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Research article

## Displaced, Distorted, Reclaimed: “Voice” in Metal Music

Ahmet Elnur (✉) 

Suleyman Demirel University, Çünür, 32260, Isparta, Turkey

[ahmetelnur@gmail.com](mailto:ahmetelnur@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Metal music studies have extensively examined the genre's engagement with power, transgression, and social critique. By contrast, the lyrical construction of “voice” as a thematic and philosophical phenomenon has received comparatively little scholarly attention. This study addresses this gap by investigating the relationship between metal song titles that feature different grammatical variants of the word “voice” and distinct ontological and affective themes. The naming of voice in song titles signifies a distinct ontological position rather than a mere compositional choice and constitutes the core argument of this study. A purposive sample of 169 songs titled “Voice,” “Voices,” “The Voice,” “The Voices,” or “A Voice” was compiled from the Encyclopaedia Metallum, and their lyrics were subjected to qualitative content analysis. Textual segments were coded to identify the source, nature, and response of the voice, and then refined into comprehensive thematic categories based on Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power, Kristeva's concept of abjection, and Bakhtin's dialogism. Accordingly, three principal themes were identified. The authority theme, as evidenced by the use of definite-article titles, constructs a singular, inescapable sovereign voice commanding obedience. The abjection theme, which is dominant in the bare plural “Voices,” portrays voice as a multiplied, chaotic phenomenon tied to psychic dissolution, fear, and violence. The agency theme, as manifested in both bare and indefinite singular titles, positions voice as a site of self-empowerment, political resistance, and dialogic potential. The predominance of the abjection theme within the metal imaginary suggests that voice is most commonly interpreted as a form of psychic crisis rather than as a manifestation of authority or empowerment. These findings contribute to the field of metal music studies by demonstrating that lyrics provide a rich source for systematic, theory-informed investigation and that metal music constitutes a significant cultural archive for the broader interdisciplinary study of voice and subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Abjection, Dialogism, Disciplinary Power, Lyrics, Metal Music, Subjectivity, Phenomenology of Voice

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Научная статья

## Вытесненный, искажённый, отвоёванный: “Голос” в метал-музыке

Ахмет Эльнур (✉) 

Университет Сулеймана Демиреля, Чюнюр, 32260, Испарта, Турция

[ahmetelnur@gmail.com](mailto:ahmetelnur@gmail.com)

### Аннотация

В исследованиях метал-музыки обстоятельно рассматривалось обращение жанра к проблематике власти, трансгрессии и социальной критики. Напротив, конструирование “голоса” как тематического и философского феномена в текстах песен получило сравнительно мало научного внимания. Настоящая статья восполняет данный пробел, исследуя связь между различными грамматическими вариантами слова “голос” в названиях метал-песен и определёнными онтологическими и аффективными темами. Центральный тезис исследования состоит в том, что именование голоса в названиях песен указывает на определённую онтологическую позицию, а не сводится к простому композиционному выбору. Из Encyclopaedia Metallum была отобрана целевая выборка из 169 песен под названиями “Voice”, “Voices”, “The Voice”, “The Voices” или “A Voice”, тексты которых были подвергнуты качественному контент-анализу. Текстовые сегменты кодировались для выявления источника, природы и реакции голоса, после чего сводились в развёрнутые тематические категории, опирающиеся на предложенную Фуко теорию дисциплинарной власти, концепцию абъекции Кристевой и диалогизм Бахтина. Соответственно, были выделены три основные темы. Тема власти, проявляющаяся в использовании названий с определённым артиклем, конструирует единый, неотвратимый и суверенный голос, требующий повиновения. Тема абъекции, доминирующая в форме множественного числа без артикля “Voices”, представляет голос как умноженный, хаотический феномен, сопряжённый с психическим распадом, страхом и насилием. Тема агентности, проявляющаяся как в формах единственного числа без артикля, так и в формах с неопределённым артиклем, позиционирует голос как пространство самоутверждения, политического сопротивления и диалогического потенциала. Преобладание темы абъекции в метал-воображаемом позволяет предположить, что голос чаще всего трактуется как форма психического кризиса, а не как проявление власти или расширения возможностей субъекта. Данное исследование вносит вклад в область исследований метал-музыки, демонстрируя, что тексты песен представляют собой богатый источник для систематического, теоретически обоснованного исследования, а сама метал-музыка служит значимым культурным архивом для более широкого междисциплинарного изучения голоса и субъективности.

**Ключевые слова:** Абъекция; Диалогизм; Дисциплинарная власть; Метал-музыка; Субъективность; Тексты песен; Феноменология голоса

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## INTRODUCTION

The voice occupies multiple positions within the domain of human experience, functioning as sound, metaphor, and philosophical inquiry. This phenomenon can be regarded immediately as one of the most profound expressions of selfhood, as well as the primary medium through which external power penetrates the psyche (Foucault, 1977; Ihde, 2007). The terms “voice” and “voices” embody this duality, while a voice may act as an individual's representative or address the individual, as in the clinical phenomenon of “hearing voices” (Dolar, 2006). This semantic multiplicity renders “voice” an exceptionally suitable site for cultural analysis (Thomaidis & Macpherson, 2015), particularly within musical genres where vocal extremity and lyrical intensity converge (Phillipov, 2012; Walser, 1993).

