

FORGING MASCULINITY: HEAVY-METAL SOUNDS AND IMAGES OF GENDER

Robert Walser

The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.

Guy Debord¹

Orpheus, the god-like musician of Greek mythology, was a natural figure for opera plots, which must reconcile heroics and song; his legendary rhetorical powers made him the most popular subject of early seventeenth-century dramatic music, with settings by Monteverdi, Peri, Caccini and many other composers. But his story contains a built-in contradiction: Orpheus must sing in such a way as to demonstrate his rhetorical mastery of the world, yet such elaborate vocal display threatens to undermine Orpheus' masculine self-control. Flamboyant display of his emotions is required as evidence of his manipulative powers, but such excess makes him into an object of display himself, and suggests a disturbing similarity to the disdained emotional outbursts of women. Western constructions of masculinity often include conflicting imperatives regarding assertive, spectacular display and rigid self-control. Spectacles are problematic in the context of a patriarchal order that is invested in the stability of signs and which seeks to maintain women in the position of object of the male gaze.²

Today's heavy-metal musicians must negotiate the same contradiction. Like the story of Orpheus, heavy metal often stages fantasies of masculine virtuosity and control. Musically, heavy metal often depends upon a dialectic of controlling power and transcendent freedom. Metal songs usually include impressive technical and rhetorical feats on the electric guitar, counterposed with an experience of power and control that is built up through vocal extremes, guitar power chords, distortion and sheer volume of bass and drums. Visually, metal musicians typically appear as swaggering males, leaping and strutting about the stage, clad in spandex, scarves, leather and other visually noisy clothing, punctuating their performances with phallic thrusts of guitars and microphone stands. The performers may use hyper-masculinity or androgyny as visual enactments of spectacular transgression. Like opera, heavy metal draws upon many sources of power: mythology,

violence, madness, the iconography of horror. But none of these surpasses gender in its potential to inspire anxiety and to ameliorate it.

Heavy metal is, inevitably, a discourse shaped by patriarchy. Circulating in the contexts of Western capitalist and patriarchal societies, for much of its history metal has been appreciated and supported primarily by a teenage, male audience. But it is crucial to specify not only age and gender, but the corresponding political position of this constituency: it is a group generally lacking in social, physical and economic power, but one besieged by cultural messages promoting such forms of power, insisting on them as the vital attributes of an obligatory masculinity. As John Fiske concluded from his study of 'masculine' TV shows such as *The A-Team*, 'our society denies most males adequate means of exercising the power upon which their masculinity apparently depends. Masculinity is thus socially and psychologically insecure, and its insecurity produces the need for its constant achievement. . . .³ I would emphasize in Fiske's analysis the words 'apparently' and 'socially', for I see sex roles as contradictory, mutable social constructions, rather than as normative formations somehow grounded in biology or an ahistorical psychology. Moreover, it is not only masculinity that is insecure; none of the components of identity are stable or natural. Heavy metal, like all other culture, offers occasions for doing 'identity work': among other things, for 'accomplishing gender'.⁴ That is, notions of gender circulate in the texts, sounds, images and practices of heavy metal; and fans experience confirmation and alteration of their gendered identities through their involvement with it.

For Fiske, the contradictions built into male sex roles and the insecurity that men feel as a result help explain the episodic and generic aspects of male culture. Television shows such as *The A-Team* are structured as repeated enactments of paradigmatic narratives and representations because their function is to address anxieties that can never be resolved. Fiske's ideas are easily transferable to music and music video, where repetition and genre are also crucial phenomena. The purpose of a genre is to organize the reproduction of a particular ideology, and the generic cohesion of heavy metal until the mid-1980s depended upon the desire of young white male performers and fans to hear and believe in certain stories about the nature of masculinity. But metal's negotiations of the anxieties of gender and power are never conclusive; that is why, as Fiske says, these imaginary resolutions of real anxieties must be re-enacted over and over again. That such representations can never be definitive or totally satisfying also means that they are always open to negotiation and transformation. But social circumstances may change such that particular forms of culture are no longer relevant: metal fans tend mostly to be young because much of metal deals with experiences of powerlessness that may be, to some extent, overcome. As they get older, fans may acquire some amount of economic power, or they may beget children who replace them at the bottom of the familial and social ladders, whose physical

power and mobility is far less than theirs and who thus assuage some of their culturally-produced anxieties.⁵

Such a theoretical perspective cannot be a comprehensive one for the study of gender in heavy metal, though, for there are many female metal fans, for whom such explanations are inadequate. Indeed, since around 1987, concert audiences for metal shows have been roughly gender-balanced. But metal is overwhelmingly concerned with presenting images and confronting anxieties which have been traditionally understood as peculiar to men, through musical means which have been conventionally coded as masculine. Since the language and traditions of heavy metal have been developed by and are still dominated by men, my discussion of gender in metal will initially be an investigation of masculinity; I will return later to issues of the reception of these male spectacles by female fans.

Heavy metal, for two decades, has offered a variety of compensatory experiences and opportunities for bearing or resolving the contradictions of masculinity as they have been constructed by societies which are aligned by patriarchy, capitalism and mass-mediation. Thus one of the most important items on the heavy-metal agenda has long been to deal with what patriarchy perennially perceives as the 'threat' of women. I will be framing my discussion of heavy-metal songs and videos in terms of a loose list of strategies concerning gender and power: misogyny, exscription, androgyny and romance. Heavy-metal musicians and fans have developed tactics for modelling male power and control within the context of a patriarchal culture, and metal's enactments of masculinity include varieties of misogyny as well as 'exscription' of the feminine – that is, total denial of gender anxieties through the articulation of fantastic worlds without women – supported by male, sometimes homoerotic, bonding. But heavy metal also participates in rock's tradition of rebellion, and some metal achieves much of its transgressiveness through androgynous spectacle. Until recently, one of these three strategies – misogyny, exscription, androgyny – tended to dominate each heavy-metal band's 'aesthetic'. A fourth approach, increasingly important in recent years, 'softens' metal with songs about romance; this kind of music has drawn legions of female fans to metal since the mid-1980s.

In spite of the fact that this categorization of metal might look like a menu for sexual abuse, I intend neither to denounce utterly, nor to try to rescue wholesale, heavy metal's politics of gender. To do only the former would be to ignore the politics of critique, particularly the fact that criticism of popular culture never takes place apart from implicit comparisons with more prestigious culture. Like racism, sexism is sustained and naturalized across class lines. Writers who expose racism and sexism in popular culture must take care that their critique does not collude with those who want to identify such barbarisms with an economic and cultural underclass which can thus be more self-righteously condemned and oppressed. Critics of popular music must take care to acknowledge the politics of their work: while it is imperative to be

critical, to avoid bland enthusiasm or dispassionate positivism, analyses of popular culture must also be empathetically drawn if they are to register accurately the contradictions and subtleties of popular practices. Otherwise they too easily serve as mandates for elitist condemnation and oppression. It is beyond dispute that some of the images and ideologies of heavy metal are violent and irresponsible. But of course the violence and irresponsibility of much so-called 'high' culture, and of the economic elite that underwrites its existence, is also demonstrable. The politics of prestige work to position 'high' culture beyond scrutiny, and 'low' culture beneath it. But in either case the effect is to forestall critique by mythologizing constructions that are in fact never natural, no matter how powerfully they work to constitute subjectivity. It is less important simply to denounce or defend cultural representations of gender than to critique them in the context of an explanation of how they work, what social tensions they address, where they come from, and why they are credible to particular audiences.

Gender constructions in heavy-metal music and videos are significant not only because they reproduce and inflect patriarchal assumptions and ideologies, but more importantly because popular music may teach us more than any other cultural form about the conflicts, conversations and bids for legitimacy and prestige that comprise cultural activity. Heavy metal is, as much as anything else, an arena of gender, where spectacular gladiators compete to register and affect ideas of masculinity, sexuality and gender relations. The stakes are as high in metal as anywhere, and they are more explicitly acknowledged there, both in visual and musical tropes and in the verbal and written debates of fans. By taking the trouble to distinguish carefully among the varieties of representation within heavy metal, we can gain a better understanding of larger interrelationships of gender and power.⁶

BEHIND THE SCREEN: LISTENING TO GENDER

In her pathbreaking study of music video, *Rocking Around the Clock*, E. Ann Kaplan makes two main points about metal videos: that their violence and rebelliousness place them in the 'nihilistic' category of her typology of videos, and that their reputation for blatant sexism is well deserved.⁷ Neither of these might seem particularly bold assertions; but taken together, I think, they are contradictory. Sexism is in fact a major ideological constituent of much heavy metal, but sexism is never nihilistic: the intensity and variety of modes of sexist discourse must be understood as indices of the urgency and influence of patriarchal ideals. To call such discourse nihilist is to obscure its real ideological functions.

