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## EDITORIAL

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# Metal music studies at the intersection of theory and practice

Welcome to this special issue arising from the conference *Crosstown Traffic: Popular Music Theory and Practice* held at the University of Huddersfield (United Kingdom) in September 2018. As a joint conference arranged by four popular music studies research organizations,<sup>1</sup> including the International Society for Metal Music Studies (ISMMS), it aimed to integrate different disciplines and professions, promoting interdisciplinarity and collaborative work. A total of 272 speakers from 26 countries presented 131 papers over five days, thirteen of which were directly related to metal. The central requirement for acceptance was that a presentation had to engage with topics relevant to more than one organization, namely popular music studies, metal music studies, electronic dance music and record production.

Although this requirement was a political decision of the conference committee, it encourages reflection on the development of metal music studies in general. There is a broad consensus that while research on metal music

1. The International Association for the Study of Popular Music UK & Ireland Branch (IASPM UK&I), The Association for the Study of the Art of Record Production (ASARP), Dancecult: Electronic Dance Music Culture Research Network and The International Society for Metal Music Studies (ISMMS).

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2. For an anecdotal history of the emergence of ISMMS, see Hickam (2015).

as a genre and culture has existed since the 1980s and 1990s with the foundational works of Deena Weinstein (1991), Robert Walser (1993) and Donna Gaines (1998), metal music studies did not form as a distinct field of study until 2008 with the Inter-Disciplinary.net conference *Heavy Fundamentalisms: Music, Metal and Politics* in Salzburg and, since then, proliferated with the foundation of its learned society (ISMMS) and *Metal Music Studies* journal (Spracklen and Scott 2014; Hickam 2015; Savigny and Schaap 2018).<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Lucy Hill (2021) recently described the field of metal music studies as having entered its ‘teenage years’ and called for a more reflective approach to research that does justice to academic rigour and distinguishes metal research from a mere fan or journalistic writing. And she is not alone. Andy R. Brown (2011, 2018) has repeatedly urged reflexivity in metal music research, particularly concerning our own class position as academics and fans, Heather Savigny and Julian Schaap (2018) have highlighted how to maintain the hard-won legitimacy of metal scholarship in academia through rigour, Amanda DiGioia and Lyndsey Helfrich (2018) have pointed out the need to update methodologies, and Rosemary Hill and Karl Spracklen (2010) have reminded us not to focus on analysing metal music and its culture in isolation but also to ask what we can learn from metal. Such demands for methodological reflection, rigour, significance and impact have increased in recent years and show a maturation and growing recognition of our field of study in academia and society. Perhaps the clearest expression of required criteria and academic standards in metal music studies can be found in an editorial in this journal by Spracklen et al. (2016) on ‘how to be rejected’. In addition to obvious criteria such as engagement with metal scholarship and theory, adherence to the epistemological and methodological rules of parent disciplines, coherence and relevance of metal music and related genres, the editorial team emphasized the relevance of *criticality*:

A lack of criticality is evident when authors just describe metal. Criticality is all about explanation – telling us why you think the metal subject of your paper is like it is. Criticality does not necessarily mean you are being critical of metal music (though if you are, that is okay too), but you have to be able to be more than just a fan.

(Spracklen et al. 2016: 150)

Media studies scholar Matt Hills (2002, 2004) has written about scholarly fans, fan-scholars and scholar-fans as different types of writers who engage more or less critically with the culture they are passionate about. They all use core academic techniques like referencing, but only scholar-fans engage with academic theories to produce academic rather than journalistic work. Critical engagement with metal thus requires analysis and interpretation in the light of theories and other empirical data or phenomena within and outside the immediate discipline. This ensures that writing is not simply normative or valorizing (Savigny and Schaap 2018: 550).

What Spracklen et al. (2016) perhaps only hinted at in their previously cited editorial is the value of a *comparative approach* to go beyond the mere description of metal. Comparison allows the particularities of a case to emerge. Influential writer of methodology handbooks in the social sciences, John W. Cresswell, defines case study research as a

qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple systems (cases)

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over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes.

(Cresswell 2013: 97)

The research design is guided by a clear intention and characterized by rigorous data analysis to generate an in-depth understanding of the case in relation to others. It includes descriptions but uses them as an analytical technique for comparison and finding overarching, meaningful connections beyond the purely descriptive.

It is not the intention of this editorial to discuss at length the methodology and research quality in current metal music scholarship. However, the *Crosstown Traffic* conference has led us to reflect on how metal is sometimes treated in isolation rather than in comparison to other (popular) genres and how some academic disciplines or fields are more prevalent than others. *Metal Music Studies'* editorial policy and scope are to be inclusive of all disciplinary perspectives, but in practice, the disciplines observed by Savigny and Schaap (2018: 550) – cultural studies, media studies, sociology and political science – may be central, while others are less represented. Also rare may be the comparison of metal with other genres as a way to determine its characteristics and place in culture and society.