This dichotomy has long been a subject of profound philosophical contemplation. As Adriana Cavarero (2005) argues, the voice reveals “the uniqueness of each existent,” anchoring subjectivity in the embodied act of vocal utterance rather than in abstract cognition. Steven Connor (2000) has traced the oscillatory patterns in Western culture, in which the voice has been simultaneously venerated as a guarantor of presence and feared as a vehicle of ventriloquism and dispossession. Mladen Dolar (2006) has advanced the concept of voice as an uncanny “remainder” that surpasses the bounds of linguistic meaning and acoustic materiality, a phenomenon that is fully neither the purview of the speaking subject nor that of the listening other. More recently, Konstantinos Thomaidis and Ben Macpherson (2015) have advocated interdisciplinary “voice studies” that consider voice as an embodied practice, a cultural symbol, and a phenomenological event. Collectively, these perspectives imply that voice ought not be regarded as a mere neutral auditory phenomenon; rather, it is inherently intertwined with inquiries concerning power, identity, and the limits of the self.

Metal music constitutes a uniquely fertile site for this inquiry, and not merely incidentally, as the voice assumes a dual presence within the genre. Vocally, it accentuates the extremity of utterance through guttural screams, growls, and operatic singing, establishing the sounding voice as the primary expressive medium (Burns, 2025; Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 2000). Thematically, it returns insistently to the exploration of the limits of the self as confronted with power, subjection, madness, transgression, and resistance (Kahn-Harris, 2007; Phillipov, 2012). Within this genre, extreme states find expression beyond mere representation, as they are performed through a multifaceted combination of lyrical and sonic elements (Overell, 2014; Unger, 2016). Consequently, metal music represents a distinctive site for exploring the lyrical construction of voice, arguably surpassing other genres in the intensity and analytical richness of its lyrical composition. In this context, the voice assumes a central role as a medium for expressing profound psychic and political themes. While a substantial body of scholarship, ranging from Robert Walser's (1993) seminal study of guitar timbre as a form of empowerment to Michelle Phillipov's (2012) theorization of death metal's affective intensity, has examined the sonic and performative dimensions of the metal voice, there is a paucity of research on how the notion of “voice” functions as a lyrical and conceptual theme within the genre. Within the realm of metal music, the utilization of titles containing the word



“voice” or “voices” in song titles does not merely serve as a label for a musical composition. Instead, it constitutes an act of selection, whether conscious or intuitive, from a spectrum of ontological positions that carry distinct philosophical implications.

This study aims to reveal and interpret the aforementioned ontological distinctions through a qualitative content analysis of 169 metal songs whose titles present the word “voice” in various forms. Drawing on a comprehensive conceptual framework grounded in Michel Foucault's (1977, 1980) theorization of disciplinary power, Julia Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection and semiotic disruption, and Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) dialogism and the heteroglossic potential of utterance, the analysis categorizes the lyrical construction of voice into three principal modalities: authority, abjection, and agency. By undertaking this investigation, the study makes a significant contribution to the interdisciplinary dialogue between metal music studies, philosophy of voice, and cultural theory. Furthermore, it demonstrates that metal music lyrics constitute an essential and currently underutilized archive for theorizing the phenomenology of vocal experience in late modernity.

This study proposes that these modalities exhibit a coherent distribution across the analyzed lyrics, demonstrating a discernible tendency to correspond to the manner in which each song designates its own voice. Specifically, when the voice is referred to as “The Voice” or “The Voices,” it typically constructs an already identified, sovereign presence, a sovereign that commands and forecloses reply. When the term “Voices” is used without further qualification, it typically evokes an uncontained multiplicity that dissolves the boundaries of the self. Moreover, the use of “Voice” or “A Voice” in these contexts suggests openness to the potentiality of voice, emphasizing the relational and emergent nature of utterance, which remains inadequately defined or articulated. Accordingly, the form of the title functions as a threshold of interpretation, signifying to the listener the ontology of voice that a song inhabits prior to encountering its lyrics, constituting a form of indexicality as described by Silverstein (2004). Therefore, these naming practices correspond to the authority, abjection, and agency modalities, though systematic departures from this pattern illuminate the conditions under which the lived construction of voice works against the expectation its title would otherwise set.

## VOICE IN CRITICAL THEORY AND METAL MUSIC STUDIES

The philosophical interrogation of “voice” has a long and complex genealogy, with scholars examining the term from various angles across different historical periods. This conceptualization can be traced back to Aristotle's distinction between *phōnē* (animal sound) and *logos* (meaningful human speech) (Naas, 2022; Sparshott, 1994), and extends to Jacques Derrida's (1976) critique of phonocentrism. In Western thought, there has been a persistent shift between privileging the voice as the guarantor of presence and truth and suspecting it as the vehicle of illusion and domination (Cavarero, 2005; Connor, 2000). Foucault's (1977, 1980) studies on power and discourse offer a seminal framework for understanding the voice as a means of authority, in which power operates not solely through overt coercion but also through discursive regimes that generate “truths” and regulate subjects. The authoritative “voice” in its unambiguous, singular form can be



comprehended as an embodiment of what Foucault (1980) termed “power/knowledge,” a voice that not only conveys but also obligates obedience, molds perception, and precludes competing utterances. Indeed, this assertion signifies the voice of the sovereign entity, the institutional framework, and the internalized sense of moral rectitude that functions as a form of self-discipline.

Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection provides a contrasting framework for understanding the multiplied, chaotic voice. In this context, the object is theorized as that which disturbs identity, system, and order, “what does not respect borders, positions, rules.” The aforementioned phenomenon of “hearing voices,” particularly in its association with psychosis and the dissolution of the unified subject, corresponds to Kristeva's understanding of the semiotic, the pre-symbolic, rhythmic, pulsional dimension of language that threatens to overwhelm the symbolic order. Furthermore, Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) dialogism offers an additional theoretical framework, reinterpreting multiplicity not as a form of pathology but as the fundamental condition of human expression. In this sense, each word is considered to be “half someone else's” (Bakhtin, 1981), thereby highlighting the notion that meaning emerges from the dynamic interplay of voices engaged in dialogue. The Bakhtinian “voice” can be characterized as inherently relational, contextual, and resistant to monologic closure.

Building upon these foundations, Mladen Dolar's (2006) “A Voice and Nothing More” further elaborates this theoretical framework by conceptualizing voice as an entity that transcends the realms of meaning and sound, a phenomenon that eludes the purview of linguistics and acoustics. This double excess is methodologically consequential for this study, as a textual analysis engages the voice on the side of meaning, while its acoustic materiality, the dimension to which vocal techniques pertain, reconnects with the lyrical findings in the discussion section. The “object voice,” as Dolar (2006) terms it in accordance with Lacan's theory, occupies the uncanny space between the self and the “other,” between the interior and the exterior, rendering it an object of both fascination and dread. Within the context of metal music lyrics, the barren or ambiguous “voice” often embodies this dialogic capacity: a voice that responds, resists assimilation into authoritative discourse, and establishes new possibilities for agency and resistance.

The field of metal music studies has undergone significant expansion following the seminal contributions of Deena Weinstein's (2000) foundational sociological analysis and Walser's (1993) pioneering musicological intervention. Engagement with themes of power, transgression, and social critique has been extensively documented across multiple subgenres (Kahn-Harris, 2007; Phillipov, 2012; Spracklen, 2020). From the late 1990s onward, the rise in the study of metal music in fields such as subcultural studies, sociology, and music video analysis has led to a surge in scholarly work on the topic (Coggins, 2019). Karl Spracklen (2014, 2016) has theorized metal music as a “communicative space” where counter-hegemonic discourses are articulated and negotiated. Similarly, Keith Kahn-Harris (2007) has influentially analyzed the genre through the lens of “transgressive subcultural capital.”

More recently, scholars have begun to examine specific aspects of metal music with greater scrutiny. Rosemary Overell's (2014) ethnographic work on grindcore scene exemplifies how experiences in these environments function as a form of “affective



intensity” that resists discursive capture. Nelson Varas-Díaz et al. (2024) have explored the potential of metal music for “decolonial truth-telling”. Studies on specific bands have examined how metal lyrics engage with socio-political phenomena, including war, environmental destruction, and political manipulation (Elnur, 2024; Fathan & Budiwati, 2026; Saarinen, 2013). Harris Berger's (1999) phenomenological approach further demonstrates the value of attending to the lived dimensions of musical meaning-making, including the ways in which voices both performed and narrated. Rosemary Lucy Hill's (2016) research on gender, metal, and the media has also generated significant insights into the gendered nature of metal music subcultures. However, a systematic analysis of how the concept of “voice” is thematized within metal lyrics remains conspicuously absent from the existing literature. This study addresses this gap by treating “voice” not merely as a sonic or performative phenomenon but as a lyrical-philosophical inquiry, which metal musicians engage with in remarkably nuanced ways.

Based on the theoretical foundations outlined above, this study provides a threefold framework for analyzing the concept of “voice” in metal music lyrics. Following Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power, the first theme, “The Voice as Authority,” explores how songs with titles like “The Voice” or “The Voices” depict voice as a singular, commanding, and often oppressive entity that demands obedience and exercises disciplinary power over the lyrical subject. Drawing on Kristeva's concept of the abject, the second theme, “Voices as Abjection”, explores how songs titled “Voices” depict the voice as a multiplied, chaotic, boundary-dissolving phenomenon associated with madness, psychic fragmentation, and the collapse of the subject/object distinction. Grounded in Bakhtin's dialogism, the third theme, “Voice as Agency,” examines how songs titled “Voice” or “A Voice” construct voice as a site of emergent selfhood, dialogic engagement, resistant speech, or the potentiality of meaningful utterance. This threefold framework elucidates predominant tendencies rather than prescribing rigid categorizations, thereby offering a nuanced and multifaceted perspective on the phenomenon.

