

Article

Apopcalypse: The Popularity of Heavy Metal as Heir to Apocalyptic Artifacts

Jörg Scheller

Department Fine Arts, Zurich University of the Arts, 8005 Zurich, Switzerland; joerg.scheller@zhdk.ch

Abstract: This paper examines the heavy metal genre as a popular form of apocalypticism, i.e., as a warning reminder or “premediation” of potentially (large-scale) lethal crises. By confronting the audience with disturbing, seemingly exaggerated scenarios of disease, chaos, war, and horror, heavy metal builds barriers in popular culture against what philosopher Günther Anders has called “apocalyptic blindness.” The genre, then, offers a kind of “aesthetic resilience training” particularly in relatively stable and peaceful times, when large-scale crises seem unlikely or, in the case of global nuclear war, exceed in their sheer dimension the human imagination. What connects traditional religious apocalyptic artifacts such as the *Book of Revelation* with heavy metal is a specific appeal to the popular. Apocalyptic artifacts and their contemporary secular heirs lend themselves well to popularization because of their strong affective and aesthetic sides, as the *Revelation* and its many ramifications in popular culture, not least in heavy metal, demonstrate.

Keywords: heavy metal; pop; popular culture; apocalypse; religion

1. Introduction

In this article, I will discuss the popularity of heavy metal with respect to one of its key sources: religious apocalyptic texts and imagery in general (for the sake of simplicity in the following: apocalyptic artifacts), the *Book of Revelation* in particular (Malkinson 2022). The popularity of apocalyptic artifacts within the heavy metal genre seems to stand in stark contrast to an empirical finding discussed in the next section: Heavy metal has emerged in relatively (!) pacified, wealthy, liberal western consumer societies and is currently expanding around the globe in the footsteps of growing prosperity, liberalization, and social security. I will argue that precisely under these circumstances, what could be termed “aesthetic resilience training” is needed to avoid posthistoric self-sufficiency or what philosopher Günther Anders called “apocalyptic blindness,” and to prepare oneself, at least mentally, for large-scale crises to come. Heavy metal thus is not only a medium of premonition or prophecy, but also an instance of “premediation” (Grusin 2010).

Proceeding from this assumption, I will first outline the popularity of heavy metal and apocalyptic artifacts, respectively, and then explore heavy metal as a modern heir to religious apocalyptic artifacts. My focus is on ‘classic’ heavy metal, i.e., on the genre-defining European and American bands, songs, and cover art from the late 1970s and early 80s from which contemporary metal bands still draw inspiration, either through affirmation or critical distancing (Scheller 2020, p. 41). My remarks also apply to parts of extreme metal and crossover, which I will not go into, however. Discussing extreme metal and crossover, which in fact are extremely diverse, also in terms of social and even more so political milieus, would require considerably more space than given in this article. Classic heavy metal from the late 1970s and early 1980s is certainly diverse as well, yet mostly male, European-American, time-critical, and not activist. A significant expansion of the scene occurred through mixing with activist practice-what-you-preach milieus (punk, hardcore), which was not the case with, e.g., Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden, Metallica; through mixing with, e.g., rap music and the concomitant social groups (Body Count et al.); through mixing with



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extra-European, extra-American cultures in the course of globalization (cf. e.g., the blending of Scandinavian black metal and native Taiwanese traditions by Chthonic), and through the opening-up to more (overt) diversity in terms of sex and gender (cf. e.g., Amber R. Clifford-Napoleone's treatment of metal as "queerspace", Clifford-Napoleone 2015). With respect to religion, discussing more forms of metal would have to take into account discussing more religions than only Christianity, e.g., the treatment of Buddhism in the death metal of Dharma (Taiwan) or the treatment of Islam in the crossover of Voice of Baceprot (Indonesia). Satanism, in turn, understood as an ideology rather than as a provocative gesture, only occurs with the emergence of extreme metal (e.g., Gorgoroth, Deicide), whereas a clear Satanist creed is absent in classic metal, as theologian Sebastian Berndt states: "[in classic metal there] are no elements that can be clearly described as Satanic. Neither in the popular nor in the theological sense can one speak of Satanism" (Berndt 2012, p. 113). Speaking with Kahn-Harris: "The extreme metal scene is characterized by a far more sustained engagement with occult ideas. Whereas heavy metal musicians generally denied being Satanists or tried to evade the question, some extreme metal musicians claim to be committed Satanists. Early extreme metal bands, such as Venom, were fascinated by the occult, but for the most part, the scene avoided wholeheartedly embracing its philosophy or practice. This changed in the early 1990s when the black metal scene emerged" (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 38). With that said, doing justice to all of these aspects in one article is not possible. A precise focus on the early days and their echoes in the present is more promising.

