

# ■ Too Much to Digest: The Irresistible Voice in Contemporary Gothic Metal

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## Abstract

Ingestion concerns not only the body but also the language, an instinctual behavior which consumes, and at times repulses, materials and structures of signification. Voice, emitted by the mouth and received by the ear, is a particular kind of ingestion which has troubled philosophers throughout history, and a common Gothic device deployed to question the integrality of the perceiving, listening character, at the same time tempting him/her with the guilty pleasure-in-pain, *jouissance*. This essay discusses the ambiguity of voice, its extimate relationship with the body and the language. Adopting a Lacanian/Žižekian psychoanalytic approach, this essay suggests that “the object voice” be understood as the primitive bodily signifier resistant to symbolization, with the quality of the Thing, a surplus, intimate otherness which troubles the subject and resists fetishization, therefore always causes of anxieties. Contemporary Gothic Metal’s manipulation of the singing/growling voice is analyzed in this essay; this subculture’s ingestion of the poisonous voices such as the siren voice, the hysterical voice, the demonic voice, the bestial voice, the spectral voice, and the frenetic voice shows a libidinal economy that, instead of obeying the pleasure principle and vomiting the object voice, consumes and internalizes it, along with the potentially devastating *jouissance*. Such an ingestion of voice is understood as a way to deal with the subject’s immanent void, the Thing misperceived as subjectivity.

**Keywords:** voice, the object a, fantasy, Slavoj Žižek, Gothic Metal

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Ingestion concerns the preservation not only of the material body, but also of the symbolizing language which demarcates and regulates the consuming body as well as the consumed food. Through accepting food or rejecting it, or denying it—repulsing it after it is ingested—one consciously or unconsciously addresses the Symbolic Other, in other words, makes a voice that is simultaneously somatic, bodily. Voice is therefore closely associated with ingestion. Emitted by the mouth that also eats, voice carries a bundle that is received by the ears of an other who may or may not properly listen to and hear, properly digest this incoming voice, an other who may or may not “voice itself” in return. Indeed, the circuit of voice depends on the ingestion of language; it appears that voice is for language and the body what food is for the body, that voice is a particular kind of food preserving the symbolizing language. However, the voice in its relation to body and language is so unstable that it may appear to be forever oscillating. This paper will attempt to elucidate the ambiguity of voice in relation to body and language, that is, to clarify the nature of voice as the *objet a extimate* to both body and language. As a further development of this idea, the paper will analyze contemporary Gothic Metal music in light of the theorization of the object voice, demonstrating not only the libidinal economy underlying the musical composition of Gothic Metal but also its subcultural ethics.

Voice and language, *phōnē* and *logos*, the relationship between these two has never ceased to trouble philosophers. There is a tension between *phōnē* and *logos*, much though they depend upon each other, and this paradox is perhaps most of all revealing in the case of music, the “most rational and technical of all arts yet the most resistant to rational explanation” (Kompridis 168). Music seems to be an art which gives philosophers nightmares, or perhaps indigestion. The truth is that western civilization has always suffered from “music trouble,” and the west has needed thousands of years of philosophical, musical, and cultural domestication and rationalization to guarantee the precarious supremacy of *logos* over *phōnē*.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the philosophers’ anxiety about music originates from *phōnē*, the sound but also the voice, and it is the voice which is supposed to “communicate the presence in flesh and bone” that causes such a problem with music (Cavarero 1, 177). The philosophers’ affinity for the “bodiless universality” of a “*logos* . . . devocalized to the sphere of silent thought”—which also has “misogynist overtones” according to Cavarero (8, 43, 4)—is incompatible with the “eva-

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<sup>1</sup> For insightful historical and philosophical discussions on the tension between *logos* and *phōnē* in the western tradition of music, see Cavarero 158-59 and Hamilton 1-3.

nescent, corporeal vocal emission" (4), and the solidification of *logos* eventually results in the privileging of the "rational, masculine *logos*" that "thinks" over the "mad, feminine voice" that "sings" (6). The devastating power of voice therefore lies in its "excessiveness," for voice is always more than *logos* and points to that "body" which is often repressed, devocalized (30-31). Approaching the question of voice from the viewpoint of subjectivity, John Hamilton points out that rather than assuring the subject's "presence" and "autonomy," the "evanescent quality of the voice" often "undermines the subject's position" if the voice is not gathered into a meaningful sequence, a *logos* (27-28). Thus the "maddening subversion of the voice" never ceases to haunt "the rationalizing force of the word":

[L]ike Freud's return of the repressed, sonority, rhythm, and timbre—remnants of a preverbal, lost sphere of pleasure—continue to press upon the symbolic process of signification and thereby threaten to destabilize the very ground of subjectivity, namely, the systematic functioning of language that produces the subject. (12)

Like Hamilton, Mladen Dolar argues that there is a "dichotomy of voice and *logos*" (43). The real danger in music is "the voice that sets itself loose from the word, the voice beyond *logos*, the lawless voice" that "threatens the established order" (Dolar 45; Žižek, "I Hear You" 103). Voice is then an extremely unstable signifier that appears to be something more than itself. It can be the docile carrier of *logos*, but more often the voice slides toward meaninglessness; it "belongs to the living" and "signals a body," but it can detach itself from the body and become disembodied (Dolar 59). The singing voice in music, Jan Jagodzinski declares, "exceeds the word so as to transgress and go beyond the Law" and indicates the point "where the drive meets desire" and "where excessive jouissance meets *logos*" (33). This subversive power moreover splits voice, causes the *deadlock* of voice; voice is always split and contradictory, as the incompatibility between Cavarero's corporeal-oriented and Hamilton's subjectivity-oriented theorizations clearly manifest. In ontological terms, the moment voice is emitted it is already incongruous with the emitting body; it enters several systems of signification and libidinal economies, enters a cycle of vocal digestion; it carries an "excess, the point of fascination" (Dolar 10) and so wreaks havoc in the form of a sublimity whose other side or face is monstrosity, even ridiculousness. While music opens up endless processes of the Symbolic/Imaginary in its endeavor to tame voice, the unstable signifier of *logos*, *voice as the objet a*, the residue of the signifying process, marks the limits of these processes and consequently reveals the horrible, disintegrating emptiness of the listening subject.

