example, for coining the terms black metal, grindcore, death metal), promoters, record company PR people and journalists. However, not all the actors in this relationship have the same amounts of access to symbolic space or the means to represent symbolic significance. Rather the process is analogous to Bakhtin's dialogic communication⁴ wherein symbolic claims are made, modified and adapted in relation to past claims and coterminous conjecture. The crucial issue though is why do certain terms, interpretations and narratives begin to persist, reproduce themselves, become dominant or accepted? The answer is that some structures of symbolic communication have a greater determining or fixing force than others. And this is because they occupy the structurally most important position in the positions of communication: therefore their interpretation, if repeated enough, is likely to prevail as the common parlance of description. Alternatively, because they occupy the most strategic position of acceptance or rejection of a common term or description they either will resist or facilitate its communication to wider publics or participants. This is not simply the role of gatekeeper but also of privileged interpreters in relation to a symbolic field that is decisively constituted by the discourse about it.

For example, the genre terms: heavy metal, NWOBHM and nu-metal have a decisive influence in their acceptance and persistence, than other terms, such as: speed metal, thrash metal, death metal, black metal and grindcore, because the

former are terms that were popularized by journalists and industry agents; whereas the latter terms were scene-defined terms that were then given symbolic confirmation because of their persistence or in the absence of other terms. However, even here the generic acceptance of a term then had consequences for which bands and sounds were defined as definitive and which were seen as derivative or different by comparison.

3. The Church of Metal or the Old Testament of Heaviosity

Weinstein argues in her seminal book:

Heavy metal erupts from 1969 to 1972 and begins to crystallize from 1973 to 1975. The golden age of traditional heavy metal, its full crystallization, occurs from 1976 to 1979. Then from 1979 to 1983 metal undergoes a surge of growth in numbers of bands and numbers and kinds of fans, leading to an inward complexity, and an expansion of its boundaries. This period of growth, finally, results in a rich diversity that crystallizes into fragments and subgenres after 1983.⁵

The use of the term ‘traditional’ here already suggests a retrospective claim.⁶ In a subsequent text, Weinstein revises the period of *crystallization* forward to 1979–1982,⁷ therefore aligning it with the *New Wave of British Heavy Metal* (NWOBHM) and the popularity of key bands Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, Diamond Head, Motorhead, Saxon and Venom.⁸ One of the consequences of this choice is the exclusion of Black Sabbath because the ‘slower tempo’ of its sound does not fit the ‘British heavy metal paradigm fully.’⁹ In defence of this, Weinstein claims that Sabbath’s second album *Paranoid* ‘did not sell especially well when first released’ but sold better when re-released in June 1980.¹⁰

A further problem is that her list of influential bands *includes* bands that were not popular (such as Diamond Head), and *excludes* bands that were popular, such as Def Leppard. Weinstein’s justification for this is that if one is going to define the crystallization of a genre then it is necessary to distinguish between ‘core and penumbra’ such that some bands and songs are ‘paradigmatic’ and others are peripheral. Although popularity is key, it is popularity with ‘fans’ (judged by ‘a panel of ten metal experts’, including performers, writers, band managers and documentary filmmakers).¹¹ This is to some extent consistent with Weinstein’s model of genre as resulting from the interactions of creators, ‘appreciators (fans) and mediators’ (such as venue owners and record labels).¹²

Weinstein also offers musicological reasoning, suggesting that the crystallised form of heavy metal ‘incorporated influences’ from British punk, progressive rock and psychedelia.¹³ But the genre can only be said to ‘detach’ itself from psychedelia via ‘hard rock’ in the form of Cream, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple,

Black Sabbath and less clearly, bands such as Uriah Heep.¹⁴ While many of the NWOBHM bands identify these bands as sources of inspiration,¹⁵ there is a time lapse of about ten years.