Kaplan's readings of videos as texts embedded in the contexts of MTV and consumer culture are sometimes acute and illuminating. But two serious methodological shortcomings flaw her comments on heavy metal. First, beyond her observation that metal audiences are made up of 'young males'

(not entirely true even when her book was written, and certainly not now), Kaplan's comments appear to be uninformed by any ethnographic or personal contact with the heavy-metal musicians and fans whose texts and lives she presumes to explain. While Kaplan's conclusions are based on her analysis of MTV as a spectacular reinforcement of universal decentredness and passivity, the interviews and questionnaires I have received from heavy-metal fans point to a wide range of activities connected to their involvement with the music. *Headbangers' Ball*, the weekly three-hour MTV programme devoted to heavy metal, is quite popular with the fans I surveyed, but it is hardly the most important aspect of their involvement with metal. Concerts, records, radio, fan magazines and quite often playing an instrument figure as primary components of metal fans' lives. A significant number of fans (especially male) watch MTV seldom or never, and for many (especially female) the glossy photographs of rampant musicians to be found in the copious fan literature are more important sources of visual pleasure than videos. This is not to argue that metal videos are unimportant, but rather to say that they do not operate in a social vacuum: their analysis must be inflected by knowledge of the lives and cultural investments of the viewers.

Second, certainly the most serious shortcoming of Kaplan's book is the almost total absence of analysis pertaining to the *music* of music video. Kaplan's few comments addressing musical details of heavy-metal songs are hardly helpful: she characterizes heavy metal as 'loud and unmelodious', filled with 'relatively meaningless screaming sounds'.⁸ Though musical discourses are invisible, they are nonetheless susceptible to analysis, and musical analysis is crucial for music video analysis because aural texts are indisputably primary: they exist prior to videos and independently of them, and fans' comments make it clear that it is the music of music video that carries the primary affective charge. That is, it is the music that is mostly responsible for invoking the libidinal and corporeal investment that intensify belief, action, commitment and experience. The challenge of analysing music videos is that of interpreting and accounting for *both* musical and visual discourses, simultaneous but differently articulated and assuming a variety of relations.

If the cinema, as Laura Mulvey asserts, 'has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego', the same was surely true of music long before cinema was invented.⁹ Musical constructions, in metal or elsewhere, are powerful in part because they are made to seem so natural and unconstructed. We experience music's rhetorical pull apart from language, seemingly apart from all social referents, in what is usually thought a pure, personal, subjective way. Yet that impression of naturalness depends on our responding unselfconsciously to complex discursive systems that have developed as historically and socially specific practices. It is not only lyrics or visual imagery, but the music itself that constructs gendered experiences.¹⁰ The musicians I will discuss have used musical codes to articulate visions of the world that are filled with the

pleasures of energy, freedom, power and a sense of community. Discursively, specific details of rhythm, pitch and timbre *signify* – some of them through the conventions of heavy metal proper, some as part of a complex, mutable tradition of musical semiotics that stretches back centuries. Such signification always occurs in social contexts structured through political categories such as gender, class and race; and musical meanings are thus inseparable from these fundamental constituents of social reality.

Only with its complex sonic texts and ethnographic contexts disregarded, as in analyses such as Kaplan's, can heavy metal be casually characterized as both sexist and nihilistic, or as a monolithic, adolescent deviance. For 'heavy metal' is a genre label which includes a substantial and growing female audience, a number of distinctive and sophisticated musical discourses, and many different 'solutions' to complex problems of gender relations. As I discuss several heavy-metal songs and their videos, I hope to delineate their musical and ideological strategies more precisely than is accomplished by such vague but pervasive terms of dismissal. As I work through the various gender strategies I have identified in heavy metal, I will be arguing on the one hand that music videos cannot reasonably be analysed without the musical component of such texts being examined; and on the other hand, that it is crucial for the cultural critic to develop an understanding of the interests and activities of the communities who find meaning in their encounters with these texts.⁷

NO GIRLS ALLOWED: EXSCRIPTION IN HEAVY METAL

The most distinctive feature of heavy-metal videos is that they typically present the spectacle of live performance; bands are shown on stage, performing in sync with the song. Other kinds of pop music videos also frequently feature 'live' synced performances, but pop songs are less often 'performed' on a stage than mimed in front of fantastic or arty backgrounds, or in unlikely locations; often only vocals are synced, as only the singer is visible. In the typical metal video, however, actual concert footage is often used, and when it is not, sets, backdrops and musicians' posturings usually imitate the spectacle of an arena concert. Bands as different in their styles and constituencies as Guns N' Roses, Poison and Metallica all rely on scenes of 'live' performance for most of their videos. Heavy metal has long had the most loyal touring support of any popular musical genre, and the arena concert experience of collectivity and participation remain the ideal which many videos seek to evoke.

Besides the videos of metal singles to be seen on programmes like MTV's *Headbangers' Ball*, full-length heavy-metal concerts are popular rentals at video stores. Since a favourite performer might come through town once a year at best, and since many younger fans are not allowed by their parents to attend concerts, heavy-metal videos make more widely available the singular

events which are most highly valued by fans. The video in a concert setting, with or without fans, presents the performers in all their glory, as 'larger-than-life figures' whose presence is validated by feelings of community and power, and evoked by venue and music.

Many such performance videos offer for the pleasure of young males a fantasy not unlike that constructed by *The A-Team*, as John Fiske describes it: a world of action, excess, transgression, but little real violence; one in which men are the only actors, and in which male bonding among the members of a 'hero-team' is the only important social relationship. As Barbara Ehrenreich has pointed out, for young men maturing in a patriarchal world where men dominate the 'real' world while women raise kids, growing up means growing away from women.¹¹ Fiske's analysis of the television show stresses the value of male bonding for creating close social ties while excluding the threat of the feminine: 'Feminine intimacy centers on the relationship itself and produces a dependence on the other that threatens masculine independence. . . . Male bonding, on the other hand, allows an interpersonal dependency that is goal-centered, not relationship-centered, and thus serves masculine performance instead of threatening it.'¹² Even in many non-performance metal videos, where narratives and images are placed not on a stage but elsewhere, the point is the same: to represent and reproduce spectacles that depend for their appeal on the exscription of women.

Even exceptions to the metal concert video format emphasize the performative. In Judas Priest's 'Heading out to the highway', a song from 1981 that was still popular as a video in 1988 and 1989, performance is not literally represented. The band's two guitar players drag race on an empty highway in the middle of nowhere, flagged on by the singer, whose macho stances, gestures and singing are the only elements of the real performance retained in the fantastic setting. The song and the images are about freedom and adventure, and we don't even need the initial 'Hit 'em, boys' to know that we're talking about a specifically male kind of freedom. There are no women to be seen in this video, and what is there to be seen – the cars, the road, the leather, the poses – have long been coded as symbols of male freedom, linked as signs of aggressiveness and refusal to be bound by limits.

The performance enacts this in musical terms as well. The vocals and guitars constantly anticipate the downbeats, punching in ahead of the beat defined by the bass and drums throughout the song. Halford's rough, powerful voice finds support in harmony vocals that sound as menacing as a gang's chant. He sustains triumphant high notes at the end of each chorus, in a display of power that has counterparts in the guitar's solo section and the bass pedal under the verse. Not only his voice, but the singer's writhing and posing provide a spectacle of male potency for a male audience, including both the band on screen and the presumed male viewer of the video.¹³

But images of masculine display are available to be construed in a variety of ways. Gay heavy-metal fans sometimes celebrate forthrightly the

homoeroticism that is latent in such displays of exclusive masculine bonding. This can be seen, for example, in the activities of the Gay Metal Society, a social club of over 100 members, based in Chicago. In addition to sponsoring and organizing parties and nights out on the town for its members, GMS publishes a monthly newsletter, which contains commentary on the history, criticism and discography of heavy metal. The GMS *Headbanger* also functions as a forum for debate of issues involving sexuality and music. Gay fans celebrate metal musicians whom they believe are gay, such as Judas Priest's Rob Halford, and confirm and contest each other's 'negotiated' readings of popular texts. They may see metal videos as erotic fantasies, while straight fans resist the homoerotic implications and insist on identification with the power and freedom depicted.¹⁴ Of course, straight fans must negotiate their readings, too. Some of Accept's lyrics are explicitly homosexual if studied closely; despite this, the band is quite popular among heterosexual, often homophobic, men. As with classical music, heterosexual and even homophobic audiences can negotiate their reception and find the constructions of gay composers powerfully meaningful.

Male bonding itself becomes crucial to the reception of metal that depends on masculine display, for it helps produce and sustain consensus about meaning. Exscripting texts do occasionally refer to sexuality, but typically as just another arena for enactments of male power. Mutual erotic pleasure rarely appears in the lyrics of heavy metal, just as it is seldom discussed by men in any other context. Metal shields men from the danger of pleasure – loss of control – but also enables display, sometimes evoking images of armoured, metallized male bodies that resemble the *Freikorps* fantasies analysed by Klaus Theweleit.¹⁵ The historical context and social location of these fantasies marks them as very different from heavy metal, but the writings and drawings of the German soldiers Theweleit studied evince a similar exscription of women, and a concomitant hardening and metallic sheathing of the male body as a defence against culturally-produced gender anxieties. Such images from heavy-metal lyrics and album cover art could be cited by the hundreds, in a tradition that goes back to one of the founding texts of heavy metal, Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* (1970), which included the song 'Iron man'.¹⁶

The seductive women who sometimes intrude into otherwise exscripting videos signify in several ways. First, these shots function just as they do in advertising: to trigger desire and credit it to the appeal of the main image. But the sexual excitement also serves as a reminder of why exscription is necessary: the greater the seductiveness of the female image, the greater its threat to masculine control. Moreover, the presence of women as sex objects stabilizes the potentially troubling homoeroticism suggested by the male display. I will have more to say about the anxieties produced by homoerotic display in my discussion of androgyny below. There are, however, many videos which attempt to manage gender anxieties more overtly, through direct representations of women.