As far as methodology is concerned, this article decidedly refrains from a clear methodological or disciplinary classification. It is neither firmly situated "in sociology", nor "in theology", nor "in musicology", nor in any other discipline. It is rather situated in the liminal spaces between disciplines and methods and *discusses*, in the basic philosophical sense of the word, a tripartite problem: In what sense is classic heavy metal popular (Section 2), in what sense is the biblical apocalypse popular (Section 3), and what social function might the metal-specific combination of popularity and apocalypticism have in the context of the postindustrial, relatively peaceful and relatively (!) prosperous Western societies in which metal emerged (Section 4)? The partially speculative nature of the answers given in chapter four, among others that classic heavy metal provides aesthetic resilience training through popularizing apocalypticism in secular times and premediating major crises, is intentional. With a view to the series "new perspectives on pop culture", it proceeds from the assumption that "newness" is found by moving out of established domains and admitting a certain degree of transparent, self-conscious idiosyncrasy—not for the sake of idiosyncrasy as such, but to allow unforeseen encounters.

The article thus makes no claim to a definite conclusion (therefore the open, rather poetic ending that invites (further) associations). Instead, it sets, or, more precisely, keeps in motion the process of truth-seeking (if one pardons the somewhat solemn term "truth"). It is conceived as a door-opener in the tradition of scholarly essayism (from Montaigne through Leslie Fiedler to Donna Haraway and beyond) and what philosopher Paul Feyerabend termed "theoretical anarchism". Feyerabend was convinced "that anarchism, while perhaps not the most attractive political philosophy, is certainly excellent medicine for epistemology, and for the philosophy of science" (Feyerabend 2010, p. 51). The prestigious Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and the University of California, Berkeley, hired Feyerabend in 1980 precisely because his way of thinking would bring about rupture and challenge what physician and biologist Ludwik Fleck called the harmony of "thought styles" (Fleck 1980, pp. 40–53) and "thought collectives" (Fleck 1980, pp. 52–70). Science, of course, requires formalization and epistemological rigor, but it does not start there.

2. Heavy Metal as Popular Anti-Pop

Notwithstanding the self-perception of significant parts of the international heavy metal scenes as "underground" and a carefully cultivated anti-pop rebel image, classic heavy metal (e.g., bands and musicians such as Judas Priest, Metallica, Megadeth, Iron Maiden) and younger bands continuing this tradition (e.g., Night Demon, Halestorm,

Haunt, Blade Killer) is clearly a popular music genre (cf. [Marshall 2022](#)). It emerged in the music industry of England as a post-punk, post-hard rock form of guitar-centered pop music and youth culture in the late 1970s. The term “heavy metal” was coined by the popular music press and was only later adopted by the respective bands themselves ([Scheller 2020](#), p. 40). Even though heavy metal radicalized the sonic, visual, and performative aesthetics of rock music and shared the D.I.Y. ethics of punk and hardcore, the genre (i.e., not sub-genres such as garage black metal, grindcore, funeral doom, etc.) is firmly rooted in the pop music industries. Small businesses have always been a driving force of heavy metal (cf. Section 4), but Metallica’s album *Master of Puppets* lifted the metal brand to unforeseen commercial heights as early as 1986—only eight years after the release of the album that, musically as well as visually, transformed hard rock into heavy metal: Judas Priest’s *Stained Class* ([Keller 2018](#), pp. 46–47). As of 2023, *Master of Puppets* has sold almost eight million copies in the US alone ([Young 2023](#)). Heavy metal thus contributed to the popularity of anti-pop.

“Anti-pop” refers to the fact that many heavy metal bands attempted to set themselves apart from the light-hearted image of the pop music of their time, particularly of the disco wave of the late 70s, but also from fashionable punk rock, through playing heavier, harder, faster, louder, and tackling controversial or taboo issues. This process started already with Black Sabbath’s proto-metal: “Previous rock stars had enchanted pop consciousness with flowers, parades, and promises to change the world. Black Sabbath strode at the end of that procession, still preaching the need for love but warning stragglers there was no return to a naïve state of grace. While most popular contemporaries stuck to ‘girl bites man’ territory, Sabbath sang of fatherless children and the wickedness of the world” ([Christe 2004](#), n.p.). Of course, Black Sabbath entered the pop charts as early as 1970, and, of course, Iron Maiden performed on Top of the Pops only ten years later ([Christe 2004](#), n.p.). Looking back at this time in his autobiography, Bruce Dickinson, the singer of Iron Maiden, states not quite convincingly: “Above and beyond pop music, fashion, and the detritus and useless decadence of ‘reality’ celebrity, Maiden was hard work and tangible, substantive and complex, but also visceral and aggressive” ([Dickinson 2018](#), p. 272). As an act of subversive affirmation, the metal band Suicidal Tendencies pointed to the popularity of anti-pop in an ostentatiously easy-going pop-punk song entitled “Pop Songs” (2000).

