

Voicing the Real in Extreme Metal

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I feel shitty having let him be in the band, doing those lyrics,” Creekbaum said. “Because I know, like, whereas I saw it as a joke — like, ‘Let’s play this and we’ll shock some people,’ and then the people that we know laugh — he didn’t see it as a joke. He was like, ‘Fuck, yeah. We’re gonna do this. It’s like, Jesus Christ, how much of this was like real life for him?’” he said.¹

Introduction

Metal – perhaps more than most genres of music – is often asked to account for its ‘real life’ effects. Metal musicians, metal journalists and, indeed, even metal scholars are regularly called on to explain what metal means in ‘real life’ – in terms of misogyny, racism, or... worse. Lately, worse might mean terrorism, and lethal violence particularly against women. In 2019, coverage of the mass shooting² perpetrated by Connor Betts in Dayton, Ohio, USA quickly focused on Bett’s role in “a vile heavy metal band”³ called ‘Menstrual Munchies’ as the *cause* of the deadly attack.⁴ Betts shot and killed nine people, and injured seventeen others, at a bar in Dayton in August 2019. Betts was fatally shot at the scene by police. There was apparently no motive for the attack, though it was clearly premeditated. Betts was out with his sister, Megan, and a male friend of hers, when he went to his car, changed his clothing (including changing into a metal band t-shirt) and retrieved a home-altered

AR-15 gun. He opened fire at a bar, with his sister and her companion being the first victims.

In the ideological space of 'objective' journalism,⁵ metal as a cause of masculinist terror is offered as simply *speaking for itself*. Popular media accounts of the intersections between 'metal' – as a descriptor, and 'terror' regularly position metal as the *cause* of terrorist and violent acts – that, say, Betts's membership of a porno-grindcore band generated a disposition inclined to mass-shooting. This is despite the rise in popular critiques of metal 'moral panics', particularly after the notorious West Memphis Three case. The case has been widely covered in popular, and academic, media so I will only briefly summarise it here. In 1994, three young men were jailed for child murder; the prosecution anchoring their case in the men's liking for metal music and 'Satanism'. The men were released in 2011 partly due to public pressure, after the three-part documentary *Paradise Lost*,⁶ and numerous 'true-crime' documentaries which framed the prosecution's case as spurious.

So too, in academia; metal scholars are keen to point out the limitations of quick causal explanations. The burgeoning field is replete with discussions of, and, importantly, counters to, the boilerplate 'moral panics' which have accompanied the genre since the 1970s.⁷ Outside metal studies, legal theory, particularly work around the West Memphis Three have also offered retorts to the persistent mainstream media framing of metalheads as 'folk devils';⁸ as has work in the broader social sciences.⁹ Despite such discussion, with the Dayton massacre in 2019, Betts's position as a metalhead was repeatedly offered as a clear cause for his violence.

This article approaches the spectre of the metalhead – and the causes for *his* (for those metalheads who do perpetrate violence, usually, remain men) violence – differently. I want to work through this causality through Jacques Lacan's work on the object-cause and *petit objet a* and the 'Real'. In the accounts quoted above, 'real' works as – well – a matter of fact; as something actual. This is clear in the opening appraisal from Betts's bandmate, Jesse Creekbaum. He is stunned at the shift from Betts's articulation of metal's jokey vulgarity ("we'll shock some people") to "real life", on a horrifying scale. It materialises some actuality, as Creekbaum notes Betts moved from "doing... lyrics" to "do[ing] this" – a mass shooting. Creekbaum denotes this as "real life". His shock at his friend's actions is clear, but as to how it is framed in the media, hardly surprising. In mainstream media, it 'goes without saying' that metal not only connotes something transgressive, subcultural and obscene, but materialises this worse-ness, that it is, 'really', terrifying.

Of course, nothing can go without saying – not even 'real life'. It *is* worth saying that Betts's lyrics were about inflicting murderous violence on women, and that four of his nine victims were women, most significantly, including his own sister. On the

topic of the 'real' (as actual) effects of metal and the gestation and irruption of terrorism, much has already been said. To return to Betts's attack, we saw this, albeit (and interestingly) in the form of a negation, spoken by fellow metalhead Ryan Ward in a *VICE* interview:

I feel it's our responsibility to make it a point to let people know that, no, *this is not what we actually stand for*, he added.¹⁰

Ward's remark about what metal – and in particular, extreme, metal 'stands for' is interesting. In his assertion of the actual (*real*) he relies on the absent – not only what 'we' (metalheads) are *not* – but also on the absence implied by the turn of phrase 'stand for'. There is an, understandable, distancing in Ward's articulation. In this article, I wonder about what metal 'stands for', in Lacan's terms, how it works in the Symbolic and the Imaginary. But also, what happens when what 'we actually stand for' explodes, terrifyingly, into the Real. It seems sensible to consider what Betts's lyrics *stood for* – a hatred of women? A hatred of his sister? Worse? Indeed, the press certainly works outwards from these stand-ins, which become evidence of causality – juvenile utterances scribbled on DIY CD-Rs – 'Daughter's Gash'; 'Filleted Anal Cavity'; 'Prostitute Beatdown'; 'Cum Eating Carnage'. Surely, such obscene stand-ins speak for themselves. Indeed. But, here, I want to think about the cause from a different angle, as irrupting from the Real, excreted (quite an apt stand-in considering Betts's scatophilic vocabulary) in the metal voice.

Soon after Betts' attack, due to my 'expertise in metal', I received an email from a journalist asking for comment on what metal 'means in contemporary culture, in terms of terrorism, incels and misogyny ... in layman's [sic] terms ... in 800 words or less'.

Or less?

There's always more to be said.

Here – in rather more than 800 words – I want to consider metal as *Real*. I offer metal music – and the interplay between its *aurality* and its culture – as working in that terrifying register which Lacan designates as a site which cannot be so easily – if at all – moved into meaning through inclusion into the symbolic. While metal might quite clearly seem to be a scene more inclined to an easy linkage with 'terrorism, incels, misogyny', particularly when we consider events such as the Dayton shooting, I want to suggest that it is not quite so simple a jump from metal signifier to real violence. There is something more to it.

This is *not* a defense of metal, or Betts. I am not in the camp which is gathering traction in some areas of metal music studies, and cognitive psychology

that metal is, *actually*, non-violent, or even pacifying. Rather, I want to interrogate this move – from metal to violence – as one which bears something in *excess* of the significations apparently held discretely together in the “dehumanizing”¹¹, “warped”¹² song titles and descriptions congruent with the genre and lingered over in popular media.

