

EXTREME SOUND, “EXTREME” LIFESTYLE? INVESTIGATING CATTLE DECAPITATION’S STANCE ON THE HUMAN IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

With insight into the lyrics and lifestyle choices of some of the members of the Californian deathgrind band Cattle Decapitation, this article explores the connection between their extreme sound and the “extreme” messages in their work. Namely, the band’s current and former members have been vocal about their stance on animal cruelty and human impact on the environment, also reflected in the band’s lyrics and imagery. Their positions are supported by, to use the terms coined by Keith Kahn-Harris, the utilization of discursive, bodily, as well as sonic transgressions. With that in mind, the goal of this paper is to examine the ways in which these transgressions, or rather, forms of “extremism,” collaborate, reinforce, and strengthen each other. This will be achieved by questioning the points of contact among the movements concerning political/environmental/animal rights and the sounds deemed extreme in contemporary society.

Key words: extreme metal, Cattle Decapitation, environmental impact, animal rights, vegetarianism/veganism

There's no fear for tomorrow when there's no trust for today
There's no ever after... debts have to be paid
"Death Atlas," Cattle Decapitation, 2019.

When visiting Cattle Decapitation's website^[1] after the release of their latest album *Death Atlas* (2019), one will instantly see *The Unerasable Past*, a short film by Wes Benscoter (Metal Blade Records, 2019) which accompanied the album's release. "Cattle's apocalyptic nightmare soundtrack," "grim, atmospheric, and topical," as Benscoter described it, is represented in this music video by the song "Unerasable Past," as well as the title song from the album ("Death Atlas"), and came to life with a "mix of old-school practical effects, some digital tricks and an insane amount of sand and fog."^[2] During the first part of the video, the pace of which follows the atmospheric and slow tempo at the beginning of the "Unerasable Past" (including piano, strings, and clean vocals), a gradual movement away from the greenery of grass and into the sand reveals images of dying birds, plastic and electronic waste, oil spills, bullets, and barbed wire. The catastrophe is not natural; it is human-made, as stated in the song's lyrics. In the second, longer part of the film, the song "Death Atlas" appears as the soundtrack to another apocalyptic, yet slightly different, setting: life as we know it is extinct and has disappeared in flames due to unbearable temperatures and the pollution of the atmosphere. The connection between human impact and the final result is clear and emphasized in the song's verses: "We deserve everything that's coming. We took this world to our graves... we made its creatures our slaves."

Since the beginning of their long career, this extreme metal band, founded in San Diego, California in 1996, has had topics concerning the human influence on the environment as their primary ideological focus. Their ideological stance is also part of their biography, as well as their public appearances – the band's members often discuss the causes about which they are passionate, and the journalists, publishers, and media promoters with whom this band have dealt also emphasize these. Other than Cattle

[1] <http://cattledecapitation.com/> Acc. Nov 16, 2020.

[2] Wes Benscoter's comment on the process of making the film. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmYcFP1vTdk&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=MetalBladeRecords

Decapitation's Wikipedia page, where its authors have stated that the band's songs "protest the mistreatment and consumption of animals, the abuse of the environment," as well as dealing with the subjects of misanthropy and genocide (Wikipedia 2021, last edit February 6, 2021), other websites have also taken note of the band's stances. Similarly, *Encyclopedia Metallum. The Metal Archives*, (the largest internet database on metal music and performers) notes that "(t)he band has quite a large fanbase among animal rights/liberation supporters due to their beliefs, album covers, and lyrics, which usually focus on prioritizing animals over human life" (Cattle Decapitation, n.d). These summaries, as well as other media coverage, also state that the band's entire original lineup (David Astor (bass, drums), Gabe Serbian (drums, guitar), and Travis Ryan on vocals^[3] – were all self-declared vegetarians. The current lineup that, aside from Ryan, includes Josh Emore and Belisario Dimusio (guitars), Oliver Pinard (bass), and David McGraw (drums), is not entirely vegetarian, yet the band's message is still very much the same. Furthermore, on their latest albums, the band and Ryan (as primary lyric writer) has placed their focus anthropocentrism and its general impact on the planet.

