

More than Screams and Distortion: Chilean Metal Against the Ecological Crises and the Extractivist Economic Model¹

Author: Jan Koplow Villavicencio (Duke University)

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Introduction

The planet is experiencing unprecedented ecological crises as a result of human action (IPCC 2014), which, among other things, has generated an increase in greenhouse gasses (GHG) and, with it, an irreversible increase in the Earth’s temperature (Marín and Gallegos 2021). This situation, commonly known as climate change, has increased the probability of floods, droughts, forest fires, and with them the consequences that these disasters have on human and non-human lives. Furthermore, although climate change is a global phenomenon, its effects vary across different locations, even within a single country, making it difficult to address (Marín and Gallegos 2021). Due to an increased awareness about climate change, musicians are actively responding through their creative and professional activities. This has been done through song lyrics and themes, the development of concerts with a lower environmental impact, the use of recycled instruments, and political activism (Prior 2022).

Metal music and musicians are no exception, since musicians make “use of its harsh lyrics, sounds, and visual imagery to express critical concerns about human behavior and decision making and anxieties about the future” (Wiebe-Taylor 2009, 89). Nevertheless, much scholarly attention has been given to metal music and climate change in the Global North (Buckland 2016; Collinson 2019; Lucas 2015, 2019), there is a lack of studies reflecting on that same matter in the Global South. Addressing this void of knowledge is relevant since metal music is also a global phenomenon with a great variety of local manifestations (Brown et al. 2016; Calvo 2018), which means that metal’s discursive, sonic, and visual aspects are regionalized and redefined.

Particularly, Latin America, besides having ecosystems that are highly sensitive to climate change (Rojas and Ortega 2016), is dangerously dependent on extractivism as an economic model (Estenssoro 2010). This model is defined as “the extraction of natural resources, in

¹ This paper is a slightly modified and translated version of a previously published article. I did the translation, and the original work was initially published in Spanish in the journal *Lenguas Radicales*, N°4, December 2022. The full version is available at <https://lenguasradicales.cl/index.php/lr/article/view/29>.

large volume or high intensity, and that are essentially oriented to be exported as unprocessed raw materials, or with minimal processing”² (Gudynas 2015, 3). Furthermore, it deploys not only colonial and capitalistic conceptions of nature (Machado 2010; Mignolo 2007) but also establishes asymmetric relationships between the continent and the world market that affect the ability of most Latin American countries to protect their ecosystems (Weinberg 2021). In this context, Chile is considered one of the first examples of implementing and developing neoliberalism and extractivist economic policies in Latin America (Pelfini and Mena 2017).

In this vein, metal music in Latin America tends to have a decolonial view of the social phenomena which afflict each country (Varas-Díaz, 2019), and studying how Latin American metal bands respond to their ecological context should bring new insights to the relation between metal and climate change on a global scale. Therefore, this paper briefly analyzes how Chilean metal bands have participated through their music in the discussion about the ecological crises and the effects generated by the country’s extractivist economic model. I suggest that Metal in Chile is more than screams and distortion; rather, in line with the decolonial character of Latin American metal, it shows a critical, regionalized reflection on the current environmental context. The paper consists of an analysis of two songs created by bands from the Chilean metal scene:³ “El verde estupor de los grillos” by Horeja (2014) and “Animal” by Egregor (2020).⁴ Specifically, I make a complementary analysis of song lyrics and the sonic elements common to metal music. My theoretical approaches that guide this research are from environmental and decolonial studies, particularly in the line of research proposed by Nelson Varas-Díaz (and Morales 2018; 2019) on decolonial discourses in Latin American metal music and how it serves as a mechanism for critical sociocultural reflection.

Ecological Crises, Extractivism, and Chilean Metal

In the 1980s, during the civic-military dictatorship, the Chilean government introduced the nascent neoliberal economic model to increase international trade. This gave ground for and fostered the process of developing extractive policies that understood the land solely as a means for financial gain (Pelfini and Mena 2017). Reinforced by ideologies of “progress” and “development,” this economical engagement with the natural world came with serious environmental consequences, such as the privatization and overexploitation of natural resources (Yáñez and Molina 2011), destruction and contamination of natural areas and their surroundings (Contardo 2022), and human displacement resulting from worsening living conditions (Acevedo 2014). One of the most striking aspects is that extractivism

² Author’s translation.

