

# Representation of Woman in Metal Subculture

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Odjel za anglistiku

Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

**Adriana Janković**

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## Representation of Women in Metal Subculture

Završni rad

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Zadar, 2017.



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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to look closely at how women are represented in subculture of metal, since it greatly contributes to the construction of people's identities. In close connection with representation is the concept of popular culture, the otherness, male gaze, identity and the sole concept of gender, so it is important to clarify and explain these concepts in the beginning. The theory which is taken as a focus of the study is Laura Mulvey's concept of male gaze. It is then connected to some previous sociological researches done particularly on the field of metal subculture, as is Walser's "Running with the Devil" and Weinstein's "Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture". One particular woman, Jinx Dawson and her band Coven, is analysed in this paper as an example of how women's influence has been neglected since the emergence of metal as a genre, since the 1960s, especially if we are familiar with the fact that Coven was a predecessor to Black Sabbath, the most iconic metal band. Also, there are examples of different reactions by women themselves to obvious sexual objectifications which will be analysed.

All practices that are part of society are represented in a particular way, filled with meanings and values and contribute greatly to construction of our cultural identities. One of such social practices that are of great importance to most people could be listening to music. Thus, it is no wonder that world of music in general and its phenomenon is so deeply analysed in connection with identity, representation and gender studies, for instance with how women are represented in a particular society. Even when they first appeared in metal subculture, in the 1960s, women were represented and considered mostly as objects used to sell a particular band and its music, hence their sexual objectification. The fact of a lot of girls being groupies is added to this representation of women as objects. Of course, this is a generalisation and not necessarily true for each and every member of the subculture, but it is the realistic, general situation.

## 2. Theoretical background

Representation of a gender, as explained by Stuart Hall (346), a cultural theorist, is so uncertain as a concept that even those terms are not easily explained in general since they are also, from his point of view, culturally constructed and do not reflect some pre-given male and female 'essences'. This cultural significance of, for example, women, cannot be measured in comparison with the real world, but depends in which context it is observed, as in this case, women are observed how they are represented in the metal subculture. It is a particular case since subcultures have always been considered as a form of rebellion and defiance, even 'counterculture' (Hjelm et al., 6), regardless of the 'higher' culture in which it is observed. Connected to the birth of the female metal vocalist, which is a form of defiance, it is stated that "Often the consequences [of deviating from a culture's definition of masculinity or femininity] are severe and can affect your relationships, job opportunities, and quality of life." (URL 1) This can be transferred to metal subculture since many women who have been fighting with resistance of entering this male-dominated world of metal, have had to sacrifice their status in the society in general, as society tends to look at anything new with a bit of scepticism, and female's presence was particularly intolerable at first from the view of the already existing male members of metal subculture. Therefore, it was not easy for women to even enter the metal scene, not to mention the troubles they had to go through in order to be considered equal or even acknowledged as musicians. (Hall, 348; Addison-Wheeler, 7)

"Objectification theory postulates that many women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use by others" (qtd. in Szymanski et al., 6). Today we live in an environment that enables women to feel as sexual objects due to various reasons: existence of traditional gender roles; because of male-dominance, which causes women to hold less power than men in environment; a lot of attention is paid to physical attributes of women; there is approval and acknowledgement of male gaze... Szymanski et al. (20) include

in their research a specific term SOE (sexually objectifying environment) which is described through aforementioned core criteria. First of these is the existence of traditional gender roles which are defined as a set of behaviours, concepts and expectations according to cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity. When looked at from the perspective of traditional gender roles, men are powerful, controlling, dominant, see women as sex objects they possess, and sex as a conquest. Accordingly, women's traditional gender roles are to be nutritive, emotional, passive, dependent, harmonious, submissive, fulfil men's needs, seek protection from them and similar. (Szymanski et al., 21)

According to Hall (2), amongst other cultural fields, the term popular culture stands for widely distributed forms of popular music, otherwise called „mass culture“ of an age. It is of course changing over the years and periods and it is even regionally different, and metal is for some individuals a genre of popular culture which is not easily defined. Popular culture is often put in contradiction with 'high' culture and as something that needs to be regulated, especially in connection with the vulnerable youth. Culture in general may be most accurately defined as giving and taking of meaning between the members of a society or group. That meaning can be given to objects, people and events or any other phenomenon that occurs in the world around us, which consequently means music is a powerful tool in the hands of society because it can contribute greatly to shaping of people's identities.