As Ryan is an avowed animal rights activist, the fact that the band does not practice a vegan lifestyle may seem hypocritical. However, Ryan has answered these concerns, taking into account the lifestyle of an active band on the road (in pre-pandemic times):

"We've tried and tried to be as up front about that as possible but the entire media world thinks we are hardline vegan, which in turn trickled down to fans and we're just not. I've been vegan at points but I try to be as correct as possible and point blank, there's times on tour where I just don't know if what I've been given to eat has eggs or dairy in it and the road is rather unfriendly to us. We aren't afforded the luxury of going to a Whole Foods at 3 am after a show. At that point its fucking Taco Bell or something disgusting. You're driving down the road burning fossil fuels and your vehicle is covered in the carcasses of insects and sometimes birds and other animals. So how far does one take it? This is why I can't claim vegan. I live my life with as much compassion as I can for others, the environment and the animals though. At home it's much easier."^[4]

[3] Ryan was preceded by the first vocalist of the band, Scott Miller.

[4] <https://www.moshville.co.uk/interview/2015/07/interview-travis-ryan-of-cattle-decapitation/>

Ryan's statement explicates the predicament of a musician's lifestyle, and at the same time, shines a light on the fact that sustainable life is not simply a given. It requires a set of specific privileges (i.e., the means to invest in better quality foods, for example), knowledge about how and where particular products were produced, and humility in acknowledging that learning is a process and requires gradual change. In this context, especially bearing in mind Ryan's observation on how the media and fans often perceive his band as 'hardcore' and extreme because of its beliefs and practices, I will examine the ways in which Cattle Decapitation's music, discourse, and imagery are considered "extreme", in order to better understand the spectrum of extremity in metal music, and contemporary society in general.

LOCATING THE *EXTREME*

The *extreme* in metal culture may equally refer to its sound, the discourse around certain performers/bands, as well as the behaviour of individual musicians (on stage or in private life). Described in the sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris's terms, these extreme traits can be categorized and scrutinized along the three strains of transgression: sonic, discursive, and bodily (Kahn-Harris, 2007, 27-49). Although these individual types of transgression may appear more prominent in a specific musical act respectively, they are usually combined and inseparably put in motion.

Breaching norms in extreme metal music is not only detected in comparison to mainstream popular music, but also when it comes to metal music culture as a whole. The more visually, lyrically, and – I would argue – sonically tame glam metal bands of the 1980s dealt with a great deal of repression. Since then, and particularly during the last decade of the XX century, the transgressive motions in the metal and punk scenes have led to the development of a significant number of subgenres in extreme metal, many of which act upon diverse ideological beliefs, spanning from far the right to the far left.

When taking the radical ideologies in extreme metal into consideration, it is not unusual that its right-wing and nationalistic strains come to mind first. However, following the notorious second

wave of Norwegian black metal in the early 1990s (it caught the attention of the public eye as it involved acts of murder and arson, and involved bands which promoted paganism, and nationalism), one can trace some of the diverse radical ideologies communicated through metal music. As Kahn-Harris stated (Kahn-Harris, 2007, 48-49), the acts with which the Norwegian second wave black metal scene gained notoriety are not the norm for the rest of the extreme metal scene. It is more often the case that the transgression of norms is performative and does not have real-life consequences in society other than inducing a sense of shock and disgust, which has resulted in the isolation and distancing of extreme metal scenes from other music scenes, also leading to the establishment of an independent infrastructure for the production, dissemination, and reception of such music.

While the discursive transgressions in non-musical discourse such as band names, lyrics, song and album titles, fanzines, record sleeves, etc., are what most frequently occupy the attention of metal scholars (also due to the proportionally small number of musicologists and music theorists among sociologists, anthropologists, and historians of metal), insight into the sonic and behavioral dimensions of a band's music is crucial should one wish to understand a band's intention. The necessity for a fully encompassing approach to a band's output is evident when dealing with a band such as Cattle Decapitation, as activism is inextricably linked to their extreme metal sound.