THE KISS OF DEATH: MISOGYNY AND THE MALE VICTIM

Blatant abuse of women is uncommon in metal videos. There are unequivocal exceptions, such as the brutal stage shows of W.A.S.P., or the forthrightly misogynistic lyrics in some of the music of Guns N' Roses and Mötley Crüe. But despite heavy metal's notorious reputation among outsiders, few heavy-metal videos have ever approached the degree of narcissistic misogyny routinely displayed by, for example, pop star Michael Jackson (e.g., his videos for 'Dirty Diana', or 'The way you make me feel'). If the exscripting music of Judas Priest or AC/DC conflates power and eroticism, making pleasure contingent upon dominance, many of heavy metal's critics have similarly confused the issue. Tipper Gore, for example, makes it clear that she considers rape and masturbation equal threats to 'morality'. And William Graebner has offered an analysis of 'the erotic and destructive' in rock music that too often fails to distinguish between the two themes.¹⁷ But articulations of gender relations in contemporary patriarchy are complex, and if constructions of sexuality in popular music are to be understood, their relationship to structures of power and dominance must be delineated, not crudely presumed.

Like heavy metal, sexually explicit films have an undeserved reputation for physical violence, according to a recent historical study of hard-core pornographic films. Building on the observation that sex is more shocking than violence in the United States, Joseph W. Slade explains the rampant violence in 'legit' films as a result of prohibitions of dealing with eroticism. Violence is often used as a metaphor for passion, Slade maintains, in discourses where explicit depiction of sexual activity is banned. In X-rated films, on the other hand, where representation of sex is not only permissible but primary, power relations are articulated through sexual relations rather than violence. The central purpose of pornography, Slade summarizes, has been 'to assuage male anxieties about the sexuality of females'.¹⁸ Male authority is characteristically made secure through porn because that authority is represented as being founded in love: women are seen to submit themselves voluntarily and gladly, and force is unnecessary.

While non-violent fantasies of dominance might be, for some, no less repugnant than blatant misogyny, it is important to recognize that they are different. As is typical of hegemonic constructions, overt force is not only unnecessary in pornography, but it would be disruptive of a representation that depends on presenting itself as natural and uncoerced. Heavy metal too relies much less on physical violence against women than on a number of more hegemonic representations. Because metal has developed discourses of male victimization, exscription and androgyny, its power to reproduce or adapt patriarchy is often contingent on the absence of overt violence. Although some of these discourses embody challenges to or transformations of hegemonic ideology, some reproduce rather directly the hegemonic strategies of control and repression of women that pervade Western culture.

For example, there is the strategy of confronting the 'threat' head-on: one of the more successful representations of women in metal is the *femme fatale*. Such images are quite popular, from Mötley Crüe's 'Looks that kill' to Whitesnake's 'Still of the night', but the metal band Dokken could be said to have specialized in such constructions, embedded in narratives of male victimization. Many of their best-known songs enact the same basic story of the male entrapped, betrayed or destroyed by the female: 'Heaven sent', 'Prisoner (chained by love)', 'Just got lucky', 'Into the fire' and 'Kiss of death'.¹⁹ Dokken's success with this formula was enabled by two of the band's particular assets: singer Don Dokken's voice and face are clean and soulful, the perfect complement to his tragic, self-pitying lyrics; and guitarist George Lynch is a powerful rhetorician whose solos and fills demonstrate a perhaps unmatched command of the semiotics of frantic but futile struggle.

Dokken's 'Heaven sent' (1987) is reminiscent of nineteenth-century operatic constructions such as Salome and Carmen in the way it locates women at a nexus of pleasure and dread.²⁰ Dokken sings of a woman who is simultaneously angel and witch, temptress and terror. A slim young woman in the video appears inexplicably, metamorphosed from a much heavier and older woman. She never speaks, but walks alone through the night, sometimes in black mini-skirt and leather, sometimes in a flowing white gown, holding a candelabra; she is followed by a rushing, tipping camera until she mysteriously dissolves. Jump-cuts and shifts in point of view fragment the video, but the decentering and transformations are precisely the point: the boys in the band, first seen playing chess in a bar (in an unlikely portrait of innocence), wind up doing their onstage posturing in a graveyard, to the tune of their own victimization. Of course, the woman in the video never actually does anything threatening; it is enough that she exists. Women are presented as essentially mysterious and dangerous; they harm simply by being, for their attractiveness threatens to disrupt both male self-control and the collective strength of male bonding.

Musically, 'Heaven sent' constructs this victimization through images of constraint and struggle. The song opens with the repetition of a pair of open fifths, a whole step apart. But the fifths are not the usual power chords – they lack sufficient sustain and distortion. Instead, they sound haunting and ominous, and their syncopation and sparseness give them an anticipatory air, in contrast to the rhythmic control and driving energy of the rest of the song (and of most other metal songs). Once the song gets under way, the rhythm is inexorable and precise, in that articulation of power and control that is one of the primary musical characteristics of heavy metal. In tension with the rhythmic stability, though, are the sudden and unexpected harmonic shifts that articulate 'Heaven sent' formally. Like the jump-cuts in the video, these key changes are initially disorienting; but since the song stays in its gloomy Aeolian/Dorian mode throughout, each new section is affectively felt as the

same scene, however distant harmonically – just as the various manifestations of 'woman' in the video are linked by an aura of mystery and dread.

The guitar solo, often the site of a virtuosic transcendence of a metal song's constructions of power and control, is in 'Heaven sent' a veritable catalogue of the musical semiotics of doom. As with 'ground bass' patterns in seventeenth-century opera, the harmonic pattern uses cyclicism to suggest fatefulness; as in certain of Bach's keyboard pieces, the virtuoso responds to the threat of breakdown with irrational, frenzied chromatic patterns.²¹ The guitar solo is an articulation of frantic terror, made all the more effective by its technical impressiveness and its imitations of vocal sounds such as screams and moans. After the solo, the song's chorus intensifies these images through ellipsis: seven measures long instead of the normal, balanced eight, the pattern cycles fatalistically, without rest or resolution.

Visual images, narrative and the music itself combine in this video to represent women as threats to male control and even male survival. The mysteriousness of women confirms them as a dangerous Other, and their allure is an index of the threat.²² Female fans, who now make up half the audience of heavy metal (though only a very small fraction of metal musicians are women), are invited to identify with the powerful position that is thus constructed for them; it is a familiar one, since women are encouraged by a variety of cultural means to think of appearance as their natural route to empowerment. Men, on the other hand, are reassured by such representations that patriarchal control is justified and necessary. Such constructions are by no means to be found only in heavy metal, of course; not only do they belong to a long and esteemed tradition of Western cultural history, but their success in the 1980s has been widespread in a political context marked by reactionary governmental policies and a significant backlash against feminism. It is crucial to recognize that heavy metal itself, then, is not the aberrant 'Other' that many conservative critics would have it be. The sexual politics of heavy metal are a conflicted mixture of confirmation and, as we will see, contradiction of dominant myths about gender.

LIVING ON A PRAYER: ROMANCE

Heavy metal changed a great deal in the last half of the 1980s, and one particular album of 1986 is a good register of the shift, as well as a major factor in precipitating it. With *Slippery When Wet*, one of the biggest-selling hard-rock albums of all time (over 13 million copies), Bon Jovi managed to combine the power and freedom offered by metal with the constructed 'authenticity' of rock and, most important, the romantic sincerity of a long tradition of pop. Though Bon Jovi offered typical experiences of the heavy-metal dialectic of absolute control and transcendent freedom in a performative context of male bonding, lead singer Jon Bon Jovi also projected a kind of sincerity and romantic vulnerability that had enormous appeal for female fans. It is this

discursive fusion that enabled the band's Top 40 success, and which helped spark the unprecedented entry of much heavy metal and metal-influenced music into the Top 40 of the late 1980s.

Bon Jovi was certainly not the first to achieve this fusion; bands like Van Halen, Boston, Journey, Foreigner, Loverboy and others were engaged in similar projects some time before. But Bon Jovi's music was a phenomenal success, and it helped transform what had long been a mostly male subcultural genre into a much more popular style with a gender-balanced audience. The fusion was developed and managed very deliberately: once a standard leather/chains/eye-liner heavy-metal band, with lots of tragic, macho songs about running, shooting and falling down, the band sought to capture a wider audience for *Slippery When Wet*. The most obvious change was in the lyrics: abandoning heavy-metal gloom, doom and creepy mysticism, they began cultivating a positive, upbeat outlook, where the only mystical element was bourgeois love. Writing songs about romantic love and personal relationships, they tempered their heavy-metal sound and image and pitched their product to appeal as well as to a new female market.