It was arguably aesthetic radicalization that, only seemingly paradoxically, facilitated the popularization of heavy metal in the postmodern era, when permanent boundary-pushing, the diffusion and extension of aesthetic domains became the new normal ([Vattimo 1990](#); [Michaud 2011](#)). Even extreme metal, e.g., black metal, has long entered the charts, starting with Venom as the figurehead of the first wave of black metal in the early 1980s, continuing with the second wave of black metal bands such as Dimmu Borgir and Cradle of Filth in the early 2000s ([Scheller 2003](#)). However, aesthetic extremes do not necessarily mirror extreme societal conditions; they may as well compensate for what societies (feel they) lack in extremity. It is telling that heavy metal, which was considered extreme before the advent of extreme metal, initially was played by the sons of industrial workers in England but developed in parallel to the emergence of, by international comparison, relatively (!) wealthy, relatively (!) peaceful, and relatively (!) liberal post-industrial consumer societies. Since heavy metal requires expensive technological equipment, it is not surprising that a high level of material wealth facilitates the thriving of heavy metal scenes. A study conducted by the management professor Richard Florida in 2014 shows that “the number of heavy metal bands per capita is positively associated with economic output per capita” ([Florida 2014](#)). Heavy metal, the author concludes, “springs not from the poisoned slang of alienation and despair but from the loamy soil of post-industrial prosperity” ([Florida 2014](#)).

Like Western pop culture as such, heavy metal benefits from constant “over-production” ([Engell 2004](#), p. 192) in mass consumption societies. While the genre has never produced genuine super- and megastars such as Beyoncé or U2, it is not only “getting noticed by many” ([Döring et al. 2021](#), p. 1) all over the world, but has been, from the very beginning,

also measured, compared, and displayed in the charts as well as further statistics (Werber et al. in this volume).¹ If the music as such is not getting noticed, then certainly the cultural phenomenon or selected aspects thereof are. As Motörhead, one of the trailblazers of heavy metal music, put it in their song “We are Motörhead”: “We are the ones you heard of, but you’ve never heard” (Motörhead 2000).

To give just a few examples of metal being noticed by many across the globe, when Motörhead’s Lemmy Kilmister passed away, Germany’s most-viewed news show (Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland 2023), the *Tagesschau*, broadcast an obituary on prime time. Indonesia currently (as of 2023) has—unthinkable in the past—a ‘metal president’ (i.e., the acting president Joko Widodo is an outspoken metal fan, NPR 2018), and Taiwan has had its first black metal member of parliament (Freddy Lim, Strittmatter 2016). In Scandinavian countries like Sweden or Finland, heavy metal has become a sort of state-subsidized form of folk music and a significant export sector (Karjalainen and Kärki 2020; Feeney 2013); Sao Paulo, Mexico City, and Santiago have been labeled as “metal megacities” (Marshall 2022). The Ruhr region in Germany has discovered and advertised heavy metal as a cultural asset (Scheller 2020, p. 182). Popular events like the Eurovision Song Contest or America Got Talent regularly include heavy metal or metal-inspired performances (e.g., Lordi, Lord of the Lost).

The popularity of heavy metal can be further substantiated empirically and quantified. From an economic point of view, heavy metal forms a stable, albeit not dominant backbone of the pop music business and inspires mainstream pop acts such as Lady Gaga for her 2011 song “Heavy Metal Lover,” or Jay-Z who collaborated with Linkin Park for the 2004 album *Collision Course*. The various metal scenes and subgenres profit from loyal fanbases and small companies run by idealists (see below). While streaming services prosper at the cost of the artists (as music critic Tobi Müller put it: “Streaming is social progress for the majority of users, and regression for the majority of makers”; Müller 2022), heavy metal bands continue to sell, and metal fans continue to buy physical products, thus benefiting the artists (Marshall 2022). Metal magazines such as *Rock Hard* or *Metal Hammer* even continue to include CDs. A sprawling metal merchandise sector has evolved over the decades with labels such as Nuclear Blast in provincial Southern Germany (estimated annual turnover: 25 million € (Nuclear Blast GmbH im Lexikon der Weltmarktführer 2023) becoming global players. Heavy metal festivals attract large audiences (e.g., the Wacken Festival with circa 85,000 visitors in 2022), and even heavy metal boat cruises are routinely organized these days (*70.000 Tons of Metal*). Although it is difficult to obtain reliable figures in terms of market shares, representatives of the music industry confirm the relevance of heavy metal in the light of its specificities. Martin Koller from SPKR Media, an independent media group that serves as the umbrella company for boutique record labels such as Prophecy Productions, Dependent, and Magnetic Eye, told in an interview that