³ When I refer to the Chilean metal scene, I mean bands from different parts of the country. In this case, Egregor is a band from Arica, a city located in the very north of the country, where most of the economy depends on the mining industry. Meanwhile, Horeja is a group from Santiago de Chile, the capital, which is in the middle of the country but relates profoundly with the issues that affect the Indigenous cultures in the south of the country such as the logging and hydroelectric companies. Even though the songs I will analyze do not speak directly about mining, logging, or dams, said backgrounds and interests permeate the position and scope of each band.

⁴ In the original work, I analyze four songs. The missing ones are “Verde Caer” by Kontra Sangre and “Bienvenidos a robar” by Horeja.

could be regulated in such a way as to avoid or counteract the damage it generates; however, the Chilean government has yet to control or sanction industries' illegal acts and the damages they produce (Contardo 2022; Pelfini and Mena 2017; Yáñez and Molina 2011).

In the same decade, metal music globalized in Chile, primarily through the importation of recordings of foreign bands and international music fanzines. Although metal music is historically deemed a countercultural genre from a Western perspective, Chilean musicians and audiences did not use metal music throughout the dictatorship to criticize the political situation, but rather focused on discovering and enjoying this new sonic experience and the opportunities for social encounter that the genre offered (Sánchez 2014). Over time this changed, and “between the post-dictatorship years and the beginning of October 2019, the dissemination of a [countercultural] message evolved from few attempts of social criticism to a volume of songs that have achieved notoriety within the style and have marked metal fans” (Cerdeña 2020, 85).⁵ Part of this evolution happened due to a growing awareness of the Chilean environmental and economic context, which is enunciated by metal bands through different sonic and discursive resources.

One of the most prominent social critiques by Chilean metal musicians focuses on the neoliberalist logic that encourages the privatization of natural resources. This can be observed in the song ‘El verde estupor de los grillos’ by Horeja (2014).

El verde estupor de los grillos

¿De quién es esta tierra?
¿De quién el agua y las piedras?
Del demonio que se aferra
A su carne y a sus venas
Allá en la ciudad se engendraron
Sus garras de metal y su Estado
Cuando reventó en sus manos
Y se expandió como un gusano.

The green stupor of crickets⁶

Whose land is this?
Who owns the water and stones?
They are from the demon that clings
To their flesh and veins
There in the city, they were engendered
His metal claws and his State
When he burst into their hands
And he expanded like a worm.

The critique states that the earth, water, and stones belong to a demon, one that is alien to nature and who was engendered in the city. From my perspective, this demon corresponds to neoliberalism since it promotes an economical use of the land based on the ideas of privatization, deregulation, and economic liberalization. Those ideas embody the colonial thought that sustains extractivism since it was through that mindset that nature “became a repository of objectified, neutralized, and largely inert materiality that existed for the fulfillment of [society’s] economic goals” (Mignolo 2011, 12). This idea is consistent with the relationship between the demon and the concept of the city since the city represents the modern space where neoliberalism and extractivism was developed. In this vein, the demon’s metal claws may represent the different tools of domination and destruction that humanity has created and deployed over time. Consequently, the description of the demon

⁵ Author’s translation.

⁶ Author’s translation. Audio available at bit.ly/3TWX08d.

proliferating itself by erupting from the hands of its creators and expanding like a worm could be understood as neoliberalism exceeding the limits of the city and spreading itself in various places underground, which makes it difficult to be stopped.

