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Michelle PHILLIPOV, *Death Metal and Music Criticism: Analysis at the Limits*

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L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

Michelle Phillipov, *Death Metal and Music Criticism: Analysis at the Limits*, Plymouth, Lexington Books, 2012.

MICHELLE PHILLIPOV provides two short books in one in *Death Metal and Music Criticism*. The first part surveys the general trajectory of popular music studies, pioneered as it was by the field of cultural studies, towards a politicized understanding of popular culture. Phillipov is critical of this trajectory, seeing it as a perspective which limits the questions one can ask of music and popular culture. In the second part, Phillipov eschews a politicized perspective, unpacking the pleasures and aesthetics of the genre of death metal to demonstrate that more nuanced and complex analysis can be carried out if political interpretations are not over-priorities. I found her critique of the field useful and illuminating; her analysis of death metal came across as a mixed success.

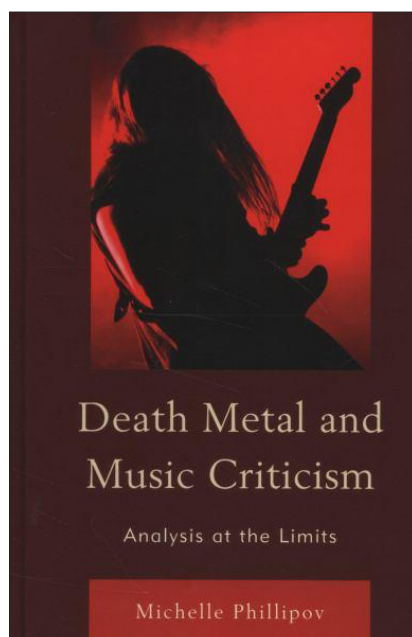
The introduction of the book lays out Phillipov's central problem: popular music studies privileges select genres like punk, hip hop, and electronic dance music because they provide easy examples of progressive, populist politics; in contrast, heavy metal is studied less frequently, and is often criticized for its reputed conservatism or for taking "vacuous" apolitical stance. Death metal, with its fantasies of murder, bodily destruction, and gore, is particularly difficult for scholars to interpret politically by the standards that work well for punk.

The first chapter discusses why popular music studies became preoccupied with political topics. The field's pioneering research came from British cultural studies, and the field's characteristically Marxian approach placed an emphasis on the capacity of popular culture to creatively resist hegemony on the part of the working classes. Phillipov chronicles the development of

subcultural theory and its more complex successor theories (scene, neo-tribe, post-subculture). Chapters two and three survey studies of punk, hip hop and electronic dance music, showing how the analysts' progressive political agendas shaped the critical descriptions of these genres in academic publications. Punk and hip hop provided easy narratives of subcultural protest and resistance; electronic dance music required postmodern theorizing to be recuperated as a progressive, potentially revolutionary musical style. In all cases, Phillipov points out how counter-evidence to the political meanings of these genres was under-reported, and that politics was sometimes less central than the analysts admit for the subcultures in question.

In chapter four, Phillipov surveys the academic literature on metal, and finds that most scholars see metal as a response to the social and economic stresses brought on by de-industrialization and neo-liberalism. However, most researchers find metal's response lacking: its emphasis on individualism, virtuosity, hedonism and heterosexual, male-centred normativity fails to arrive at any progressive or constructive responses to the crises of the working classes in the Anglo-American world. The growing field of global metal studies challenged the notion that metal's meaning is found simply in a white, male structural location, but, says Phillipov, this just divides metal into politically progressive "good" metal and the regressive, apolitical metal of the West.

The first half of the book is well researched, surveying a significant swath of literature and offering nuanced critique. Phillipov shows convincingly that the polit-



ical preferences of scholars played a significant role in the selection of popular music topics, and shaped their analysis. The book's second half analyzes death metal's aesthetics, beginning with the use of extremity and noise in the genre. She then tackles the uses of horror and gore in the genre. While some scholars argue that horror is used in metal to personify what society normally represses, Phillipov argues that it is consumed with a disinterested and unreflexive appreciation of the craft of depicting extreme violence.