To look at this more closely and to avoid purely subjective impressions, we examined the keywords ( $N = 1,008$ ) of all 157 articles published since the first issue of *Metal Music Studies*.<sup>3</sup> In terms of genres, the keywords suggest three conclusions: First, extreme metal genres are written about the most, perhaps because of their subcultural capital, with black metal ( $n = 19$ ) taking the top position, followed by generic extreme metal ( $n = 17$ ) and death metal ( $n = 8$ ). Second, uncool metal subgenres such as power metal ( $n = 2$ ), djent ( $n = 2$ ) and nu metal ( $n = 1$ ) are rarely written about, which may indicate a tendency towards fan-scholarly rather than scholar-fan writing (Hills 2002, 2004), in that we may study subgenres with which we identify ourselves. Third, and perhaps most notably in the context of the *Crosstown Traffic* special issue, comparing metal with other (popular) music genres is the exception; only the keywords of one article refer to another genre (rap). While recourse to other disciplines and fields in terms of theories, concepts and methods is common, drawing on knowledge of and from other genres remains rare according to the keywords used. It could thus be argued that metal scholarship tends to stay within its own musical genre and perhaps misses out on insights that could be gained through a more comparative approach.

The keyword analysis does not clearly indicate the disciplines and fields from which metal scholarship borrows most frequently. Concerning the organizations participating in the conference, however, it seems that the art of record production, or music technology more generally, is relatively under-represented; only eight articles each are indexed as focusing on production and on technology, with four more on the music industry – and these articles are written by less than a handful of individuals. The data further suggests that most research focuses on reception rather than production in a cultural studies tradition, and when production is considered, it is usually media production in the sense of journalism.

A more thorough analysis of the keywords and of metal scholarship would be needed to confirm these cursory observations, but the five articles in this

3. We recognize that keywords do not adequately represent the entirety of the articles' scholarship, but they provide statistical insight into otherwise anecdotal or subjective interpretations of the field.

special issue seem to follow the observed principles: articles examining the art of metal music record production are written by scholars with a track record in this very field (Niall Thomas and Jan-Peter Herbst), and the only article comparing metal with another genre (gabber and techno) is authored by non-metal music scholars (Hillegonda Rietveld and Alexei Monroe). As metal music studies continue to grow, seeking links with other genres and less represented areas of scholarship may be a way to develop our field.

This special issue begins with an analysis of the music and narrative in Pain of Salvation's concept album *The Perfect Element: Part I* (2000). Lori Burns and Patrick Armstrong investigate the compositional aspects to determine how musical parameters (formal, harmonic, temporal and thematic) convey the song lyrics and album concept through the lens of narrative theory, demonstrating how the music reinforces the lyrical narrative and its emotional impact.

The second article continues with an album analysis, *Year Zero* (2007) by Nine Inch Nails. David Deacon interprets the album through Brian Massumi's concept of 'politics of affect' in the post-9/11 era, arguing that Trent Reznor's lyricism shifted from an early introspective and confessional style to defensive and anxious tropes after the September 11 attacks in 2001, accompanied by related themes and artwork in the album's media and live performance.

Hillegonda Rietveld and Alexei Monroe draw on a metal studies framework, especially Walser's (1993) concept of horror, to understand the formation of gabber, a hardcore electronic dance music that emerged amongst working-class youth in Rotterdam in the early 1990s. Tracing how the sonic DNA of avant-garde and industrial music facilitated its adoption across the political spectrum suggests that the nihilistic and politically symptomatic sound functioned like a safety valve that allowed producers and followers to process the contradictions and tensions of a post-human, accelerated technoculture.

The last two full articles look at the musical production of metal. Niall Thomas uses producer interviews to explore the influence of technology on the practice of producing metal records, emphasizing the tensions between innovation and tradition that arise from commercial and artistic pressures of expected homogeneous production methodologies. Jan-Peter Herbst also utilizes phenomenological producer interviews to examine culture-specific production and performance characteristics of 1980s and 1990s metal production in West Germany, Great Britain and the United States. He concludes that while performance characteristics and production aesthetics may have differed between cultures, producers find it difficult to clearly identify cultural differentiators, not least because genre conventions play into the mix.

Finally, our second section contains two reviews: Andrés Celis Fuentes reviews the book *Espíritu del Metal: La Conformación de la Escena Metalera Peruana (1981–1992)* ('The spirit of metal: Formation of the Peruvian metal scene [1981–1992]') by José Ignacio Lopez Ramirez Gastón and Giuseppe Risica Carella (2018), and Stephen S. Hudson reviews Metallica's self-titled 'black album' 31 years after its release to reflect on its legacy in relation to alternative metal and alt-right politics.

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