

Marcus Erbe

**‘This isn’t over till I say it’s over!’**

## **Narratives of Male Frustration in Deathcore and Beyond\***

In the midst of their album *Goodbye to the Gallows*, the American deathcore band Emmure confronts the listener with a two minute electroacoustic montage that consists of craggy synthetic drones, grinding noises, and a slowly dying heartbeat. This short interlude is entitled ‘Travis Bickle’. Those who are familiar with the cinema of Martin Scorsese will immediately recognise that Travis Bickle is in fact the name of the male protagonist in *Taxi Driver*. Thus it comes as no surprise that Emmure’s unsettling amalgamation of sounds alludes to a specific portion of the score, which can be heard all through Bickle’s attempt at suicide after the film’s shoot-out finale. However, one cannot help but wonder whether this particular piece of instrumental music bears a meaning that goes beyond the sonic imitation of a movie scene. After all, we are presented with a highly referential title that evokes a fictional character without telling his story (in other words: there is no text – only context). So what are we to make of this allusion and how does a seventies movie relate to the subject of my paper?

Being a maverick in his mid-twenties, Travis Bickle comes across the campaign worker Betsy, whom he perceives as an angelic figure, unlike all the crooks, hustlers and prostitutes that he usually spots during his night time shifts as a New York City cab driver. When he finally works up the courage to ask Betsy out on a date, he thinks it appropriate to take her to a sex education flick. Bemused by this empty-headed manoeuvre, Betsy decides to break tie with Travis on the spot. His belated efforts to regain her trust are in vain, which ultimately prompts him to demonise not only Betsy, but all of womankind. Bickle’s scorn is expressed through a scene, in which he storms Betsy’s workplace, takes on one of her male co-workers, then shouts at Betsy: ‘You’re in a hell, and you’re gonna die in hell like the rest of ’em! You’re like the rest of ’em.’ The voice-over that can be heard immediately thereafter intensifies this notion: ‘I realise now how much she is just like the others, cold and distant. And many people are like that – women for sure. They’re like a union.’

Bickle’s unrequited affection marks the beginning of his career as a perpetrator. He illegally obtains a number of guns, compensates for his emotional distress with extensive physical training, adopts a menacing appearance and diligently practices macho postures in front of a mirror. Meanwhile, he gets to know the underage prostitute Iris. He becomes obsessed with the idea of keeping her away from the streets, thus imposing upon her his own concept of morality. In the end, he executes Iris’ pimp and one of her suitors. Ironically, this act of vigilante justice turns out to be socially accepted when Betsy’s employer, the New York senator who – unbeknownst to him – was almost assassinated by Bickle, declares the man a public hero.

Against this background, one could say that Emmure’s ‘Travis Bickle’ reconstructs the movie character as the agent of a certain narrative. It is the narrative of the decent guy, who at some point feels rejected or betrayed by the opposite sex and strives to restore his injured pride by resorting to violence. As a matter of fact, almost every song from the aforementioned album tells the story of male frustration, presenting it as a catalyst for aggression and cruel behaviour. Yet it is a type of storytelling that does not necessarily draw upon words, but rather on a medial interplay between lyrics, sound, the materiality of the voice, and imagery.

\* Paper presented at the international congress *Heavy Metal and Gender*, University of Music and Dance Cologne, on 9 October 2009. Advance publication with kind approval from Florian Heesch.

In order to grasp this correlation, we shall first look at the words of a specific song dubbed ‘10 signs you should leave’:

You know it’s all a game that we play back and forth  
I leave, you chase, and we’re back to square one  
We were not meant to be, and I tried my best to work it through  
I asked my friends: What should I do?  
Their only advice was leaving you  
But I’m glad I did – or at least that’s what I tell myself  
I swear to God I never would’ve known your face or your name  
If every day is a constant reminder, you’re a whore, liar, ghost, harlot  
And it’s sad to say that I,  
I still cry to the Bayside CD everyday  
Don’t you know that those songs are about you?  
Check tracks 8 and 9, then call me back  
You ask me: When is it over? [x2]  
Over?  
This isn’t over till I say it’s over! [x4]