## METHODOLOGY

The dataset for this study was obtained through a systematic search of Encyclopaedia Metallum, the most comprehensive online metal music database, which catalogs over 195,000 bands and their discographies (Encyclopaedia Metallum: The Metal Archives, n.d.). The search targeted all songs with the exact titles “Voice,” “Voices,” “The Voice,” “The Voices,” or “A Voice,” for which complete English lyrics were available. After removing entries with unavailable, instrumental, or non-English lyrics, the final corpus comprised 169 songs spanning multiple subgenres, including death metal, black metal, thrash metal, power metal, progressive metal, doom metal, gothic metal, and various hybrid forms, as well as different release types, such as full-length albums, EPs, singles, demos, and splits. The lyrics were compiled into a structured dataset including band name, album title, release type, song title variant, and full lyrical text. This purposive sampling strategy was designed to capture the full range of grammatical and ontological permutations of “voice” within the metal music. The generated dataset



establishes a rigorous basis for the qualitative interpretation of lyrical content through thematic analysis.

The analytical object of this study requires clear delineation before engaging with the subject matter. In this study, the acoustic and performative dimensions of vocal delivery through which metal lyrics are articulated have been methodically bracketed in order to isolate the lyrical and semantic construction of voice as a textual object. This bracketing functions analytically rather than ontologically, thereby avoiding the implication that the sonic materiality of the metal voice is irrelevant to meaning. Indeed, vocal technique constitutes one of the most potent signifying resources of the genre (Phillipov, 2012; Walser, 1993). Instead, the decision to initiate the study by examining the lyrical content is indicative of the study's specific aim, which is to recover the conceptual and philosophical thematization of voice that has remained obscured by the field's longstanding emphasis on timbre and performance. The relationship between these lyrical modalities and their characteristic modes of vocal delivery is addressed directly in the discussion section, where the textual findings are reconnected to the acoustic body of the voice.

In this study, a qualitative content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012) was adopted, aligning with the methodology employed in recent lyric-based metal music research, which utilizes systematic coding and thematic categorization. The analytical procedure was executed through a multi-stage process, with each stage being interconnected with the preceding stage. The lyrics were read iteratively to develop familiarity and identify recurrent motifs, metaphors, and narrative structures associated with the concept of voice. Subsequent to this preliminary coding phase, an open coding phase ensued, wherein textual segments referencing voice were coded according to three distinct dimensions: the characterization of the source of the voice (internal, external, unknown, divine, demonic); the nature of the voice (commanding, whispering, screaming, multiplied, singular); and the lyrical response of the subject to the voice (obedience, fear, resistance, empowerment, fragmentation). Following a cyclical process of comparison and abstraction (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2013), the initial codes were then reorganized into higher-order categories corresponding to the three ontological themes of the conceptual framework: authority, abjection, and agency. Finally, exemplary lyrical passages were selected to illustrate each category, with particular attention to the rhetorical strategies employed to construct voice, including metaphor, personification, imperative mood, and interrogative forms.

The constant comparative method was employed throughout to ensure analytical trustworthiness, with new data continuously compared against previously coded material (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Researcher reflexivity was maintained through ongoing documentation of analytical decisions and interpretive assumptions (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The threefold framework was modified in accordance with emergent data, thereby ensuring the inclusion of lyrical passages beyond the confines of pre-established categories when they did not substantively align.



## FINDINGS

An examination of the 169 songs within the dataset reveals significant disparities in the distribution across various title variants. The plural form “Voices” is the most prevalent, significantly outnumbering the singular “The Voice” and the plural “The Voices.” The bare singular “Voice” and the indefinite “A Voice” constitute the smallest categories. This distributional pattern is analytically significant because in the realm of metal imaginaries, the experience of voice is most typically characterized as uncontained multiplicity rather than singular authority or bounded agency.

### “I’m the Voice and You’re My Slave”: Voice as Authority

The presence of the definite article in lyrics (“The Voice” or “The Voices”) consistently conveys the notion of voice as an external or relatively external authority that wields power over the lyrical subject. The defining characteristics of this theme encompass control, domination, and the dissolution of individual autonomy.

Crest of Darkness's “The Voice” exemplifies this modality with considerable clarity: “I’m the voice in your head / I’m the voice, and you’re my slave.” In this text, the voice is presented as an external entity, addressing the listener directly and claiming authority over the listener's internal experiences. The employment of the definite article serves to underscore the singularity of this voice, articulating a unifying and comprehensive presence that refuses to acknowledge any form of rivalry or plurality. This master-slave dialectic aligns with Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power as a mechanism that is internalized through surveillance and control.

This thematic intensity is further illustrated by Denim and Leather's “The Voice”: “I am the voice that screams inside your mind / I am the evil that commands your body and your soul [...] Your doctor is wrong, I'll never set you free / Your mind is full, you're crazy, can't you see?” In this text, the voice wields a dual effect, simultaneously claiming dominance and subverting external sources of authority, namely the doctor and medical knowledge. This assertion of authority positions the voice as the sole interpreter of reality, effectively eclipsing other potential perspectives. This concept aligns with Foucault's (1980) notion of the productive dimension of power, characterized by the capacity not only to repress but also to shape the individual's perception of reality.