An attention to the excessive and to the Real affects, which *do*, I argue, indicate something violent in metal discourse, requires a focus on the metal *voice*. A focus on the excessive suits the particular type of metal which I discuss here: *extreme* metal, such as death metal and grindcore, and the sub-sub-genre of pornogrind. Unlike the comprehensible, ‘clean’ singing styles of relatively popular metal – in bands like Metallica, Gojira, Opeth or Dream Theatre – extreme metal is characterised by screamed, growled and grunted ‘vocals’ and, usually, incomprehensible lyrics.¹³ Hereafter, I will use the phrase ‘metal’ for brevity. I venture that Lacan’s work on anguish / anxiety, as a site of the object-cause, carried partly by the *voice*, is helpful for looking at the relation between extreme metal and violence. I shift from metal’s *effects* – the horrors focused on in salacious news coverage – to metal’s *affects* to consider how the voice works in extreme metal as an index of the Real. I shift from a concern with ‘real-as-actual’ where the appeals to the real work ideologically to affirm the terror event as an exception, to suggest that, following Lacan, the Real encountered as a voice that signals something *worse*, that – in the cases of recent terror and broader, yes, *misogyny*, in metal music – can have, literally, explosive affects. Creekbaum’s question: *How much of this was real to him?* here, I hope, will take on a different resonance.

This article, then, is a provocation about metal music and its resonances with violence meted out by men. Firstly, I will outline how journalistic writing engages issues of metal, violence and misogyny at the level of, in Lacanian terms, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. I will note the limits of this approach in terms of accounting for the contradictory work which metal signifiers ‘stand for’ in metal, and broader, social contexts. I trouble the straightforward assumption that signifiers of misogyny work as ‘real as actual’ ‘matters of fact’ that move effortlessly from the articulated (spoken, sung, posted online) to a whole, patriarchal, body – say that of the terrorist. I note that the more and more typical counter to this approach, in the metal scene and, even, academia, is the offer of an inversion, or, like in Ward’s words above, a *negation* through declarations that metal signifiers are ‘not actually’ demonstrative of misogynistic violence and are, in fact, potentially ‘resistant’ or ‘subversive’. I suggest that, the inversion, or ‘flipped’, approach can only work at the level of the registers the Symbolic and the Imaginary collapsing a binarised representational (‘standing for’) framework with ‘actualised’ (‘real’) politics. This, I

argue, effaces the Real work of gendered violence always-already present in metal signifiers, but also in the bodies which emit them – in the metal; voice. Through an account of the voice, and an insistence on the knotted modality in which the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary work, we might see that these indexes operate rather more in terms of a partial, unstable – even anguished – masculine subjectivity – one whose voice generates terrifying affects and, indeed, literally dehumanizing effects.

This paper is not an extensive *application* of these ideas to metal – I only gloss some examples – drawn from illustrative, recent popular media representations, particularly around the Betts case. Rather, I simply want to propose a more nuanced approach to metal and its ‘real-ness’ with recourse to Lacan and psychoanalysis. To do less, I venture, is to reduce metal to a series of barely fleshed out tropes – which, in fact (I dare not say ‘really’), continue the familiar metal stereotypes which are as limiting as those anchored in moral panics.

Context 1: ‘Real’ Violence in Recent Popular Media Coverage of Metal Music

Heavy metal, and particularly extreme metal, is regularly at the center of popular media controversy due to its violent signifiers: its images, language and style. The transgressive lyrics of bands, alongside their album artwork, and the fashion style of its artists are often positioned as the cause of ‘real life’ violence.¹⁴ Such popular media approaches collapse the signifier and the signified through appeals to a number of canonical ‘metal moments’ where metalheads *did* enact spectacular violence.¹⁵ Betts’s recent violent act is a pertinent example, which I will discuss later in this article. Firstly, however, I want to look more broadly at recent discourse around metal, elaborating on the off-hand remark by Ward, above, that violence is ‘not actually what we stand for’. Ward fits a broader, and growing, thread which claims that metal signifiers cause ‘non-violence’ in listeners and metal musicians. That metal surely *does* cause violence is demonstrated, I suggest, in the increasing banal presence of this discussion; apparent in articles concerning the ‘news’ that scientists have *proved* that metal is more likely to induce “a warm hug” than ... something else.¹⁶ This preoccupation with an apparent negation of the ‘matter of fact’ (or ‘actuality’) – that metal causes violence – demonstrates the assumption’s hold. For example, *The Guardian’s* write up of a 2015 University of Queensland School of Psychology and Neuroscience research project, opens with an affirmation of the shared assumptions regarding metal noting that, despite metal being “commonly associated with headbanging, satanism and the decapitation of small mammals”, neuro-scientists have found that the music calms listeners, rather than incites them.¹⁷ A more recent study, also by a Psychology and Neuroscience team, this time at Macquarie University,¹⁸ generates a similar lead at the BBC:

'I've one desire since I was born; to see my body ripped and torn'

The lyrics of death metal band Bloodbath's cannibalism-themed track, *Eaten*, do not leave much to the imagination. But neither this song – nor the gruesome lyrics of others of the genre – inspire violence.¹⁹

I will return to matters of 'imagination', the Imaginary and, indeed, desire, later. Here, though, I emphasize that what this type of coverage demonstrates is that metal's lyrics, in particular, leave little – in (if you will) 'layman's terms' – to the 'imagination'. That is, the lyrical accounts of "ripped and torn" bodies presume a materialisation of what is, naturally, outside of the 'imagination' – the real-as-actual, empirical and in the world. That engaging with Bloodbath's, or others' music, does *not* do so, according to scientific facts, becomes the news-story.²⁰ That these news-stories arise from pressers drawn up by University Science Faculties is notable. Despite widespread outcries around a 'post-truth' era, the hard facts of 'Science' remain a key signifier of journalistic 'objectivity' and adherence to the real-as-actual.²¹ Science simply seems to speak for itself. That Science must tackle the question of metal's effects at all – to declare a new signification (metal causing 'hugs' rather than 'hostility') – demonstrates the taken-for-granted assumption that metal causes 'real life' violence. Metal – too – apparently speaks the empirical into being. The peer-reviewed publications cited in these journalistic accounts enforce this same assumption; the Queensland and Macquarie studies position their findings in terms of "real-life violence"²² defined as "inflict[ing] harm on others" generally associated with metal.^{23 24}

Context 2: 'Real' Violence as Misogynist Violence

Notably, these accounts – popular or academic – do not mention another taken-for-granted fact about metal: that metal's assumed violence bears the signification of masculinity. Again, this material has been discussed at length in metal music studies.²⁵ For present purposes, however, I turn to journalistic accounts of the Dayton mass shooting, which focused on Betts's participation in pornogrind as an indication of his "toxic masculinity".²⁶ The signifier and signified collapse in assertions that the killer's horrific act was inevitable, at least partly due to his interest, and participation, in metal. Journalists lingered over Betts's band's "violent and sexually explicit" lyrics,²⁷ listing song titles (much as I did!) such as '6 Ways of Female Butchery'; 'Pre-teen Pussy Slaughter' and 'Cunt Stuffed With Medical Waste' as evidence of Betts's misogyny. Headlines and ledes from tabloid press stated the brutal facts of the event

(that nine people were murdered and twenty-seven injured) alongside Betts's position in Dayton's pornogrind scene. This example, from *The Daily Mail*, is typical:

Connor Betts, the gunman who slaughtered nine people and wounded 27 others in Dayton, Ohio early Sunday morning, was a singer in 'pornogrind' bands whose lyrics frequently included references to raping and killing women as well as necrophilia.²⁸

The *Mails*' headline ran: "Connor Betts was a vocalist in 'pornogrind' metal bands that sang misogynistic songs about sexual violence and necrophilia in months leading up to Dayton massacre".²⁹ ³⁰ This suggests a causality between Betts's vocalization of misogyny in Menstrual Munchies and the massacre. The use of words such as slaughter and massacre to describe Betts's attack also generate a causal association between metal signifiers, and particularly those of Menstrual Munchies, whose song titles and lyrics included words such as 'slaughter' and 'massacre', and the journalist's 'objective' description of events. Further, the emphasis in these articles is on the particular gendered – misogynist – violence represented in the pornogrind signifiers tallied. Though tabloid papers perhaps offer the most salacious copy,³¹ broadsheets also dubbed Betts misogynist due to his participation in pornogrind.³² *New York Magazine's* offshoot *The Cut* ran a piece under the tagline 'Misogyny' listing song titles as examples of Betts's "overt misogyny".³³ *The Cut's* article, again like many others, tabloid or broadsheet, also noted that Betts penned a 'Kill List' and a 'Rape List' as a teenager. During high school, Betts had circulated a list of young men he wanted to kill and women he wanted to rape. *The Cut* quotes a former classmate who noted that Betts "would talk about violence and use harsh language about women, like calling them 'sluts'".³⁴ The article quotes another peer, saying that Betts would often "pretend ... shoot guns – guns with his hands". This signification of gun violence – the movement of taking shots 'with his hands' – is positioned as foreshadowing, with the next paragraph noting that, "Despite Betts's history, he was able to legally purchase the AR-15-like assault rifle"³⁵ used in the killings. The history to which the journalist refers, is the 'Lists', and Betts's participation in metal – not the hands – but it is indicative of how significations of violence – "harsh language" and mimed shooting – sits as a cause for his later act. These popular journalistic examples demonstrate the Saussurean structuralist assumption that, though originally arbitrary, the relation between signifier (say, of the word 'metal', 'pornogrind', 'slut', 'gun' *etcetera*) and signified (say, of the concept misogynist violence) is culturally indissoluble. This relation is cemented through the intersection of journalism's claim to objectivity and the real-as-actual events which Betts perpetrated. Here, I am not

concerned with alibi-ing Betts's act or suggesting that the signifieds which journalists ascribe are 'wrong' or 'false'. Rather, I emphasize the easy significations mainstream media make between metal and violence (*in spite of* Scientific Studies 'proving' the opposite!).

Flipping the Script: 'Feminist Metal'

I make this emphasis because, following the logic foregrounded in my discussion of scientific studies of metal as generative of 'hugs not hate', the inverse of the association between metal and misogynistic violence maintains, rather than subverts, the patriarchy. Just as the 'real word' on metal offered by the neuro-scientists affirms the taken-for-granted that metal remains a signifier of hate, music journalistic, and to some extent academic, coverage on 'feminist metal' affirm metal's misogyny. We see this in responses which celebrate what is given the signifier 'feminist metal' – referring to woman-fronted or all-women bands that take up extreme metal's generic tropes and 'flip' the gender. Instead of women being victims (say as signified in Betts's typically pornogrind song titles), they are the perpetrators.

VICE provides a useful example in their coverage of all-women band Castrator.³⁶ The journalist describes them as a "perfect feminist death metal revenge *fantasy*".³⁷ Like the coverage of Betts's music above, song titles ('Emasculator'; 'Honour Killing' *etcetera*) are dwelled on, though their "feminist", "life-affirming" (rather than ... death affirming?) significations are emphasised. The feminist meaning of Castrator's music rests on their inversion of tropes present in "the astonishing glut of metal songs that celebrate graphic, gory violence against women".³⁸ The band's name 'Castrator' is offered as the clearest inversion – the name is coupled in *VICE*, and elsewhere, in band promotional material with an image of the band-members brandishing a castration tool. The article closes with a quotation from frontwoman, M. S.: "We're excited to get out there and emasculate!".

Joan Jocson-Singh³⁹ in an article for *Metal Music Studies*, offers a similar understanding, albeit from a scholarly perspective. Jocson-Singh dubs Castrator as 'vigilante feminists'⁴⁰ in "direct opposition to the current masculinized death metal hegemony". Through a "complete reversal" of death metal "discourse",⁴¹ particularly via their lyrics, Jocson-Singh argues that the women band-members and listeners are "empower[ed]".⁴² Jocson-Singh offers a detailed lyrical analysis of 'Emasculator',⁴³ noting that, rather than the dominant death metal imagery of men violating women with weapons (Cannibal Corpse's 'Fucked with a Knife' being the canonical example⁴⁴), Castrator demonstrate a "shift of power" through an insistence of the woman being the bearer of the castrating weapon. An excerpt from the lyrics runs: 'Take his weapon! / Castration / Crush and cut the balls / Emasculation ... Penile

amputation / Remove the weapon / From the offender'.⁴⁵ Jocson-Singh emphasizes this apparently 'complete reversal in power' in a side-by-side of Castrator's, and Cannibal Corpse's,⁴⁶ lyrics in the prelude for her article.⁴⁷ The shift in gender of the imagined subject of the lyrics demonstrating a destabilisation of metal norms specifically and patriarchy more broadly.

My psychoanalytic standpoint being already foregrounded, Castrator surely is an ideal example!

Perhaps.

For *VICE*, Jocson Singh, and Castrator's band-members, however, castration is not taken in terms of Lacan's discussion of it as the necessary condition of *all* speaking beings.⁴⁸ Rather, it is considered an assault on men which, if a woman wields the weapon, demonstrates feminist empowerment. If we follow Lacan – which, for this article, I suggest we do – castration, offered as a 'feminist' subversion of what is implied as the real-as-actual metal – that is, metal music anchored in misogynist, macho and masculine signifiers does not quite hold.