There is still a lot of metal in Bon Jovi's music, although the question of his inclusion in the genre is vigorously contested among various factions of metal fans. Features of heavy metal are evident in the timbres and phrasing of both instruments and vocals, the emphasis on sustain, intensity and power, the fascination with the dark side of the daylight respectable world. But by not wearing makeup anymore, and by wearing jeans, not leather or spandex, Bon Jovi abandoned much of heavy metal's fantastic dimension in favour of signs of rock 'authenticity'. Moreover, from pop music the band got its constructed sincerity, just the right degree of prettiness, and a conscious appeal to a female audience. The sustained and intense sounds of heavy metal are channelled behind the romantic sincerity of pop, while smooth, sometimes poignant synthesizer sounds mediate the raw crunch of distorted guitars.

The biggest hit song from *Slippery When Wet* was 'Livin' on a prayer', which invites us to sympathize and identify with Tommy and Gina, a young couple who are good-hearted but down on their luck. Tommy, now out of work, is a union man, working-class, tough – but also tender, caring and musical. He used to make music, that is, until he had to hock his guitar; Tommy's loss of his capacity to make music is a sign of the couple's desperate circumstances. The lyrics of the song fall into three groups, each with a different sort of text and musical affect: the verses of the song tell the story of Tommy and Gina's troubles; the pre-choruses are resolutions not to give up, the pair's exhortations to each other about the power of love; and the choruses are Tommy's affirmation that such hope and faith in love is justified, that love really can transcend material problems.²³

The source of the song's main pleasures is its musical construction of romantic transcendence. As with most pop songs, the transcendent moment is the place in the chorus where the title hook is presented, where the affective

charge is highest: it is there, if ever, that we are convinced that Tommy and Gina *will* make it, that love *must* triumph over adverse social conditions, that bourgeois myths *can* survive even the despair of joblessness. Such affirmative stories have led to critical dismissal of Bon Jovi as fatuous rock 'perfect for the Reagan era'.²⁴ But such disparagements typically ignore gender as a site of political formation, and critical sneering does little to help us understand the tensions that are mediated by such a vastly popular song.

There are at least three ways of understanding how this sense of transcendence is constructed musically. First, and simplest, it is at this moment that the piece moves out of its minor key and into its relative major. Such a key change accomplishes a tremendous affective change, moving from what is conventionally perceived as the negativity or oppression of the minor key to the release and affirmation of the major. Experientially, we escape the mark that has contained us since the beginning of the song. Second, this moment in the chorus offers an escape from the C–D–E pattern that has been the only chord progression the song has used until this point, and which thus has seemed natural and inevitable, however cheerless.²⁵ 'Livin' on a prayer' breaks out of its gloomy treadmill at this point of transcendence, moving from C to D to G, not E. By breaking free of its oppressive minor tonality, and by doing so through a brand-new progression, the song leaps into an exciting new tonal area and constructs a transcended context for Tommy and Gina, and for the song's audience. To clinch it, a background group of voices joins in here to support Tommy's tough solo voice; the rest of the social world seems to join in this affirmation.

Finally, this new progression C–D–G has discursive significance. This pattern has been one of the most important formulas for establishing resolution and closure in Western music from Monteverdi to the 'Monster mash'; it is not, however, a common progression in heavy metal. The C–D–E progression upon which most of 'Livin' on a prayer' is built, on the other hand, is strongly associated with metal. Thus when 'Livin' on a prayer' reaches its moment of transcendence, the shift in affect is marked by the use of a different harmonic discourse. The transcendence is in part an escape from heavy metal itself, with all its evocation of gloominess, paranoia and rebellion. 'Livin' on a prayer' breaks away from the musical discourse of heavy metal at the point where it offers its bottom line: transcendence through romantic love. To offer such a payoff, it *must* break away from metal.

The success of the song depends on the contrast of and tension between two affective states: the Aeolian grunge of the beginning, which sets up the story of Tommy and Gina's hardship; and the transcendent change to G major in the chorus, which symbolically and phenomenologically resolves it. For most of the song, the grunge frames and contains the chorus. It seems more realistic, since it returns as though inevitable whenever Bon Jovi's fervent vocalizing stops. The utopian promise is thus made contingent on the singer's efforts. Only at the end of the song, where the chorus endlessly repeats through the

fade-out, does it seem that the transcendence might be maintained – and then only if the singer never ceases. At the same time that the magical power of romantic love, transcending material conditions, is being touted as the solution to what are in fact social problems, the Horatio Alger solution of hard individual work is also suggested. In the end the utopian moment wins out, keeping the realistic grunge at bay and even suggesting that the transcendent fantasy is more real. But all of this is possible only because Bon Jovi has created these realities: a bleak, resonant social landscape, the power of romantic love to offer transcendence, and a tough but sensitive male to make it work. The patriarchal premisses of Bon Jovi's fusion are clear.

Towards the end of the song the transcendent moment is kept fresh through a key change, up a half step. Not only does the pitch rise, creating an overall affective elevation, but it also forces Bon Jovi's voice higher, charging it with even more effortful sincerity and, since he meets the challenge successfully, utopian promise. Moreover, the key change is made to coincide with a dropped beat, so the music jumps forward suddenly, unexpectedly, onto this new, higher harmonic plateau. In the concert footage used in the video of 'Livin' on a prayer', Jon Bon Jovi sails out over the audience on a wire at precisely this moment, tripling the transcendent effect.

The rest of the video seems to have little to do with the song as I have analysed it. It consists mostly of grainy black-and-white footage of Jon and the band backstage and in rehearsal, without any visual connection to the romantic narrative of the song. Neither is it a typical performance video like the ones I discussed above, since more camera time is devoted to backstage and rehearsal scenes than to actual or even faked (synced) performance. Yet the video is closely connected to the music; the biggest visual gesture is the sudden switch to colour film and a live concert audience, which occurs two-thirds of the way through the song, precisely at the climactic moment of transcendence indicated by the song's chorus. The video marginalizes the literal narrative of the lyrics, in accordance with the way that typical heavy-metal videos cater to fans' enjoyment of live concerts. The transcendence constructed by the music, originally mapped onto the story of Tommy and Gina, has now become the transcendence available through Bon Jovi: the music, the concert and even the grainy black-and-white footage that purports to let the fan in on the behind-the-scenes lives of the musicians. What was framed by the lyrics as a moment of transcendence for a romantic, heterosexual couple, made possible by the male narrator, is now a celebration of the band members as objects of desire, and of the concert as an experience of collective pleasure. The 'Livin' on a prayer' video is less a romantic story than a spectacle of masculine posturing, and the musically-constructed transcendence of the song is linked to patriarchy through both narrative and visual pleasure.

It has been argued that the cinema has only recently begun to present the masculine as spectacle, in something like the way that women have been so

presented. This is in contrast to theorizations of earlier cinematographic practice, where women were typically presented as erotic objects of the male gaze, but representations of men functioned as embodiments of a powerful, ideal ego.²⁶ Such a development is of great interest, because the contradictions historically coded into representations of gender result in an almost androgynous glamour being attached to male objects of desire. Bon Jovi's image has been carefully managed so as to simultaneously maintain two different kinds of appeal to male and female fans. For example, the release order of singles from *Slippery When Wet* was carefully balanced between romantic and tougher songs, in order to sustain interest in the band from both genders.²⁷ But we will see more serious problems of managing desire in the face of gender blurring in a sub-genre of heavy metal distinguished by blatant visual androgyny.

NOTHING BUT A GOOD TIME? ANDROGYNY AS A POLITICAL PARTY

Androgyny in heavy metal is the adoption by male performers of the elements of appearance that have been associated with women's function as objects of the male gaze – the visual styles that connote, as Laura Mulvey put it, 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.²⁸ The members of bands like Poison or Mötley Crüe wear garish make-up, jewellery and stereotypically sexy clothes including fishnet stockings and scarves, and sport long, elaborate, 'feminine' hairstyles. Though they are normally included within the genre of heavy metal, such 'glam' bands are considered by most fans to be less 'heavy' than the mainstream. This is due less to musical differences than to their visual style, which is more flamboyant and androgynous than heavier metal.²⁹

Androgyny has a long history in music; I have already mentioned problems of gender and representation in Baroque opera. (And one could also mention the seventeenth-century castrati – perhaps the most dedicated androgynes in history.) Recent examples of male androgyny outside of heavy metal range from Liberace to Little Richard to Lou Reed, not to mention the androgynous glamour of many country-and-western stars.³⁰ Some of this history has faded through supercession: some thought the Beatles' hair, for example, threateningly androgynous in 1964. But in glam metal, androgyny has found popular success to a degree unique in the rock era. And it's a particular sort of androgyny; unlike the 1970s' great androgynous, David Bowie, heavy metal lacks ironic distance. It is this absence of irony more than anything else that leads rock critics to scorn glam metal, for the ridiculous seriousness of metal's gender constructions is at odds with the patriarchal premisses undergirding the ideologies and institutions of rock.