## A Psychoanalytic Theory of the Voice

In his “Analytic of the Sublime” in *Critique of Judgment*, having been ambivalent about music because unable to decide whether it is beautiful or even agreeable, Kant condemns it as a form of poison and contamination:

The case of music is almost like that of the delight derived from a smell that diffuses itself widely. The man who pulls his perfumed handkerchief out of his pocket attracts the attention of all round him, even against their will, and he forces them, if they are to breathe at all, to enjoy the scent. . . . (220)

Involuntary indigestion characterizes music, its *phōnē* being poisonous to both the listening, absorbing body and the linguistic, sociopolitical *logos*. Yet the lethal curiously brings about a particular sense of pleasure, pleasure-in-pain, *jouissance*. So overwhelming is this sense that Kant speaks of the violent, Sublime power (*Gewalt*) that frustrates our imagination and reason, instead of an ordinary power (*Macht*) (Hamilton 113). In psychoanalytic terms, despite the unremitting Symbolic *logos* that tries to control music, the Real lurks in it, always ready to erupt, devastating the subject with its *jouissance*. Kant’s judgment of music—violence, with the implication of poison and contamination—testifies the philosophical tradition of music trouble, yet it is exactly the Kantian Sublime degrading music, the “wearisome” producing only “*transitory* impressions,” as the lowest of arts, which inspires the Romantic theory of musical transcendence, a retroactive fantasy of primordial full satisfaction (Kant 219, original emphasis). This section will theorize the concepts of the object voice, the voice-Thing and most importantly the musical fantasy of absolute pleasure, a fantasy ruthlessly smashed by contemporary Gothic Metal.

In the Romantic fantasy of musical transcendence, *phōnē* is the only sense allowed in the extra-sensual world, the shared and sharing voice—related to “life, a living being”—essential in the transindividual realm of absolute pleasure (Žižek, “I Hear You” 94). An association between voice, music, and pleasure indeed prevails in the western history of music, at least since Aristotle’s statement that music is one of “the most pleasant things” (Aristotle 235). Music has always been associated with a pleasure by no means ordinary, one that is absolute, ineffable, too intense to express. Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann also speaks of musical transcendence: “[M]usic discloses to man an unknown realm . . . a world in which he leaves behind him all definite feelings to surrender himself to an inexpressible longing” (qtd. in Burkholder, et al. 604). This inexpressible longing for or of a transindividual realm, a boundlessness permeated by voices shared and sharing, is reminiscent of what Freud terms “entropy,” the “desire for

undifferentiation” of the child who has no sense of difference between self and other, subject and object (Jackson 72-73).

In psychoanalytic terms the desire for non-differentiation is a regressive, narcissistic desire for primordial enjoyment, and the idea or sense of music as absolute pleasure is a fantasy through which we endeavor to occult the *deadlock of voice*. Through a retroactive construction, the subject misperceives the unrecognizable Thing charged with jouissance as the enjoyment primordially ceded to the Other. Here jouissance (mistaken as primordial, full satisfaction) is characterized as “musical,” the “physical energy circulating between and within musical bodies of self and Other” (Jagodzinski 43). In the fantasy of a musical absolute pleasure, the transindividual realm refers to the pre-Symbolic stage during which the infant enjoys the full “sonorous body mediated by voice” (39). Yet the primordial cut soon destroys the full voice. When the caring other becomes the Other, immediately there is a traumatic split in the shared voice, which is the distinction between the voice of the Other and the voice of the poor infant. The voice of the Other is that part of enjoyment which the infant cedes, the primordial lost enjoyment, the attractive voice-Thing which the Symbolic subject forever longs for.

The transindividual absolute pleasure thus designates the forever lost voice-Thing, jouissance hidden by the mask of full satisfaction, but the situation is complicated. The intervention of the letter or of writing during the formation of the Symbolic subject further splits the voice of the Other. The Other as the Law, *logos*, is mute; it is “essentially *written*” (Žižek, *Metastates* 57, original emphasis). When the Other does use the voice, the voice is “the structural element which ensures that the letter is not ‘the dead letter,’” “*structurally at the same position as sovereignty*” and having the potential of suspending the Law (original emphasis, Dolar 120). No wonder we have *logos*’s incessant regulation of sound and voice throughout western civilization. In contrast, the superego, the obscene support of the Law, has no problem with voice. It always appears as the “traumatic *voice*” (Žižek, *Metastates* 37, original emphasis). The voice of the superego demands, regardless of the subject’s own desire. An excessive voice, the voice of drive, it “appears as the part of the Father which is not quite dead” (Dolar 101), that is, as the Father-Enjoyment evoking the jouissance of the voice-Thing.

In a sense, the superegoic voice in our head demanding that the subject “Enjoy!” does return the voice-Thing to the subject, only that the jouissance is too much to digest. As for the traumatized infant, having tasted the otherness of the Other, it fixes itself and its voice on the narcissistic Imaginary of the whole body image. This fixation does not last long, for the transition from the

Imaginary ego to the Symbolic subject immediately partitions and signifies the infant's body and voice. As "the first sign of life," the voice implies "a subjectivity which 'expresses itself' or inhibits the means of expression," and is a fetishistic empty signifier where meanings fight against one another (14-15). The infant's voice is split again and again, entering different systems of signification behind which are the Others. Ultimately what is left to the infant (now a Symbolic subject) is nothing but a voice, a residue: the object voice, the primitive bodily signifier unassimilable to any kind of signification, extimate to both body and language. The subject retroactively regards the/its lost Imaginary wholeness as a lost primordial wholeness, and the object voice as the voice-Thing. In other words, the object voice now substitutes for the voice-Thing in the fantasy of transindividual absolute pleasure.