We see the argument that an inversion of the gendered subject and object of castration and violence as a feminist politics elsewhere in *VICE*s – and other music press's – coverage of 'feminist' metal. An article on woman-fronted band, Venom Prison, notes that "Death metal ... plays with themes of violence... often at the expense of a female victim".⁴⁹ The reporter then asks "what happens when you turn that on its head?".⁵⁰ *Metal Hammer* also appeals to head-spinning metaphors regarding Venom Prison: "Introducing Venom Prison, Wales' new death metal warriors... aiming to turn convention on its head".⁵¹ In *Kerrang!* Castrator and Venom Prison are positioned as "turn[ing] the tables" on "misogyny in death metal".⁵² This type of 'flipping', 'spinning' and 'turning' feminism' echoes broader liberal, or 'post-' feminist approaches which presume that simply having 'girls on top' will render sexism and misogyny moribund.⁵³ While this is a clearly problematic notion which ignores patriarchy's embeddedness in capitalist structures and that such inversions are quite palatable to both capitalism and patriarchy as both a niche market (all those #FEMINIST tote bags and tees), and as 'evidence' of patriarchy's waning – it is a notion which also persists in discussions of popular music (we see a rotating spectacle of #FEMINIST artists...); cinema, with its push to 'balance' the industry, post-#MeToo, through the hiring of more women directors, and, of course, in representative politics – Hilary Clinton's campaign and Jacinda Ardern's success in New Zealand being recent examples.⁵⁴ To return to the *VICE* profile of Castrator – the notion of balance – of evenness and equality common to liberal feminism is parsed the author's declaration that the band "level the playing field".⁵⁵

What is problematic here is not only a complicity with capitalist patriarchy, but that such an inverse logic, maintains an assumption of a binarised structure of gendered subjectivity (man / woman) which works on the limited level of signification in terms of what Lacan dubs the Symbolic and the Imaginary. It is interesting that *VICE* posit Castrator as a *fantasy* (yes in a tongue in cheek way, but “perfect” nonetheless) of feminism – but this is surely the only level this type of ‘flipping’ feminism works at – that by turning the signifier ‘on its head’ the signified is also reworked and some sort of liberation in terms of the real (as the actual) is achieved. Not only does this work only as a flip – but, too, it is *flippant* – the signified of masculine violence remains and subversion works only on a surface level.

A Real Metal Topology

Rather than following the flip – of hugs over hostility, of woman-castrator over man-castrated – I follow Lacan’s knotted topology to unpack the gendered politics of metal. I do this through an insistence on what is inferred but not quite regarded in the above examples – through a focus on the Real. If we follow Lacan, the relation between signifier and signified is less stable than that proffered by discourse.⁵⁶ Most importantly, for Lacan, the site of language – of signification – is one of rupture, rather than of symmetry, or even cultural connotation. This rupture, he argues, is precipitated through an encounter with the Other. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan states that signifiers only *work* through how they “represent ... a subject for another signifier”.⁵⁷ Here ‘a subject’ is only constituted via its Otherness – and its encounter with “the field of the Other” – as language (from signifier to signifier, in the slide of metonymy); but also, as an-other subject – what Lacan⁵⁸ will latterly refer to as a speaking being – the subject who is both object and subject generated through discourse. This works through a process of what is often experienced as ‘petrification’⁵⁹ where the act of speaking as productive, positive – is also the point where the subject is caught in the language of the other – apparently fixed, via negation and objectified.⁶⁰ The very process of signification as ‘subjectification’ – always already bound to, and generated by objectification via inclusion in language / discourse. For Lacan, this process is violent – a rupture – and indexes the fundamental non-rapport between subjects – particularly, in his words, ‘sexuated’ subjects. Indeed, it is a process which *castrates* the subject – as noted above, *all* subjects. That ‘there is no sexual relation’⁶¹ pushes an analysis of metal and gender in a provocative direction. Firstly, it allows us to see how journalistic accounts of gendered (with *masculinised* as normative), ‘metalhead violence’ work as a productive and enjoyed fantasy; but also, secondly, demonstrates how metal signification, too, operates within an Imaginary invested in the sexual relation – despite seemingly obvious disavowals. A rupture is more than a flip, or a

turn of tables, or heads. Indeed, the Lacanian topology on which I draw here is of the Borromean *knot* which brings together three orders: the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary.⁶² There is not a simple move or equation between Symbolic (as present / material signifier) and the Imaginary (as referred to / absent signified), for which the signifier simply ‘stands for’. Rather, there is always something in excess of this rhythm between presence and absence – in this third register – that of the *Real* – which generates and indexes that which exceeds binarised, representational logic, but also the horror of the non-rapport. The Real is often parsed as “that which resists symbolisation absolutely”⁶³, drawing on Lacan’s early work. Nonetheless, in the later, knottier, Lacan, the Real is not absolutely resistant, or somehow outside, the Symbolic or the Imaginary. Rather, it is radically *extimate* and, even, stuck or adhered to (indeed, knotted with) the other registers. While signification might seem to work on the turn, or flip, of differentiated, signifiers; the remainder of the Real, is inassimilable into a simple, oppositional system. It is, according to Lacan, undifferentiated and – well – impossible to imagine, *without recourse to the other two order*. Lacan’s topology, too, cannot be un-knotted or segregated into external and internal – that is, onto an objective, empirical, external, ‘real-as-actual’ or a subjective (in lay-terms), personal, ‘imaginary’. This, tricky, knotty, topology is, I propose, a more productive means for unpacking metal – than that of flips, spins and inverted turns – and, indeed, is crucial in accounting for metal’s recent intersection with terrifying violence.

The Metal Voice as Cause

The Lacanian Real, as Colette Soler puts it, “owes nothing to language”.⁶⁴ Its value lies elsewhere. I suggest that we can approach the metal Real, and metal as cause, via a concentration not on its stand-in representations – its lyrics, or even its gory style – but in its *voice*. In *Seminar X*, Lacan identifies the voice as an ‘partial-object’ of the invocatory – also partial – drive, and key to the generation of ‘the only affect which does not lie’: anxiety. Arguably, this discussion of partial drives, and their partial objects, is a precursor to Lacan’s *petit objet a*, introduced in *Seminar XI*, as the object *cause* of desire; that little thing that drives us *towards*, but never quite *to*, this or that desire.⁶⁵ The *petit objet a*, as Lacan notes, is a curious index of the Real. It arrives as not-wholly-formed: it is the anamorphosis present in Holbein’s ‘The Ambassadors’ (1533) which Lacan discusses in *Seminar XI*; the glitch or smear or disturbance in the circuit of signification which *short* circuits, but also triggers, the object of desire. It is present inside but, somehow also external, and invasive upon, the Symbolic and Imaginary. The *petit objet a* sits in the space at the centre of the Borromean Knot. It is

the thing which – when the subject is ushered in to the Symbolic through language (castrated) – is irretrievably lost and can never be regained. It is extimate; *Real*.

From here on, then, I will use *petit objet a* to discuss the metal voice.

As Lacan, and those who have written on the voice from a Lacanian perspective⁶⁶, note, the voice does not elide with ‘content’ – the sayings or the words that the voice carries. Nonetheless, as Leader⁶⁷ points out, this does not mean the voice is pure sound, or meaningless. Rather, it is – as all such little objects are – an object which operates in relation to the Other.⁶⁸ Leader is insistent that the voice be considered as an interpellation as “the experience of being addressed” by the other⁶⁹ – evident in Seminar X, when Lacan states that “The voice is the voice qua imperative, in so far as it calls for obedience or conviction”.⁷⁰ The voice, however, does not only operate solely to position a subject within the Symbolic order (though it does that too), its ‘Real-ness’ adds something more to the voice-d content of the super-ego’s interpellations. The voice’s noise bends communicative signal. In its dissonances, we hear an invocation to be heard but also, a desire to be addressed. These dissonances, too, draw our attention to the gap between the language and meaning. The metal voice; rather than being clearly a vehicle of either misogynist menace, or empowering feminism, is ambivalent, disruptive to such straightforward elisions – it is a blight on the Symbolic, *yet still* has some interpellative function.