You will probably agree with me that the lyrics themselves are not overly vicious. Generally speaking, they reflect the feeling of a loss of control after a break-up. The narrative authority appears to be a male heterosexual, addressing the conscience of his ex-girlfriend in a confessional manner, while lamenting the frailty of their relationship. We find here a darker type of love song that can be traced not only in metal and that conforms to the poetic conventions of the love song as a popular genre, especially by establishing an intimate connection between the ‘you’ and the ‘I’. The single reference to physical violence is of an intertextual nature. It is encrypted in the lines ‘I still cry to the Bayside CD everyday / Don’t you know that those songs are about you? / Check tracks 8 and 9, then call me back’. Supposedly, these verses point to the self-titled album by Emmure label mates Bayside, an alternative rock band from New York. The songs in question are called ‘Existing in a crisis’ and ‘Don’t call me Peanut’. Suffice it to say, they also deal with failed romances while taking a reproachful tone. But moreover, they explicitly state the idea of brutally murdering either the female lover or the male rival. Hence, already at the level of text semantics, there is in the Emmure song – albeit concealed – the threat of revenge.

Yet the music video makes this aspect much more apparent, as it elaborates on the subliminal belligerence of the words. For a start, we should run through its plot: The male protagonist, portrayed by Emmure vocalist Frankie Palmeri, figures out that his girl is sleeping with one of his buddies. His suspicions about the cheating must have been aroused at an early stage, because in the opening scene one is shown that the soon to be horned boyfriend jumps at every chance to document the imminent betrayal on film. After having killed his rival, he kidnaps the girl to a remote warehouse, where he straps her to a chair, seals her mouth with duct tape and forces her to watch the video evidence he produced. Then, in an uncontrolled outburst of rage, he faces the woman and screams at her several times: ‘This isn’t over till I say it’s over!’

The narrative strand of the clip is interwoven with the band’s performance, which takes place in a chamber of mirrors. This chamber is also the setting for a metaphoric sequence, in which the female character desperately tries to escape her mirror image. Simultaneously, some of the song’s key words like ‘liar’ and ‘harlot’ are visualised as inscriptions on disfig-

ured photographs (see fig. 1). This motif of erasure reaches its climax when the band members shatter their surroundings with their instruments and in doing so symbolically demolish the woman's face.

Figure 1: Details from the music video to '10 signs you should leave' by Emmure<sup>1</sup>



Thus far, I have considered the semantic interdependency between the lyrics and their videographic rendering. I would now like to call to your attention a third driving force of the song's meaning: its sound, or in the words of Adam Krims: its 'musical poetics' (Krims 2000, 27–31).

It has often been claimed that the transparency of metal lyrics is of lesser importance to the recipient than the sense of power they convey. This conception is held to be especially valid for all kinds of extreme metal, where the harsh vocals are sometimes viewed not so much as a linguistic but rather as a sonic signifier (e.g. Berger 1999, 58). True as that may be, I want to suggest that musicians – along with their producers – are quite clever in devising strategies to make themselves understood nonetheless. In the example at hand, this is achieved by several variations of the musical and vocal texture. To begin with, some of the words that script out the overall plot are not growled indistinctly, but recited in a highly stylised, yet discernible fashion. Take for instance the opening lines 'You know it's all a game that we play back and forth / I leave, you chase, and we're back to square one'. [Musical example: Emmure, '10 signs you should leave', 0:04–0:15]

Listening to said passage, one cannot fail to notice that during production it was decided to put a staccato-like rhythm guitar on the right stereo channel while panning the leading riff all the way to the left. Such a spatial layout is not just a gimmick, because it increases the tangibility of the words. Moreover, the opening of the song is – as opposed to the subsequent part – performed at a fairly slow pace. This brings us to a second musical ploy: the manipulation of temporal flow and texture.

1 Images and song lyrics reproduced with kind permission of Victory Records.

Whereas a good portion of the track flashes by at punk rock speed, it once in a while slows down for the sake of so called breakdown (or beatdown) sections. These musical breaks are earmarked by reiterations of sometimes just a single chord and possess a strong rhythmic quality due to palm muted string picking, with the rhythm guitar, the bass and the kick drum being in perfect synchronisation. Palm muting results in a sharpening of the guitar tone's attack while at the same time its decay is being softened. As a consequence, this style of playing punctures little holes into the musical fabric, which leaves more space for the non-guitar elements of the arrangement, in particular for the voice. Breakdowns are key components of many modern metal and hardcore styles. Since it is their formal function to refocus the listener's attention and to convey a certain sense of sluggishness in the process, they are often carefully prepared, either by the modification of musical parameters (like pulse structure and rhythmical density) or by the deployment of special sonic markers. Accordingly, the bars preceding a breakdown may clearly state that there is going to be a perceptive shift. In the case of this particular song, the central breakdown section is announced through a series of boisterous drum fills, followed by an isolated guitar bend. And when the break finally erupts, it makes way for a metrically more distinct articulation of the words, which are repeated over and over again. [Musical example: Emmure, '10 signs you should leave', 1:57–2:17]