Sanity's Eclipse's “The Voice” offers a nuanced dramatization of this power dynamic through a dialogic structure: “I want you. – Leave me alone. / You will loose. – I don't need your help. / I am stronger than you. – I don't let you out / You can not resist my force. – Get out of my head.” The subject's resistance is progressively overcome until the final capitulation: “The voice is now stronger than before, I let it out, can't take it anymore! [...] I escaped by using a knife.” Within these lyrics, escaping from The Voice's authority becomes synonymous with self-destruction, a vivid illustration of internalized power that echoes Foucault's (1977) notion that disciplinary regimes effectively create the entities they seek to control.

Enslaved's “The Voices” extends this analysis to collective authority: “I hear their poisonous words again / As they call out for submission and code [...] These were the voices that destroyed us.” The plural definite article in “The Voices” functions as a



signifier of institutional or systemic power, representing a code, a regime, or a cohesive apparatus of submission. Specifically, the response, “Fail to comply – reborn in war / The answer being no,” introduces a moment of resistance that is explicitly framed in terms of confrontation rather than liberation. Psychosis's “The Voices” further elucidates this theme: “The voices of your masters / Are hung in the air / You hear them whispering in the darkness of the night / Your time has come / Get up! [...] They are crying for the sacrifice of blood.” Within this context, the voice that assumes a masterful role demands more than mere compliance by necessitating ritual sacrifice, which positions the individual as a mere medium for mysterious and uncontrollable forces.

Sociopathy's “The Voice” sheds light on the compulsive dimension: “Voice inside my head / Murder act / Brings my soul to relieve [...] Whatever voice says, I must do it / Because I'm weak in my sinful soul.” By deliberately acknowledging powerlessness, the individual conveys a stance that transcends conventional notions of resistance or even reluctant compliance. Instead, this acknowledgment signifies a fundamental weakness in the face of The Voice's authority. This perspective aligns with Dolar's (2006) conceptualization of the “voice as object,” a phenomenon that emerges from a dominant position and transcends the individual's capacity for refusal or resistance. Similarly, Queensrÿche's “The Voice” articulates a culminating moment of self-recognition: “when life is hanging from a thread... you can hear that voice in your head [...] And now my heart's done bleeding, but I've just started seeing.” In this context, the voice emerges at the threshold of death and vision, functioning as “voice as object,” a residue that persists when all signification has been stripped away.

Within the theme, analysis reveals a predominant subject-object relationship, characterized by the dominance of “The Voice” over the lyrical content. The definite article functions as a grammatical marker of ontological closure, representing the voice that has already been identified, named, and established as sovereign within the psyche.

### **“Voices Growing Louder Still”: Voice as Abjection**

The plural form “Voices” represents the most prevalent theme in the dataset, exhibiting a consistent narrative trajectory. This thematic profile portrays voices as a multiplied, uncontrollable, and disruptive phenomenon, associatively linked with psychic disintegration, violence, and the abject.

Born from Deception's “Voices” offers a quintessential expression of this tendency: “Instead of quiet, there is chaos / Voices growing louder still / Insatiable, their thirst for blood / Demanding once again to kill [...] The voices leave him restless, awake at night, never sleeping / The voices are relentless, at all hours, always speaking.” The voices in these lyrics defy conventional boundaries, disrupting the traditional distinctions between waking and sleeping and between interior thought and exterior action. Their insistence represents a demand for the dissolution of the traditional boundaries between subject and act, rather than the unconditional compliance demanded by The Voice. This concept aligns with Kristeva's (1982) notion of abjection, conceptualized as a state of lacking respect for boundaries, established positions, or prescribed rules.



Algea's "Voices" serves to reinforce this perspective: "Voices inside my head / Wanting me dead / That bring pain to loved ones / In exchange of shame [...] Breaks the boundaries of reason / Confounds my mind with malice / And desecrating thoughts of death." By explicitly referencing "breaking boundaries of reason" and "desecrating thoughts," the voices establish themselves as agents of semiotic disruption. This disruption, similar to Kristeva's (1984) concept of semiotic chora, involves the breakdown of the symbolic order with considerable force.

Dream Theater's "Voices" exemplifies self-awareness in a theoretical sense: "Voices repeating me / 'Feeling threatened? We reflect your hopes and fears.' / Voices discussing me / 'Others steal your thoughts, they're not confined within your mind.'" Indeed, the voices explicitly announce their role as reflections, repetitions, and discussions, thereby illustrating the decomposition of the individual's psyche into a cacophony of competing perspectives. In this manner, the notion that thoughts are "not confined within your mind" articulates precisely the Kristevan dissolution of the "self/other boundary" (Keltner, 2006).

A more nuanced illustration of this phenomenon manifests in Alice in Chains's "Voices": "Who am I? Is this me? Am I wrong? Or thirteen? [...] Everybody listen / Voices in my head / Everybody listen / Cause you'll see what mine says." The initial inquiries serve to underscore the inherent identity crisis that accompanies the experience of voices. The imperative "everybody listen" paradoxically externalizes the internal chaos, thereby requiring others to bear witness to the fragmentation. Additionally, Burning the Oppressor's "Voices" introduces the institutional dimension: "White walls around me... I cannot see the exit / Voices invade me, voices impose all limits / Welcome to my world, my reality / This is my world, a paranoid story." In this context, the "white walls" symbolize the confines of the psychiatric institution, while the voices "impose all limits" on the autonomous perception of the subject. This intersection of madness and institutionalization recalls both Kristeva's (1982) analysis of abjection in relation to the social order and Foucault's (1965) earlier work on madness and civilization.