I will go into a little more detail about extreme metal vocals. The metal voice is screamed in a low pitch; it is growled, or groaned. Lyrics are generally indiscernible through the guttural noises the vocalist produces and some metal music researchers have even described the metal voice as similar to a percussive instrument.⁷¹ For many bands, their ‘songs’ do not even have lyrics, with the vocals being improvised screams and growls.⁷² Further, in pornogrind and gore-grindcore, such as the music produced by Menstrual Munchies, the voice is often routed through a pitch-shifter which adds extra distortion and usually moves the vocals to an even lower register.⁷³

Leader discusses the mother’s and the infant’s voice (and, admittedly, the latter’s screams and cries) and Dolar considers the voice in arias and classical music. The metal voice, however, I think provides a vital exemplar of Lacan’s object-voice and, as I shall demonstrate, the voice’s relation to anxiety. Drawing on Dolar, I propose that the metal voice is “recalcitrant to meaning”⁷⁴, in the grunts, growls and groans of metal vocalists “words structurally fail”.⁷⁵ This emission of noise, from the mouth, which fails to communicate to the ear, viscerally incarnates the disturbance of *petit objet a*. For the metalhead too it plays (rather than *sings*) to the invocatory drive, the vocalist’s screams are replete with affect but resist interpretation. Rather, the metal-enjoyer – interpellated, but not quite completely positioned, by the metal voice – orbits the three registers, carried by the *petit objet a*. As Dolar puts it, the

object-voice is: a remainder which cannot be made a signifier or disappear in meaning; the remainder that doesn't make sense, a leftover, a cast-off.⁷⁶

This excess, or cast-off element is the *petit objet a* and where, I argue the metal voice sits. Its cast-off-ness though, implies some on-ness; a register or site from which the voice exceeds; that is, from the Real. Further, as demonstrated by the numerous popular and academic forays outlined above – so keen on attributing a clear (even Scientific!) meaning on metal's vocal eruptions – this cast-off is constantly pinned and pulled back into the Symbolic and the Imaginary via interpretation. The excess, then is also extimate; the voice bursts out of the body vocalizing; it scrambles, moves – and, is positioned within the Other's structure of language (the Symbolic). The metal voice is an example of what Leader discusses as both the *pure cry* (*cri pure* the beyond or more than symbolic) the Real of the subject and the *cry for* (*cri pour* recognition from the other via Symbolic).

The extimacy of the metal voice, and its suitability for a discussion of the operation of the *petit objet a* is also evident in its non-human qualities. As noted above, critics regularly note the metal voice's likeness to a musical instrument. Dolar notes that the object voice is that which is “deprived of the human touch”⁷⁷ which makes it “disturbing” to the listener. Likely, this is most evident in pitch-shifted vocals. However, all forms of the metal voice, like the *petit objet a* it never fully integrates, either as machine, or as a human articulation – it is a cast off situated *in between* in the gap within the knot of the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary.

The Metal Voice and Anguish

This gap – and the little object 'a' which dwells, and circulates, in this space – is indicative of the wound of the castration caused by integration into the Symbolic, in the form of Other's language. The wound, despite that little thing, *petit objet a*, which offers some hope that a pursuit of this or that object of desire will plug it up, is impossible to cover over. Nonetheless, the subject finagles and cobbles together various screens, including language, but also the figures and forms of the Imaginary to vainly fill in this space which will, always, fundamentally *lack*. These screens, and I return to this later, are, for Leader, something of a modulation in the face of the potential destitution of the Real.⁷⁸ Such destitution is discussed in *SX* through the affect of anguish; which is the affect arising from the failure of such plugs, stoppers and screens – and, particularly those of the Other – in filling up this lack, and making whole what has been cast off. Anguish not only erupts when the subject encounters this lack, but when the *lack of the Other to salve this wound* come to the fore.⁷⁹ When Lacan states that anguish is the only 'true' affect, he means that it is the only affect which indexes the failure of the Symbolic and opens onto the Real. Unlike Spinozan

or Deleuzian understandings of affect, which place such 'intensities' outside of language and discourse, Lacan's approach considers affect an *effect* of language. Discourse produces, but also *specifies* (through language) affects. For Lacan affects 'lie' in the sense that they displace the signifier from an embodied sensation which is then replaced (substituted) onto another signifier in the chain. There is always some little thing left over after this substitution, however. When discussing the object-voice, Dolar notes a similar remainder: "the signifying chain... yields as a *result* or as a *leftover* the voice".⁸⁰

The voice-as-leftover object (*petit objet a*) exemplifies Lacan's understanding of affect. Further voice as such a causative object, in its disturbance of language and indication of the gap / wound / lack to which the *petit objet a* adheres, exemplifies the particular affect of anguish. The moment of anguish is one which pays attention to the gap between the cause and effect, however, of language – it draws attention to the lie that affects can be reduced to the effect of substitution. Anguish is wholly given over to *lack*. It *is* what it *feels*. It is the one affect which refers "not to the signifier that leads us astray owing to substitutions"⁸¹ but to the *petit objet a* and the failure of signification in itself. Anguish takes us towards the Real (recall its position – as the object-cause *a* in the knot). But it rests on its stubborn role as the central object around which we circle it "reveal[s] ... the very point at which the signifier throws in the towel"⁸² and stymies substitution. Importantly, anguish, according to Soler, arises when the Subject is confronted with the Other's terrifying *petit objet a* – the object-cause of *their* desire, which, in turn, indicates the Other's own lack.⁸³ Though it is like all affects in that it can never be completely absorbed by the Symbolic – it is the one affect which most indexes this position.⁸⁴

If anguish – as an exceptional affect – is *petit objet a* then, when taken with Dolar's account of the object voice, what can we say about metal? I venture that the metal voice *is a voice of anguish*. It is horrifying and destabilising due to its opening onto the site of the *petit objet a* in the Borromean Knot. It indicates moves towards, and confronts us with, the Real. That incomprehensible site that abolishes the Symbolic. This movement towards the Real and the need to double back to the Symbolic and Imaginary is a cut – it fails *and* draws attention to this failure – the difficulty of what Soler parses as 'languaging' (or Othering following the proposition of language as Other in Lacanian terms). It vacillates, says Soler, on the cut between "meaning and the signifier's fundamental non-meaning".⁸⁵

The violence of metal is not in the content – its lyrics or horrifying imagery – but its voice, which reveals itself as *petit objet a*, indexes the fundamental lack in the Other, and opens onto the Real.