The theorization of the fantasy of musical "absolute pleasure" highlights the splitting of voice and the misperception of *jouissance*, in sum, the *deadlock of voice*. The rest of this section will focus on the *voice extimate to language and body* which gives both the individual consuming body and the Symbolic body of *logos* "indigestion," and will provide a theoretical approach to the vocal analysis of contemporary Gothic Metal. The aforementioned distinction between the voice-Thing and the object voice requires further elucidation. In reality the absolute negative Thing, the uncognizable void, must "suffer misrepresentation," and the liminal *object a* designating "what remains of the Thing after it has gone through all processes of symbolization" often functions as a substitute for the unrepresentable Thing (Boothby 242). The power of the indeterminate voice which dismantles subjectivity by excessive fixation or disintegration has the dimensions of both the voice-Thing (absolute negativity or void) and the object voice (primitive bodily signifier or quasi-substance). It is impossible to draw a definite line between the two due to their affinity and synchrony. In this paper the object voice, therefore, refers to *the primitive bodily signifier resistant to symbolization, with the quality of the voice-Thing*.<sup>2</sup>

Language and body are two crucial dimensions from which the analysis of the object voice starts. The object voice is the leftover, an empty signifier, an excess which has no signified. From a "logocentric" point of view that denies voice a meaning of its own, so that it is not always already destined to become speech, however, voice must contribute to the process of signification (Cavarero 13). As noted earlier, voice, the sign of life, is a fetishistic signifier that is always

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<sup>2</sup> This theorization of the voice-Thing and the object voice, which departs from Žižek's usage of the term "object-voice," is meant to highlight the split nature of voice as well as the complex retroactivity of "enjoyment" in voice.

under interpretation. Even slight differences in vocalization such as accent, intonation, timbre, modulation, cadence, and inflection are relentlessly and ceaselessly categorized, codified, and conventionalized so that eventually voice can be “streamlined by meanings” and “language” (Dolar 20, 21). Similarly, the spontaneous voice is subjected to an intersubjective network and transformed to become “minimal speech,” “address and enunciation” as manifestation of desire, which is also the desire of the Other (28).

A horror-stricken scream, Žižek observes, marks the “relief of vocalization” that finds an outlet for the unbearable tension (*Symptom* 117). The Other interprets the voice as the enjoyment that is sacrificed to it, to provoke it and sway it, to satisfy its impenetrable desire. That is, the scream “voices” and answers the “*che vuoi*.” Thus, the seemingly purely instinctive scream already involves the choice to exchange enjoyment with the Other, so that “the subject finds himself/herself within the community” (117-18). The voice always reaches its destination; in fact the moment it is voiced, it enters the intersubjective systems of signification and already reaches the destination (the Other). Dolar analyzes the double interpretation of this spontaneous vocalization as “a double movement, interpretation of the scream and scream as interpretation of the Other” (28). The concentration on meaning or signification renders voice the helpless carrier of *logos* which prefers the silent reason and the dead letter.

If vocalization cannot escape the clutch of meaning, then the paradoxical conclusion is that “the object voice par excellence” in the strictest Lacanian/Žižekian sense is “silence” (Žižek, “I Hear You” 92). In other words, “the voice qua object is precisely what is ‘stuck in the throat,’ what cannot unchain itself and thus enter the dimension of subjectivity” (*Symptom* 117). The *person* refuses to exchange enjoyment with the Other, clinging to the voice-Thing. The object voice at its purest must be “divorced from sonority” (Dolar 159), and “we *do not hear*” any absolute negativity beyond vocalization (Žižek, *Symptom* 117, original emphasis). Silence, though, is not the only form of the object voice. What Žižek means by using the term the “object voice” may be better understood if we consider the dimension of enjoyment.<sup>3</sup> Misperceived as primordial enjoyment (full satisfaction) in the libidinal economy, the object voice is the “something evasive and not conducive to signification” around which desire turns (Dolar 72). Dolar points out that despite the Symbolic *logos*’s endeavor to make even vocalization itself a form of signification in language, “on the way to making sense it

<sup>3</sup> For example, Christine’s voice as a substitute for the maternal voice-Thing in *The Phantom of the Opera*, Doris Day’s scream as an expression of incestuous enjoyment in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and Ariel’s hypnotic, disembodied voice as representing fetishistic fixation in *Little Mermaid*.

always produces more than the sense catered for, its sounds exceed its sense” (146). As a result “there is an excess of sounds over sense, a sound-surplus which does not make sense, it is there just like that, for the fun of it, for the beauty of it, for the pleasure of it” (146). The object voice (the primordially excluded voice-Thing) making meaning possible literally means nothing but a surplus pleasure, an excessive enjoyment, threatening to impede the Symbolic fluidity of signification with its enthralling meaninglessness. Nor does the object voice allow a narcissistic fixation on the false sense of full satisfaction (the fetishistic nonsensical voice) for long, since it is only a short-circuited *jouissance* that hurls voice after voice at the subject, disintegrating it with the monstrosity of too many sublime voices.