Poison is a good example of a successful glam-metal band: one that boasts millions of fans and no critical approval. 'Nothin' but a good time', from

Poison's multi-platinum album *Open Up and Say . . . Ah!* (1988), is shot almost entirely as a performance video, one that presents the band as though actually performing the song we hear. It includes, however, two framing scenes, which I will describe and discuss briefly before focusing on Poison's androgyny. The opening scene shows us a young man, with a metal fan's long hair, washing dishes in the back of a restaurant. He is swamped with work, surrounded by dirty plates and hot steam, and he is alone except for a small radio, which is playing a song by Kiss, the founders of spectacular metal. Next we meet his boss, loud and rude, who has stomped back to apply a verbal whip; he threatens and insults the dishwasher, flipping off the radio as he leaves. Disgusted and exhausted, the kid sullenly turns the radio back on as soon as the boss leaves. Then he kicks open a nearby door, as though to grab a bit of air before returning to the grind. When the door opens, we are instantly plunged into a Poison performance, taking place just outside. 'Nothin' but a good time' begins with that door-opening kick, and while it lasts, the framing narrative is suspended; we don't see the dishes, the washer or the boss until the song is over. Afterwards, we are returned to the same scene as at the beginning. Having heard the music, the boss storms back into the frame to lash again at the kid; he suddenly notices, however (at the same time that we notice it), that all the dishes, miraculously, are clean. Confounded, he sputters and withdraws, as the dishwasher relaxes and smiles.

The framing scenes of this video call to mind cultural critics' debates about class and resistance in popular culture. The issue is whether or not popular narratives such as that presented by this song and video contain any oppositional potential or critical perspective, whether they offer viewers anything more than an experience of rebellion that is ultimately illusory and inconsequential. We must be wary of simply dismissing such 'unreal' resolutions of real social antagonisms; as Fredric Jameson has argued, although mass culture has conservative functions, though it commonly arouses utopian hopes but perpetuates their containment within hegemonic social forms, the very representation of social fantasies is risky, and maintenance of dominant ideologies is never complete.³¹ However, the overt political lesson of the video's framing narrative may be far less important than the implications of the band's visual and musical styles for notions of authenticity and gender. 'Nothin' but a good time' can serve as an example of those subcultural challenges to hegemony which, as Dick Hebdige has argued, are not issued directly, but rather are 'expressed obliquely, in style'.³²

In the 'Nothin' but a good time' video, the song itself is framed as a fantastic experience. Reality is the world of the frame, the world of work, steam, sweat and abuse; as in *The Wizard of Oz*, the real world is shot in muted colour so as to enable the fantasy to seem more real. When the dishwasher kicks open the door, Poison explodes in colour and musical sound, and the real world, the one which supposedly includes the fantasy, vanishes; the fantasy takes over as a more real reality. Even the dishwasher himself disappears for the duration of

the song, in a kind of dissolution of the ego in the flux of musical pleasure. This fantasy is credited with magical agency as well: at the end of the song, we are returned to grey reality to find the dishes done, the impossible task fulfilled. The boss's torrent of abuse is plugged; something has been put over on him, though he can't say what or how.

When combined with the song's lyrics, the video's message seems fairly simple self-promotion: the good time being sung about is something that can be accessed through Poison's music, no matter what the 'real' conditions. As with many TV advertisements, Poison's fantasy is represented as more real than mundane reality, and the fantasy is to be enjoyed through involvement with a commercial product. Such an appeal, though, must evoke our desires for community and for greater freedom and intensity of experience than are commonly available in the real world. Poison, like Pepsi, uses narrative and image to arouse these longings and then present us with a particular kind of consumption as the means of satisfying them.

But it would be a mistake to exaggerate the importance of the narrative framing of the song; however obvious the 'political' message of the framing narrative may seem, it may be far less important than the gender politics of the song and its performance. Debates over the liberatory possibilities of mass culture all too often proceed in terms that neglect the gendered character of all social experience. Yet popular music's politics are most effective in the realm of gender and sexuality, where pleasure, dance, the body, romance, power and subjectivity all meet with an affective charge. The significance of the musical section of the video may be overlooked because it seems to be simply a representation of a live performance, whereas the frame is more arbitrary, and thus presumably more meaningful. But it is the band's performance that is privileged visually, through colour, free movement and spectacle – and through the transgressive energies of male display and flamboyance. Most tellingly, it is the performance rather than the framing narrative that benefits from the affective invigoration of the music. If the framing scenes address labour relations, they do so in a rather flat, pedantic way. It is the video of the song itself that deals with the issues of greatest importance to metal fans: the power, freedom, transcendence and transgression that are articulated through fantastic, androgynous display. The young man we meet in the frame finds his release from drudgery in Poison's spectacular androgyny.

Significantly, the video's 'live' performance of 'Nothin' but a good time' is neither live nor a real performance, but a constructed fantasy itself. The musicians undergo impossibly frequent and sudden changes of costume, without narrative explanation, through the invisible, extra-diegetic powers of editing. Along with similar metamorphoses of the guitar player's instrument, which is a different model and colour each time we see it, these unreal transformations contribute to the fantastic aura of the performance by offering an experience of freedom and plenitude. Moreover, there is no audience; the band 'performs' in an abstract space, a contextless setting for

pure spectacle. Such a location can serve as a 'free space' for Poison's play of real and unreal, authenticity and desire, and the ambiguous subversiveness of androgyny, supported by the energy of the music.

The lyrics of the song are fairly simple: they combine a lament about overwork with a celebration of partying. The music is similarly straightforward, built around a vigorous rock beat and standard power chords on the scale degrees I, ♭VII and IV. The musical mode is mixolydian, quite commonly used in pop-oriented hard rock or metal, as it combines the positive effect of the major third with the 'hard' semiotic value of the minor seventh.³³ 'Nothin' but a good time' derives much of its celebratory energy from the repeated suspension of the fourth-scale degree over this major third, and the conventional move to ♭VII adds to the song's rebellious or aggressive tone. The visual narrative and the musically-coded meanings are roughly parallel; the lyrics are supported by music that is energetic, rebellious and flamboyant.

But in 'Nothin' but a good time' we can also detect the association of androgynous visual styles with a particular set of musical characteristics. The song features compelling rhythmic patterns, it contains the requisite guitar solo, it utilizes the distorted timbres one would expect in the electric guitar and vocals of a metal song; in short, the song meets generic criteria in every way. It is, of course, successful music, deploying discursive potentials with skill and effectiveness. However, one would be hard pressed to find it very distinctive in any way; this is not especially innovative or imaginative music. Androgynous metal usually includes less emphasis on complexity and virtuosity than other styles of metal, and many arguments among fans are provoked by the collision of visual spectacle and transgression with metal's dominant aesthetic (masculine) valorization of sonic power, freedom and originality.

This alignment of androgynous spectacle with a musical discourse relatively lacking in sonic figurations of masculinity is crucial, for it signals the extent to which a linkage of 'feminine' semiotic instability with monolithic, phallic power is deemed impossible. To be sure, if the music of glam metal were separated from its visual context, it would still sound like hard rock. Compared to other kinds of popular music, glam rock is replete with constructions of masculine power. But within the context of heavy metal, glam metal's relative lack of virtuosity, complexity and originality are aural contributors to androgyny. Fans link visual signs of androgyny with an abdication of metal's usual virtuosic prowess. 'It seems like if you have the makeup you're thought of as less than a musician', complains Poison's guitarist C. C. Deville. 'It seems because of the image we can't get past that hurdle. Now we try to stay away from the glam thing. When we first came out we were a little extreme.'³⁴

Indeed, I was quite surprised when I attended a Poison concert and discovered that their drummer, Rikki Rockett, was actually an excellent musician whose featured solo was marked by sophisticated polyrhythms and

rhetorical intelligence. I was surprised by this because his playing on Poison's recordings had always been extremely simple, however accurate and appropriate. But Poison's simplicity is constructed, like that of much American popular music throughout its history. From Stephen Foster to Madonna (not to mention Aaron Copland), many musicians have used great skill to craft musical texts that communicate great simplicity. The musical construction of simplicity plays an important part in many kinds of ideological representations, from the depiction of pastoral refugees from modernity to constructions of race and gender. Poison succeeded in a genre dominated by virtuosity because their musical simplicity complemented their androgynous visual style and helped them forge a constituency. As Deville's comment indicates, the band now yearns to be respected musically as well, and though they have yet to make much progress towards this goal, they have drastically reduced the amount of make-up they wear, in pursuit of it.