“what I know from my consulting activities with competitors and from public sources [e.g., Bundesanzeiger D/Firmenbuch Austria, etc.] is that the metal sector differs from other music styles in that a not insignificant share is generated by small companies that do not have professional structures and whose data is therefore not available. The big players do not have the market power/market domination as in other genres and the larger ones are almost all associated with major labels, be it participation, distribution or as licensors.”

(Koller 2023)

Hence the metal sector can be described as heavily diversified. This portrait could be continued for many pages, but it is high time for the apocalypse.

3. The Biblical Blockbuster

Before discussing heavy metal as an antidote to “apocalyptic blindness” in the next section, some remarks on the Bible and apocalyptic artifacts with respect to popularization are indispensable. It goes without saying that the Bible is a popular book. To date, it is the bestselling book of all time. Worldwide, to be exact (Statista 2023). However, if we

see the Bible not as a monographic book, but as what it actually is, namely a collection of books, some of them are more popular than others. The *Book of Revelation*, the last part of the New Testament, enjoys great popularity not only in religious circles, but in popular culture at large, from horror movies such as *The Seventh Sign* (1988) through novels such as Robert Schneider's *Die Offenbarung* (2007), to hip hop albums such as Busta Rhymes' *Extinction Level Event: The Final World Front* (1998), country music songs such as Johnny Cash's "The Man Comes Around" (2002), and, as will be shown below, heavy metal in particular. Hollywood screenwriter Brian Godawa has described the *Book of Revelation* as a "literary masterpiece of epic horror fantasy. [. . .] Christians who appreciate the horror or fantasy genre have much to delight in since they are God's favorite genres when giving prophecy to his people (Revelation, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah)" (Godawa 2017). At Yale Divinity school, the book is introduced by stating that "its graphic visions and peculiar symbolism have made it one of the most popular books in the canon, influencing generations of artists, writers, and filmmakers who have been captivated by its powerful imagery" (Yale Divinity School n.d.).

This popularity comes as no surprise. The *Book of Revelation* is full of sensational drama, esoteric horror, fantastic creatures, and mysterious numbers. It stems from the late first century A.D. Probably against the background of monotheistic Christians feeling marginalized in the polytheistic Roman Empire, the unknown Christian author writing in exile on Patmos uses dazzling, almost psychedelic metaphors to encode his concerns:

"Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. The name written on her forehead was a mystery: babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth."

(Rev 17,3–5, NIV)

The proximity between the "vast image reservoir" (Tilly 2012, p. 51) of biblical apocalypticism and the vast image(ry) reservoir of heavy metal cultures is obvious. Already the proto-metal cover art of Black Sabbath's 1973 album *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath* and Judas Priest's 1976 album *Sad Wings of Destiny* recall the aesthetic of John's visions, not speaking of then and future song lyrics (e.g., "they smashed through the clouds into the light of the moon/Their steeds were full charging, called destruction and doom"; Judas Priest, "Island of Domination," (from Judas Priest 1976)): "A significant part of metal mythology revolves around the more apocalyptic strain of Christianity, especially the Book of Revelation" (Weinstein 2009, p. 129). I will elaborate on this mythology in the next section.

If popular culture is roughly understood as that strand of culture which, in a given period, factually gets noticed by quantitatively broad audiences rather than only by in-groups, the *Book of Revelation* can be considered as the blockbuster finale of the Bible. It appeals to a readership that is not only interested in intricate moral or theological ponderings, but also in entertaining "special effects," as it were. John means showtime: "The message of the first apocalyptic visions, particularly that of John's Revelation, would not have had such a long-lasting impact, had the prophecy of decline and deliverance not been shrouded in dramatic scenes of unheard events, in horrifying, mysterious, and magnificent images" (Vondung 2008, p. 187). The New Testament thus closes with an implicit prophecy of the popularization of Christianity through means that have not much in common with the asceticism, also aesthetic asceticism, typical of the early Christians.

Always contested in theological circles, the pompous last part of the New Testament not only echoes the prophetic finale of the Old Testament but also anticipates the evolution of Christianity: From ascetic faith in the Roman Empire to caesaropapistic political theology with global outreach and—important for any enterprise that seeks to expand across cultures—diversified discursive, aesthetic, affective means. Accordingly, and irrelevant to the author's intentions, the *Book of Revelation* also prepares Christianity for the advent of

Western modernity. In Western modernity, the stratified society of the Middle Ages gives way to democratic consumer societies in which everything formerly confined to small, elitist circles, sooner or later becomes popular, that is, in one way or another, known to, loved or hated, used or owned by the population at large.