As I said earlier, the lyrics of '10 signs you should leave' are not excessively bleak. By themselves they do not exhibit the kind of viciousness that metalheads know from songs such as Cannibal Corpse's infamous 'Fucked with a knife'<sup>2</sup>. What makes them uninviting after all – and eventually reinforces their misogynistic undertone – is a certain declamatory style in conjunction with the rhythmically pounding, bottomless sound.

A third strategy to fortify lyrical expression can be spotted at the level of harmony. Whereas the globally uncompromising signature sound of deathcore and similar styles is not bound to a particular lyrical theme, there are usually different degrees of heaviness within a single song that can epitomise certain local meanings. What thus distinguishes the aforementioned breakdown part from the rest of the song is not only its repetitive character (note how the voice faithfully mimics the percussiveness of the accompaniment), but also a particularly spiky sound. This sound is the result of an intervallic displacement, since the perfect fifth, which is commonly played in a power chord, gets substituted by the tritone, adding an extra edge to both the distorted guitar tone and the vocal growl. In deathcore, this peculiar type of break can be heard so frequently that I am tempted to call it a genre stereotype. But as with all stereotypes, at least one knows what to expect. To put it bluntly: If a breakdown is accompanied by words, there is your chance to catch a portion of the lyrics without having to read along.

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The point of my analysis was to show that none of the elements in question can be regarded as discrete instances of meaning. It is the lyrics plus their vocalisation, together with a certain sonic and formal layout as well as extra visual markers that make up the entire semantic feel of the song. Remember the function of vocal repetition and the procedure of advertising key words in the music video as a kind of subtitle to the less clear, raspier vocals. Even if the combination of all those features leaves one with just fragments of lyrical meaning, it still does not fail to give the gist: '[H]arlot... This isn't over till I say it's over!'

2 Nor do they show any sign of irony as does Iron Maiden's 'Charlotte the Harlot' (cf. Weinstein 2009, 25).

Such claims of vengeance and retribution against women, who are portrayed as being fraudulent, adulterous and double-minded, have become a recurring theme within the death-core and metalcore repertoires<sup>3</sup>.

To give one other concrete example, I shall discuss in a few words the audiovisual staging of 'Lie to my face' by Carnifex. Obviously, the song title is not gender specific, but since the motif of female deceit is incredibly stable throughout the genre, it almost automatically serves as a tagline for the song's semantic framework.

The scars on my arms remind me how I got this way  
I can taste the stain of your sickness on my lips  
Of all the stupid things in my life I fell for this  
I fell for this  
I'll ask again like you never knew  
Just lie to me  
Just lie to me: We're gonna make it through  
I'm well past wanting the truth  
Just lie to me: I'll always love you [x2]  
Lie to my face! [x3]

Here again, the lyrics do not propagate blatant force at all, whereas the music video could not give a more severe interpretation of the words. Along with the band's performance we see a young woman being gagged and tied to a chair. She has to endure various acts of humiliation that are inflicted upon her by someone who appears to be her ex-boyfriend. The guy repeatedly hustles her, yells at the girl by mimicking the singer's voice, blows cigarette smoke in her eyes and partially undresses her with a crowbar. During the song's climax – which once more happens to be a breakdown, serving as the accompaniment to various exclamations of the key phrase 'Lie to my face' – the defenceless woman is literally beaten to a pulp.

Figure 2: Shots from the music video to 'Lie to my face' by Carnifex<sup>4</sup>



3 As with many things in the realm of popular music, one could trace back this subject to the myriad of blues and jazz songs that equally deal with issues of infidelity, heartache, and the desire for revenge. However, there is a substantial difference in terms of gender performance, seeing as a fair amount of blues lyrics embraces the female perspective. Needless to say, this rarely happens in extreme metal.