Before further details on the band's creative output, I would like to address the meaning of "extreme lifestyle" in this context. Namely, animal rights activism and lifestyle choices are often qualified as extreme. Such a stance prevails when discussing the exclusion of animal products in one's diet, fashion, or in other aspects of one's everyday life, but is particularly prominent when the actions of activists have consequences on the larger-scale production that relies on animals or consumer politics. With the number of vegetarians and vegans steadily increasing in Western societies, public discourse is slowly transitioning from a "vegaphobic" and derogatory one (see, for example, Cole and Morgan 2011) to one which is more accepting and willing to recognize its earnestness.^[5]

[5] Outi Lundahl (2018) wrote about the role of celebrities in the gradual de-stigmatization of veganism in an analysis of the British newspaper *Daily Mail*. The author's findings show that, although a plant-based diet is

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Even though the matter itself is pressing and an awakening of the public's attention is long overdue, the question of animal agriculture's impact on the environment has gained more prominence and entered the mainstream in the more recent years. Beside the vast pool of content available on the internet – YouTube video analyses, blog posts, media coverage, and documentaries – numerous studies have examined the impact of our collective lifestyle on the environment, notably focusing on the dietary habits of people around the world. During the last decade or so, studies have shown the need for a more efficient and less damaging (for the environment and public health) food system (Marlow et al., 2009; Tilman and Clark, 2014; Rosi et al., 2017), and that potential dietary change (from animal-sourced foods to a vegetarian or more plant-based diet) can (and depending on other factors) contribute to the goal of reducing GHG emissions and demands on land (Hallström et al., 2015, 8). Recent studies such as Springmann et al. (2018) also examined the possible impacts of dietary change on health and environmental concerns by using an integrated modelling framework for more than 150 countries, showing different outcomes which were dependent on a country's average rate of income. Likewise, many studies have emphasized the importance of local-specific product usage (Rosi et al., 2017).

Thus, discussions on this topic have become increasingly frequent, more thorough, and exhortative. Nevertheless, we can also notice that that was not the case when Cattle Decapitation began their musical journey in the late 1990s. In the realm of metal music, this discussion was not as widespread as it is now, but there were some notable exceptions such as Metallica's song "Blackened" (1988),^[6] Testament's "Greenhouse Effect"

now recognized as healthy and even recommended for communities and individuals as an alternative to the overconsumption of meat, "there has not in fact been significant changes to the representation of veganism as a moral lifestyle" (Lundahl, 2018, 26). Taking into account more recent events, such as Joaquin Phoenix's Oscars acceptance speech in 2020, in which he addressed the moral implications of the meat and dairy industries, we can acknowledge that the question of ethics is increasingly prominent in public discourse.

- [6] Termination (termination)
Expiration (expiration)
Cancellation (cancellation)
Human Race
Expectation (expectation)
Liberation (liberation)

(1989)^[7], or Nuclear Assault’s “Critical Mass” (1989).^[8] These examples are from the genre of thrash metal, which had its peak during the 1980s and falls outside what is considered extreme metal today. Nevertheless, the misanthropic undertone of their lyrics was influential on the bands to come. The French band Gojira should be mentioned here, as they are a metal band with a large audience whose work includes many themes related to society’s impact on the environment, especially on marine life.

Carcass (an English extreme metal band, 1986-1996; 2007-present) is a band whose music and lyric content were greatly influential on Cattle Decapitation’s beginnings. Travis Ryan has admitted the band’s appreciation of Carcass’s grind phase (Pratt, 2018), referring to their music and thematic content. As with other grindcore bands such as Napalm Death and Agathocles (providing the form of grindcore during the early period of the scene), Carcass spoke about animal rights and animal mistreatment (Barchi, 2017).