4. Heavy Metal as Popular Philosophizing about the Apocalypse, Premediation, and Aesthetic Resilience Training

Against the background of what has been said so far, it is plausible to attribute the popularity of heavy metal not only to the often-mentioned need for catharsis, i.e., the release of negative energies, e.g., at concerts (Dawes 2012; Rose 2022; Wieland 2022). Nor should heavy metal be idealized as a medium of nonconformism, given its quick rise to international popularity, its economic significance, and its social substrates as outlined above. Instead, it is plausible to argue that in—by historical standards—relatively peaceful, prosperous, and liberal times, there is a need for popular cultural content that reminds audiences of and (mentally) prepares them for the possibility of major crises.

It is significant that already John wrote his *Revelation* on the remote island of Patmos while, as described above, heavy metal was emerging along with the post-industrial economy and the new middle classes who resided on socio-economic islands, so to speak. Judas Priest's Rob Halford, who has his stage name "Metal God" officially protected under trademark law, personifies the transition from industrial to post-industrial and proto-metal to metal: Whereas Black Sabbath' Tony Iommi actually worked in a factory, Halford, who is strongly inspired by the Christian religion, already earned his money in a theater and a men's clothing store (cf. Halford 2020). John, in turn, probably did not suffer persecution from Roman authorities, as overcome research has assumed. The *Revelation* was most likely written during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, who "was a problematic ruler but not a persecutor of Christians" (Karrer 2010, p. 2). In a similar vein, the classic heavy metal songs were composed, recorded, and played by a generation that had not directly experienced the sublime catastrophes that were the focus of their art. They mostly knew them from the media. War. Nuclear strikes. Hunger. Disease. Terror. Hence, heavy metal may be situated in the tradition of the distanced prophecy as typical of the *Book of Revelation*, but also of memento moris such as the medieval "Dance of Death," a topic that has been recurring throughout heavy metal history).

Already on Black Sabbath's genre-inspiring album *Black Sabbath* (1970), we find plenty of allusions to the *Book of Revelation*. If Jesus has "eyes like flames of fire" in Revelation (Revelation 2:18b), Satan appears on Black Sabbath "with eyes of fire" (title track). The album *Paranoid*, released in the same year, is full of apocalyptic terms, which, however, refer to earthly disasters, primarily wars and dehumanization through mechanization: "Now in darkness, world stops turning/Ashes where their bodies burn/No more war pigs have the power/Hand of God has struck the hour/Day of Judgement, God is calling/On their knees the war pigs crawl" ("War Pigs"); "And so in the sky shines the electric eye/Supernatural king takes earth under his wing/Heaven's golden chorus sings, Hell's angels flap their wings/Evil souls fall to Hell, ever trapped in burning cells!" ("Electric Funeral"). Cladding inner-worldly events in such mythological, religious language distinguishes classic heavy metal from punk, which favored bluntness and calling things by their names.

Iron Maiden even introduce one of their most famous songs, "The Number of the Beast" (Iron Maiden 1982), with original quotes from Revelation 12:12b and 13:18, spoken by actor Barry Clayton: "Woe to You Oh Earth and Sea/For the Devil sends the beast with wrath/Because he knows the time is short/Let him who hath understanding/Reckon the number of the beast/For it is a human number/Its number is six hundred and sixty six". On Metallica's debut album *Kill 'Em All* (Metallica 1983), the song "The Four Horsemen" also refers directly to Revelation: "You know it has all been planned/The quartet of deliverance rides/A sinner once a sinner twice/No need for confession now/Cause now you have got the fight of your life/The Horsemen are drawing nearer/On the leather steeds they ride/They have come to take your life". In 1987, Brazilian speed metal band Viper summon

up “four rider beasts [who] ride the sky” (“Knights of Destruction”, [Viper 1987](#)). Many contemporary examples could be listed as well, such as Behemoth’s song “We Are the Next 1000 Years” (2018) or the four zombie horses on the cover of Kreator’s album *Phantom Antichrist* (2012).