Furthermore, the sound of the piece contributes to the ideas expressed in the lyrics. This song begins by surrounding the listener with the sound of crickets, then gives way to the instruments, and finally to the voice. With this introduction, the band evokes a natural environment since the crickets' song is audible in meadows or forests, but not in the city. This sonority establishes a particular physical space; later on, when the sound of the guitars and voice enter, the music is tinged with a mixture between metal musical phrases and the ambience of a non-human natural world. As such, it sounds to me that the crickets, as a synecdoche of nature, are declaiming the lyrics. This same relationship opens the door to conceiving metal music's confrontational and empowering nature from a posthumanist perspective, as something not restricted only to giving voice to human issues but also to the injustices that other living beings are facing.

My second example is Egregor's song "Animal" (2020). Its lyrical content demonstrates the musicians' criticism of the disconnection of modern humanity from nature and the consequent damage this generates. In this song, the vocalist speaks to two subjects: an animal and a human being. Addressing the animal figure, the female vocalist empathetically recounts its suffering, portraying it as an innocent and defenseless being who is a victim of human behavior. She later changes her attitude to interrogate human actions and thoughts, portraying humans as greedy, destructive, and disconnected from nature. This dual attitude can be seen in the following lyrics:

Animal

Presas fáciles,
arrancan tus ojos y corazón
Empacado se da,
cuerpo sin rostro, no incomodará

Entiende bien,
no hay diferencia
cuando se trata de dolor,
sin compasión.
Humanidad
a quien condenas
si ya mordiste tu conexión
por ambición.

Animal⁷

Easy prey,
they tear out your eyes and heart
Packed is given,
faceless body, will not bother

You should understand,
there is no difference
when it comes to pain,
without compassion.
Humanity
whom do you condemn
if you already broke your connection
for ambition.

⁷ Author's translation. Egregor 2020. Audio available at <http://bit.ly/3nBJ7QM>.

When speaking to the animal figure, the singer's voice is soft and tender with an undistorted electric guitar accompaniment. The drummer plays quietly on the kick, the snare, and cymbals, and the bassist plays long notes without much melodic movement. However, when speaking to the human being, the atmosphere changes drastically. The vocalist adopts a strong and empowered lyrical persona with powerful, marked, and melodic singing. At the same time, the guitar and bass are played with distortion; heavy and intense riffs fly alongside a more strident, dynamic drumming. Through this contrast, it is possible to conceive a symbiotic interaction between discourse and sound that strengthens the impact of the critique towards the colonial/economic mentality that reigns in the minds of some humans and catalyzes the different ways of damaging the environment such as extractivism.

Conclusion

As seen in this essay, Chilean metal bands have expressed themselves critically regarding the ecological situation that the country is experiencing and the consequences of the extractivist economy prevailing within the nation. Through the lyrics, both songs encompass a fundamental aspect of criticism grounded in the Chilean environmental context: the desire for privatization and exploitation associated with neoliberalism and extractivism ("El verde estupor de los grillos"), and the colonial/conquering mentality that has led humans to damage the world due to the loss of connection from nature ("Animal"). Meanwhile, using the powerful and strident sound of metal, and its contrast with more content and quiet passages, each song manages to establish a soundscape that may challenge some listeners to reflect on what the singers declaim through the feelings, ideas, and reflections that emerge while listening to the song.

Therefore, it is possible to suggest that metal in Chile is more than screams and distortion. Instead, Chilean metal bands manage to establish a reflective critique of its own context, all the while transmitting the anxieties and challenges that the future holds. Instead, it is a genre that manages to establish a reflective critique of its own context, all the while transmitting the anxieties and challenges that the future holds. Nevertheless, there are some issues that remain to be addressed, particularly the complexities and possible controversies behind this eco-friendly and eco-critical perspective since metal music is a genre that heavily relies on modern technology that electrifies musical instruments and amplifies musical sound. It is therefore necessary to continue delving into the intersection between music and the ecological crises to reflect on music's impact on society and evaluate how music stimulates a paradigm shift to face the future but also how it can affect the same problem that is trying to address. Finally, it is worth saying that the ecological crises that all living beings face will not stop, so it is necessary to approach climate change in the most holistic way possible and generate more discussion around it to stimulate better ways of dealing with this situation.

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