In lieu of this, Cattle Decapitation’s discursive radicalization lies in recognizing the climate, environmental, and moral struggles of contemporary global society. They emphasize in their work their stance that the climate crisis is caused, or rather, accelerated by human activity –not only evident in their band name, lyrics, song and album titles, public appearances and interviews, but also in the visual material connected to the band. Cattle Decapitation’s albums – *Human Jerky* (1999), *Homovore* (2000), *To Serve Man* (2002), *Humanure* (2004), *Karma. Bloody. Karma* (2006), *The Harvest Floor* (2009), *Monolith of Inhumanity* (2012), *The Anthropocene Extinction* (2016), and the aforementioned *Death Atlas* – are accompanied by upsetting and disturbing artwork depicting, respectively, a decapitated

Population (population)

Lay to waste

See our mother

Put to death

See our mother die

[7] Chorus: Seal the planet’s fate

Crimes they perpetrate

Wasting precious land

It’s time to take a stand.

Our only hope to breathe again

To stop the madness closing in

What will we do when all is lost

Environmental holocaust...

[8] Another oil spill!

Atomic waste displaced!

Another forest dies!

cow, dead animal parts, a queue in front of human slaughterhouses, “rapid de-evolution”, human and wildlife extinction due to plastic and industrial pollution. In Travis Ryan’s words, the artwork for *Homovore* represents a “shifting focus towards people, instead of what people are doing to the animals” (Aggressive Tendencies, 2016).

DISCURSIVE AND SONIC TRANSGRESSION IN CATTLE DECAPITATION’S WORK

*Environmental scientists and engineers now describe the current
era as planet Earth’s sixth mass extinction.*

Its cause: humans.

“The Great Dying,” Cattle Decapitation, 2019.

The themes occupying the discursive aspect of Cattle Decapitation’s production over the years developed with an increasing focus on the human impact on climate change and the mass extinction of plant and animal life and less on animal welfare itself. *Homovore* can also be seen as a turning point: lyrically and visually the emphasis is explicitly on the mistreatment of farm animals. The lyrics on their album *Human Jerky* (Satan’s Pimp Records/Three One G Records) is their sole recording deserving of the “gore” classification, along with typical characteristics of the grindcore and goregrind subgenres such as the song length (in total, 18 ‘microsongs’ last for 16 minutes), fast tempos, and a saturated and distorted sound. However, when comparing this album with the other extreme music that usually covers human gore, pathology, death, and rape, *Human Jerky* has animal mistreatment as its subject, depicting bloodshed and the genuine danger of infectious diseases that originate from such practices, while also indicating the moral fallacy of the very system itself. Nevertheless, misanthropy is most apparent and explicit in the lyric about a recipe for human jerky preparation (Cattle Decapitation, n.d).

Visceral lyrical themes of gore are still rather intense and explicit on *Homovore* (Three One G Records). The graphic portrayal of the life and death of farm animals, as well as the infectious diseases and physiological

consequences caused by the organized mistreatment of animals on a large scale, still continue to inspire Cattle Decapitation's work on Human Jerky. Song titles like "Mauled," "Joined at the Ass," "Open Human Head Experiment with Bleach Lacquer and Epoxy," "Molested / Digested," as well as lyrics such as "You are what you eat, you are what you shit, you are what you vomit" (from "Diarrhea of the Mouth"), display a feeling of utter disgust toward human actions and their effects. Furthermore, on the following album, *To Serve Man* (the band was signed to Metal Blade Records from this album on), songs like the title piece, "Everyone Deserves to Die," and "Deadmeal" signal the band's aforementioned gradual shift toward more overt misanthropic ideas, and mark their (sub)genre transition toward death metal and deathgrind.

Humanure sees an even greater misanthropy in its themes, including ideas of planet overpopulation and human beings as "passive ecological terrorists," and such is further explored lyrically in *Karma. Bloody. Karma.* The emphasis on the "unintelligent design" of human beings and their anti-environmental politics on this album are further developed on *The Harvest Floor*: there is mention of "god's design," Jesus Christ, and the New Testament on this album.^[9] "Christian indoctrination" is also a prominent theme on the *Monolith of Inhumanity* album, coupled with already established lyrical elements of discursive transgression in Cattle Decapitation's texts. The final two albums, *Anthropocene Extinction* and *Death Atlas*, are lyric verbalizations of the Anthropocene characterized by the band's distinguishable narratives. The lyrics on *Anthropocene Extinction* concern mankind's culpability in the mass extinction of the natural world, and are also somewhat centred on the (now realized) possibility of farm-induced pandemics, as well as man-made environmental catastrophes such as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. In a similar vein, *Death Atlas* concentrates on "geocide" and the unavoidable consequences of "humanity's past accomplishments and vanities" ("The Geocide").