The opposition between voice (vocalization) and silence, from the perspective of the body, stems from the long tradition that associates voice with life and silence with death. Conventionally, the voice embodies a “presence” (Dolar 36), a positive entity, a substance or an inner worldly object that pertains to the body; it is the “corporeal bodily resonance” (Cavarero 108), “material” (136) and “interior to body” (107). Furthermore, every voice is “unique” (25), “singular” (Hamilton 12), and “evanescent, communicating itself before it communicates any definitive sense” (32). The voice is a bodily signifier of one unique individual’s ontological body. This bodily signifier is substantial and doomed to be split: recognized by the Other, it is rendered a carrier of the dead letter (Cavarero 25). Such a substantial voice would not be questioned until machines begin to sound like humans, and what the phonograph achieves is precisely the traumatic desubstantialization of the voice. New technologies increasingly blur the distinction between the natural voice and the artificial voice, and indeed on the contemporary music scene there is no voice that is not unprocessed.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the substantial voice assuring a bodily presence, the object voice is the traumatic partial object excessive to the substantial body, simultaneously signifying the absolute negativity, the void of the Thing. The object voice does not pertain to the subject’s body; it reminds us of a body once violently partitioned, a body that the subject is not sure can be pieced together again. The object voice is “both the surplus of the body, a bodily excess, the no-more-body, the end of the corporeal, [and] the spirituality of the corporeal” (Dolar 71). Far from “assuring the subject of [its] self-presence,” the “meta-physical” object voice, “the spiritual corporeality as materialized *jouissance*” (Žižek, *Fantasies*

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<sup>4</sup> Even in live performance, synthesized, re-tracked, re-mixed voices are synchronized with the “natural live singing voice,” which is “mediated” (if not processed) by multiple high-tech receivers and amplifiers.

42), functions, quite on the contrary, like a stain, a strange body “prevent[ing] the subject from achieving [its] self-identity” (Awry 125-26). The primordial full satisfaction and the narcissistic Imaginary fixation mask the object voice that is energized by the repetitive drive of *jouissance*. The object voice is the Siren’s singing voice: one thinks he/she is listening to the pleasurable voice of desire, and then all of a sudden finds that this voice is “the object of a drive” and finds that he/she enjoys being devoured by the Siren.

The desubstantialized voice, the voice without the body is inherently uncanny, and indeed is a favorite device of the Gothic. Michel Chion’s study on *acousmètre*, “the acousmatic character,” provides Žižek and Dolar with a perfect example of the vocalized object voice (Chion 129-30). Žižek defines “*la voix acousmatique*” as “the voice without bearer” that “cannot be attributed to any subject and thus hovers in some indefinite interspace,” while Dolar regards the “acousmatic voice” as “a voice whose source one cannot see, a voice whose origin cannot be identified, [and] a voice one cannot place” (Žižek, “I Hear You” 92-93; Dolar 60). It is what sticks out, an acoustic blot that already includes the listener. The acousmatic voice is but one possible form of the object voice. It terrifies not because of the disappearance of the body, but rather because of its *indeterminacy*. Jagodzinski observes that the singing voice almost always “uncannily detaches itself from the body” (50). Somehow voice uncannily exceeds the interior of the body and extends to the exterior; the voice “outsizes” the perceptual body as if there is another “acoustic body . . . float[ing] on its own” (39). The fact is that even the normal voice is never wholly interior; rather it is *liminal*, between the interior and exterior. The moment voice is emitted it irreparably detaches itself from the body, entering the Symbolic *logos* which cannot completely digest and symbolize it.

The object voice turns out to be “*what language and the body have in common,*” but “*part neither of language nor of the body . . . extimate to both*” (Dolar 73, original emphasis). The problem of the fantasy of absolute musical pleasure obviously lies in the wish to re-substantialize the subject through voice to regain full satisfaction, through voice as an unquestionable substance belonging to the body of the subject desubstantialized by the transcendental Reason. The dream of sharing voices fetishizes voice, stopping short on the verge of the void, the *deadlock of voice*. We listen to music “*in order to avoid the horror of the encounter of the voice qua object*” (Žižek “I Hear You” 93, original emphasis). After the sublime subjective destitution, music and voice are relocated in the register of the pleasure principle after all, and in the end reconstitute the subject of transcendental Reason.

The theorization of the object voice as *the liminal bodily signifier with the quality of the Thing, extimate to both body and language* enables us to analyze

contemporary Gothic Metal from a vocal approach supplanted by musical and textual analyses.<sup>5</sup> This paper is then defining the object voice in Gothic Metal in relation to both body and language. Radically ambiguous, enjoyable and unbearable, the object voice challenges the limits of the human, putting in question the boundary between human body, animal, and machine. Linguistically, the object voice tends to make little sense at the level of lyrics as it is often wordless or singing incomprehensible words, thus simply enjoying the signifier(s) regardless of any signified(s). The object voice may be fetishized, elevated to the sublime voice of full satisfaction, but *jouissance* always threatens to desubliminate this Imaginary fixation: the sublime voice becomes monstrous or ghostly, if not a ridiculous croak stuck in the throat, signifying nothing but “indigestion.”<sup>6</sup> Despite all possible means of symbolization and embodiment, language/*logos*/body still cannot swallow the voice.

### **Dark Diva, Beauty and the Beast, and the Evil Symphony**

Goths rarely fight, thanks to Gothic subculture’s lack of a central ideology except for the metaphoric “dark code” which could be simplified as a kind of “romantic obsession with darkness” (Goodlad and Bibby 1). With its predilection for the dreadful and macabre (1), beauty deformed (Ancuta 73), the grotesque and degeneration, Gothic subculture emulates a melancholic mindset expressing sometimes a somber depression, sometimes an unrestrained, exultant mania (86-87).

When it comes to the question of music, nevertheless, Goths do fight, although “fight” in the Gothic subculture tends to connote sado-masochistic fun. As Katarzyna Ancuta correctly observes: “there is no better way to provoke an argument among Goths than to ask them to define Goth as a musical genre today” (48). Gothic Metal is a postmodern hybrid monster that “makes more sense in retrospect,” as most musical genres do (Kilpatrick 87). Still, there are some characteristics shared by Gothic Metal bands, although they are not necessarily exclusive to this genre.

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<sup>5</sup> To clarify my criteria of “the object voice in contemporary Gothic Metal,” it should be emphasized again that in the strictest Lacanian sense these voices are misrepresentations of the silent object voice. The primary focus of this paper, however, is to point out how contemporary Gothic Metal, through its pervertization, hysterization, manipulation, and combination of voices and sounds in the Gothic context, approximate voices to the haunting effects of the silent object voice.