Women also belong to that spectrum of parts of society that can be represented one way or another by the way we think, talk and feel about them. They are put in specific frameworks of interpretation and thus represented in the whole society, or as can be the case, in their micro fields as is metal subculture. The circuit of culture is a phenomenon responsible for producing meaning, since we create meanings in every aspect of cultural/social life. The meaning of the world around us that we create is hence responsible for the development of our own identity. Thus, when talking about music's cultural politics, it certainly plays a great



role in shaping of one's social identity. (Shuker, 2) In particular, subcultures use musical forms and styles as a basis for their identity. Even Bourdieu (qtd. in Shuker, 14) observed that taste in music most clearly affirms one's class. In particular, people who identify with metal music and the whole subculture in general, seem to share particular characteristics and values (such as standing up for yourself, surviving and overcoming impossible odds) as most of its members, from musicians to audience, are from working-class. (Pilay, 9) Marx (qtd. in Pilay, 3) claims that all such types of music that developed through history and are nowadays part of society we live in, are just a reflection of history class struggles. Therefore, it is logical to assume that metal music cannot be in concord with traditional feminine values, because of the historical struggle between classes and the aggressive behaviour that it triggers. It cannot be „cute and soft“ (qtd. in Pilay, 4). Accordingly, it seems to be that women who look and behave tougher and follow the dominant masculinist code are generally more accepted and admired in metal by both genders.

Saussure (qtd. in Pilay, 5), a theorist of structuralism argues that language defines ideas within the human mind and is thus responsible for some behaviours. Basically, language and thought are in the same connection as a signifier, symbol, word, or drawing; and signified, or the meaning behind it. In connection to metal subculture, an arbitrary joint of meanings can be produced - metal is a signifier of aggressive working-class individual. (Pilay, 6) How women are represented in this world is just one of the cultural fields that can be further analysed. One of the factors that has certainly also influenced the change of women's representation in metal, is the change in subcultures in general. Post-subcultural theorists suggest that subcultures nowadays have assimilated so much with the mainstream culture that there is hardly any difference. The people on the consumerist market are offered commercialized products to which also products unique for particular subcultures belong, as is not only music but also clothing and accessories, thus making it possible for anyone who is

not necessarily a member of a particular subculture, to resemble its member. That may be one of the reasons there is a thin borderline that differentiates subcultures from the mainstream culture nowadays. Also, mass consumption, globalization, and interconnectedness of people, places and products... it all adds up to transformation of the ways subcultures manifest in the identities of individuals. (URL 9)

### 3. Metal as a subculture

In order to understand the phenomenon of women representation in metal, it is first necessary to create a general picture of metal music as a subculture and as a genre, which emerged in the 1960s. The typical characteristics of the metal movement are distorted guitars, aggressive vocals concerning music and innovations in fashion such as denim, leather and spikes. Metal reached the peak of its popularity in the 1980s, and while a lot of especially young people enjoyed it, there were critics and other people who called it sick, repulsive, dangerous and considered its members unsophisticated. To be stereotyped, condemned and dismissed is nothing new nowadays for metal fans, since it has been happening consistently for over 40 years now. (Dunn) Although often considered a monolithic subculture, it is most definitely not since there are two main surges of subgenres that developed in the 1980s - 'lite' metal bands that embrace pop and rock such as Poison and Def Leppard on the one hand, and thrash metal bands such as Slayer and Metallica, from which other extreme subgenres of metal including black, death and doom developed, on the other. (Hjelm, 6)

Subcultures are an important part of formation of young people's identities, especially if they do not find concord in opinion with the high culture of their conservative mainstream society or out of spite to oppose their parents' class culture. In such cases, there are various subcultures and their suitable fandoms that one can join in order to be offered solutions to establish the wanted identity, outside of the norms offered by work, home or school. (qtd. in Shuker, 207) Metal as a subculture has since its beginnings been marginalized and represented on the edge of culture as such, as is the case with every other subculture – their members are often already somehow marginalized since they cannot meet the norms of the dominant culture or they chose and found their identities not as members of the dominant culture, but subculture. (URL 9) There is a great analogy that can be drawn with the dark,

noisy basements where foundations of metal have been set in the 1960s. However, it is by all means the most enduring genre, although in constant opposition with the society and engaging with some of its most controversial taboos and topics. (Walser, 11) Metal simply tends to be dominated by 'transgressive' themes and musicality due to which it often faces criticism, especially concerning obscenity, black magic and anti-Christian nature and is blamed for setting a bad influence on youth and their values. (Shuker, 217) (Hjelm et al., 6) As Stuart Hall (2) states, popular culture is to be considered an important site of social contestation and formation, but marginal culture, as in this case metal subculture, is not necessarily more important, interesting, complex or more profound than popular, mainstream culture. Weinstein (112) claims metal is not sexist, ageist or racist subculture, but defines it as exclusivist because it does insist upon upholding the codes of its core members. Still, there are members of the metal subculture who, in a very sexist way, presuppose that women are attracted less to „true“ heavy metal music and more to power/gothic love ballads. (Phillips, 28)