'REAL MEN DON'T WEAR MAKE-UP'

In the case of bands such as Poison, we might understand androgyny as yet another tactic for dealing with the anxieties of masculinity. Androgynous musicians and fans appropriate the visual signs of feminine identity in order to claim the powers of spectacularity for themselves. But while it is certainly important to understand heavy metal androgyny as patriarchal, metal takes part in a rock 'n' roll tradition of Oedipal rebellion as well: the musical and visual codes of heavy metal may function to relieve anxieties about male power, but they are incompatible with the styles previous generations of men developed for doing the same thing. Teenage boys and young men chafe under patriarchal control even as women do, and boys often develop innovative ways of expressing control over women as simultaneous proof of their achievement of manhood and their rebellion against dominant men. This internal tension is never entirely manageable or predictable, and heavy metal transgresses against patriarchal control in ways that sometimes undermine, sometimes affirm, its tenets.³⁵

Musicians themselves may notice how the ambiguities of androgyny provoke compensatory strategies. Aerosmith's hit song and video 'Dude Looks Like a Lady' (1987) confronts the gender anxieties aroused by androgyny, airing the problem with a tone of mock hysteria. And singer David Lee Roth self-reflexively connects his enthusiasm for bodybuilding and martial arts training to his 'feminized' image on stage: 'A lot of what I do can be construed as feminine. My face, or the way I dance, or the way I dress myself for stage. . . . But to prove it to myself, to establish this [his masculinity], I had to build myself physically. I had to learn to fight'.³⁵

Roth's private regimen allows him to go on being androgynous in public. His personal anxieties about masculinity are shaped by conventional patriarchy, yet the attraction of androgynous transgression is also strong.

Among the most leering of rock's lyricists, Roth seems neither personally nor artistically to have resisted sexist objectification of women, as is attested by his notorious paternity insurance policy, or the video for his swaggering remake of the Beach Boys' 'California girls'. Yet Roth has also publicly criticized the sexism of a society that discourages women from becoming professional musicians:

What if a little girl picked up a guitar and said 'I wanna be a rock star'. Nine times out of ten her parents would never allow her to do it. We don't have so many lead guitar women, not because women don't have the ability to play the instrument, but because they're kept locked up, taught to be something else. I don't appreciate that.³⁶

Roth's ideal of personal freedom is in conflict with the limitations of conventional gender definitions, though he doesn't grapple with the problem of how patriarchal power relations might be further strengthened by transgressions that rely on objectified representations of women.

In the journalism of heavy metal, the most heated debates are over 'authenticity', which often implicitly revolves around issues of gender and sexuality. Fans frequently write to the letters columns of metal magazines to denounce or defend glam-metal bands. Attackers label such musicians 'poseurs', implying either that the band is all image with no musical substance, or that they find androgyny fundamentally offensive, a perversion. As one female fan complained in a letter to a fan magazine, 'real men don't wear makeup'.³⁷ On the other side, defenders of glam metal are quick to respond, though they rarely defend androgyny *per se*:

This is to Kim of Cathedral City . . . who said that real men don't wear makeup. I have just one question: Do you actually listen to the music, or just spend hours staring at album covers? True, Metallica and Slayer kick f!lkin' ass and Megadeth rules – but Poison, Mötley Crüe and Hanoi Rocks f!lkin' jam too.³⁸

Unwilling to discuss gender constructions directly, or lacking cultural precedents for doing so, fans usually defend the musical abilities of the band's members or argue for the intensity of experience provided by the group. But they may also respect the courage that is required of those who disrupt the symbolic order through androgyny, those who claim social space by having 'the guts to be glam'.³⁹

Male fans of 'harder' styles of heavy metal are often frantic in their denunciations of androgyny, seeing in it a subversion of male heterosexual privilege and linking it to the threat of homosexuality. On the cover of an album by MX Machine (*Manic Panic*, 1988), a picture of a grimacing boy with his fist in the air is accompanied by a sticker proclaiming 'No Glam Fags! All Metal! No Makeup!' Both homosexuality and symbolic crossing of gender boundaries threaten patriarchal control, and they are thus conflated in the

service of a rhetoric which strives to maintain difference and power. Musicians who wear make-up often compensate in private for their transgressions with homophobic banter, insulting each other in order to call masculinity into question and provide an opportunity for collective affirmation of heterosexuality.⁴⁰ An interview with Charlie Benante, drummer in the thrash-metal band Anthrax, confirms that even instruments themselves are conventionally gender-coded, and that the use of a feminine-coded instrument in the context of heavy metal evokes the spectre of homosexuality. When an interviewer asked, 'Would you ever consider using keyboards as a major part of the song?' Benante replied, 'That is gay. The only band that ever used keyboards that was good was UFO. This is a guitar band. . . .'⁴¹

However, since many glam-metal performers appeal in particular to young women, an analysis of heavy metal that understands it only as a reproduction of male hegemony runs the risk of duplicating the excription it describes. Heavy-metal androgyny presents, from the point of view of women, a fusion of the signs specific to current notions of femininity with musically- and theatrically-produced power and freedom that are conventionally male. Colourful make-up; elaborate, ostentatious clothes; hair that is unhandily long and laboriously styled – these are the excessive signs of one gender's role as spectacle. But on stage in a metal show, these signs are invested with the power and glory normally reserved to patriarchy. As usual, women are offered male subject positions as a condition of their participation in empowerment; but the men with which they are to identify have been transformed by their appropriations of women's signs. In their bid for greater transgression and spectacularity, the men on stage elevate important components of many women's sense of gendered identity, fusing cultural representations of male power and female erotic surface. At the symbolic level, prestige – male presence, gesture, musical power – is conferred upon 'female' signs which, because they mark gender difference and are used to attract and manipulate, adolescent men pretend are trivial but take very seriously.

Feminist scholars have long been concerned with investigating the gendered aspects of the relationship of symbolic and political orders, and the long-standing linkage of women with ephemeral spectacle is highly relevant to metal videos. Kaja Silverman has pointed out that the instability of female fashion has historically marked women as unstable, while male sartorial conservatism represents the stable and timeless alignment of men with the symbolic and social orders.⁴² Heavy-metal androgyny challenges this 'natural' alignment, drawing on the power of musical and visual pleasures. It is true that there is no inherent link between subversive textual practices and subversive politics, but the relationships I have delineated among the lyrics, music, images, fans, musicians and ideologies of heavy metal, particularly with respect to gender, are intended to make the case for a conventional link.⁴³ Glam metal has prompted a great deal of thought and discussion about gender by demonstrating, even celebrating, the mutability of gender, by revealing the

potential instability of the semiotic or symbolic realms that support current gender configurations. In some ways, heavy metal reflects the impact of what Jane Flax has called the greatest achievement of feminist theory, the problematization of gender.⁴⁴

Metal replicates the dominant sexism of contemporary society, but it also allows a kind of free space to be opened up by and for certain women, performers and fans alike. Female fans identify with a kind of power that is usually understood in our culture as male – because physical power, dominance, rebellion and flirting with the dark side of life are all culturally designated as male prerogatives. Yet women are able to access this power because it is channelled through a medium – music – that is intangible and difficult to police. Female performers of heavy metal can become enabled to produce and control very powerful sounds, if they meet other genre requirements and acquiesce in the physical display that is so sexist and widespread in society generally, but which may in fact seem less so in metal, where men similarly display themselves.⁴⁵ Thus when metal guitarist and singer Lita Ford brags 'I wear my balls on my chest', she combines her seemingly inevitable status as an object of sexual spectacle with her metallic stature as an object embodying the spectacle of power.⁴⁶

Women's reception of these spectacles is complex, and female performers of heavy metal may be advancing provocative arguments about the nature and limits of female claims to power. I have observed and interviewed female fans who dress, act and interpret just like male fans, for example, particularly at concerts of bands like Metallica – bands which avoid references to gender in their lyrics, dealing instead with experiences of alienation, fear and empowerment that may cut across gender lines. Elements of rock music that had been coded as masculine, such as heavy beats, are negotiable, in so far as female fans are willing to step outside of traditional constrictions of gender identity.⁴⁷ It may well be, then, that the participation of female metal fans reflects the influence that feminism has had in naturalizing, to a great extent, the empowerment of women. Even in the 1970s, fewer women would have been comfortable identifying with power, when power was more rigidly coded as male. The choice was between being powerful and being a woman, a dichotomy which has since eroded somewhat.

But female fans also maintain their own distinctive modes of engagement with heavy metal, including practices which are often too quickly dismissed as degrading adoration. Sue Wise has argued that the young women who screamed and swooned over Elvis were not so much worshipping him, as so many male rock critics have assumed, as *using* him. Instead of a subject who caused his helpless fans to go into frenzies, Elvis was for many women an object, by means of which they explored their own desires and formed friendships.⁴⁸ Similarly, many female heavy-metal fans take great pleasure in collecting, owning and looking at pictures of male heavy-metal musicians. Predictably, male fans tend to be scornful of the pin-up magazines and their

devotees.⁴⁹ But the enthusiasm of young women for glam styles of heavy metal is not simply an example of masochistic submission to male idols. Such spectacle also infuses with power the signs of women's hegemonically constructed gender identity, offers visual pleasures seldom available to women, and provides them with opportunities to form their own subsets of the fan community.