<sup>6</sup> This is exactly what happens to the “diva” Carlotta in *The Phantom of the Opera*, and a common technique deployed by contemporary Gothic Metal.

Gothic Meal, Electronic Goth, Dance Goth, Dark Wave and Ambient, as well as Doom Metal and Death Metal to a certain degree, have all inherited the Gothic traits of 1980s Gothic Rock, “the darker offspring of punk and the bastard pansexual cousin of glam,” distinguished by its “eerie guitar effects, strong bass lines, and morbid, introspective lyrics bearing similarity to the psychological focus of Gothic literature” (Kilpatrick 79, 88). Gothic Rock is in love with “spooky sound effects” achieved by manipulation of several registers of sound. Guitar distortion, “disjunct harmonies, broken-chord, and roulades” (Walser 284) are intensified with “echoes and digital delays” (Bibby 243). The scales of the dominant bass go extremely low, with a preference for “descending chromatic line” (Walser 268). With its classical music heritage, Gothic Rock often evokes “Baroque music,” especially in its “harmonic minor modality” (294), its “ominous organ, and the fateful cyclical progressions set[ting] up an affect of mystery and doom” (281). Gothic Metal brings the aura of the “Gothic cathedral” (Bibby 240) into full play by combining this with the Gothic’s long fascination with the sublime/monstrous voice, “the voice that emulates the soul drifting from the body” (Kilpatrick 77).

Unsurprisingly, then, the quality of *voice* is a crucial element of Gothic Metal. Under the spotlight, the sublime diva, angelic beauty and monstrous beast mediate the symphonic and disruptive metal sound registers. Usually Gothic Metal bands feature one female vocalist, often classically trained (a diva or goddess), but female vocalists (angels) who were not operatically trained are also quite common. Bands may have regular male vocalists, most of them “death vocals” who accompany the female vocalist. The combination of the clean, sweet female vocalist and the aggressive male death vocal is called “beauty and the beast,” a pattern highlighting extreme vocal incongruity. The demarcation of the diva, angel and monster, however, is often subject to musical/vocal manipulation. Gothic Metal specializes in complex ensembles and tricky sound effects, with the listener confronting *jouissance* in his/her experience of the “Gothic moment” (Beville 37). In the subculture’s terms, a voice “goes goth!” In Gothic Metal, then, the voice is seldom just “a pleasurable singing voice,” but expresses hallucination, delirium, hysteria and perversion. These “voices in one’s head” which are “in me more than me” and menace reality, question the very existence of reality, and threaten to disintegrate the subject.

Extremely complex and scrupulous compositions with unabashedly “overt” sound effects (Bibby 239), mainly relying on the keyboard, distinguish Gothic Metal from other Metal genres. If Gothic Rock tends to create the aura of “doom,” it prefers the Burkean Sublime of overwhelmingly painful pleasure. Elements of classical music, especially symphonic, baroque and polyphonic

ones, are so common in Gothic Metal that it is also called symphonic Metal.<sup>7</sup> Appropriations of classical music are mixed with heavy instrumental bass and guitar passages, producing deep, low, eruptive sound registers, and the tension between classical and metal requires the mediation of the vocalists. Double bass drums increasingly join the eruptive register and literally “attack” the listener with bombastic techniques. The musical innovations of Gothic Metal highlight the essentially uncontrollable nature of music by exaggerating its “incongruity.” Most importantly, through juxtaposing at least two discrepant sound registers, Gothic Metal challenges the singing (or growling) voice as mediator. Pushed to its limit, this voice that we expect to be simply sublime or angelic turns out to be monstrous, while the beastly voice begins to enjoy itself. From both the vocal and musical perspectives, Gothic Metal is obsessed with the voice, and in particular the object voice which is excessive, too much for language, too much for the body, too much for pure pleasure.

Gothic Metal as postmodern Gothic text is thus preoccupied with haunting, madness, violence, death and destruction, themes which touch upon the “fundamental negativity” of the subject, the subject as the void of the monstrous, uncanny Thing. The monster, fallen angel, femme fatale, serial killer, sick paternal/maternal figure and evil child abound in the lyrics, images, and music videos, and critique the pervasive postmodern violence of the id. The excessive object voice that is extimate to language therefore plays a particular role in Gothic Metal; its exclusion from language (from the lyrics), whether as the voice-Thing (primordially ceded) or the primitive bodily signifier (residue of all significations), “provokes” *langue* to articulate the sense of postmodern haunting. In fact, the voice must be combined with the music and lyrics to create Gothic Metal’s fantasy, create the Symbolic/Imaginary relationship between the postmodern subject and the object voice in its response to the postmodern fantasy of enjoyment.

### Too Much to Digest

In 2000, After Forever released the now classical “Beyond Me” featuring two unprecedentedly incongruous female vocalists, and shocked the Gothic Metal world. “Beyond Me” depicts a psychotic breakdown in which one hears

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<sup>7</sup> Gothic Metal and Symphonic Metal share profound affinities; however, they are two genres, not one with alternative labels. Seldom can bands stick to one genre without boring their most supportive fans.

the voices of the split selves, a scenario achieved by using three vocals and the sharp contrasts between different movements of the song. The vocal and musical analysis, supplemented by lyrical analysis, demonstrates the splitness of voice as well as its extimacy, the desublimation of voice, and the relationship between *jouissance* and the subjective disintegrating repetition.