The Accüsed's "Voices" achieves a devastating compression: "Curled up on the floor / Four walls and a bed / Me, myself and the voices in my head." The persistent reiteration of this refrain symbolizes the experiential phenomenon of the voice ensnared in a repetitive loop, the self-reduced to its most fundamental aspect, surrounded by its own inherent plurality. Borknagar's "Voices" further explores this theme, expanding it into the existential realm: "There are voices in the air, there are voices in the air. / They always find me, they find me, no matter where I go [...] When I finally stop to breathe / All the voices will only linger in the field." In this context, the voices transcend their internal nature, permeating the landscape itself. Ultimately, the only release from this state is death, defined as the cessation of breathing. Nevertheless, as posited by the lyrics, the voices merely "linger" in the space between life and death.

Toxik's "Voices" encapsulates the complete trajectory from internal affliction to externalized violence and ultimate self-destruction: "These voices in my head they say / Just what they want to say / They taunt me in my sleep / They want me to kill their way [...] Free from them, they're finally out / Out, get them out." The only resolution to this



predicament, as elucidated in the following discourse, lies in the literal effusion of one's own blood: “From my wrists, blood cascades / Free from them, they're finally out.”

Within this theme, the most prevalent responses observed include fear, a sense of loss of control, a desire for cessation, and expressions of violence, either enacted or demanded by the voices. Rather than exhibiting successful resistance, the individual's response is characterized by ambivalence, shifting between feelings of helplessness and horror, and a subsequent capitulation of will. This consistent pattern across various songs from disparate subgenres, countries, and decades suggests that the unadorned plural “Voices” has solidified within the metal imaginary as a stable signifier for psychic dissolution.

### “Fear No Master”: Voice as Agency

The least extensive theme, represented by songs titled “Voice” or “A Voice,” exhibits a distinctly divergent profile. In this context, voice does not function as the totalizing sovereign or the chaotic swarm, but rather as an emergent, relational, and potentially resistant utterance that is aligned with Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) concept of dialogism. Despite the plural title, Archetype's “Voices” articulates a discursively agentive narrative: “Here I am, the shady voice inside your head / Shake the silence off and face yourself instead [...] Rise! Upon your darkest past / Feel the strength and the pain from the memories that'll last [...] Locate the masterpiece you were searching for.” In this context, the voice transcends the conventional paradigm of authority, instead evoking the individual's inherent potential for self-creation. The imperative “Rise!” does not function as a disciplinary directive, as would be expected in the context of *The Voice*. Rather, it can be understood as the concept of a “word with a sideways glance,” as described by Bakhtin (1984). By employing this term, the message is directed not only to address the other, but also to establish both the author and the recipient of the message.

Warforged's “Voice” explores the concept from an existential-phenomenological perspective: “...blurry faced things staggered out from the trees [...] I tried to scream, can't you hear me calling from the dark?” In this context, voice can be understood as a verbal expression that has not yet been addressed to its recipient, thereby exemplifying the Bakhtinian concept of an “utterance” in a state of suspension, situated at the intersection of the individual and the external world. Sinbreed's “The Voice” employs a comparable but inverted logic. Notably, the title names a singular, authoritative voice typically associated with the authority modality, yet subverts this conventional designation to critique the master-slave dynamic: “I hear a voice in my head and in my heart / Getting louder day by day / It calls my name telling me to dare the start / To no longer stay a face in the crowd / I will stand for my beliefs – strong and proud [...] Never bow your head – fear no master.” The explicit rejection of the master-slave dynamic, as exemplified by the phrase “fear no master,” serves to invert the established paradigm of the “authority” domain.

Within the realm of lyrical content, Mortad's “The Voice” stands out as a noteworthy exemplar, particularly for its political significance. Dedicated to Neda Agha-Soltan, the young Iranian woman killed during the 2009 pro-democracy movement,



whose name corresponds to “The Voice”: “Neda fear not / Stay with us [...] Bore a hole through the stone / Fought with her flesh and bone [...] Smothered the will / Our will to mutiny.” Voice is theorized as political agency in this context, signifying the act of voicing truth to power despite the potential for lethal consequences. This perspective aligns with Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the “internally persuasive word,” which challenges authoritative discourse, and with Cavarero's (2005) notion of voice as the embodiment of “uniqueness of each existent”. Noxus's “Voices” reframes multiplicity as solidarity rather than fragmentation: “You are the voice, we do this for you [...] Let me hear / All I want / All I need / Hear your voice / Scream my name.” In this context, the imperative “hear your voice” inverts the traditional structure of the “Voices” domain, wherein voices are typically imposed on a passive subject. In contrast, the individual actively seeks the other's voice as a fundamental element in defining their own identity and sense of self.