Chapters seven and eight explore the work of the British death metal group Carcass and the US group Cannibal Corpse. The former group's graphic but playful descriptions of bodily destruction (disease,

surgery, putrefaction) and the latter's obsession with occult-based fantasies of murder and dismemberment are compared and contrasted. Both groups are used as examples of death metal's pre-occupation with the technical aspects of music and virtuosity; hence their complex song structures, inventive guitar solos, and so on. Phillipov suggests that the gory lyrics of the groups are appreciated on a similarly "technical" level of craft, creativity, and pushing of limits. Phillipov concludes that the pleasures of death metal are difficult to reconcile with conventional discussions of politics, and that it is even unethical to push a political agenda on to the study of a genre like death metal. It is better, she says, to "think with" the aesthetics of genre before proclaiming what its music and fandom means.

I generally concur with Phillipov's conclusion, and agree that accounting for insiders' musical experiences is important, however messy a picture it produces. I appreciate Phillipov's willingness to ask blatantly if our field has become over-politicized in its perspective. Having said this, I have reservations. Given that her analysis of death metal was supposed to take a pleasure-based and not political approach, her findings echoed most of the existing studies of metal which she criticizes. The technical and virtuosic in metal, as well as the meanings of horror and extreme expression, have been discussed similarly elsewhere. Her work on death metal's vocality, and discussion of a "disinterested" appreciation of horror texts, are nevertheless original contributions.

But by avoiding the political, she also avoids the social. Phillipov argues that death metal's pleasures cannot be explained by the social-structural position of its practitioners. This flies in the face of much research on aesthetic pleasure, which acknowledges social identities as playing significant roles. Her explanation

of death metal's aesthetics in terms of disinterest, distance, anti-reflexivity, and technical musical appreciation calls out for social analysis: scholarly critiques of taste, like Bourdieu's, find that this aesthetic posture is fostered by some sort of privilege. If Phillipov feels that it is not, she needs to build a larger theoretical argument her analysis provides.

However, I think Phillipov's book is a provocative study of politics' role in popular music studies, and invites a conversation worth having.

Chris McDONALD

Esa Lilja, *Theory and Analysis of Classic Heavy Metal Harmony*, Helsinki, IAML Finland, 2009, 229 p.

LA MUSICOLOGIE s'est progressivement emparée des musiques dites populaires au cours des trente dernières années, peu de travaux ont jusqu'à présent été consacrés à une analyse de leurs structures harmoniques. Celles-ci semblent souvent considérées comme étant relativement élémentaires ou secondaires, et elles se voient délaissées par la plupart des chercheurs¹. Partant de ce constat, Esa Lilja – chercheur finlandais affilié aux *metal studies* – s'est penché sur les musiques heavy metal à travers le prisme d'une étude systématique des procédés harmoniques qui y sont à l'œuvre.

L'ouvrage ici présenté constitue sa thèse de doctorat, soutenue en octobre 2009. Lilja s'intéresse à ce qu'il désigne par l'étiquette « heavy metal classique » : il considère le genre heavy metal de ses fondements – au début des années 1970 – jusqu'à sa fragmentation, qui intervient vers le milieu des années 1980 et à la suite de laquelle la relative unification stylistique du genre s'amointrit (p. 9 et p. 30).

1. Mentionnons pourtant ici deux exceptions notables à travers les travaux de Christopher Doll (Doll, 2007) et, en France, ceux d'Elvio Cipollone (Cipollone, 2009).

Le heavy metal étant fortement lié aux autres styles musicaux occidentaux (p. 17), il paraît raisonnable de chercher à déployer dans ce cadre les théories et méthodes analytiques employées pour les musiques dites « savantes », ces théories nécessitant cependant une adaptation destinée à prendre en compte les spécificités des musiques metal. L'auteur commence donc par réaliser un bref historique de chacun des concepts de base de l'harmonie : il s'agit pour lui de saisir les logiques présidant à l'évolution historique de ces notions, ce afin de déterminer quelles conceptions semblent les plus appropriées aux musiques metal. Du concept « d'accord » à celui de « consonance », Lilja réalise une série de choix définitionnels dont l'adéquation avec son corpus est soigneusement discutée. Il tente également d'appliquer le principe des « fonctions harmoniques » au heavy metal, plaidant pour un modèle s'appuyant à la fois sur les théories de Heinrich Schenker et de Hugo Riemann, et qui valoriserait les structures plagiées omniprésentes dans les musiques rock et metal².

2. Esa Lilja semble avoir entendu les réticences exprimées par Allan Moore qui, dans un article publié en 1995,