It has developed from the hard-rock/biker and the psychedelic musical subcultures, with some of its recognizable signs being long hair, leather, studs, denim, tattoos, flashing the devil horn sign, playing the air guitar, etc. (Weinstein, 16) Since the beginnings of rock n' roll music there has been a phenomenon called "moral panic"<sup>1</sup> surrounding it and it has been constantly connected with juvenile delinquency, obscenity, even linking the Columbine massacre to Marilyn Manson in 1999. Popular music has in general historically been constantly censured, condemned and regulated. It is no different with metal music as a subculture. (Shuker, 217) Heavy metal has as a genre since its beginnings been considered as

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<sup>1</sup> Moral panic is a sociological concept which appears in a community in form of over-reaction to new media forms (silent cinema and the talkies, dime novels and comics, television and video) and (often associated) deviant subcultural groups. There is a general concern of the impact of popular culture particularly on the young population, because it is seen by its critics as diametrically opposed to high culture and it is considered as something to be regulated. (Shuker, 192)

primarily male-oriented, since it is simply in accord with the social constructs. (Shuker, 232)

What is more, metal typically includes playing an electric guitar or drums, which is by traditional gender socialisation not considered feminine. Flute, violin and piano are traditionally „feminine“ instruments, whereas an electric guitar and all of the additional equipment (leads, amplifiers, plug boards) is considered „masculine“, especially when connected with the phallic thrust. Thus, since the emergence of rock music, women are typically excluded from this world merely because of social reasons. (qtd. in Shuker, 233)

„Many people hold that heavy metal music, along with drugs and promiscuous sex, proves that some parts of youth culture have gone beyond acceptable limits. To many of its detractors heavy metal embodies a shameless attack on the central values of Western civilization.” (Weinstein, 3)

That is why Dunn as a conclusion in his “A Headbanger’s Journey” also states:

*I’ve set out on this journey to answer one question: why has heavy metal been consistently stereotyped, dismissed and condemned? And what’s become clear to me is that metal confronts what we’d rather ignore, it celebrates what we often deny, it indulges in what we fear most and that’s why metal will always be a culture of outsiders.*

(Dunn, 2005)

In this citation, the core of the general mass’ opinion about heavy metal subculture is contained. Viewed from this point, it may explain why this subculture has been on the one hand attracting so many people since its emergence and has not collapsed or faded away and caused so much criticism on the other. Still, further researches are conducted on this particular field and it is more and more looked into as a particular subculture phenomenon.

## 4. Representation of women in metal subculture

### 4.1. Sexual objectification, male gaze and otherness

The fact that Shuker (90) claims that most metal magazines are aimed at adolescent male readership and are similar to teen glossies, says enough. As Szymanski (24) claims, one of the best manifestations that acclaim the objectification of women in metal subculture is visual media depicting women's bodies and body parts, as does Revolver Magazine, among others. Namely, in their yearly issues it devotes a whole section to the best looking women in metal subculture, called „Hottest chicks in metal“ (URL 4) regardless of their musical skills, thus objectifying them even more. On the other hand, magazine Metalholic with their annual issue tries to deny objectification as being the sole and main cause of such sections, articles and calendars. Before their article (URL 5), titled „Top 25 Women in Hard Rock and Metal for 2015“ Metalholic strictly claims this is not „hottest chicks in metal“ thing and directly refers to the reader that if they visited the page merely because of the pictures, to be free to “take their misogynist views elsewhere”, since their main aim is to promote talent and recognition of deprived females in the metal subculture and not their bodies. While it is true they try to devote most of their article to descriptions of their talents, the comments about their good appearances cannot so easily be avoided. One of the examples when such at first sight objectifying devices as “Metal Hammer Maidens of Metal Calendar” helped a band get signed is in the case of band “Kobra and the Lotus” because as Kobra herself states, it did happen very soon after her photo was published in the aforementioned calendar, but unlike many of her colleagues, she does not seem to be offended or of least value because of at first being taken into consideration primarily owing to her appearances. There is a similar situation that happened to Alecia ‘Mixi’ Demner and her band 'Stitched up heart'. In general, there are quite a few musicians (in this case female) and their bands who owe their breaking through on