4 Images and song lyrics reproduced with kind permission of Victory Records.

One cannot help but wonder why such crude displays of brutality appear to be less irritating when shown – for instance – in the context of a slasher movie or on the theatre stage. Elisabeth Bronfen, one of Germany’s leading scholars in cultural anthropology, pointed out that the patriarchic discourse heavily relies on the portrayal of the ‘beautiful’ woman as a menace to male dominance and self-determination. In western arts, women can be constantly beheld as the source of seduction, betrayal, and narcissistic hurt, while men feel obliged to take drastic measures as to restore the phallic order. More often than not, the male hero’s last resort seems to be the annihilation of the female body (cf. Bronfen 2004). So one could argue that our examples resume a theatrical tradition, that they epitomise excessive plays of cuckoldry, where no one actually gets hurt, because everything is just fiction. Yet something is amiss.

In terms of genre history, the gender stipulations of deathcore have a lot in common with 1990s death metal, in the sense that ethical transgression is not artistically mollified, particularly when evil is presented in a somewhat prosaic style or even depicted from the viewpoint of the wrongdoer. Of course, the latter applies to numerous horror films, yet with a crucial difference: morality is reinstated whenever the bad guy / fiend / psycho killer etc. is hunted down and punished for his atrocities (cf. Purcell 2003, 172–185).

But back to the instances at hand: What does account for their unsettling effect? I would suggest that it is a particular concept of authenticity. Irrespective of the fact that Roland Barthes declared ‘the death of the author’ (Barthes 1977), the originators of such relentless gender representations do not tire of pronouncing their texts to be expressions of personal experience and serious soul-searching, even if said texts might just as well be viewed the product of discursive conventions. When asked about the sincerity of his music, Matt Rudzinski, the driving force behind the unmistakably sexist band Killwhitneydead<sup>5</sup>, replied:

I don’t mask anything; you know how I am feeling when you listen to the songs... The topics are very serious to me, since I write all the lyrics. I have been hurt and that is what I choose to express in my songs. I basically write about seeking revenge, and getting even with people who have done me wrong.<sup>6</sup>

I myself received similar responses from Frankie Palmeri in an e-mail interview that I conducted for Ox Fanzine:

My thoughts are a constant and thus so are my words or how [I] perceive things. I let my most pure and honest form free inside the music... I won’t dive too deep into my views on women or sexism... I would hope that people would understand that music is [a] healthy way to express things you feel right there in the moment. I have said many things out of anger, even some I

5 Paradigmatic: the albums *Never Good Enough for You* and *Hell to Pay*. Typical of Killwhitneydead’s music is a re-contextualisation of film dialogues through sampling. These sound recordings may add to the singer’s sometimes indecipherable vocals as a further means of passing on dubious worldly knowledge about women. Besides that, most of their videos (e.g. ‘Let me give you a hand throwing yourself out’) are perfectly in line with the kind of narrative discussed in this paper.

6 <http://www.deadtide.com/interviews/page.php?id=73>. Elsewhere it is interesting to see how Rudzinski strives to fulfil the need for lyrical genuineness while at the same time being well aware of the artificiality and conventionality of his work: ‘But I’m just like any horror story, like Stephen King or Clive Barker. I’m anybody like that; I write horror stories. Mine just happen to be set to music rather than to actors and on film’ (<http://thegauntlet.com/interviews/3528/Killwhitneydead.html>; both documents retrieved 4 July 2009).

wish I could take back, but when you're young you tend to be quick to use your heart more than your head and from the heart is where inevitably good music comes from.<sup>7</sup>

Barthes or not: Unencumbered by academic debates one can detect among fans a tendency to perceive the narratives of treacherous girls and unadulterated boys as irrevocable facts of life<sup>8</sup>. To a great extent, those beliefs are reinforced by having the bands and their creative peers let such plots take place in real life scenarios. Let me illustrate this observation with a counterexample.

As we can learn from Robert Walser, metal is jam-packed with stories about the femme fatale. However, a great deal of these tales, especially when it comes to the fantastic sagas of the so called true metal genre, is set within imaginary realms (cf. Walser 1993, 114–119). A vivid case in point would be the music video to Rhapsody's 'Rain of a thousand flames': Whilst the band members join forces to fight off a half-naked, half leather-clad demonic sorceress, they do not need to gaffer tape her or to pick up a crowbar, because they have at their disposal the wondrous might of magic. But when Emmure's Frankie Palmeri chooses to impersonate your average over-testosteroned ruffian, we are led to believe that he is the guy who would torture his girlfriend; that he is truly prepared to commit a violent crime out of suspicion and distrust. It is this form of hyper-masculine pseudo-realism that makes it somewhat difficult – and in terms of the genre's conception of authenticity I believe it is supposed to be difficult – to separate the artist as a person from his stage(d) persona<sup>9</sup>.