Within this theme, the prevailing response to the voice manifests through engagement rather than obedience or submission. Specifically, the subject, characterized by lyrical content, engages listeners by inviting them to listen, respond, question, and ultimately take action. Within this framework, voice is not conceptualized as a possession or an affliction, but rather as an event that occurs between individuals.

## DISCUSSION

Qualitative content analysis of lyrical content has yielded a threefold taxonomy, “Authority, Abjection, Agency.” This framework reveals how metal musicians, across a broad spectrum of subgenres, engage with the concept of “voice” in resonant ways with contemporary philosophical and critical-theoretical frameworks. This convergence ought not to be considered purely coincidental, as the voice, the primary medium of metal music performance and one of the core thematic domains of its lyrics, occupies the intersection of the genre's genre-specific thematic preoccupations, as evidenced by the lyrics analyzed in this study.

The overwhelming predominance of the “Abjection” theme necessitates particular consideration. This distributional tendency implies a prevalent association of voice with psychic crisis within the metal imaginary. The voices expressed in these lyrics deviate from the rationality, communal harmony, or constructive discourse characteristic of conventional lyricism. Instead, they embody a dissolution of these qualities, wielding violence, curtailing autonomy, and erasing the boundaries between the self and the other, the interior and exterior, rationality and madness. This finding resonates with Phillipov's (2012) understanding of metal music as an affective experience worthy of exploration. It also aligns with Overell's (2014) ethnographic observation that extreme music scenes foster a sense of “brutal belonging” through the shared experience of intense sound and themes.

While less prevalent, the “Authority” theme is deemed more philosophically consequential. The construction of voice as a singular, disciplinary, inevitable sovereignty is exemplified in the lyrics “I'm the voice and you're my slave,” by Crest of Darkness, which elucidate a theory of internalized power analogous to Foucault's (1977)



analysis of the “panopticon”. At this juncture, the voice emerges as an internal observer that requires no external validation, having already assimilated itself within the psyche of the individual. The recurrence of this motif across a variety of musical genres and time periods indicates that the experience of being compelled by an inner voice of authority is a persistent cultural concern with unique expressive potential through metal music. This finding further aligns with Niall Scott's (2012) observations concerning the internalization of discursive structures within subcultural expressions and Owen Coggins's (2018) analysis of how metal music facilitates experiences of transcendence and submission through sonic extremity.

Despite its classification as the least substantial thematic category, the “Agency” theme provides a crucial and noteworthy counterpoint. The analysis of songs within this theme reveals the capacity of metal lyrics to serve not only as a medium for documenting subjection and fragmentation, but also for the imaginative representation and enactment of resistance. Mortad's dedication to Neda Agha-Soltan transforms “The Voice” from a metaphor of inner turmoil into a political declaration. Sinbreed's injunction to “fear no master” directly challenges the logic of domination as espoused by the “Authority” theme. Meanwhile, Archetype's imperative “Rise!” reconfigures voice as a tool of self-empowerment. These findings align with Varas-Díaz et al.'s (2024) recent positing that metal music functions as a form of “truth-telling” in contexts of political and cultural oppression, and with Heather Savigny and Simon Schaap's (2018) broader claim that metal music studies should attend to the resistant and emancipatory potentials of the genre alongside its transgressive dimensions.

A comprehensive analysis of the dataset indicates a strong and persistent, though not exclusive, association between the way a voice is designated in a song and the ontology of vocal experience embodied in its lyrics. By employing the singular and definite voice in a song, the voice effectively establishes an authority that is already identified, sovereign, and established. When “Voices” is used without qualification, it evokes a presence that is anonymous, multiple, and uncontainable. The use of an indeterminate singular (“Voice,” “A Voice”) denotes the domain of potentiality, signifying an unformed voice yet to be defined and appropriated. The principal aberrations from this paradigm manifest in the agency modality, wherein songs reappropriate titles otherwise associated with authority or abjection. Drawing upon Silverstein's (2004) conceptualization, these naming practices can be regarded as sites of performative enactment, where cultural presuppositions concerning the “what” and the “who” of communication are indexically reconstructed in each instance of utterance.

Interpreting metal music lyrics as text while invoking phenomenologies of the voice that privilege its sonorous and embodied dimensions (Cavarero, 2005; Ihde, 2007) poses the issue of creating an apparent tension. Given Cavarero's (2005) notion of voice as a primary signifier of uniqueness in its embodiment rather than in its semantic content, an exclusively textual reading faces the possibility of reproducing the phenomenon of devocalization it aims to contest. However, this tension remains more apparent than substantial, and its dissolution illuminates the scope of the extant findings, underscoring their limitations. Roland Barthes (1977) identifies a level of signification inherent in the materiality of vocal production, which operates independently of semantic content within



the context of song. This level of signification renders the body audible, thereby emphasizing the physical nature of vocal production over semantic interpretation. This grain, as posited by Barthes, is distinguished from, and indeed prioritized over, the communicative and expressive register of the sung message. Nevertheless, this study conceptualizes these two aspects as co-implicated facets of a single signifying event, thereby pursuing the lyrical-semantic dimension without denying the inherent meaning carried by the vocal grain. Dolar's (2006) concept of "object voice" offers a framework for understanding the phenomenon by articulating the dimensions of vocal experience that exceed both the auditory and the linguistic dimensions that extend beyond the conventional boundaries of language. Consequently, the lyrical and sonic dimensions are understood to be intertwined, rather than confined to distinct realms.