The metal voice fails to screen the gap which lyrical, or even harmonious, melodic non-lyrical driven music (including some genres of metal) does. Pop, punk, R&B, or rock songs generate affects but these are arguably always primarily anchored around what appears a straightforward signification (a song in minor key generates an affect we symbolise as sadness [or repulsion, depending on your persuasion]). We connect the embodied affect (longing, rage *etcetera*) to the words of the lyrics and see this as an anchor or generation of affect when in fact it is a substitution; a 'lie'. Importantly, though, the metal voice indexes this inadequate screen, thus, pushing into anguish. It does this through the incomprehensible noises which make up its form. Harmonious, lyrical, music obfuscates the *petit objet a* – it re-anchors it into signification through the Symbolic and Imaginary and, often as an object of aesthetic formality and appreciation. This does not mean that such, melodic, music does not generate the object voice. Just that, due to the pre-eminence of the scream or growl in metal, it is more appropriate for elaborating on the object voice because it sits uncomfortably. It disturbs and will not move smoothly back into the signifying chain. Recall, too, Dolar's emphasis on the voice (rather than the *object* voice) as contingent on signification due to its position as an *appeal* to the Other (i.e. its place within discourse) and Leader's insistence on its *interpellative* function. In metal, however, the scream is without message or content, or even a consistent form. It demonstrates the subject's futile reach for (*cri pour*) the other – for completion via recognition – but also the subject's desire to be interpellated via the Other's voice. As Dolar writes of the scream: "there is a double movement in this ... drama, interpretation of the scream and scream as interpretation of the other". He continues:

with the scream, it appears that we are dealing with a voice external to structure, yet this apparent exteriority hits the core of the structure: it epitomises the signifying gesture by not signifying anything in particular, it presents the speech in its minimal traits, which may later get obscured by articulation. *The non-structured voice miraculously starts to represent the structure as such, the signifier in general.* For the signifier in general, as such, is possible only as a non-signifier.⁸⁶

The object-voice, expressed in the scream, *does* interpellate the subject of discourse, but only in the register of the Real – in anguish – due to its incarnation of the non-relation, the non-structure which sits at the heart of the signifier, the knot and, discourse. The scream also affirms Lacan's other famous maxim that the sexual relation – a harmonious rapport between sexuated subjects – is impossible.

The Return to the Law

The panics and missives – from mainstream media, scientific and academic studies – work as a wrench towards the screen of the Imaginary and the surety of the Symbolic. These snatch the scream in to the apparent neatness of signification. They assuage anguish. The metal genre, with its repetition and, indeed, over-production of screens apparently attesting to ‘toxic masculinity’ (the song titles; album covers *etcetera*), I think, point us to the fitful, failed – and *anguished* – circuit which the object-voice travels. Rather than an assured masculinity that the gory song names and hard male bodies represented on album covers might suggest, when the screams begin, a gap is produced which points us to the impossibility of reining in affect through the substitutionary signifiers of archetypal masculinity. The anguished scream, grunts and growls in metal does not lie; it foregrounds the gap or emptiness in the centre of the Borromean Knot and emphasises *in its very medium* (the voice).

What extreme metal indicates is in fact the Symbolic power – the Law – on which patriarchy rests but also its lack its inability to rest inside a gendered body and hold on to symbolic coherence. There is repetition in metal which seems to cohere it as a solid genre (in fact, it is common to hear that metal ‘all sounds the same’). Nonetheless, if we regard this repetition in vocal styles it is far from simply indicative of an ‘aesthetic’, rather it is anguished, unknowing and unpredictable particularly in its more anarchic forms, such as death metal and grindcore. And even then, the technical metal (high competencies and packaged riffs) sets itself up against what Soler or Lacan might call the ‘wild destitution’ of forms like grindcore. Its lack of standard (say compared to the repetitive ticks of technical metal) or movement within the standard to make new postures – those grunts and growls that do not fit, which erupt from bodies that do not match, generate anguish. The mismatched body might seem to be borne most obviously in woman-fronted groups, like Castrator and Venom Prison. But, I venture, the un-human, or more-than-human voice present in any extreme metal track, including those ‘sung’ by men is just as jarring. The metal voice does not fit *any* human body. Dolar’s quote here, on the object-voice, is fitting:

... a voice whose origin cannot be identified, a voice one cannot place. It is a voice in search of an origin, in search of a body, but even when it finds its body, it turns out that this doesn’t quite work, the voice doesn’t stick to the body, it is an excrescence which doesn’t match the body.⁸⁷

Surely such an unplaceable object, unstuck and excessive, is the very special *petit objet a* which Lacan proffers in *SX*; an object generative of anguish. Soler argues that anguish is a “moment of ‘subjective destitution’” where one peers – horrified – at the prospect of being reduced to an object of the Other – a bodily object of another’s signification.⁸⁸ In the face of this, according to Soler, we rush to *yield (cede)* to the *Symptom*, as well as the Symbolic, the Law and the Other as language to avoid this encounter through a reflexive enactment of ourselves as signifiable, coherent and whole. I see the retreat to the tropes of metal – horrifying and obscene as they are – as a rush to the symptom. A consideration of these symptomatic eruptions as anguish potentially *yields* different results. Soler writes: “There is no such thing as subject without a symptom ... the symptom is a solution [to anguish]”.⁸⁹

We might think the obsession with the *signified* corporeal (the represented body) in metal’s generic signifiers, but also in the popular discourse *around* metal works as exemplary of this the movement to signification via substitution and the symptom. This, too, highlights the anguish which necessarily arises when one is reduced to the body, which in turn generates a frantic re-subjectification via appeal to the Symbolic / Imaginary. We see this through the *signification of outrage* from the moralising media; but also, the bluster and defiance from the metal practitioners themselves (recall Castrator even do this in their provocations about castration and emasculation). Note that even though the morality police and metalheads themselves agree that they are ‘outsiders’ – either pathological or rebellious (depending). That is, whether outsider or not, the metalhead is presumed whole, readable and objectifiable as ‘transgressive’; this does not do the subject, metal or otherwise much justice. And it certainly does not account for the metal voice.

Closed Circuit Bodies

In closing, I wish return to Dolar’s remark about the voice as *petit objet a* as one emitting from a subject who is *in search of a body*. An other’s body, but also, perhaps one of their own. Bodies are, surely, the thing which this essay has circled around but – maybe – has not completely addressed. Let’s consider some-bodies, particular bodies, which were obliterated by Connor Betts in 2019. Betts is, of course, a bearer of the metal voice. His fellow metalhead, Jesse Creekbaum – indeed – wondered ‘*How much of this was real to him?*’ What happens when that Real – here, Betts’s metal voice; his screams on ‘Cunt Stuffed with Medical Waste’ and ‘Preteen Pussy Slaughter’ – explode forth *in search of a body*. What kind of body? Well, perhaps the need to anchor his voice in the Law of misogyny (a world of Cunts for Stuffing and Pussys for Slaughtering) is indicative of something Real to which the object-voice

alerts us. Not in the titles alone – as somehow discrete signifiers alternating only between Symbolic and Imaginary – but in the gap between the Real of the impossibility of the sexual relation (the ... can never quite be stuffed ...) and the signifiers meant to hold them. This gap, literally *screams* forth. It disturbs – yes. But what happens when that disturbance overwhelms, lurches forward and renders those bodies, which might – yes – hold you as an object; which make you feel destitute? What happens when you turn that destitution onto those bodies and annihilate them?