“Beyond Me” begins with a lyrical melody, sung in a somber tone by a classically-trained female voice (Floor Jansen, leading female vocalist) and so suggesting the prima donna tradition in which a consuming and penetrating voice offers intense bodily pleasure to both the singer and the listener:

I know I'm alone, but somebody's watching me  
Follows me everywhere I go

In terms of libidinal economy, this kind of voice is, of course, divine, sublime, the voice in which we expect to find a primordial full satisfaction. For hundreds of years the spectacles in opera houses have always depended on the “fetishization of the voice,” an ambivalent gesture “evok[ing] the object voice and obfuscate[ing] it, open[ing] the gap that cannot be filled” (Dolar 31). However, this fetishized voice does not last long. At 00:46 into the piece there begins the floating female voice (Sharon den Adel, guest female vocalist), which empties out the pleasure in/of the all-consuming embodied voice we had been listening to.

A cold flow surprised me again, I shiver  
The presence of something I can hear it's breathing

While the consuming voice is traditionally considered to be embodied, the floating voice is bodiless. It is as if the voice detaches itself from the body, becoming another voice which, not aware of its (her) own ghostly existence, is haunted by the presence of the embodied voice. And yet, at 01:07 and 01:10, at the appearance of bass, the floating voice turns unpleasant, even perverse; the eruptive sound of metal musical instruments has always been associated with such excesses as those of madness, perversion, violence, transgression. The intervention of metal gives power to the exhausted bodily voice, and it is capable of singing out:

Leave me alone, wherever you came from  
Hearing so much [*sic*] voices, no one's talking  
Oh leave me alone

Obviously, the sublime female voice suffers an auditory hallucination, hearing voices when in reality she is alone. Accompanied by a chorus intended to create a symphonic aura, the classically-trained voice is more consuming. In

fact it is so consuming and intense that it can no longer be a fetish but only something ambiguous. No longer expressing a primordial lost enjoyment but on the edge of becoming the unbearable, it ushers in a traumatic disruption of the illusive narcissistic full satisfaction. Indeed, the ghostly floating voice reappears at 01:36, parallels the consuming voice for eight seconds, and finally replaces it at 01:44-01:46. The brief, incongruous combination of the embodied and bodiless voices is in the Lacanian sense Sublime, that is, both sublime and monstrous. For some listeners the combination of Jason (“amazing & full of strength”) and den Adel (“angelic & delicate”) is “[a] goddess and an angel singing together” and “simply superb,” while for others this duet is traumatic, “weird,” even “scary,” however much they may like Jason’s and den Adel’s voices.<sup>8</sup>

The tone of the musical composition changes after the Sublime duet in which the consuming voice and ghostly voice are haunted by each other. The meter becomes faster, the style less lyrical and more majestic (but unusually boisterous), and then there comes again the consuming voice, repeating the words:

Leave me alone, wherever you came from  
Hearing so much [*sic*] voices, no one’s talking

This time a new voice emerges. At 02:45, all of a sudden a beast-like, guttural growl (Mark Jansen, male grunt) intrudes as the listener is still immersed in the engulfing voice of the goddess. The bestial grunt (a kind of death vocal) instantly challenges the listener’s conception of a human voice. “[W]hat is ‘animal’ in humans,” “‘inhuman’ in us,” the unbearable bestial sound/voice of “bare life” causes a traumatic experience, a sudden awareness that my body is not my body, or that there is something inside me more than me, a monster lurking in my body (Jagodzinski 46). This is a voice whose source we are afraid to determine, yet nonetheless a voice that, because of its harshness and unpleasantness, does physical violence to us. In terms of language the bestial grunt is nothing but a noise, since it is totally unintelligible, incomprehensible. It functions within a system of signification but makes no sense within this very system, and as such it is also not in this system; it is “included in the Symbolic through exclusion, as an exception” (46). The bestial death vocal is the object voice *per se*. In the scenario of psychotic breakdown in “Beyond Me,” however, the bestial voice of the male grunt as object voice is far from being one voice; it is split, just as the female embodied and bodiless voices are split. To fully appreciate the complexity

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<sup>8</sup> Comments on “After Forever with Sharon Den Adel—Beyond me.” *YouTube*. Web. 10 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjtzvMEdnN8>>.

of the bestial voice in “Beyond Me,” a consideration of the musical composition accompanying the part of the male grunt is necessary.

When the bestial voice first appears, its movements are relatively metric and smooth, with an epic atmosphere created by the combination of symphonic sound effects and heavy metal instruments. The first movement of melody at 02:45-03:19 is the majestic and boisterous metal-centered music already foreshadowed at 02:00-02:22, before the consuming goddess is about to be interrupted. The second movement at 03:20-03:46 is even slower, and the sound effects of stringed instruments are abundantly used to create an orchestral atmosphere. At 02:45-03:46, the bestial voice has an amazing “poetic effect” similar to what Lacan attributes to “*lalangue*” (Dolar 144, 148). Lacan uses the concept of *lalangue* in his attempt to explain the aesthetic pleasure found in the sound effects of poetry, arguing that there is enjoyment in speech in the very process of making-sense (149, 145). Despite being charged with an enjoyment that radically challenges the dimensions of the human body, the bestial voice is not a total refusal of language. It “enjoys”; it is “enjoyment” “integrated into the signifier” (144) which does not care to arrive at the signified, although its inclusion in the Symbolic language is “structurally inevitable” due to the “erratic nature of *lalangue*,” the object voice of *lalangue* conceived as signifier (145). A few lyrics growled by the poetic bestial voice, the object voice of *lalangue*, intriguingly enough do end up being comprehensible:

Waiting for something, nothing in the black of the night  
 Creeps around you, the invisible force that makes you crazy  
 I can't remember how it feels to be warm, to be alone . . .  
 Without that fear deep inside me  
 Icons of death float on beyond me  
 whispering my name and breathing my fear . . .

The physical violence to the listener's ears, however, remains very real, and if the listener does enjoy the poetic effect it is a masochistic pleasure-in-pain, a *jouissance*. This kind of “enjoyment-in-meaning” or “*jouissance* of meaning” is “*jouis*-sense,” where the “self-enjoying” and “self-consuming” voice “uncannily detaches itself from the body” (Jagodzinski 50, 57). In other words, though the bestial voice between 02:45-03:46 is not the typical object voice (extimate to “both” the language and the body) we expect from the death vocal, in its libidinal economy it is nevertheless the object voice violating the listener's narcissistic Imaginary fixation.