The channelling of so much masculine prestige through feminine forms thus represents a risky sexual politics, one that is open to several interpretations. Heavy metal's androgyny can be very disturbing, not only because the conventional signs of female passivity and objectification are made dynamic, assertive, transgressive, but also because hegemonic gender boundaries are blurred and the 'natural' exclusiveness of heterosexual male power comes into question.⁵⁰ For all its rhetoric of male supremacy – phallic imagery, macho posturing, the musical semiotics of male power – metal's rebellion and fantastic play offer its fans, both male and female, opportunities to make common cause against certain kinds of oppression, even as the same texts may enable each gender to resolve particular anxieties in very different ways. The level of discussion of gender among heavy-metal fans is impressive, in statements that reflect their awareness of the mutability of gender roles and other cultural constructions. Practically every issue of the fan magazine *RIP* in 1989 contained letters from fans protesting sexism, racism and even homophobia.⁵¹ Glam metal fostered greater perception of the conventionality of gender roles, and thus helped lead to greater participation in metal by women, and to debates over gender stereotypes, masculinity, behaviour and access to power.

Androgyny offers male performers (and vicariously, male fans) the chance to play with colour, movement, flamboyance and artifice, which can be a tremendous relief from the rigidity expected of them as men. Philip Gordon argues that singer Dee Snider 'grew his hair and wore women's clothes and make-up, not merely to assert a difference between himself and his parents (as if any sign of difference would be equally effective), but as a carefully constructed style signifying attractiveness, energy and opposition to authoritative restrictions on particular pleasures.'⁵²

Critics have not generally understood glam metal in this way. E. Ann Kaplan denies any significance to heavy metal's gender politics: 'Unlike the genuine Bakhtinian carnival, the protest remains superficial: mere play with oppositional signifiers rather than a protest that emerges from a powerful class and community base.'⁵³ But Kaplan can make such a statement only because she made no efforts to discover anything about the 'class and community base' of heavy metal. There is nothing superficial about such play; fans and musicians do their most important 'identity work' when they participate in the formations of gender and power that constitute heavy metal. Metal is a fantastic genre, but it is one in which real social needs and desires are addressed and temporarily resolved in unreal ways. These unreal solutions are

attractive and effective precisely because they seem to step outside the normal social categories that construct the conflicts in the first place.

Like many other social groups, metal musicians and fans play off different possibilities available to them from mainstream culture, at the same time that they draw upon the facts of a social situation that is not mainstream. Androgynous metal's bricolage of male power and female spectacle, and its play of real and unreal, are complex responses to crucial social contradictions which its fans have inherited. Heavy metal's fantastic representations clash with the visions of many other social groups in the cultural competition to define social reality, and like the tensions to which they are a response, metal's fantasies are themselves richly conflicted. If male heavy-metal fans and musicians sometimes assert masculinity by co-opting femininity, what they achieve is not necessarily the same kind of masculinity that they sought, as the conflicting demands of masculinity and rebellion are mediated through new models, and the free play of androgynous fantasy shakes up the underlying categories that structure social experience.

However, androgyny is by no means a purely utopian sign. Capitalism, after all, feeds on novelty as a spur to consumption, and mass culture may colonize existing tensions and ambiguities for consumer purposes rather than to prefigure new realities. As Fred Pfeil points out, mass audiences are increasingly offered 'scandalously ambivalent pleasure', and the same 'de-Oedipalization' of American middle-class life that makes androgyny possible, attractive and thrilling can also block further development towards new collective social forms, beyond fragmentation.⁵⁴ Moreover, postmodern cultural 'decentring' can serve capitalism by playing to sensual gratification in ways that deflect people from making the connections that might enable critique.

But postmodern disruptions also open up new possibilities and enable new connections and formulations to be made by delegitimizing conceptual obstacles; androgynous metal's defamiliarization of social categories that are still thought normative by many must be given its due. Poison's music and images reflect a concern with shifting boundaries of gender and reality that cannot simply be disregarded as nothing but inauthentic or commodified fantasies. For such fantasies are exercises in semiotic power, offering challenges at both the level of what representations are made and who gets to make them. Dismissing fantasy and escapism 'avoids the vital questions of *what* is escaped from, *why* escape is necessary, and *what* is escaped to.⁵⁵

Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie ended their early theorization of rock and sexuality with what they saw as a 'nagging' question: 'Can rock be nonsexist?'⁵⁶ The obvious answer would seem to be 'no', for there is no way to step outside the history of a discourse, and Frith and McRobbie's question begs for a kind of music that is recognizably – that is, discursively – rock, but which does not participate in the sexism that rock has articulated. Rock can never be gender-neutral, because rock music is only intelligible in its historical

and discursive contexts. Rock can, however, be anti-sexist; instead of dreaming of a kind of music that might be both 'rock' and 'nonsexist', we can spot many extant examples of rock music that use the powerful codings of gender available in order to engage with, challenge, disrupt or transform not only rock's representations of gender, but also the beliefs and material practices with which those representations engage. The point of criticism should not be to decide whether rock music is oppositional or co-optive, with respect to gender, class or any other social category, but rather to analyse how it arbitrates tensions between opposition and co-optation at particular historical moments.⁵⁷

I have ranged widely within heavy metal in this paper, turning to a number of very different bands, and to various visual and musical strategies for dealing with the contradictions inherent in the gender roles in the 1980s. The range of examples is necessary, I think, in order to demonstrate that heavy metal as a genre includes a great variety of gender constructions, contradictory negotiations with dominant ideologies of gender that are invisible if one is persuaded by metal's critics that the whole enterprise is a monolithic symptom of adolescent maladjustment. In fact, it is those most responsible for the very conditions with which metal musicians and fans struggle – the contradictory demands of subordination and socialization, of 'masculine' aggressiveness and communal harmony, the possibilities of transcendent pleasure and street pain – who insist on reading this music as impoverished and debased 'entertainment'.⁵⁸

Heavy metal, like virtually all cultural practices, is continually in a flux, driven by its own constitutive contradictions. Patriarchy and capitalism form the crucible, but human experience can never be wholly contained within such a vessel: there are aspects of social life that escape the organization of one or the other; there are also aspects organized in contradictory ways by the pair. Culture cannot transcend its material context, but culture very often transcends hegemonic definitions of its context: heavy metal perpetuates some of the worst images and ideals of patriarchy at the same time that it stands as an example of the kinds of imaginative transformations and rebuttals people produce from within such oppressive systems. Masculinity is forged whenever it is hammered out anew through the negotiations of men and women with the contradictory positions available to them in such contexts. It is also forged because masculinity is passed like a bad cheque, as a promise that is never kept. Masculinity will always be forged because it is a social construction, not a set of abstract qualities but something defined through the actions and power relations of men and women – because, with or without make-up, there are no 'real men'.⁵⁸

NOTES

1 Guy Debord (1983) *Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit: Black & Red, \$4.

- 2 See Susan McClary (1991) 'Constructions of gender in Monteverdi's dramatic music', in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, Sexuality*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 35–52.
- 3 John Fiske (1987) *Television Culture*, New York: Methuen, p. 202. See also Fiske (1987) 'British cultural studies and television', in *Channels of Discourse*, Robert C. Allen, (ed.) Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, pp. 254–89.
- 4 See Arthur Brittan (1989) *Masculinity and Power*, New York: Basil Blackwell, especially pp. 36–41.
- 5 Deena Weinstein (1991) believes that heavy metal 'celebrates the very qualities that boys must sacrifice in order to become adult members of society'; see her *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology*, New York: Lexington Books, p. 105. I argue the opposite of this: that the same patriarchal ideals are largely held in common by 'boys' and 'adult members of society'.
- 6 Heavy metal engages with many other social formations and historical tensions than those subsumable under 'gender'. For more comprehensive musical and social analysis of heavy metal, see my forthcoming book, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Hanover, New England: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.
- 7 E. Ann Kaplan (1987) *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture*, New York: Methuen.
- 8 Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, p. 107.
- 9 Laura Mulvey (1985) 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, Bill Nichols (ed.), Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 308.
- 10 For a full discussion of this point, see Susan McClary, 'Introduction: a material girl in Bluebeard's castle', in *Feminine Endings*, pp. 3–34.
- 11 See Barbara Ehrenreich (1990) *The Worst Years of Our Lives*, New York: Pantheon, pp. 251–7. It is crucial to recognize that excription is not subcultural deviance but a mainstream ideological convention. Daniel Patrick Moynihan once proposed that 'character defects' of young black men be solved by removing them to a 'world without women' in the military. Adolph Reed Jr and Julian Bond (1991) 'Equality: why we can't wait', *The Nation*, 9 December, p. 733.
- 12 Fiske, 'British cultural studies', p. 263. Fiske properly discusses the links between such a concept of masculinity and its context of patriarchal capitalism.
- 13 Of course, some women also find such images attractive, as I will discuss below. But the point is that 'the social definition of men as holders of power is translated not only into mental body images and fantasies, but into muscle tensions, posture, the feel and texture of the body' (not to mention the music). R. W. Connell (1987) *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*, Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, p. 85.
- 14 When I first started studying metal, a friend and I discovered we were reading a Judas Priest concert film in these two very different ways. Occasionally, the 'threat' (for straight men) of homoeroticism is addressed directly, as by metal star Ted Nugent, who remarking during a concert, 'I like my boys in the band, as long as they don't fucking touch me.' On the theory of 'negotiated' readings of popular texts, see Horace M. Newcomb (1984) 'On the dialogic aspects of mass communication', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1, pp. 34–50.
- 15 Klaus Theweleit (1989) *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 16 For example, many Judas Priest songs, such as 'Hard as iron' and 'Heavy metal', from *Ram It Down*, and the album cover art from *Ram It Down*, *Screaming For Vengeance* and *Defenders of the Faith*.
- 17 Tipper Gore (1987) *Raising PG Kids in an X-rated Society*, Nashville: Abingdon