Especially the German thrash metal band Kreator, who returned to their classic metal roots in the 2000s after a phase of experimentation, is a good example of the eminent role of the *Book of Revelation* in the heavy metal genre. Like prophets, who offered their criticism of the times in a language that was difficult for censors to see through, the band often remains in the realm of the vague and ciphered. In an interview, Kreator’s bandleader Mille Petrozza said in 2017: “I’m all about people being able to relate to an experience without having had it themselves. Apocalyptic vocabulary lends itself very well to that in metal, because those are powerful words and images” ([Scheller 2020](#), p. 180). One could paraphrase the latter half-sentence as: “because they are noticed by many,” or simply: “because they are popular.” And Petrozza added: “We [as a band] tend to generalize things and try to metaphorize them rather than attack any political groups and explicitly name things that are happening in politics or world events. I’m often inspired by political events, but you won’t know it. The lyrics of “Phantom Antichrist” [2012], for example, are also politically inspired, but it doesn’t give that away. You have to decipher it” ([Scheller 2020](#), p. 204). In a similar way, the *Revelation* can be seen as a covert, metaphorizing critique of the Roman Empire, as mentioned above. In the sense of the Greek “apokalypsis” (“revelation”, “unveiling”), a hidden truth is expected to appear and end the corrupted present. Hence, this truth brings about significant change, a “crisis” in the literal sense of Greek “krisis” and Latin “crisis”: “decisive turning point.” In John’s *Revelation*, a New Jerusalem descends, which later socialist and communist movements sought to turn from metaphysical head to materialist feet. While at first glance many heavy metal songs simply exploit suffering and hardship, the cruelty of death by war, and the end of the world, they simultaneously promise empowerment, change, and renewal.

Kreator points to this Janus-facedness in their song “Your Heaven, My Hell” ([Kreator 2012](#)): “Let us celebrate the apocalypse/[. . .] Let this last farewell resound across all lands, all cultures, no more cholera messiahs/Embrace the dawn of a new earth, different from the first, so let it bleed while a new light shines/Let’s kill all gods, let’s shatter hypocrisy/My eyes are wide open/My eyes are wide open/Your Heaven, My Hell. I, destroyer/Your heaven, my hell. I Creator.” Traditional religious and popular secular apocalyptic artifacts, then, do not entice passivity or even fatalism. On the contrary—the impending Last Judgment or inner-worldly apocalypse, painted in drastic images, may also make believers/fans rethink their lives and try to become better people. The apocalypse serves, as does heavy metal, in the words of Hans Magnus Enzensberger, both as an “aphrodisiac” and as an “anxiety dream” ([Enzensberger 1978](#), p. 1). Just as John’s *Revelation* has been controversial as part of the Bible, so too is heavy metal often controversial as part of popular culture. Is heavy metal still “pop”? Isn’t it too weird, too crass, too extreme? Such questions pertaining to exaggeration also play a central role in philosopher Günther Anders’ reflections on “apocalyptic blindness” in his book *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* ([Anders \[1956\] 1961](#)).

Anders wrote about “apocalyptic blindness” ([Anders \[1956\] 1961](#), pp. 234–63) with regard to the reluctance of post-Second World War populations to acknowledge the possibility of a nuclear apocalypse. Against the backdrop of this reluctance and the sublime, unimaginable dimension of the possible large-scale crisis, he argued that “trivialized subjects require exaggerated formulations” ([Anders \[1956\] 1961](#), p. 235). Only through exaggeration “towards truth” ([Anders \[1956\] 1961](#), p. 175) could they be re-introduced into the public consciousness. Hence, for Anders, exaggeration is not opposed to popularization:

“If there is any chance at all of reaching the ear of the other person, it is only through sharpening one’s speech as much as possible. This is the reason for the exaggeratedness of my formulations. The happy time when one can afford not to exaggerate and not to overstate: this time of sobriety we have not yet reached.

What matters, then, is to find a tone that could be heard in a wider circle, that is, to philosophize popularly.”

(Anders [1956] 1961, p. 237)

What if heavy metal stood in this tradition?