Regarding the band's sound, after several full-length releases in the grindcore genre, the band then established itself as one of the top acts in the

[9] "Wreckers. Ruiners. Terrorists... Addicted to death. God damned this world -- that is if "god" exists, God hates this world -- left his "son" tied to a stick? God is sadist - this is the portrait you paint. God is within and we ruin everything" ("The Gardeners of Eden"); "Itemized flash -- scanned inventory. A New Testament is greed. Taking count -- humanity is the product" ("The Product Alive").

sphere of deathgrind. Namely, by combining saturated and distorted guitar, blast-beat drums, and extreme vocal techniques such as growl and high-pitched shrieking with longer, death and extreme metal song structures (rather than grindcore microsongs lasting from a few seconds up to a few minutes), Cattle Decapitation has developed a recognizable sound. After embracing elements of death metal, the melodic lines in their guitar parts became more pronounced, with the song structures becoming increasingly complex and innovative. Regarding band structure and instrumentation, they began as trio typical of grindcore (guitars, drums, and vocals), later including a bass player, as well as occasional keyboards, guest electronics, and string instruments (see Table 1).

Ryan's vocal technique has also evidently advanced over the years: on their first two full-length releases, the vocals were generally incomprehensible, with death growls and shrieks double-tracked throughout the album. This kind of double-tracking for an entire album has been largely abandoned or used more economically and more effectively on the *To Serve Man* album, and his widening vocal spectrum has seen the introduction of techniques such as pig squeal and a variety of guttural vocal gestures. Inspired by the vocal sound of Jeff Walker and Bill Steer from Carcass, Ryan began exploring vocalization with tongue and air displacement in order to achieve a shrieking/screaming effect, now commonly referred to as "tunnel throat" (Loudwire, 2019). On the band's last few albums, Ryan introduced his notorious and distinguishable singing technique, commonly referred to as high "goblin screeches" or "high melodic goblin vocals" by fans of the band on platforms such as YouTube. In his own words, what encouraged and intrigued Ryan to explore "screaming in key" was hearing overtones when screaming, as well as effects such as reverb and slap-back (Loudwire, 2019). This technique involves the engagement of the back of the tongue, with the nose closed, and the nasal palette lowered, and then adding distortion with a vocal apparatus, without moving the larynx (Kardavox Academy, 2019).

Table 1.

full-length albums	genre	themes/lyrical focus	instrumentation
Human Jerky	grindcore, goregrind	gore, animal slaughter, forensic pathology	vocals, guitar, drums
Homovore	grindcore, goregrind	gore, animal slaughter, forensic pathology	vocals, guitar, drums
To Serve Man	grindcore, death metal	gore, forensic pathology, misanthropy	vocals, guitar, bass guitar, drums
Humanure	deathgrind, death metal	misanthropy, humans as eco-terrorists, environment	vocals, guitars, E-bow, bass, electro-theremin, drums
Karma. Bloody. Karma	black metal, deathgrind, death metal	misanthropy, flawed religion as the base of society	vocals, guitars, E-bow, bass, piano, drums
The Harvest Floor	deathgrind	misanthropy, flawed religion as the basis of society, Christian indoctrination	vocals, keyboards, percussion, guitar, bass guitar, drums. Additional: electric cello, electronics, atmospherics, female vocals

Monolith of Inhumanity	deathgrind	misanthropy, environment, future of the Earth (if the current lifestyle continues), gender reassignment, Christian indoctrination	vocals, keyboards, guitars, bass guitar, drums
The Anthropocene Extinction	deathgrind, technical death metal, progressive death metal	misanthropy, human impact on the environment	vocals, keyboards, guitars, bass guitar, drums
Death Atlas	deathgrind, technical death metal, progressive death metal	environment, misanthropy, hate, mass destruction, plague/pandemic, end of life on Earth	vocals, keyboards, guitars, bass guitar, drums

