

# The deconstruction



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Ever wonder what the mysteriously silent, monolithic guitar-bass section of Gneissmaker thinks about? Oblivious to the pandemonium around them, the expressionless and immobile Jon Allen and Tim Teichgraeber ponder verbose intellectual pomposities.

photos by Lacy Eckl



Organic intellectual Jon F. Allen mumbles to himself, tossing grindcore deconstructionisms left and right.



Tim Teichgraeber is bored. What better way to defeat boredom than to revel in the stimulation of semiotics!

by Jon F. Allen, Tim Teichgraeber and Jesse Seven

To attempt a psychoanalytico-deconstructive semiotic analysis of the cultural phenomenon of Heavy Metal, particularly of the Speed, Power, and Death variants, is no mean feat for the armchair semiotician.

One, as always, runs the risk of articulating a false dichotomy between text and "reader," in this case to be treated as the listener, and of overlooking what the father of deconstruction, the French philosopher and literary critic Jacques Derrida, called the 'difference,' the simultaneously "real" and "fictional" 'trace' between the signifier and the signified. Also to be avoided is becoming embroiled in an infinite regress of unintentional irony. To begin, then, perhaps a psychoanalytico-existential reading of Slayer's South of Heaven is in order.

Thus, throwing caution to the wind and flying it like a bioluminescent kite, let us (as another infamous frog thinker might have it) plunge headlong into the void and see if we can't come out with a keeper. Guitars are phallic symbols? Oedipus complexes manifested in anti-disestablishmentary manifestos? Come on, you pud, even Rosensweig could tell you that's kid stuff. What are these kids so peeved about? Skyrocketing peroxide prices, the failure of anal retentive society to accept 'dude' as the personal pronoun of the future that it so very much is. For Collitch Boy and Collitch Girl to feebly attempt to subvert the Id of today's Viking Warrior and tomorrow's Odin is pure folly.

However, for the French Nazi-turned Deconstructive metacritic, Paul de Man, the essential argument of the preceding paragraph would have, in postmodern/deconstructive terms, "differed" from itself. The entire text would have unravelled before our very eyes. However, as the German semiotician Hans Robert Jauss has shown us with his Rezeptionstheik, such an approach is merely a decadent nihilism encased in absurd bourgeois metaphysics. Jauss' Rezeptionstheik is actually quite crucial in understanding the appeal

and meaning of Speed and Death metal to today's media-assaulted, alienated youth.

The technically flawless double kick-drum patterns, the atonal chord structures, the hi-hat hiss representing a (quasi-heral) vent into "hell," all these signs allow us to construct a modulus of the fractellated, fundamentally meaningful(less) nature of discourse. Of course, text is everything, and any attempt to see Slayer's cover of Judas Priest's "Dissident Aggressor" as anything but a severely flawed (mis)reading of a primary text is to buy into a dangerous architectonic construct, in which objective "meaning" is attributed to a meaningless datum.

Insofar as Jauss is concerned, he never even saw the titanic Black Sabbath through anything but rose-coloured spectacles. So we descend to the subtext, where the archetypic constructs have been playing card girders and matchstick shingles. As Tipper Gore, social hyperbolist, seeks to replace mother (oh so incompetent these days, to be sure), with herself veiled in a cellophane Moses ensemble, she bellows the following commandments:

1. Thou shalt not say the word 'fuck.'
2. Thou shalt not fuck (openly).
3. Thou shalt not commit the transtextual 'sin' of confusing the signifier-signified with the signified-signifying, in Kierkegaard or De Saussure's terms, or in Derrida's terms, confuting the 'difference' with the 'supplement.'

And the collegiate flunky gapes. The eternal pyramidal omen of aesthetic objectification is realized. Enslaved by the High-brow in chains porcelain pure, the gearhead resigns the inevitable, trusts in the absurd, and faith leaps out of the frying pan and into the fire. Not so fast, Komradel!

This sort of approach is of course, in danger of treading very close to elitism. If there is a meaning to speedmetal, we must project it onto the textual surface of the music itself.