the scene to such, one might say, sexist and misogynist articles. (URL 4) Obviously, the controversy among people is present and the question remains whether such representation of women in media is desirable or not. On the other hand, Arch Enemy's Angela Gossow firmly opposed the fact that Revolver represented her as one of the hottest chicks in metal as she obviously rejects any such objectification in metal world. According to her opinion, such representation „...unfairly steals some of their heavy-metal thunder by implying that the only reason that they are there is because they are that attractive—that they are there as eye candy and stage dressing, instead of as talented road warriors in their own right“. Angela believes such appearances clearly diminish women's fight to justly enter the world of metal music – being recognized because of their musical capabilities. (URL 6) I believe Angela has a clear point in opposing the representation of women as simply “eye candies” because it not only misfits in the mentality of heavy metal but it also falsely represents female metal musicians as solely objects for visual pleasure since female body is in wider society mostly sexualised so it in a way must transfer also to metal subculture. However, it is not simply due to men's (and women's) presence in metal subculture that leads to objectification, but the whole organization of cultural gender ideals that have the power and influence woman in the environment. (Szymanski et al., 24) As Walser (109) also argues, heavy metal as a subculture has always been man-made: made for, of and by men and mostly reflects patriarchal ideologies, male bonding and male power by representing misogyny and exclusion. This is reflected by excluding women from music, album covers and videos and mostly using male heroes battling against superhuman villains. Even if women are included, it is deliberately, to please the male gaze, or they enter the metal subculture through a boyfriend or due to the sexual attraction. It altogether contributes to them feeling like aliens in that world and may even cause women to feel as victims of sexual objectification and misogyny. (Shuker, 234; Walser, 129)

Since it is in the first place male-dominated subculture, it is logical that women are considered „the other“. The phenomenon of otherness exists also because of concept of the phallus which gives power to men. It is in this case not considered a part of anatomy of men, but as a social construct that defines gender. (qtd. in Pilay, 8) Females are deprived of phallus and thus not dominant. (qtd. in Pilay, 14) It is a kind of irrationality in metal subculture since the subculture itself is the culture of outsiders and „others“ when regarded in the whole society, so women as „others“ should be accepted and sympathized with. However, this is often not the case. The message that metal subculture often sends out with the concept of „groupies“ and depictions of half-dressed or naked women, is the one of misogyny, powerlessness and sexual objectification of women. Still, some, even the world's most famous groupie herself, Pamela Des Barres, claims that women, i.e. groupies also chose their way of life and are just where they want to be, even where they strive to be, hanging out with the band members and doing as they please. She says they are not dragged to be there, they even “make every effort to be there”. (Dunn) However, another view to it may also be integrated in them subconsciously due to society's set concept to be submissive to the Lacanian concept of phallus. (qtd. in Pilay, 19)

As mentioned before, in close connection with „otherness“ is Laura Mulvey's term of „male gaze“ introduced as such within her analysis of cinema. According to her vision of how it functions in the cinematic world, Mulvey states that women are merely bearers of meaning for men, who are the makers of meaning which perfectly emphasizes the power imbalance between them. A woman is considered a man's negative correlation. The same term is applicable in every other cultural aspect of life because it concerns the way men see women, the way women view themselves and the way they view other women. When talking about „male gaze“ in general, it is male in the first place because of the patriarchal order that was (and still is) predominant as in the whole society, so in the metal subculture. (Mulvey, 5)



Therefore, every field of activity is subordinated for the pleasure of the gaze of the predominant group – male, young, white population – hence the headlines such as „hottest chicks in metal“ or „top women of metal“. A female on such a display is passive and objectified for a male gaze regardless of the viewers' gender. That way, women have no choice but to experience the world around them secondarily, only after identifying with a man's perspective, i.e. the male gaze. Women connote to-be-looked-at-ness and at the same time are the objects of the male gaze. Not only do males find pleasure in looking at females, but there is also another important component – forming of their identity which comes by the help of the image seen. It is the represented woman that crystallizes the paradox of the gaze being pleasurable, yet threatening for the formation of identity. (Mulvey, 4)

In reference to Kaplan's survey about MTV videos and the male gaze she mentions in relation with metal subculture, Walser (112) denies it due to some shortcomings of her research. Namely, opposed to Kaplan, Walser (113) claims that music videos do not have such an impact on metal fans as much as concerts, radios, records and fan magazines do. According to his research, most metal fans watch MTV seldom or never (especially males), and many of them, females in particular, find more visual pleasure in watching photographs that can be found in the fan literature than in watching videos. Moreover, Walser (113) opposes Kaplan because of one more aspect of her research, and that is neglecting the music in the analysis of metal music videos, which also bothers metal fans who realize music is the primary concept in the whole phenomenon of music videos. Another point to consider is the fact that most metal music videos are primarily composed of live performances and scenes of audience at a concert and musicians performing. Another kind of pleasure and fantasy is thus offered to fans – as John Fiske (qtd. in Walser, 114) calls it – “The A-Team” – “a world of action, excess, transgression but little real violence, bonding with other men” which is important because as Barbara Ehrenreich points out, “growing up for young men where men

dominate the world means growing away from women”. In that way, while bonding with other males, men exclude the threat of the feminine world and its influence. Even in videos where the focus is off-stage, the main idea is the same: to represent women as excluded in the whole spectacle of male bonding. (Walser, 115) Males are said to be connected to metal music’s emotionality which exerts power and masculinity. For instance, in Judas Priest’s “Heading Out to the Highway”, the main motives that appear are cars, road, leather, poses, and of course no women – which gives the audience a perfect picture of what male freedom looks and should look like. The masculinity in metal is obviously very much prominent and celebrated in every aspect, which leads to the exclusion of females and their femininity to periphery. (qtd. in Walser, 115)