The echoes of “fear” mark the beginning of the third movement of melody (03:47-03:54), featuring the augmented drums and the chorus chanting in **Ab** at an accelerating speed, creating an intense atmosphere that is followed by a

tearing, monstrous screech lasting for six seconds (03:55-04:01). The fourth movement, the longest one (which is in fact hardly a melody at all), of the male grunt (03:55-04:36) is characterized by bullet-like barks and howls accompanied by the aggressive metal instruments and frantic chorus, both repetitively spiraling in chromatic scales at an extremely fast, almost crazy meter.

The menace of insanity  
 Inner voices cry out for action  
 Defenseless as I am  
 Lost in the alleged paradise  
 I'm not sure if I am here or elsewhere  
 Searching for satisfaction  
 Beyond the frontiers of my comprehension

In the western tradition chromatism has always been associated with madness. Sung so repetitively by the chorus, these mad inner voices seem to imply that the bestial voice is already insane, while this voice only thinks it is menaced by insanity. Significantly, in this movement there is little melody; the repetitions of the aggressive heavy metal instruments dominate the music. The association between metal musical instruments and perversion previously implied by the bodiless female voice at 01:07-01:10 is now clear and sound, which is also suggestive of the bestial voice's insanity. And the lyrics growled by this mad beast are indeed totally incomprehensible. If in the first two movements the poetic bestial voice now and then at least makes a little sense, then in the fourth movement the mad bestial voice is literally unintelligible. The mad bestial voice at 03:55-04:36 is the typical death vocal, the object voice which devocalizes the signifying language and animalizes, dehumanizes or "inhumanizes" the human body.

The split between the two kinds of bestial voice, the voice in *lalangue* which sometimes ends up making sense and the mad voice which completely refuses language, is worth pondering. Thematically, the unconventional if understandable death vocal at 02:45-03:46 serves to contrast with the total insanity at 03:55-04:36, further highlighting the scenario of psychotic breakdown. The poetic bestial voice first appears to be a monstrous voice that haunts and speaks to the embodied female voice, only to be revealed as a haunted voice as well, one which/who becomes (or is replaced by) the mad bestial voice upon the emergence of its/his own deep fear. From the psychoanalytic perspective, the mad bestial voice is the eruption of the Real that destroys the barest Symbolic element left, that of language. It is the most disastrous subjective disintegration, the result of the inclusion of the *objet a* in the Symbolic language. In "Beyond Me" the ghostly bodiless voice, the self-consuming Sublime voice, and especially

the self-enjoying bestial voice are the object voices included in language, and thus more or less understandable; in contrast, the voice/sound of the mad beast violently yanks the listener from the place of sense-receiver and devastates the Symbolic subject of language. This mad sound/voice can be regarded as the excess of sound(s) over sense that emerges during the process of sense-making, the monstrous voice-surplus of compromised voices.

Uncannily, the music that comes after the male grunts is again the melody and lyrics at 02:00-02:44, where the consuming female voice is disrupted by the monstrous voice of the beast—as if the embodied voice were trapped in a circle of repetition.

Leave me alone, wherever you came from  
Hearing so much [*sic*] voices, no one's talking

The difference between 02:00-02:44 and 04:37-05:19 is that the consuming, embodied female voice is even more consuming than ever, approaching a desperate madness in her abusive vibratos and modulations. The premonition of infinite repetition and eternal haunting comes true at 05:20 when the floating female voice joins in:

Leave me alone, wherever you came from  
Hearing so much [*sic*] voices, no one's talking

Not knowing that she herself is the inner voice that haunts the embodied one, the ghostly bodiless voice also wants to be left alone, to be spared of the many voices. At 05:20-05:42 there is again the incongruous combination of the embodied and bodiless voices, accompanied by heavier metal instruments (as compared with 01:12-01:46) that intensify the overwhelming, excessive, simultaneously sublime/monstrous effect. After this Sublime haunting the bodiless voice disappears and the embodied one continues, with several vocal ornamentations.

Oh leave me alone . . .

She is, however, not left alone, and probably never will be. Long after her voice disappears the voices of the chorus (in chromatic scales again), the other inner voices, linger in the soundtrack. The psychotic breakdown which reaches its climax, if one may put it this way, in the mad bestial voice is irrevocable; even if the consuming voice takes over, she is no longer a Symbolic subject of language but an embodied voice (ironically, haunted by a bodiless voice that is also haunted by the embodied voice's presence), one that is repeating the same "dead words" again and again.

The sole aim of the death drive is to repeat itself in *jouissance*, while the object of this drive changes in the endless repetition. In "Beyond Me" this drive

repeats itself endlessly, shifting between the four kinds of object voice, while the narcissistic full satisfaction supposed to be offered by the fetish voice of the sublime prima donna, or the object-cause of desire of the pleasure principle, is from the very beginning haunted by the drive. The listening experience, of course, cannot be wholly pleasant. For those not used to death vocals, the male grunt part “ruins” what is achieved by the combination of “angel and goddess,” making this song hard to swallow; for those “goths” who are already developing the skill to appreciate the displeasure, however, it is the “brutish” monstrosity of the male grunts that makes the trio of Mark Jansen, Floor Jansen, and Sharon den Adel an “epic” one.<sup>9</sup>

### A Narcissistic Gothic Diet

The goths devour, consume the seemingly indigestible voices, savoring their brutish unpleasantness: such a particular diet reveals a kind of libidinal economy, one that is different from the contemporary irrational id violence resulting from the subject’s fundamental antagonism.