While we can point to the influence of some progressive rock bands on NWOBHM, in the UK by the late 1970s both genres had become unpopular or rather ‘unfashionable’. The reason for this was not that their fan base had dried up (although it was beginning to decline) but the persistent and vitriolic criticism levelled at certain big name bands by the rock music press.¹⁶ As for punk, of the core bands identified, only one of them, Motorhead, is in some way assimilable to punk.¹⁷ The other bands are formed, musically, as a reaction to punk, taking the speed and DIY aesthetic but also competition with ‘harder’ styles of post-punk, such as Oi!, Street and Anarcho-Punk¹⁸ while defining themselves, most obviously, as a revival of hard rock.

This raises two important points. The first is that the bands Weinstein views as core to the crystallization of heavy metal within the NWOBHM are quite dissimilar, in terms of music, style and popularity. This suggests therefore that the mediators, particularly the commercial and media-based ones, are more important to her account than she initially suggests. This is so because the term NWOBHM is not just recognized as a genre name but in fact was a term coined by music paper *Sounds*, ‘as a catch all title for a melting pot of bands with an immense variety of musical styles.’¹⁹

Second, the public adopting of the term heavy metal by a significant number of bands becomes evident in the 1979-82 period as an outcome of interaction with strategic music media (*Sounds*’ favourable coverage, for example) which is consolidated by further interaction with a new, largely sympathetic niche media, mostly clearly represented by the launch of *Kerrang!*, a glossy weekly magazine dedicated to the coverage of heavy metal, from 1981 onwards.²⁰

4. New Testament of Rhythm and Cultural Reading

The task Andrew Cope sets himself in *Black Sabbath and the rise of Heavy Metal Music* is to offer a ‘re-evaluation of the rules that define heavy metal as a genre and its distinction from heavy [or hard] rock.’²¹ For Cope, this crucially involves distinguishing the ‘musical syntax and aesthetics’ of Black Sabbath from that of Led Zeppelin because the former established the unique musical coding of heavy metal via ‘radical and extensive transgressions of the blues and rock and roll context of their origins’²² whilst Zeppelin faithfully retained these generic stylisations, thereby perpetuating such codes in the work of subsequent bands, who took their influence from one or the other. It is surely noteworthy, given my discussion of Weinstein, that Cope refers to a *Kerrang!* magazine feature as a point of departure for his analysis: a compilation of the 50 most influential albums of all time.²³ Cope notes how writers cite the Zeppelin album *Physical Graffiti* (1975) as an influence on Audioslave, the White Stripes and the Foo Fighters,

whereas *Black Sabbath* (1970) is said to have influenced Pantera, Slayer and Cradle of Filth. Cope also employs a conception of the ‘core and periphery model’ of genre formation and mutation, identifying “key” codes that appear to be present in all forms of metal (the core) and peripheral codes that become important in the formation of sub-genres.²⁴ These include ‘specific textual and timbral elements that result from the use of down-tuned and seven string guitars, guitars heavily laden with distortion, palm-muting and aggressive performance techniques’²⁵ In contrast to Weinstein, Cope argues that it is the combined coding of Black Sabbath and NWOBHM that is ‘ubiquitous’ in the subsequent development and proliferation of contemporary metal styles.²⁶ Indeed, the stability of metal as a genre style, is signified by the frequent re-emphasising of these key musical codes in different combinations.

Central to Cope’s theoretical rationale is the need to identify a clear point of differentiation of musical (and lyrical or thematic) syntax between Zeppelin and Sabbath, so that a generic-code or ‘finger print’ can be established, clearly defining bands that are ‘considered to be heavy metal (or not).’²⁷ There is a suggestion, similar to Weinstein, that this code is not only recognisable to musicians and writers but in the reception practices and values of fans.²⁸ The problem with this tracing of the genre finger-print through music practice and time, is that it travels in reverse, seeking a point of origin for the contemporary musicological feature of metal music: *the complete absence of blues stylings*. The problem is that the differentiation that Copes seeks to establish between hard rock and heavy metal is far from clear, particularly in the 1980s, when many Zeppelin-influenced ‘lite’ metal bands not only achieved unprecedented commercial success but also a considerable fan base within the metal audience. Also, as Kahn-Harris has observed, Cope’s trace from contemporary metal styles is quite narrow, ignoring doom metal entirely, surely a ‘sub-genre that has been most assiduous in maintaining the Black Sabbath blueprint’?²⁹ Missing also is the problem of the rap and funk influences on Nu-metal, the influence of punk and post-punk on NWOBHM and thrash, not to mention ‘the continual cross-fertilisation between metal and hardcore [...] complexities that a more genealogical historical perspective [might] elucidate.’³⁰