We can take our metaphysical cues here from K?hler, one of the founding members of the WGrzburg School, more commonly referred to as the Gestalt

psychologists. If we see the phenomenon of speed and death metal as a gestalt, a 'whole,' we must be prepared to take the textual discourse of the so-called 'metalheads' with the utmost seriousness. We must see it as a fully mature and developed Weltanschauung.

Our own perceptions, in this case, do not literally allow us to intertextually 'penetrate' the epistemic privilege of the 'blickpunkt,' or viewpoint, in Gestalt terms, of the socio-cultural group known as 'metalheads.' Let us then dispense with the socio-cultural criteria for 'being' a metalhead, and give a reading of the music itself.

In the interest of brevity, we must limit our discourse to the nth percentile of our subject. That is precisely (or roughly if you abhor abstraction) what merits consideration, regardless of topic. Some join the "nth" through sheer immortality (e.g. Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden), and those who ascend to the 'n' in the present with skill, power, and happy-go-lucky attitudes, (e.g. Metallica, Slayer). Despite the sacrifice of the punk/hardcore backbeat for the cacophony of quickness, many a pre-pubescent paw has been a-blistered by the likes of Ride the Lightning or South of Heaven.

Knitting coherence and meaning out of the yarn of oblivion is the test. The Knit one, purl two fingerbleeds shovel snow into nowhere while the macrame kings and queens (not to slight 'Jo' of Bolt Thrower fame) take their seats with the Boyz from Brazil (Sepultura) and Kreator (not God, but close).

Additionally, in as much as any auro-sociological movement can successfully ascribe itself with the mores of its object/audience, the mind-shatteringly precise aural fabric that 'is' heavy metal has done so. Speed-Death-Grind Metal's receiver, be he/she drop-out or deconstructivist critic, ultimately prescribes and/or subscribes to the emotional and intellectual clarity of the eschatological construct laid out clearly by the irrefutable truth of metal's crunching guitars, throbbing drums, and thundering bass. The sonic ensemble of a Slayer or a Metallica is conceptually

synonymous with the end/or beginning of time. The audience is forced to interact on every level with a series of readily manifest equations.

Does not the distortion of James Hetfield's ESP Explorer mimic the distortion in the pimply youth's own life? Is this not the same ear-splitting crunch of the apocalypse, at once dreaded and welcomed by all who have spent time in high school? Does not the seismic impact of Dave Lombardo's double 24-inch Tama Bass Drums reflect the trembling of the political and historical ground on which the denim-jacketed yard ape stands throughout his or her life? Even in metal's lyrics, the eschatological agenda is at once addressed and reckoned with. To quote from Metallica's "Fight Fire With Fire,"

"Time is like a fuse, short and burning fast, armageddon is her, like said in the past. Fight fire with fire, ending is near, fight fire with fire, bursting with fear, we all shall die."

The "end times" are at once dictated by the youthful underclass of metal listeners and also to that same population by the music itself.

Of course, this is only one (mis)reading. We could certainly deconstruct its architectonic crypto-marxist structure and its accompanying subtext of smugly insincere populism. Marxism and marxist criticism in general has shown itself to be woefully inadequate in dealing with things aesthetic, literary, and cultural. Its reliance on the existence of a pre-discursive realm alerts the deconstructive critic to its lack of utility as a critical tool, and its idealist metaphysics masquerading as a 'scientific' (!) 'historical materialism' "differs" from itself so radically that it sets the stage for one of the most spectacular textual unravelings in critical-literary history.

Let us, then, in conclusion, step metaphorically into the shoes of such 20th century Marxian critics as Gramsci, Lukacs, and Habermas. If we see the psycho-historical phenomenon of Speed and Death Metal as the last gasp of objecto-subjectified youth rebelling at the impersonal, hegemonic forces of production, we must abandon any Leninistic pretensions about "Vanguards."

We must see ourselves as, at best, "Organic" intellectuals, to use Gramsci's term, and proceed with the syntactic/semiotic-deconstructive project of establishing, to paraphrase Nietzsche, the "free play" of signs in a meaningless world. And what's more, METAL UP YOUR ASS!

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