One explanation that may be taken into consideration when finding reasons for such strong oppression of women and exaltation of men, as Weinstein (275) claims, except for emphasizing the strength of patriarchy, may be that it is a defensive response to the weakening of male hegemony. Music-based masculine subcultures as is metal started developing approximately at the same time when the women’s movement was at its peak, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Young males were seeking to escape from maternal and other forms of female authority yet were attracted to women sexually and that is where contradictions and threats to male-dominance appear. Male children had freer rein in childhood, so when they transfer to adults, they must sacrifice some qualities which metal, for instance, celebrates. (Weinstein, 105, 110) On the same topic, Walser (124) also refers to Mulvey’s assertion that cinema at the same time allows temporary loss of ego and reinforces it. He claims music does and did the same long before cinema was invented, since music signifies a lot to its listeners, constructs categories in our minds such as gender, class, and race. Thus, music is inseparable from social reality and its aforementioned constituents. Walser rejects to refer to heavy metal music as sexist and nihilistic, since it is a fact that by the late 1980s, this particular subculture

included female audience and the inclusion of women in general was (and is still) growing, thus offering alternative sophisticated solutions for problems of gender relations and producing distinctive musical discourses. (Walser, 140)

It is even said that our gender identity may impact what pop culture we choose to consume. Music in metal is in general closely connected to feelings of identity and notions of community. (Shuker, 13) Still, over the past few decades, metal has been more open to women, with probably one of the most influential female band called Girlschool founded in the 1980s. (Pilay, 14) A very helpful circumstance in their successful breakthrough was that Motörhead recognized them as potential quality and they did some work together such as duets and touring. That still does not mean they were not mocked and patronized for their gender since they did enter a male-dominated world after all and they probably felt their power was in danger and because in such society, it was not expected of a woman to get up and play guitar. (Cogan, 123) It all happens because of the perception people have in their minds set by language we use, but females started to behave rebellious as well, destroying that way some of the set ideas of gender roles. (Pilay, 14) Another concept that co-occurs with women starting to rise on the metal scene is denoting their otherness by labelling the band as all-female or female-fronted. It is true that such bands are in a way admired and celebrated, but it is mostly due to their difference. Girlschool, Lita Ford, Doro Pesch, Nightwish and similar female-bands, interested the audience because they were different from all-male bands. (Pilay, 19)

#### 4.2 The concept of female gender in connection with metal subculture

The preconceived notion of female gender and the concepts it is connected with in European culture is, as Whiteley (274) states it „caring, nurturing, supportive, gentle and tender: feminine“. However, there is no one general and stable definition of femininity as it is

not constant and changes over time. Women are mostly portrayed as decorative objects in provocative clothes, while men are mostly represented as independent, adventurous, unemotional and competent beings. When looking at an object, people tend to see more than just the thing, we see the relation between the thing and ourselves. (URL 7) According to Lacan, gender is also a social construct, because it has no connection with biology, but the idea of one's gender is created by what the world around us tells us what we are, where language once again plays a significant role. (qtd. in Pilay, 9) Binaries also reinforce this idea and help create one's gender identity. Lacan says that male is a male because it is not female, and vice versa, female is a female because it is not male. (qtd. in Pilay, 9)

When it comes to the prevailing gender in metal world in general, it is most certainly male since the traditions and language of heavy metal have been developed and are still dominated by men. However, nowadays, a lot of attention is being paid to women's equality with men even in such male-dominated world. Heavy metal is overflowed by gender constructions that can be analysed as a cultural activity. That way we can learn not only about patriarchal assumptions and ideologies but such popular culture field may teach us about conflicts, conversations and bids for legitimacy and prestige. Males and females in the world of metal can be seen as constantly competing against one another for the power prevalence of their gender.

