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Keith Kahn-Harris, Extreme Metal – Music and Culture on the Edge. Oxford: Berg 2007. 194 pages.

[Keith Kahn-Harris](#) is a British independent scholar lecturing at the Open University and Goldsmith College. His newly-published essay *Extreme Metal* is the first scientific, book-length study of a heavy metal category which includes the subgenres death-, thrash- and black metal. Based on the author's PhD thesis, *Extreme Metal* is a highly welcomed contribution, as a critical debate on extreme metal is "sorely needed" (p. 6). As Kahn-Harris' impressive [bibliography on Metal Studies](#) shows, most of the literature does not regard extreme metal, which is mainly tackled in short and marginal essays; *Extreme Metal* thus becomes a highly valuable and pioneering work. The book "is not a history or an 'appreciation' of extreme metal music and culture" (p. 7) nor a musicological study of the genre, "rather it explicitly seeks to ask difficult questions with the aim of providing new perspectives on the politics of extreme metal." (ibid.) In order to answer these questions, Kahn-Harris chooses a holistic and spatial approach, basing his study on the concept of 'scene'. Since 'scene' "need not be based on predetermined ideas of what scenic involvement consists of" (p. 21), it allows him to take into account the different musical and non-musical discourses within the genre.

'Transgression' is a first key concept in Kahn-Harris' investigation, which is of particular interest in its discursive aspects (pp. 34-43). The author focuses on the concept of 'abject', an entity perceived as 'other', that needs to be "mastered and dominated" (p. 36), as well as on 'inhuman' and 'anti-Christian' discourses (p. 38). Although intriguing, some of Kahn-Harris' points suffer from crude generalisation, as for example with the concepts of 'misanthropy' and 'elitism', which, according to Kahn-Harris, seem to couple with a growing interest in paganism (p. 40). This may be correct, but the author does not elaborate much on the issue and one hardly grasps why these trends should appear together. More interesting are his accounts on bodily transgression, which often takes the shape of a rejection of bodily expression and sex among scene members (pp. 43-46).

The central chapters in the book investigate the ways in which capital, power and infrastructure govern the scene. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's theories on the field of cultural production, the author makes the term 'scene' coincide with Bourdieu's 'field', thus allowing him to set a framework for the accumulation of subcultural capital in the scene. Kahn-Harris distinguishes between two kinds of such capital, i.e. mundane and transgressive subcultural capital. The former includes the everyday practices performed by scene members (musicians, label owners, traders, fans) in order to gain capital within the scene (for example a huge collection of records or an extremely detailed knowledge of bands and genres) (p. 123-4). Transgressive subcultural capital, on the other hand, is normally sought by musicians, often through a marked individualism; it can take the shape of self-proclaimed elitism (p. 128), love for experimentalism (p. 129), and even strong criticism of the scene itself (p. 127).

Quite interesting for the theoretician are the sections in which the author analyses power relations, strategies and struggles to obtain capital in the global extreme metal scene. Among other things, he proposes 'reflexive anti-reflexivity' as one of the leading strategies to obtain and maintain capital in the scene. Drawing upon A. Giddens' concept of 'reflexivity', Kahn-Harris investigates the reflexive anti-reflexivity of several extreme metal bands, a way of "knowing better but deciding not to know" (p. 145) which, for example, plays a central role in the delicate relationship between black metal and politics. Black metal bands have often flirted with totalitarianism and Nazism especially, yet rarely taking responsibility for it (p. 152-156).

Reflexive anti-reflexivity is also at stake in the developing of humour within the scene. It often takes the form of a "love of 'cheese', a celebration of lack of taste and lack of hipness" (p. 147) that still "ensures that laughter is never overwhelming and that the humorous never undermines the serious" (p. 151). The author uses this concept to analyse a promotional photo of the Norwegian band [Immortal](#): taking advantage of *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*'s electronic nature, I see reflexive anti-reflexivity even more convincing if applied to the following video clip the same band shot for the song *Blashyrkh* in 1995. [VIDEO](#).

"One possible 'preferred reading'", says Kahn-Harris, "is that the band look stupid. There is a certain comic hubris in a black metal band apparently attempting to look 'evil' and warlike, but ending up ridiculous". Yet, "a highly developed appreciation of the comic can be found within the scene. The important point about the comic within the scene is that it generally does not undermine [it]" (pp. 146-147). Thus reflexive anti-reflexivity is what allows Immortal to maintain a balance between joking and seriousness, so to prevent the entire scene from laughing at them.

A consistent part of the book focuses on a nation- and region-based investigation of the global scene and on the inequalities between countries in terms of scenic power and accumulation of capital. Kahn-Harris shows that countries with a rich economic capital do not automatically account for equal richness in terms of (sub)cultural production; for instance, if the United States is an important lucrative market (pp. 102-105), it appears far weaker in terms of musical production.