5. The Scenesters or New Prophets of Sub-genre Variation and Hybridity

Lena and Peterson’s AgSIT model of genre trajectory³¹ appears to offer the genealogical qualities that Weinstein and Copes’s accounts lack. In summary, they propose a hypothetical model of genre development which identifies Avant-garde, Scene-based, Industry-based, and Traditionalist phases (hence AgSIT). Working with 60 genres the authors expected all of them would grow from Avant-garde beginnings but only 40 did so, while only 16 experienced the full trajectory, one of them being Heavy Metal.³²

According to Lena and Peterson, heavy metal conforms to the full AgSIT

trajectory, whereas Thrash metal has experienced an Avant-garde, Scene-based, and Industry-based phase but has not, to date, formed a Traditionalist genre.³³ Death Metal and Black Metal have both experienced an Avant-garde and Scene-based genre – not yet achieving or unlikely to achieve an Industry genre phase. Nu-metal, according to the authors, has not experienced either an Avant-garde or Scene-based phase, suggesting that it was from its inception an Industry-based genre.³⁴ But there are other interesting implications that can be drawn from the AgSIT model concerning the historical trajectory of heavy metal. The first is the extent to which heavy metal ‘most closely resembles’ Bebop, Old-school rap, Punk rock, and Rockabilly ‘in the spectacular and contentious Industry-based phase of their trajectories.’³⁵ It could be plausibly argued that the billboard chart-topping success of ‘lite’ or big hair metal, in the 1980s, is evidence of this, to the extent to which a particular scene (LA glam metal) becomes defined, via industry production and promotion (especially via MTV exposure) as heavy metal, encouraging other hard-rock and metal bands to emulate this style. But, as we have already noted in the case of Cope, hard rock is a style that has its origins in the 1970s and had, in its purer form, already achieved industry success in that period, with bands such as Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and Black Sabbath.

The other issue here is how we situate the genre of Thrash-metal, particularly its origins as an Avant-garde style? The characteristics of the thrash-genre - seeking new ways to play the guitar in heavy metal, combining aspects of punk, post-punk and hardcore, genre styles previously viewed as distinctly opposed - all confirm the Lena and Peterson model. But the San Francisco Bay area thrash scene was a competitor to the LA Glam scene, prior to the latter’s industry-genre phase, so what prompted the musicians to seek a new genre aesthetic? Applying the AgSIT model outside of the US location would suggest, in the case of the history of the heavy metal genre, that developments in Britain and Europe are crucial, as both Weinstein and Cope suggest. But both the NWOBHM and speed metal genres can be accommodated within the framework of the AgSIT model. In particular, NWOBHM appears to be a revivalist genre and then an avant-garde genre, reacting to the loss of popularity of hard-rock in the UK.³⁶ Speed metal and Thrash metal are competitor scenes, located in Europe and the United States. Avant-garde and scene-based genre developments after Thrash are not understandable within a single national music context, but an outcome of globally interconnected scenes.³⁷

Notes

¹ Deena Weinstein, ‘The Empowering Masculinity of British Heavy Metal’. In *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*. Edited by Gerd Bayer, (New York: Da Capo Press, 2009), 20.

² Op cit, 20-21.

³ Ibid, 20.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

⁵ Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture* (Da Capo Press, New York, 2000), 21.

⁶ As Weinstein notes: 'If the term "classic metal" was not reserved here for the continuation of the styles perfected in the era of crystallization into the fragmentation of the genre in the later 1980s, this era would be called the "classic" period'. Op cit, 306, note 29.

⁷ Weinstein, 2009, 21.