What is particularly interesting when talking about women in metal is a not-so-well-known fact that before Black Sabbath, whose band members are considered as godfathers of metal, there was a band called Coven fronted by an extraordinary woman, Jinx Dawson. She was the first to introduce the occult elements in metal which contributed greatly to the division of metal from other music genres, especially from rock music since occult elements are one of the few differences it has with that genre. She was also the first to introduce „The Devil Horns“, a sign made with fingers, also one of the typical signs for metal, rock and pop

culture. (Herron-Wheeler, 13) Interestingly, it was not until recently that Jinx herself found out the reason for Coven not being considered as influential and as the initial band of metal subculture. Namely, the former executive of Mercury label, that Coven eventually left, admitted to Jinx that they were looking for a band to replace them, wanting to tone down the occult references since it caused problems among people when Coven used it (especially because it was the time of hippies and love generation). Moreover, the label thought that an all-male band would not just appeal more but also be more acceptable to the wider public. So Black Sabbath (at that time called Earth) was a perfect band for them and when they accepted to sign for the Mercury label, metal started to develop even more, without people knowing it was mostly an imitation of Coven and Jinx Dawson. (URL 2) Already in 1970, a music critic Lester Bangs, recognized Black Sabbath as an unfair imitation of the band Cream and became conscious of the unjust removal of the band Coven from the newly-formed metal scene. (URL 3)

Coven as a band was not only special due to their innovative musical style that contradicted the general lifestyle and the hippie movement that was at its peak in the 70s, but also they were the first in such male-dominated society that introduced the woman as a leader of the band. Still, the only phrase that women were referred to in metal was “as good as a guy”, which says enough about the subconscious patriarchal ideals and male dominance. Except for that, there was no particular ongoing discussion about gender in 1970s, it was not until more recent times and with the beginning of feminist movement that such topics were concerned with the position of women in metal. Girlschool was a band that continued the era of women in metal, but in a new scene that appeared, New Wave of British Heavy Metal, which was mostly concerned with dissatisfaction of being born in the poverty and factory work. There was still no overt talk about them being feminist band, but the fact that they were present in NWOBHM as an equal band, was a message important enough. They even

sometimes objectified men thus turning the tables of sexism, and also portraying men as hunters and stalkers:

*You didn't like it / When I said no / You didn't want it / When I asked you to go / What could have led you / You to believe / Was it the skirt / Above my knees / Was it the way / I flicked my hair / Was it the way I said that / I did not care / You didn't mean that / Much to me / Now you'll be written out of my history.*

(Girlschool – Don't Mess Around)

For instance, in these lyrics, a sense of male inferiority is felt, thus “turning the tables”, i.e. reversing the roles and putting women at a dominant position. An interesting fact is that, being a part of metal subculture myself, males in not rare situations showed affection and maybe even fetishism towards such self-confident and I would even dare say dominant attitudes expressed by females. It is probably a phenomenon of its own, worthy of further and more detailed research.

Women in metal defer to one of the two distinct behaviours when it comes to entering the male-dominated world of subculture. According to Weinstein (105) and her experience, there are women who will take on masculine code and dress and behave accordingly, renouncing with it their own gender. A contextual element of sexually objectifying environment can be closely connected to this phenomenon because Fredrickson and Roberts (qtd. in Szymanski, 23) when introducing their objectification theory, claim that wearing „baggy“ clothes and adhering to masculinist code may be a strategy to avoid sexual objectification. On the other hand, there are those who will adhere to traditional feminine stereotypes in metal subculture and arouse male fantasy by highly sexualised way of dressing and behaviour. Both extremes are actually generated by not only the fact that most of the metal population is male, but it is the masculinist code, i.e. the culture of masculinity that is of greatest significance, whereas biological differences do not play such a role. It is even

dangerous to play or question the boundaries of femininity and masculinity in metal subculture. The reason why both behaviours are accepted is because sexually objectified women are there for male's pleasure but also serve as a reminder to exclude them if they become a potential threat for the men's control with too much of sexual power over men. Those who feel threatened by the power of women who flaunt their femininity feel the need to diminish their value by denouncing them posers or groupies. (Weinstein, 104) A music critic, Jose Mangin, admits: "Most of the girls that are fronting metal bands are very smart about it, and they know what they're doing, and good for them, I want to see more of that, you know, whether it's DJs on the radio, or, you know, just A&R chicks, there's not a lot of A&R chicks in metal, there's, I can't even think one, you know, so I think it's gonna happen more in 2010, because women are awesome, you know, high heels and you're done, done, sucker, you're done, yes ma'am, whatever you say". (Video 1) However flattering this may seem at first, there is a slight instance of aforementioned sexual objectification and the powerlessness males obviously feel when "threatened" by females' appearance that seizes their male gaze. Various researches (Abbey, 1982; Edmondson & Conger, 1995; Henningsen, 2004; Saal, Johnson, & Weber, 1989) also showed that men are keener on perceiving the world in sexual terms and thus mistaking friendliness for seduction and vice versa. Male-dominated environments are also more sexualized than female ones. (qtd. in Szymanski et al., 22) Women, who renounce their gender by behaving more according to the masculinist code, are normally accepted, even though their opinions are still questioned and patronized in some cases merely because of their gender. Women in metal are in general considered to be alienated because of their otherness and are thus mostly by the rest of the world considered least sexy, cultured, beautiful and exciting because the world of metal subculture totally contradicts their femininity unless they choose the pattern of behaviour that enhances their feminine side. However, they are then in danger of being considered slutty by the rest of the metal