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As grim as all of this may seem, there is always the possibility of parody. Most notably, it can be found in the doings of Maris the Great. Maris, the impish zombie clown with a pink Mohawk and a giant plastic scrotum (see fig. 3), is a master at using the conventions of extreme metal against themselves. His act is not just about being a gay metal musician and therefore violating the genre's predominately heterosexual code. He also pokes fun at the macho postures that have become so prominent with recent bands – a response probably more befitting than a moral sermon with a wagging forefinger.

7 A German translation of the entire interview is published in issue 97 (August 2011) of the magazine.

8 For example, a male youtube user introduces his vocal cover version of Carnifex's 'Lie to my face' with the words: 'This song goes out to every bitch that's ever lied to me. You dumb fucking whores, I hate all of you' (<http://www.youtube.com/user/SenorBivins>). And on lastfm, someone nicknamed bloozclooz commented about the song 'Whore to a chainsaw' by Australian band Thy Art Is Murder: 'Die You Fucking Whore, You Putrid Waste Of Space, Stop Breeding Fucking Rats, You Bitches Gonna Get It - lol, don't bitch about they [sic!] lyrics, and then go listen to Cannibal Corpse, LOL'. Such and similar remarks have become the subject of a thread that raises the question 'Is deathcore misogynistic', where two respondents share their personal views on the topic as follows: '[michealdark:] To me, I'll lean with "no". Violence against women is a staple of death metal, as I mentioned. Emocore is about young men dealing with break-up issues. It makes sense when you smash the two genres together, the lyrics are going to be about young men, not completely ironically, singing about murdering their ex's. That's just the nature of the beast... [LordKinbote:] That's like saying "Is this salsa spicy? The habanero pepper I threw into it is, and so is the serrano pepper. But that's just what you're going to get when you mix two extremely hot peppers into it, so I don't think it's spicy." Of COURSE it's misogynistic. Let me do the math: 1 Very Misogynistic Genre + 1 Somewhat Misogynistic Genre = 1 Extremely Misogynistic Genre That Only Benefits From No One Actually Understanding The Lyrics' (<http://www.606studios.com/bendisboard/showthread.php?194318-Is-deathcore-misogynistic/page2>; all entries retrieved 30 March 2011).

9 This confusion of theatrics and reality is quite comparable to certain manifestations of gangsta rap, being a major cause for moral panic from the mid-1980s onwards.

Figure 3: The character of Maris the Great<sup>10</sup>



The interesting thing is that many well-known death metal, deathcore, metalcore and hardcore artists willingly participate in this burlesque, which reads as follows: Maris, together with his group The Faggots of Death, strives for domination over the world of rock and roll. Therefore he invites his creative rivals to give their final interview, after which they have to die a gruesome death. The band's (fictional) demise is then documented in a series of horrid photographs (see the samples in fig. 4). During said interviews, Maris employs two crucial elements of comedy in order to throw his dialogue partners off guard: vulgarity and inversion. With him, male band members are often the target of verbal sexual harassment, as Maris persistently offers them the pleasures of anal intercourse or calls to their attention that there are numerous gay groupies who would love to have their way with them. Equally flagrant is Maris' interaction with female musicians when they – for instance – have to learn about his distaste for vaginas, as he always refers to them as abhorrent hatchet wounds.

Figure 4: Maris' photo shoot with Emmure



10 Photos in fig. 3 and 4 by Andrea Rebel (<http://www.maristhegreat.com>; retrieved 1 October 2009).



So here we have a kind of ridicule that is misogynist and misandric at the same time. In fact, it is misanthropic, though misanthropy is exploited for the sake of comic relief. Furthermore, this travesty serves as a good example of what Bronfen describes as the fear of a queer invasion (cf. Bronfen 2004, 193–198). From this perspective, Maris' spectacle upholds an endearing thought: Should his devilish plan ever succeed, metal will be rid of the necessity to mould itself as either masculine or feminine, for it is going to be governed by un-dead gender benders.

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