- Press, pp. 17–18. William Graebner (1988) 'The erotic and destructive in 1980 rock music: a theoretical and historical analysis', *Tracking: Popular Music Studies*, 1 (2), 8–20.
- 18 Joseph W. Slade (1984) 'Violence in the pornographic film: a historical survey' *Journal of Communication*, 34 (3), 153. See also Linda Williams (1989) *Hard Core Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 19 All from the album *Back for the Attack* (1987); further examples of this type of song can also be found on earlier Dokken albums, such as *Tooth and Nail* (1984) 'Looks that kill' is from Mötley Crüe's *Shout at the Devil* (1983); 'Still of the night is on Whitesnake's *Whitesnake* (1987).
- 20 On this reading of the presentation of women in nineteenth-century opera, see Catherine Clément (1988) *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 21 See, for example, the E Minor Partita; or see Susan McClary's (1987) analysis of the Brandenburg Concerto No. 5: 'The blasphemy of talking politics during Bach's year', in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 13–62. As I have argued elsewhere, such comparisons are neither arbitrary nor coincidental: album liner credits, published interviews with musicians and the musical analyses in guitarists' trade journals all make explicit the relation of Baroque musical discourse to that of heavy metal, a relationship resulting from the continuing circulation of classical music in contemporary culture, and metal guitarists' conscious and meticulous study. See Robert Walser (1992) 'Eruptions: heavy metal appropriations of classical virtuosity', *Popular Music* 11 (3), 263–308.
- 22 In a stunning projection of violence onto the victim, the lyrics of 'Midnight maniac' by Krokus (*The Blitz*, 1984), warn of a female sex maniac creeping about at night, breaking in and killing; the singer evokes the terror of the presumably male victim.
- 23 I have written elsewhere about the musical organization of this song; see Robert Walser (1989) 'Bon Jovi's alloy: discursive fusion in Top 40 pop music' *OneTwoThreeFour*, 7, 7–19.
- 24 Rob Tannenbaum (1989) 'Bon voyage', *Rolling Stone*, 9 February, pp. 52–8, 132–3.
- 25 This distinctive harmonic progression is more fully discussed in Chapters Two and Three of *Running with the Devil*.
- 26 See Steven Neale (1983) 'Masculinity as spectacle: reflections on men and mainstream cinema', *Screen*, November–December, 24 (6), 2–16; and Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'.
- 27 Susan Orleans (1987) 'The kids are all right', *Rolling Stone*, 21 May, pp. 34–8, 108–11.
- 28 Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', p. 309.
- 29 See the album cover photos in Poison's *Open Up and Say . . . Ahh!* and the even more androgynous look on their first album, *Look What the Cat Dragged In*. See Mötley Crüe's photos on the albums *Shout at the Devil*, *Theatre of Pain and Girls*, *Girls*, *Girls*. Such images fill the pages of metal fan magazines like *Hit Parade*, *Metal Mania*, *Faces*, *Metal Edge* and *RIP*.
- 30 See Steven Simels (1985) *Gender Chameleons: Androgyny in Rock'n'Roll*, New York: Timbre Books. In 1987 the same costume designer was employed by both Liberace and the metal band W.A.S.P.; see Anne M. Raso (1987) 'Video: behind the reel', *Rock Scene*, July, p. 68.

- 31 Fredric Jameson (1979) 'Reification and utopia in mass culture', *Social Text*, 1 (1), 130-48.
- 32 Dick Hebdige (1979) *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style*, New York: Methuen, p. 17.
- 33 For explanations of the affective character of the various musical modes and their self-conscious deployment by heavy-metal musicians, see *Running with the Devil*, especially Chapters Two and Three.
- 34 John Stix (1989) 'Ready or not', *Guitar for the Practicing Musician*, March, p. 56.
- 35 Roberta Smoodin (1986) 'Crazy like David Lee Roth', *Playgirl*, August, p. 43.
- 36 Dave Marsh (ed.) (1985) *The First Rock & Roll Confidential Report*, New York: Pantheon, p. 165.
- 37 Kim of Cathedral City (1989) *RIP*, February, p. 6.
- 38 Ray R., Winter Springs, Florida (1989) *RIP*, May, p. 6.
- 39 Interview with Scott, 30 June 1989, St Paul, Minnesota.
- 40 Besides observing this behaviour among members of various bands, I discussed it openly with musicians during two interviews. Such behaviour is equally widespread among orchestral musicians; indeed, it occurs whenever men transgress against hegemonic norms of masculinity by acting expressive, sensitive or spectacular.
- 41 George Sulmers (1987) 'Anthrax: metal's most diseased band', *The Best of Metal Mania* #2, p. 24.
- 42 Kaja Silverman (1986) 'Fragments of a fashionable discourse', in *Studies in Entertainment*, Tania Modleski (ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 139-52.
- 43 For a critical view of this position, see Rita Felski (1989) *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Felski's criticism of avant-garde strategies of textual disruption as political action rests on her perception of a conflation of gender and class: avant-garde art is as elitist as anything it might challenge. It is worth noting that the same problem hardly exists with heavy metal.
- 44 See Jane Flax (1990) 'Postmodernism and gender relations in feminist theory', in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism*, New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, pp. 39-62.
- 45 Pat Benatar discusses the difficulty of creating her own hard-rock image: 'I never considered the character [I play] to be a sex symbol. I just was looking for extreme strength and self-assuredness... I listened to a lot of male-dominated groups like the Stones and Led Zeppelin. There weren't a lot of women around to emulate, no one female figure, so I took a shot in the dark and tried to figure out a way to do this without looking stupid and victimized.' Joe Smith (1988) *Off the Record*, New York: Warner Books, pp. 406-7.
- 46 Laurel Fishman (1988) 'Lita Ford', *Metal*, May, pp. 36-8. One fan told me that she was contemptuous of Ford and other female metal musicians because they are 'stupid sex objects', but also that she saw some of the male musicians the same way. Interview with Rita, 30 June 1989.
- 47 For writings which focus on female reception of heavy metal and hard rock, see Daniel J. Hadley, (1991) 'Girls on Top': women and heavy metal', unpublished paper, Department of Communications, Concordia University, Montreal; and Lisa A. Lewis (1990) *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, especially pp. 149-71. Both Hadley and Lewis discuss the fanzine *Bitch*, wherein female heavy-metal fans debated the meanings of their own involvement with metal.
- 48 Sue Wise (1990) 'Sexing Elvis', in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (eds), *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, New York: Pantheon, pp. 390-8.

- 49 This was debated at length during an interview with Lisa, Tammy and Larry, 30 June 1989.
- 50 From her cross-cultural study of androgyny, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty asserts that the androgyne expresses 'conflict between one sex's need for and fear of the other, . . . primarily the male's need for and fear of the female'. She concludes: 'Dangling before us the sweet promise of equality and balance, symbiosis and mutuality, the androgyne, under closer analysis, often furnishes bitter testimony to conflict and aggression, tension and disequilibrium. . . . Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (1980) *Women, Androgynes, and other Mythical Beasts*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 331, 334.
- 51 See, for example, the letter from 'Hard rockin' and homosexual, Boston, Massachusetts', (1989) *RIP*, August, p. 5; and a letter decrying sexism in metal by a female musician in *RIP*, May, 1989, p. 5.
- 52 Philip Gordon (1989) 'Review of Tipper Gore's *Raising PG Kids in an X-rated Society* and Dee Snider's *Teenage Survival Guide*', *Popular Music*, 8 (1), January p. 122.
- 53 Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, p. 72.
- 54 Fred Pfeil (1988) 'Postmodernism as a "structure of feeling"', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 381-403.
- 55 Fiske, *Television Culture*, p. 317. Moreover, such explorations are not unique to capitalist societies, nor are they reducible to epiphenomena of commerciality. From his study of the music of the Venda people of South Africa, ethnomusicologist John Blacking learned that fantastic music is not an escape from reality; it is a creative exploration of reality, and of other possibilities. John Blacking (1973) *How Musical is Man?*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, p. 28.
- 56 Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie (1978/9) 'Rock and sexuality', *Screen Education*, 29.
- 57 See George Lipsitz (1990) *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 102.
- 58 I would like to thank Susan McClary, George Lipsitz, Wendy Kozol, Carolyn Krasnow, Andrew Goodwin and Diane Shoos for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and Metal Mark, Gary Thomas, Nancy Armstrong and many heavy-metal fans for illuminating conversations. For a fuller discussion of heavy-metal music and politics, see *Running with the Devil*.