population, and still not feminine enough for the rest of the culture. (Video 1) In 1990s, there was a punk movement by Riot Grrrls who wanted to break down the masculinist-dominated alternative scene and make cultural space for women to freely express themselves without being critically examined by males that dominated the scene. Although they were musically originally punk bands, their emphasis was on the social change and protest against marginalisation of women in the whole subculture rather than on music itself. They questioned traditional ideas of femininity and as a result were referred to by some writers as 'punk feminists'. (Shuker, 233)

Another connection can be drawn with the punk scene and gender identities in metal. Namely, a specific kind of circular dance in metal is called 'moshing'. Together with 'stage diving', it originated from punk scene in the 80s and it is typically considered reserved for male audience since it includes some violence. For instance, elbows and shoulders are often hurt due to being extended and used as bumpers since members of the audience come together and bounce off each other, similarly to punk slamming. (Phillips, 167) Due to this exclusion of females from common dance at concerts we can see a sign of gender discrimination, since this dance represents not only catharsis and riddance of aggression, but it is also as a huge part of bonding and shows unity between members of the same subculture. (Shuker, 15) Despite the respectful attitude that should be inherent in such violent and massive gatherings, moshing is mostly a masculine activity and it is less inviting to women. It is definitely a place to be entered at one's own risk, regardless of gender. (Phillips, 167) When talking about metal subculture, one cannot avoid the consumption of alcohol which is one of the several factors unique to this subculture. However, no matter how vague it may seem, the consumption of alcohol also has a deeper sociological meaning. Namely, it enhances the masculinity that surrounds the whole society, where on the one hand fans can compete and prove their ability to drink and get wasted, but also on the other hand prove their alcohol (and often drugs)



tolerance. In the same sense, female metal fans are mentioned as, again, the „weaker“ ones, in general, when it comes to drinking and Phillips (19) also states that women mostly prefer wine over beer and some other more „fancy“ drinks. It also adds to the picture that is conveyed about women because of their culturally constructed gender.

As the perception of metal as music through ages changed, so did the perception and representation of women. In its beginnings, women were just groupies and it was as close as they got to the metal subculture, until they started to fight for gaining their place as musicians. Still, throughout the whole history of female breakthrough in metal subculture, they were mostly praised and admired because of their otherness, and I believe to some extent it is still the case nowadays. Women who, regardless of that fact, still remain active in metal music are even more admired because of their straying from traditional gender roles dictated by society. For instance, the fact that male album reviewers nowadays write things about a band called Jenner as „They are a rarity in the genre being from Serbia and being all-female which only makes them more awesome,” (URL 8) adds to the fact that the position of women in metal is changing profoundly, one would even dare to say improving. They reinforce the aggression and rebel of metal even more by not giving up or caving in. In today's Western world, the case if women totally took up metal subculture would not be so much surprising occurrence as it would have been at its beginnings. Although heavy metal may have sexual deprivation and exclusion of women in its history, it has all led to women being even more empowered nowadays in this particular culture.

#### 4.3 Exception to the rule? Masculinity and femininity in glam metal

A particular subgenre of metal, called glam metal, is representative by looks that are often described as feminine and unmanly, taking from them colourful, tight clothes, having long, often curly and poofy hair, using make up and creating as unmanly look as possible. (Dunn) Such bands are for example Poison, Def Leppard, Kiss, Mötley Crüe... These bands

are specific in cultural terms because they embraced otherness and femininity as part of their appearance, behaviour and lifestyle, in direct opposition with their masculinity and manhood. This was their own expression of rebellion and they considered themselves so sure in their masculinity that it was no problem to subvert to the totally contrary picture. It was the most masculine thing one could do – being feminine. (qtd. in Pilay, 18) Even the band members themselves do not know why they did it, Dee Snider from Mötley Crüe admits that this whole “dressing as females and behaving as such” phenomenon must be looked into by a doctor to explain it more profoundly, since they were just having fun and trying to attract attention by going to extremes. (Dunn) But what was behind it, subconsciously, stays unclear. This supports Saussure's point about arbitrary significance further, because in glam metal, being so feminine and biologically male, meant being manly and rebellious. An interesting fact is that glam metal became the most popular subgenre of metal among females and its musicians got the most sexual encounters in the history of heavy metal. So the question imposes itself – did one accentuate its phallus even more by acting feminine? (qtd. in Pilay, 17) It may have been attractive for women to see those powerful males being above predisposed ideas of gender imposed by society on itself.