In a sense, heavy metal can be considered as such an exaggerated form of “popular philosophizing” about the apocalypse and the crises (e.g., floods, fires, wars, etc.) connected with it (“apocalypse” understood not in a purely theological and metaphysical sense, but more generally as a major crisis that massively disrupts the prevailing order and brings about change). This “philosophizing” is not only popular in the sense of “a popular science book” or “a popular theory,” but part and parcel of popular culture itself and thus of entertainment, mixed with prophecy as a method of warning and of (allegedly) revealing truth. In fact, “war, particularly nuclear war, has long been an obsession in all forms of metal” (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 36). War is often summoned as a fascinosum in metal, but not necessarily as what it is veneered as in propaganda, e.g., as a series of calculated “precision blows,” as a moral necessity, or as a “heroic fight” against evil. War is also portrayed as chaos, pain, suffering, as cynical and nihilistic—this is the “revealing” part, as it were: “I march before a martyred world, an army for the fight/I speak of great heroic days, of victory and might/I hold a banner drenched in blood, I urge you to be brave/I lead you to your destiny, I lead you to your grave/Your bones will build my palaces, your eyes will stud my crown/For I am Mars, the God of War, and I will cut you down” (Motörhead 1986). “War is hell” (Toxic Holocaust 2008)—especially for ordinary soldiers: “The day not half over and ten thousand slain/And now no one remembers our names/And so it is for a soldier” (Motörhead 1991). Many more war songs from classic era bands and beyond could be listed along these lines, from Megadeth’s “Peace Sells” (1986) to Body Count’s “Shallow Graves” (1994) to System of a Down’s “B.Y.O.B.” (2005). Other metal songs deal with pandemics (e.g., Overkill’s “Elimination,” 1989), nuclear accidents (e.g., Cytotoxin, “Redefining Zenith,” 2017), floods (e.g., Wolfheart, “The Flood,” 2017), famine (e.g., Asphyx, “Three Years of Famine,” 2021), terror (e.g., Testament, “Evil Has Landed,” 2008). Hardly any of these musicians had directly, personally, or physically experienced the crises they sang about.

With that said, heavy metal, or more precisely its apocalyptic strands, can be interpreted as a particular instance of “premediation” within popular culture, and thus as a secularized form of “prophecy”. In the words of media scholar Richard Grusin, premediation can be explained via Steven Spielberg’s movie *Minority Report*. The plot revolves around a technology that “captures ‘precognitions’ of the future for playback in the present—for the purpose of preventing the recorded events from becoming actual history, to prevent the future from becoming the past” (Grusin 2010, p. 39). Rather than being a disinterested, self-centered practice, premediation “entails the generation of possible future scenarios or possibilities which may come true or which may not, but which work in any event to guide action (or shape public sentiment) in the present” (Grusin 2010, p. 47). In this vein, many classic heavy metal songs or cover artworks—and arguably apocalyptic artifacts in general—capture precognitions of the future not only to feast on the envisioned large-scale crises in a sensationalist manner, although this is certainly the case as well. They also “shape public sentiment” and hence the present; albeit not in an activist manner. As I have argued elsewhere, classic heavy metal rather pertains to consciousness-raising that precedes direct action, whereas punk and hardcore tend to prioritize the latter (Scheller 2014). The phrase “to shape sentiment” is therefore adequate in the context of classic heavy metal, also with regard to the above outlined affective side of metal. According to Grusin’s concept of premediations, the latter “contribute to the production of a collective affective orientation both towards particular futures and towards the future or futurity in general” (Grusin 2010, p. 48). In this respect, the proximity to prophecy becomes clear.

With Anders and Grusin in mind, it would be misleading to view the above-mentioned songs as nothing but sensationalist ghost trains rolling through the most vulgar fields of pop culture, drawing coaches filled with comic books, fantasy literature, horror movies,

and commodified apocalypticism. There is more to it than that. As I have argued above, religious apocalyptic artifacts such as the *Book of Revelation* also have a strong entertainment side, and this entertainment side bespeaks the need to gain the attention of the general public, to become popular, i.e., to be “noticed by many.” Precisely through exaggeration, they can serve as entities of premediation and as prophetic mementos—memento mori, memento belli, memento crisi. Accordingly, John’s fantasy-movie-like descriptions of bloody excesses preceding the revelation of divine truth take up considerably more space than his descriptions of the Last Judgment and the New Jerusalem. This is exemplary of the aesthetic profusion and exaggeration in apocalyptic artifacts in general and classic heavy metal in particular. In the sense of Anders, this feature can be understood as a dialectical counterpart to “apocalyptic blindness”; a blindness that is especially prevalent in relatively peaceful, stable times, and/or in times when the dimensions of the possible catastrophe are beyond imagination (e.g., with regard to global nuclear warfare). Put simply: the less tangible and/or imaginable death and disease, pain and decay, misery and chaos become in everyday life, the stronger the need to create an aesthetic residuum for them. Heavy metal can create such a residuum.

Against this background, Rolf Nohr and Herbert Schwaab are right to state: “To dismiss metal lyrics as eternally rigid and infantile overlooks the fact that metal made the nuclear apocalypse an omnipresent permanent topic at a time when Wolfgang Niedecken’s BAP still claimed a monopoly on the political disarmament song” (Nohr and Schwaab 2011, p. 389). While BAP may have addressed the nuclear apocalypse in their songs, they have not attempted to find an adequate, content-specific aesthetic form for it. Heavy metal, in turn, is all about creating an apocalyptic medium for apocalyptic messages. The genre keeps the possibility of major crises in the public consciousness not only through naming but also by premediating them, mimetically, as it were, with adequate aesthetic means (high volume, distortion, heaviness, comic-like imagery, etc.). The medium thus becomes the message.