Betts's first victim was his sister, Megan – whom he had been partying with on the night of the massacre. He also attempted to murder his sister's male companion. The other victims appeared to be random, caught in the crossfire of an altered AR-15, though, as I noted, four of them were women. Betts's friends were at pains to emphasise that Betts was not a racist or a right-winger⁹⁰ as mass-shooters in recent times so often are. Journalists pored over his social media profiles, landing on his declarations of being 'AntiFa'^{91 92} almost as much as they lingered on Menstrual Munchies' song titles. All these signifieds... but still, nothing seemed able to hold, to explain this Real terror meted out in a bar in Dayton.

Afterwards, news outlets looped and replayed closed-circuit-television footage of the shooting. This – remarkably short – recording shows the few seconds leading up to the massacre; people turn, then run, in horror; then, Betts onscreen, firing; it ends with the police coming into frame fatally shooting Betts. The footage, like most CCTV, is silent. There are no screams. Without that grain of the Real to short circuit – of the object-voice – is the circuit, between body and signification, closed off, readable as yet another instance of metalhead violence? I would argue, strongly: *no*. The silence, here, amplifies the object-voices missing – and the bodies for which Betts' screams in Menstrual Munchies cried. The absence of object-voice/s and the ascent, here, of the object-gaze in the pixelated CCTV footage,⁹³ heightens the anguish which Betts' screams augured. We are again, hit with the sensation of bodies which 'don't quite fit', who's imminent, literal, wounding, necessitates a scream – here, silenced, but present and, even, interpellative to the body with the gun, and to the viewer watching at home. Wrong bodies, wrong places and wrong times. Wrong too – seems – the lack of sound.

Of course, Betts and the Dayton massacre is a specific instance. One might argue that we cannot generalise about the metal voice from this extreme event. It is notable, though, how quick metalheads were to say that Menstrual Munchies were a mediocre band, which sound much the same as other extreme metal bands.⁹⁴ Betts's metal voice, perhaps, was no different to that of the vocalists in Castrator or Venom Prison. What *was* different, of course, is that, for Betts the Real (*how much of this was*

real to him? On that, night, it was *all*), indexed by that *petit objet a* pivoted into, and overwhelmed, discourse; the social bond was obliterated. The metal-voice, in other instances, might modulate anguish through a making hyper-present its Others – the obscenely imagined ‘women’ in most extreme metal and the caricatured men brought forth by Castrator. Modulation, too, can work *sinthome*-atically, to knot the split (indeed, castrated) subject together, at least in semblance, via appeals to the Symbolic and Imaginary in the form of discourse. The metal-voice usually *short* circuits – rather than engulfs, closes off contradiction, and affirms – the apparently easy suturing between voice, self and body as cohered subject. This function of the metal-voice points us at a potentially different, and less obliterating, understanding of the screams, grunts and growls of extreme metal.

Notes

¹ Newhauser, 2019: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/j5yekp/exclusive-dayton-shooter-was-in-a-pornogrind-band-that-released-songs-about-raping-and-killing-women>

² Arguably an act of ‘terrorism’, and certainly discussed as such in mainstream media (Millward 2019; Trombly; Baldas and Berry 2019; Williams *et al.* 2019). Though beyond the scope of the present article, journalistic handling of the 2019 Christchurch terror attacks also focused on the perpetrator’s apparent enthusiasm for metal, particularly for Black Sabbath (Reynolds 2019) and “moody metal band” (McNeilly *et al.* 2019), Tool, in discussions of what caused the terrorist to murder fifty-one people.

³ New Zealand Herald, 2019: <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/dayton-killer-connor-betts-revealed-as-member-of-vile-heavy-metal-band/6ZJ263SXZ4EGJC3VS5OXMSIWWY/>

⁴ See: Hall 2019; Hodge 2019; Lodi and Arnold 2019; Robertson, Burroughs and Williams 2019; Wyatt 2019; Zilber 2019.

⁵ The notion of journalism being a discrete sphere, or fourth estate of objective reporting persists. For a discussion of how the assumption of objective journalism works ideologically, see Phelan (2014).

⁶ Berlinger and Sinofsky 1996; 2000; 2011.

⁷ Hay 2018; Hjelm, Kahn-Harris & Levine 2013; Weinstein 2000 [1991]

⁸ Stidham, Fitzgerald and Baldwin 2012

⁹ Hughes 2017; Kong 2006; Liew and Fu 2006

¹⁰ Newhauser 2019, emphasis added

¹¹ See Newhauser here

¹² See Hodge here

¹³ Kahn-Harris 2006; Overell 2014. For those unfamiliar with extreme metal, I recommend listening to key early grindcore albums Napalm Death’s *Scum* (1987) and Brutal Truth’s *Need to Control* (1994), significant early death metal work by Cannibal Corpse: *The Bleeding* (1994). More recent work by Internal Rot (*Grieving Birth* [2020]) and Pig Destroyer (*Head Cage* [2018]), is also demonstrative of extreme metal style.

¹⁴ Metal is not, especially, peculiar here – with other musical genres being categorized similarly (particularly hip-hop). Videogames, horror films and, most recently, vaping have been maligned in

popular media discussions. The latter has generated headlines in the *New York Times* such as 'Dozens of Young People Hospitalised for Breathing and Lung Problems After Vaping' (Kaplan 2019).

¹⁵ In the 1980s and 1990s these reached a fever-pitch when AC/DC were at least partly blamed for the rampage of Night Stalker Richard Ramirez. See also the notorious Norwegian black metal scene cases where band-members were involved in murder and church burnings – recently depicted in the Hollywood film *Lords of Chaos* (Åkerlund 2019) based on the book of the same name by Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind (1998). For critical accounts of the latter see Hay (2018); Wallin, Podoshen and Venkatesh (2017); and Spracklen (2014).

¹⁶ Sharman 2015 refers to this as "anger" and "hostility".

¹⁷ Guardian Music 2015

¹⁸ Thompson, Geeves and Olson 2019

¹⁹ Gill 2019

²⁰ It is worth noting, though beyond the strictures of this article, that the proliferation of these journalistic items accords with press-releases from research projects aligned with neuro-psychology. As an adherent of psychoanalysis, I have reservations regarding latter-day incarnations of 'ego psychology'. In particular, I share my psychoanalytic colleagues' reservations about neuro-, and cognitive-psychology's complicity with neoliberalism. For critiques of the ideological work of popular and, now, state-funded (in Anglo-phone countries) 'cognitive behavioural therapy' as an instrument to ensure a pliable workforce, I refer readers elsewhere (Ferraro 2015; Hook 2017; McGowan 2016). For the present project, I note, however, how scientific pressers operate in the journalistic sphere as indexes of reality 'as it is'.