From this perspective, the three identified modalities are reinforced, without being contradicted, by the distinctive vocal characteristics of the genre. The authority modality, typified by a singular voice that dominates and forecloses response, finds its acoustic counterpart in the declamatory, intelligible, and monologic registers that assert mastery over the sonic domain. The abjection modality corresponds to the growled and screamed textures in which semantic intelligibility itself begins to dissolve, an audible enactment of the semiotic breaking through and overwhelming the symbolic order (Kristeva, 1982; Phillipov, 2012). Furthermore, the agency modality is frequently characterized by the dynamic interplay of clean and harsh registers, which has become a structural feature of the genre (Burns, 2025). This interplay manifests at the level of vocal production, thereby exemplifying the dialogic relation between voices theorized by Bakhtin (1981). Accordingly, this analysis provides a preliminary textual examination of a phenomenon that warrants a more comprehensive multimodal description, including an analysis of its constituent elements. This analysis highlights the interdependence between lyrical themes and vocal delivery, suggesting that these elements should be considered together in subsequent multimodal studies.

Situating these findings within the broader discourse on voice and subjectivity underscores the significance of this study. In Don Ihde's (2007) phenomenology of listening, a distinction emerges between the voice of the other and the inner voice. The metal music lyrics examined in this study systematically challenge this distinction. The voice materializes from the periphery, gradually permeating the internal domain. Concurrently, voices emanate from within, overwhelming the exterior. At the interface between interior and exterior realms, Voice/A Voice manifests, signifying the nexus of these two dimensions. This persistent destabilization of the inside/outside boundary is essential to Cavarero's (2005) phenomenology of voice. Additionally, this study suggests that metal music functions as one of its most articulate contemporary artistic expressions. Similarly, Thomaidis and Macpherson (2015) emphasize that voice inhabits the contested space between embodiment, signification, and affect, rather than being confined to a single modality. This notion is substantiated by the analysis of lyrical content in this study.

This study provides methodological insights for the field of metal music studies. By focusing on a specific lexical unit, "voice," and examining its semantic and ontological variations across a substantial corpus, the analysis underscores the value of



systematic, theory-driven investigation in the context of metal lyrics. Adopting a qualitative content analysis approach can reveal patterns that might be overlooked through close reading of individual songs. This approach also preserves the interpretive depth typically diminished by purely quantitative methods while maintaining trustworthiness.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that metal music lyrics constitute a substantial and theoretically valuable repository for investigating the ontology of “voice” in contemporary culture. A qualitative content analysis of 169 songs yielded three distinct themes: “The Voice as distinct authority”, rooted in Foucauldian power relations; “Voices as chaotic multiplicity” articulating Kristevan abjection; and “Voice/A Voice as emergent agency” in resonance with Bakhtinian dialogism. The noteworthy uniformity exhibited by these phenomena across a wide array of subgenres, national contexts, and historical periods suggests that the notion of “voice” addresses a foundational aspect of metal music imaginary. Consequently, it extends to the broader cultural phenomenology of auditory experience in late modernity.

The findings carry several implications for various domains of scholarly inquiry. In the context of metal music studies, this approach underscores the importance of examining not only vocal performance and musical structure but also the thematic construction of voice. For the philosophy of voice, they provide empirical evidence drawn from a dataset of 169 diverse subcultural texts. This evidence demonstrates the ontological distinctions theorized by Foucault, Kristeva, Bakhtin, Dolar, and Cavarero. From a broader perspective, within the domain of cultural studies, these phenomena offer a compelling illustration of how a marginalized musical genre engages with some of the most pressing questions (Who speaks? Who exerts authority? To whom does the voice of the text belong?) of contemporary individuality and subjectivity.

Future research would benefit from extending this analysis in several directions. A comparative study across different musical genres could examine whether the “voice as authority” pattern appears in the lyrics of contemporary genres with comparable frequency. A diachronic investigation into the evolution of voice construction across the history of metal music would provide valuable insights. Additionally, a reception study could examine how listeners experience the varied ontological domains in metal music. Furthermore, a multilingual analysis examining the construction of voice in metal music lyrics written in various languages with different grammatical structures, such as the presence or absence of definite articles, could offer novel insights into the impact of linguistic nuances on the perceived ontological effects. Undeniably, when metal musicians employ the term “voice,” “voices,” or simply “voice,” they engage in one of the most fundamental and enduring philosophical discourses, encompassing inquiries into the essence of speech, the act of being addressed, and the phenomenon of being spoken through.



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#### СВЕДЕНИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ / THE AUTHOR

Ахмет Эльнур  
ahmetelnur@gmail.com  
ORCID 0000-0002-3287-535X

Ahmet Elnur  
ahmetelnur@gmail.com  
ORCID 0000-0002-3287-535X

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