## 5. Conclusion

“Representation is a process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture through the use of language, signs and images which stand for or represent things.” (Hall, 15) It can refer to how a phenomenon or a person is portrayed and what is the general thought of it in a wider social environment. Representation is thus of great importance as a process since it greatly attributes to the formation of cultural identities of people. According to the theory of linguistic relativity (URL 10), the language we use is responsible for the perception we have of the world around us. Gender, for instance, is considered a socially constructed part of one’s identity and it is integrated and naturalized so much in society that people often fail to even analyse why some parts of behaviour are strictly connected to females, and others to males, and if the roles are slightly reversed, why is such behaviour not accepted and even frowned upon? To make a parallel conclusion with the topic of this thesis, it would mean that listening to a particular genre of music and actually taking its lyrics, i.e. language, into consideration, creates concepts in our mind. One of these concepts is how women are represented, i.e. looked at from the perspective of the dominant male gender, how they are treated in this particular subculture, what position they hold, how much power and right they have when participating in the subculture and its norms, values, rituals and activities. Their position and representation has been changing since the emergence of female musicians and is still in the process of normalization, since they have always been considered “the other” due to gender inequality in this male-dominated subculture. At first, women in metal emerged mainly as groupies and were present in order to please the male gaze, thus being the objects of sexual desire. Not only that, but they were (and still sometimes are), deliberately or unintentionally, sexually objectified by such representation in media (mostly magazines and music videos). Still, a survey by Walser firmly claims that metal fans are not subject to media influence, especially when it comes to music videos, but mostly take into

consideration radios, records, and find visual pleasure in watching concerts and fan magazines. Thus, it would seem that it depends on the person's will to oppose the imposed pressures of creating a concept of women as sexual objects, as generally, so in metal subculture.

To conclude, the aforementioned facts, when put into connection with the history of metal subculture and its general characteristics and social environment they occur in, create a picture of how the creation of concepts in mind is under influence of the environment, the society and its culture. With it goes the representation of women which is not stable, it changes during time and accordingly with the effort of both men and women that participate in any kinds of social activities. That is to say, when women are even mentioned in metal subculture, it is mostly connected to them being "the other", and them being sexualised or their work being undermined or even rejected merely because of the fact that they are females. It is an alarming situation, not only concerning the metal world but also because it is similar in the world in general because of the long history of patriarchal rules. People have embraced and learned to live that way in such great extent that the mentality is difficult to change. Yet, there seem to be small advances and improvements concerning this issue. Consequently, opinions and attitudes towards women as the other gender seem to be divided and are dependent on many surrounding factors.

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## REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN METAL SUBCULTURE: Summary and key words

This thesis is concerned with the problem of how women, with emphasis on their gender are represented in the world of metal subculture. Crucial cultural concepts such as representation, gender, sexual objectification, male-dominance, cultural identity and male gaze are connected with the wider topic of this thesis which is metal subculture. It is perceived as a special environment where its members' cultural identities and mental concepts, according to Saussure's theory, are formed under the influence of the whole subculture's mentality and representation of every object or phenomenon. When analysing the representation of women in metal subculture, a link with the opposition in popular and high culture is drawn according to the definitions and theories by Stuart Hall. When describing metal as a subculture, a concept of moral panic is taken into consideration as one of the prevailing in wider society when it comes to innovations.

Keywords: representation, gender, male-dominance, sexual objectification, cultural identity, male gaze, metal subculture, popular culture



## REPREZENTACIJA ŽENA U METALU KAO SUBKULTURI: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Ovaj rad bavi se problemom predstavljanja žena s obzirom na njihov rod u metalu kao subkulturi. Bitni kulturološki pojmovi poput reprezentacija, rod, seksualno objektiviziranje, muška dominacija, kulturološki identitet i muški pogled su povezivani sa širom temom ovog rada koja je metal kao subkultura. Subkultura je promatrana kao posebna okolina gdje se, prema Saussureovoj teoriji, oblikuju i razvijaju kulturološki identiteti i mentalni koncepti njenih pripadnika pod utjecajem mentaliteta cijele subkulture i reprezentacije svakog objekta ili fenomena, gdje spadaju i žene. Pri analizi reprezentacije žene u metalu kao subkulturi, povučena je i poveznica s popularnom kulturom kao oprečnom visokoj kulturi prema definicijama i teorijama Stuarta Halla. Prilikom približavanja metala kao subculture, uveden je i koncept moralne panike kao jedan od prevladavajućih u širem društvu kad se radi o inovacijama.

Ključne riječi: reprezentacija, rod, muška dominacija, seksualno objektiviziranje, kulturološki identitet, muški pogled, metal subkultura, popularna kultura