²¹ Jutel 2019; Nicholls 2019

²² Sun *et al* 2019

²³ Metal press, for example *Kerrang!* also covered this story (*Kerrang!* 2019), but for this section I wanted to emphasise 'mainstream' press coverage.

²⁴ *ibid.*; see also Thompson, Geeves and Olson 2019; Sharman and Dingle 2015)

²⁵ Digioia 2020; d'Hont 2021; Hill 2016; 2018; Hoad 2017; Jones 2018; Overell 2014; Riches 2014; 2015; Shadrack 2018; 2020; Sollee 2015.

²⁶ Mathis 2019

²⁷ Perez 2019

²⁸ Zilber 2019: see also Hodge; Perez; *New Zealand Herald*.

²⁹ This headline was typical, others, included in the bibliography below ran as variations on this copy: 'The Dayton Shooter Was The Lead Singer Of A "Pornogrind" Metal Band'; 'WARPED MIND Ohio gunman Connor Betts was lead singer of "pornogrind" metal band who praised paedos, necrophilia and performed at "Summer Massacre" festival'; 'EXCLUSIVE: Dayton Shooter Was in a "Pornogrind" Band That Released Songs About Raping and Killing Women'; 'Dayton shooting suspect Connor Betts sang about raping and killing women in "pornogrind" metal band'; 'Connor Betts: Dayton gunman played in "pornogrind" metal band, had "kill list", choked women'.

³⁰ Zilber 2019

³¹ For a discussion of tabloid coverage of black metal in particular see Hay (2018); for metal more generally see Hughes (2016); Kong (2006); Liew and Fu (2006); Stidham, Fitzgerald and Baldwin (2012).

³² Lodi and Arnold 2019; Robertson, Bogel-Burroughs and Williams 2019; Wyatt 2019.

³³ Lodi and Arnold 2019

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ Kelly 2015

³⁷ *ibid.*, emphasis added

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ 2019

⁴⁰ Jocson-Singh draws the term 'vigilante feminist' from Laura D'Amore's (2017) work which looks at feminist reworkings of fairy tale aesthetics and forms representative of masculine power towards "self-empowerment" (Jocson-Singh 265).

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² *Ibid* 265

⁴³ Castrator 2015

⁴⁴ This track is from Cannibal Corpse's most successful album, *The Bleeding*, with this track generating a great deal of outrage from family groups and censorship boards. It is also regularly listed in 'best of' lists of Cannibal Corpse songs (Aren 2016; DiVita 2015; Return Of Rock 2020). For a detailed discussion of 'Fucked with a Knife' and *The Bleeding*, see Kahn-Harris (2006).

⁴⁵ *op cit* 268

⁴⁶ Jocson-Singh 264

⁴⁷ The Cannibal Corpse lyrics are from 'Stripped, Raped and Strangled' (also from *The Bleeding*, and also regularly ranked as one of the band's 'best ofs...'): Tied her up and taped her mouth shut / Couldn't scream / Raped violently / Rope tight / Around her throat / Her body twitches as she chokes'. From Castrator, the lyrics are from 'Emasculator': 'Tightly she holds the blade / With which the rapist will be raped / Casration Of the rapist! / Emasculation'.

⁴⁸ This is not a slight on the *VICE* reporter, the members of Castrator, or Joan Jocson-Singh – for their work does not *claim* to be Lacanian! Further, Jocson-Singh's discussion of vigilante feminism is compelling and convincing within the context of a feminist discourse analysis. I simply want to note how the signifier 'Castrator' and the act of 'castration' is, well, *taken* in discussions of gender and metal.

⁴⁹ De Gallier 2016

⁵⁰ *ibid*

⁵¹ Morton 2016

⁵² Zorgdrager 2019

⁵³ Amoruso 2015; Huffington 2015; Sandberg 2013

⁵⁴ For a detailed critique of the neoliberal attunements of 'flip the script' feminism I direct the reader to Banet-Weiser (2018); Crispin (2017); Foster (2016); Phipps (2021); and, Rottenberg (2018).

⁵⁵ Kelly 2015.

⁵⁶ *Écrits* 149, 163

⁵⁷ Seminar XI 207

⁵⁸ 1976

⁵⁹ *Seminar XI* 207

⁶⁰ The full quote is as follows: "The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject" (207).

⁶¹ One of Lacan's maxims from Encore Seminar XX

⁶² Lacan 1972-3 SXX; SXXII

⁶³ Lacan Seminar I 66

⁶⁴ 2016, 40.

⁶⁵ Soler puts it succinctly: "What has no image or signifier, and thus can neither be seen nor deciphered, and consequently has to do with a real that is impossible to grasp by either the imaginary or the symbolic, but which nevertheless operates as the cause of everything that is said and done? It is the *petit objet a*" (Soler 21).

⁶⁶ See Dolar 2006; Leader 2003; Soler 2016

⁶⁷ 2003

⁶⁸ Dolar 2006

⁶⁹ Leader 78

⁷⁰ See Lacan, 1962-63 [2014], x

⁷¹ Bogue 2004; Purcell 2003; Unger 2016

⁷² Overell 2014

⁷³ Carcass's album *Reek of Putrefaction* (1988) is an illustrative example of pitch-shifted gore-grindcore.

⁷⁴ Dolar 13

⁷⁵ *ibid*

⁷⁶ Dolar 20

⁷⁷ *ibid* 22

⁷⁸ Leader 77-8

⁷⁹ see also Soler 41

⁸⁰ Dolar 35, emphasis added

⁸¹ Soler 24

⁸² *ibid* 5

⁸³ Soler 24

⁸⁴ See Soler, 5: "[Anguish is] the only affect that 'does not lie' – for it refers, not to the signifying that leads us astray owing to its substitutions, but to its effect of subtracting something from the Real, which is the object", and page 24: [A]nguish ... arises when something appears or is going to appear in this empty space, when 'lack is lacking', summoning the presence of the ungraspable guest of which there is no image or idea (Soler, 24).

⁸⁵ Soler 46

⁸⁶ Dolar 29 emphasis added

⁸⁷ Dolar 61

⁸⁸ *ibid* 42

⁸⁹ Soler 44

⁹⁰ Mitchell *et al* 2019; Newhauser 2019; Perez 2019

⁹¹ Then President, Donald Trump, predictably made much of this apparent 'liberal' 'AntiFa' connection (Klepper and Biesecker 2019).

⁹² cf. Knight and Biery Golick 2019.

⁹³ I do not have the space in the present article to go into more detail about how the scopic drive operates in metal, and particularly in relation to Menstrual Munchies, and the Betts' case. However, it would make for interesting further research.

⁹⁴ Another Ohio-based extreme metal band described Betts as: "another dime a dozen Ohio grind dude who caped progressive politics while treating women like shit" and the pornogrind genre as "for morons" (op cit in Hall 2019). The tweets have since been deleted, but were screen-capped in an article for *BuzzFeed* (*ibid.*).

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