⁸ Op cit, 23. Although she does caution that the full crystallization of heavy metal is: 'close to but not fully co-terminus' with NWOBHM, 20.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ This is simply incorrect. Not only did the single *Paranoid* peak at 4 (Nov. 70) in the UK singles chart; the album hit the UK no. 1 spot in February, 1971 and 12 in the US Billboard Top 100; whereas the re-released album, charted 14 (UK) in August, 1980.

¹¹ Weinstein, 2009, 23.

¹² Weinstein, 20.

¹³ Weinstein, 21.

¹⁴ Uriah Heep, although part of the hard rock genre, also retain both psychedelic influences and progressive aspirations, e.g. *Salisbury*, a concept album recorded with an orchestra.

¹⁵ Most surprisingly perhaps, Deep Purple, who are named as a key influence by Iron Maiden and Saxon; Led Zeppelin by Diamond Head and, quite obviously, Def Leppard's name, itself an homage to Zeppelin's.

¹⁶ See Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counter Culture* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1997), 167-178; Kevin Holm-Hudson 'Introduction', 8-10, and John, J. Sheinbaum 'Progressive rock and the Inversion of Music Values', 21-42. In Kevin Holm-Hudson ed. *Progressive Rock Reconsidered* (New York: Routledge).

¹⁷ As were some hard-rock bands, such as AC/DC.

¹⁸ The Oi! movement, championed by Gary Bushell at *Sounds*, featuring bands like *Sham 69*, was in many ways a revival of the late 1960s white, working-class skinhead subculture, whereas Real or Street Punk sought to claim Punk on behalf of the ('real' or lower) working class, whilst Anarcho-Punk saw punk as a political vehicle for agit-prop slogans and activism. With the exception of Crass, many of these bands moved closer to a metal style as the Punk scene in the UK began to decline. See Andy R. Brown, 'Punk and Metal: Antithesis, Synthesis or

Prosthetic?', Paper presented at *No Future?: Punk 2001*, University of Wolverhampton and Lighthouse, UK, 21-23rd September, 2001.

¹⁹ Weinstein, 2009, 20.

²⁰ A closer examination of the coverage of the NWOBHM in *Sounds*, in the period 1979-1982, reveals that writers such as Jeff Barton originally claimed a New Wave of American Heavy Metal, identifying a new crop of bands, such as Van Halen, that consciously sought to reinvigorate the genre.

²¹ Andrew Cope, *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music* (Surrey: Ashgate), 2010, 1.

²² op cit, 1-2.

²³ op cit, 43.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ op cit, 44.

²⁶ 6.

²⁷ 44.

²⁸ Such a view can be contrasted with Walser's cultural musicology, "That's not heavy metal" is the most damning music criticism a fan can inflict, for that genre name has great prestige among fans. But genre boundaries are not solid or clear; they are conceptual sites of struggle over the meanings and prestige of social signs', Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press) 1993, p. 4.

²⁹ Keith Kahn-Harris, review of Andrew Cope, *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music*, *Popular Musicology Online*, 2010 (ISSN 1375-0951): (<http://www.popular-musicology-online.com/issues/review%20articles/harris.html>) (accessed February, 2012)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Jennifer C. Lena and Richard A. Peterson. 'Classification as Culture: Types and Trajectories of Music Genres', 697-718. *American Sociological Review*, vol. 73(5) 2008.

³² op cit, p. 700.

³³ Arguably, with the Thrash revival, documentaries such as *Get Thrashed* (Warner Bros: Rick Ernst, 2008) and the success of the *Big 4 Tour*, this has now occurred?

³⁴ Lena and Peterson observe that the primary organizational form of industry-based music genres is the industrial (or multinational) corporation, although others may include 'independent companies organized to compete directly with the multinationals' 704. In the case of Nu-metal, this role was played by the label, Interscope, which housed Limp Bizkit, Puddle of Mud and other similar sounding Nu-metal acts, as well as rappers, like Eminem.

³⁵ op cit, 709.

³⁶ Hard rock did not experience this kind of decline in the US market.

³⁷ See, inter-alia, Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*. (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

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