Irrational violence both against others and against (our) selves marks the deadly irruption of *jouissance* rooted in the subject’s fundamental antagonism, its fundamental negativity which, once unleashed, intensifies the racial, social, gender antagonisms, a Real violence leaving both sides mortally injured. The contemporary irruption of *jouissance*, in fact, corresponds with the narcissistic postmodern fantasy of enjoyment (full satisfaction), whose perverse side is the theft of enjoyment (*jouissance*). The Thing misconceived as transgressive enjoyment (full satisfaction) is inevitably unattainable; consequently the subject “imputes to the ‘other’ . . . an excessive enjoyment (*jouissance*)” that the subject does not possess (Žižek, *Tarrying* 203). The other steals the subject’s enjoyment and enjoys too much, hence the hatred, the intolerance, the violence toward the other, despite the fact that the subject never experiences a primordial full satisfaction, for the Thing is a void misperceived as positivity: the lack is “originary, enjoyment constitutes itself as ‘stolen’” (203). The subject’s hatred of the other’s *jouissance* therefore reveals its hatred of its own *jouissance*, its antagonistic relationship to the Thing, the uncanny emptiness constitutive of the subject.

In the context of contemporary violence, the urge to harm the enjoying other is the self-destructive instinct directed at that part of me that is more

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<sup>9</sup> Comments on “After Forever With Sharon Den Adel—Beyond me.” *YouTube*. Web. 10 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjtzvMEdnN8>>.

than me, other to me. Such violence stemming from the subject's fundamental antagonism and unleashed against the socially antagonistic others is characteristic of "Id-Evil," the "imbalance between the *Ich* and *jouissance*," the "most elementary 'short circuit' in the subject's relationship to the primordially missing object-cause of desire that 'bothers' it in the 'other'" (Žižek, *Metastates* 71, original emphasis). In other words, the postmodern irruption of *jouissance* can be understood as id violence, a kind of Evil always grounded in a particular fantasy, resisting universalization (71), since it is rooted in the subject's negativity, the void, the uncanny lack. The liberal multicultural ideology often deprives the other of its otherness, remaining only open to the ideal other. Rather than filling the lack, however, such a fake openness only makes the Real other even more monstrous than ever, and once the other leaves its fantasmatic place, the fundamental antagonism immediately explodes in the form of irrational id violence.

Gothic Metal "hears" the murderous, self-destructive noise of id violence in postmodernity, and it responds to it through "internalization." Rather than musical genres of the pleasure principle which tries to "murder, harmonize the noise" by constructing the ideal other and presenting a fake openness (Jagodzinski 35), Gothic Metal acknowledges the social antagonisms and seeks "resolution of the tension via internalization of the lack" (Žižek, *Tarrying* 124). Functioning like the "dark code" of Gothic subculture, the object voice confronts the subject with the Thing, its uncanny constitutive void; moreover, in a narrative dealing with social antagonism, the object voice forces the subject to experience *jouissance* as the enjoying other: the subject encounters its inner otherness that is *the same* as the other endowed with *jouissance*.

The recognition of one's own otherness, therefore, means accepting the *other* other, the other as such, and this means that "the object (difference, antagonism) need not anymore be negated, destroyed, annulled" (124). The logic of Gothic Metal's internalization understands contemporary violence as an impotent gesture that violates the other so as to avoid the subject's inner otherness; violence is everyone's responsibility, since no one can really come to term with him/herself. Such a "narcissistic" attitude toward the need to "accept one's trauma as a necessary part of life experience" suggests a heavy burden: in the conflict between the Other (Real other) and the self, one has to assume the identity and property of the Other (Real other) (Ancuta 103). Gothic Metal's internalization "*fully identify[ies] with the fantasy*" (Žižek, *Welcome* 17, original emphasis), that is, with the fantasy of the *jouissance* of the other in me more than me, and directs the responsibility for id violence back to the subject.

Gothic Metal's staging of the grotesque, the brutal, the terror and horror understood in this way, allows a "dance with *jouissance*" that tries to maintain

a minimal distance from it while simultaneously recognizing and confronting it. Ultimately, the particular ethics of such a subculture means one must be responsible for one's own *jouissance*, for "if you are burnt, you are cursed with undeadness"!

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## 難以下嚥： 論當代哥德金屬中之不可抵擋之聲

### 摘要

攝食不僅牽涉到身體，也與語言密切相關：此一本能性的動作嚥下、並同時也反賤斥物質以及意義的結構。由嘴巴而出並且由耳朵所接收，聲音可被視為一種特殊的攝食，而此一攝食行為不只在歷史上不斷苦惱著哲學家們，更是常見的誌異手法用來探討感知與聆聽的主體的整體性，並同時以充滿罪惡的絕爽誘惑著主體。本文對聲音的閱讀從毒藥論述出發，聲音作為毒藥在傳統上被視為腐化與汙染文化與社會身體，並進而探討聲音的模稜兩可性，其與身體和語言的陌異關係(the extimate relationship)。由拉岡 / 紀傑克式精神分析觀點切入，本文提出「語音」(the object voice)作為抗拒象徵化的原初身體意符，具有原物(the Thing)之特質。換言之，一個多餘之物，同時卻又是親密的他者，困擾著主體並抗拒物神化(fetishization)，因此總是焦慮之來源。本文進一步探討當代哥德金屬樂(Contemporary Gothic Metal)對於歌唱 / 咆嘯唱腔的操作。此一次文化對毒性極強之聲音的攝食，如海妖、歇斯底里、惡魔、野獸、鬼魅、以及狂亂之聲，顯現了一種特殊的慾望經濟：違背享樂原則的要求去吐出語音，哥德次文化吞噬並內化了語音，以及其毀滅性的絕爽。本文將此攝食行為理解為哥德次文化應對主體內在空洞之方式，而其空洞則來自於原物被物視為本體性本身。

**關鍵字：**聲音，小對體，幻境，紀傑克，哥德重金屬