It is precisely in aesthetic terms that heavy metal offers something such as “resilience training”; “aesthetics” here is understood as the simultaneity of sensory perception and sense-making (cf. Welsch 2003, p. 48). If “resilience” is basically defined as the ability to go through crises unscathed, then heavy metal can be understood as a form of aesthetic expression that attempts to counteract the repression of frightening thoughts and to push people out of their (aesthetic) comfort zones in order to raise awareness and build mental strength. The frequent depictions of apocalyptic violence in heavy metal are telling in this connection. Over longer periods of time, they lead to habituation among the recipients, which can be, and has been, criticized as a trivialization of violence, but can also be interpreted as a prerequisite for techniques of psychological coping, as Berndt argues: “The habituation thesis assumes that the reception of depictions of violence leads . . . to the acceptance of violence as a means of conflict resolution. The approval of violence through the reception of depictions of violence has not yet been proven beyond doubt, but at least the habituation to depictions of violence is indisputable. This is a necessary psychological adaptation mechanism that reduces emotional arousal in favor of mental processing” (Berndt 2012, p. 191).

The attempt to push people out of their comfort zones through heavy metal works on (at least) two levels at the same time. On the level of somatic experience and emotion through the cultivation of loudness, harshness, intensity, distortion, etc. (with ballads reinforcing these qualities dialectically via contrast); on the level of cognition and imagination through apocalyptic scenarios, virtuosity, and unusually intricate song structures (Elflein 2010, pp. 255–61). The aesthetic “overkill” typical of apocalyptic artifacts thus continues in the aesthetics of the heavy metal genre: “Iron Maiden seemed to be playing ten times as many notes as anyone else, and its dazzling compositional approach elevated the musicianship of heavy metal for decades” (Christe 2004, n.p.). This applies not only to the compositions but also to the lyrics. Iron Maiden’s song “Two Minutes to Midnight” (Iron Maiden 1984), for instance, references the year 1953. Back then, the “Doomsday

Clock" of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists stood at 11:58 o'clock because the Soviet Union and the USA carried out hydrogen bomb tests. The cover of the single record shows a zombie warrior in the foreground, national flags in the midground, and a mushroom cloud in the background. In the lyrics, various entities from an apocalyptic chamber of horrors and curiosities line up: a "golden goose," an ominous "killer's breed" and some "demon's seed," an "unborn killed in the womb," "napalm screams," the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, "children torn in two," "madmen," "starving millions" This comic-style exaggeration, this aesthetic hyperbole, and the distancing effects that go along with them can easily be ridiculed, as mentioned above. To some, they appear as utterly irrational and pubertal. However, it is they who ensure popularity and attest to the popular side of apocalyptic artifacts like the *Revelation*. Hence, they can as well be viewed in the light of Günther Anders' writings and understood as a—prophetic—aesthetic resilience training for large-scale crises to come.

5. By Way of a Conclusion

Those who confront themselves with heavy metal implicitly confront themselves not only with what is neglected and repressed in times of (relative) peace, but also with the dark fascination that war, disease, suffering, and their, at times revealing and transformative consequences, wield. That way, heavy metal continues the apocalyptic project of premediation in secular times and puts, in the sense of Günther Anders, aesthetic and contextual exaggeration in the service of popularizing what is repressed, downplayed, and trivialized. It thus may help to build mental resilience—if not prophetically, then at least presciently. In this connection, the apocalyptic popularity of heavy metal recalls what author Szczepan Twardoch wrote about the meaning of war in his personal life:

"War has dominated my imagination ever since I was a child. As a ten-year old, I idolized books about tanks and battle ships, was fascinated with their technical characteristics, and yet I never wanted to be a soldier because I always despised hierarchical structures, I didn't even feel like joining the boy scouts. However, war never left me in peace, it fascinated me and continued to move me as a grown-up, remained a constant topic of my readings, my intellectual work and my novels, and as it suddenly came so close [Twardoch refers to the war unleashed against Ukraine by Russia in 2022]—it was just as if I was ready for it, as if I had been preparing myself for it my entire life, and believing this is easy for me, because no bombs are being thrown on my house."

(Twardoch 2023)

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Note

¹ Since heavy metal is a relatively technical and calculating form of pop music (e.g., regarding speed and loudness records, or rigidly laid down compositions), measuring metal is not necessarily an act of encroachment (cf. Scheller 2022, pp. 53–54).

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