More often, the most productive countries are relatively marginal on the global scale. A good example is Sweden, whose scene Kahn-Harris analyses in detail: "The Swedish extreme metal scene is one of the most capital-rich of any national scene. Although its relatively small population means that its market size is relatively modest, [...] the prestige and influence [it] has in global terms is substantial" (p. 109) According to the author, some of the reasons for such an accumulation of capital reside in high standards of living; also a developed offer in music courses in schools makes it very easy for people to start a band. Last but not least, the presence of heavy metal music in television musical programmes also plays an important role (p. 108).

In contrast, countries closer to global flows of capital have more difficulty in developing powerful extreme metal scenes. This is the case of the United Kingdom, which is the second country

Kahn-Harris analyses. In spite of its “pivotal importance in the development of metal” (p. 109) in the 1970s and 80s, the British scene “faces a certain kind of isolation” (p. 111). Some of the reasons for such isolation lie both in a dispersion of the capital, which has hardly developed in larger cities like London (p. 109) and in the scarce presence of extreme metal bands on TV. According to Kahn-Harris, another interesting trait of the British scene is its irony and rejection of over-seriousness. As examples, the author mentions how “black metal’s ‘no fun’ slogan was always out of step with UK metal culture” and the fact that “UK black metal bands such as [Cradle of Filth](#) have emphasized irony and earthly normality in interviews” (p. 110). I am quite sceptical about irony being a distinctive trait of the British scene, not only because of the lack of factual evidence (the author does not refer to any specific source) but also because irony and parodies have also been widely popular in other countries, as Kahn-Harris explains elsewhere (pp. 148-150). For example, the same Immortal video shown above has been the object of parodies which have sprung from a large variety of national scenes: allow me to quote just [this](#) funny version featuring traditional folk music from Abruzzo, southern Italy, but further examples ranging from tango to dance music are available at the website Youtube.com.

The third and last country analysed is Israel. This part of Kahn-Harris’ research is primarily important for its novelty: unlike Sweden and Britain, which are more or less ‘known’ scenes, accounts on the Israeli scene exist only as short articles written by the same author a few years ago. Moreover, such investigations help draw attention from Scandinavia, long regarded as the ‘only’ major scene, to ‘southern’ countries, including the Mediterranean and the Middle East, which have hardly been researched. As the author puts it, “Israel’s complicated history and geopolitical situation has had important consequences for its popular music culture” (p. 111), including the extreme metal scenes. The Israeli scene has long suffered from instability and isolation, due to external factors such as compulsory military service and the outbreak of the second intifada, as well as a huge lack of capital. Interestingly, Israeli bands share both an interest in local tradition and folklore, as it is common among extreme metal bands, and a hatred for their country, which is far more uncommon in the scene.¹

The author passes on to some general remarks about the marginalised Asiatic scene, the African scene (practically inexistent, with a few exceptions in Mediterranean countries) and the European scene. Probably due to lack of space, the European part suffers from approximation. While tackling southern Europe, Kahn-Harris points out the relatively large production of the Greek scene, but relegates Italy, Spain and Portugal to mere “insular” status. This certainly does not give credit to an area which has long suffered from isolation from larger scenic institutions, but has also been strongly influential in the global extreme metal scene. A typical example of such influence is the Italian band [Mortuary Drape](#), started in 1986; although they have gained capital in the global scene only in recent years, they have been long quoted by major bands as a source of inspiration. One could also draw upon [Moonspell](#) from Portugal or [Rotting Christ](#) from Greece to show that the assumption of a marginalised Mediterranean has at least to be questioned. Kahn-Harris shows elsewhere an interest for the Mediterranean extreme metal scenes, for instance with regard to the difficult situation of Islamic countries (p. 28) or to the importance of Middle-Eastern mythology in the developing of southern scenes (see the example of the Turkisk-Armenyan-Syrian band [Melechesh](#), p. 41); more elaboration on this issue would be welcome. On the whole, Kahn-Harris’ mapping of the global extreme metal scene seems a bit lacking in homogeneity. It is very detailed in the case of Sweden, UK and Israel, but far less useful to those interested in a deeper understanding of actually global trends.

Apart from the above emendations, *Extreme Metal* still is a highly valuable and groundbreaking study, a courageous attempt to lift the average quality of extreme metal writing from the standard of fanzine writing to a more critical and academic level. Such an operation is highly appreciated, as the average value of publications on extreme metal is quite low, both in the specialised press and in books. Extreme metal lacks a critical school, something which Kahn-Harris tries to create: “This book actively seeks to make value judgements about the extreme metal scenes. The aim is to develop a ‘critical’ perspective on the scene, based on an awareness of dominating practices and power relations within the scene” (p. 25). *Extreme Metal* thus becomes a very important contribution to a developing field of study, and will hopefully be a basis for further research on the global extreme metal scene.

¹ On this matter, see Keith Kahn-Harris, “I hate this fucking country”: Dealing with the Global and the Local in the Israeli Extreme Metal Scene’, *Critical Studies* 19: Music, Popular Culture, Identities, pp. 133-151.