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Returning to Kahn-Harris’ division of the norms that can be (and are) transgressed in extreme metal music, it is evident that Cattle Decapitation fulfils such expectations. Although some (or most) of such transgressive behaviours are expected in the genre and scene to which the band belongs, some of their transgressions are “extreme” even in this type of context. For example, many extreme metal bands, such as Cannibal Corpse, Carcass (and Cattle Decapitation), have transgressed what is discursively acceptable in music and art, especially regarding depictions of coercion and violence (Kahn-Harris, 2007, 36). Be it violence toward people in general, and women in particular, or even animals, such detailed

descriptions and depictions are common in the death metal realm. Graphic artwork and lyrics are expected and ingrained in this subgenre's identity.

Regarding sonic transgression, given that Cattle Decapitation is at the forefront of many crossover/fusions in existing subgenres such as grindcore and death metal, their sound undoubtedly belongs to 'extreme metal'. Therefore, their relationship toward mainstream music, or even the heavy metal and thrash of 1980s are negligible. As stated in this paper, the somewhat modest appearance of melodic lines in their guitar parts have appeared on later albums in their discography and with melodic singing appearing even later. Their distorted, dense, and saturated sound, in their composition as well as well as production, is what further alienates this sonic picture from the 'norms' and rules of mainstream popular music.

Finally, their message and the lifestyle choices of (some of) the bands members are also a particular type of bodily transgression. When describing this type of trespass, Khan-Harris takes the destructive or addictive behaviours of some in the music scene (both musicians and the audience) into account. Other than alcohol and various drugs, it is not uncommon that certain musicians in individual parts of the scene (such as black metal), practice some form of asceticism regarding substance and sexual indulgence (Kahn-Harris, 2007, 43-44). Points of intersection between extreme metal and 'straight edge' punk can also be noticed here. With Cattle Decapitation's dietary choices in mind, their similarity with straight-edgers is even more evident.

Thus, the "extremity" of not using animal products, or simply highlighting the dangers and global effects of their overconsumption in diet, fashion, and other spheres of everyday life, is not actually extreme when considering the extreme metal scene. Its initial context expects a myriad of transgressions, with bodily and, more specifically, dietary ones being a small but discernible strain. What this research has shown is that it can be stated that this lifestyle choice (evident in its music, visuals, and lyrics) is, in fact, extreme and something abject to the general public, both in its sound, and perhaps even more in its underlying message.

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EKSTREMNI ZVUK, "EKSTREMNI" ŽIVOTNI STIL? POGLED NA STAV BENDA CATTLE DECAPITATION O LJUDSKOME UTJECAJU NA OKRUŽENJE I PRAVA ŽIVOTINJA

SAŽETAK

Uvidom u tekstove pjesama i životni stil koji vode neki od članova kalifornijskoga deathgrind benda Cattle Decapitation, ovaj članak istražuje vezu između ekstremnoga zvuka, koji bend njeguje i „ekstremne“ poruke koja proizlazi iz njihova rada. Naime, sadašnji i bivši članovi benda ističu svoj stav o problemu okrutnosti prema životinjama i negativnoga utjecaja ljudi na životno okruženje, što se može primijetiti i u tekstualnim i u vizualnim aspektima njihova stvaralaštva. Govoreći u terminima koje

je ustanovio sociolog Keith Kahn-Harris, njihovi stavovi imaju osnovu u diskurzivnim, tjelesnim i soničnim transgresijama rada ovoga benda. Cilj je ovoga rada propitivanje na koji način ove transgresije, odnosno, vidovi „ekstremizma“, surađuju i time pojačavaju cjelokupni dojam. To će biti učinjeno ispitivanjem točaka ekstrema u suvremenome društvu na kojima se pozicije o politici, životnoj sredini i pravima životinja susreću sa zvukom muzike benda Cattle Decapitation.

Ključne riječi: ekstremni metal, Cattle Decapitation, životna sredina, prava životinja, vegetarijanstvo/veganstvo