

..... Kid Stuff

Marketing Sex and Violence
to America's Children

Edited by

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Music at the Edge The Attraction and Effects of Controversial Music on Young People

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

Going back at least to the rise of jazz in the early twentieth century, popular music has been a source of public concern for its possible effects on young people. Adults in every decade since have expressed the fear that the music embraced by the young may be morally corrupting and provoke them into deviant behavior. Although popular music has changed dramatically over the past century, it has been consistently portrayed as a force leading the young into temptation and separating them from the influence of their parents, teachers, and other adult authorities. First jazz, then the rock 'n' roll of the 1950s, then the rock music of the 1960s, through punk in the 1970s, heavy metal in the 1980s, and rap in the 1990s—each of these popular music genres has, in its turn, been regarded by adults as outrageous, offensive, and dangerous, while these very qualities have led many young people to greet the music with enthusiasm.

Why are so many young people attracted to music at the edge—music that many of their elders consider outrageous, offensive, and dangerous? Are the concerns expressed by adults over such music legitimate, or a

consequence of sensationalism and of adults' amnesia over how their own music was regarded when they were young? These are the questions this chapter will address.

Rieff's "Transgressive"

As a theoretical tool to analyze the appeal of diverse types of popular music over the past century, I will use Philip Rieff's idea of the *transgressive*.¹ According to Rieff, something that is transgressive violates cultural norms and expectations. All cultures have *interdicts*, which are prohibitions, social rules, commands for what one must not do. Transgressive acts violate the interdicts. Some degree of transgressive behavior is inevitable in any culture; but in Rieff's view, interdicts are healthy and necessary for a culture to flourish or even to survive. Rieff expressed the concern that American society in the late twentieth century began to elevate transgressive behavior to the level of virtue while systematically undermining the force of the interdicts. In Rieff's view, this placed American society on the road "from civilization to barbarism—from a not-doing of what is not to be done to a routine doing of precisely that" (p. 47).

This is Rieff's idea, in a nutshell. I think it is potentially valuable for analyzing the appeal of edge music to adolescents, but I wish to do more than simply apply Rieff's idea. Although Rieff introduced the idea of the transgressive he did little to develop it theoretically, and I wish to develop it here so that it can be applied to edge music. Also, rather than accepting Rieff's conclusions about the moral decline of American society and the role of popular music in that putative decline, I wish to analyze this claim critically and consider the extent to which social science research can cast light on this question.

What is it that makes the transgressive appealing, especially to the young? One source of its appeal is that the interdicts it violates often include restrictions on sexual behavior, and being transgressive often involves experiencing sexual pleasure, or at least sexual fantasies and sexually suggestive behavior. For adolescents, at an age when sexual maturity has been reached and sexual desire is new and strong but interdicts limit their sexual behavior, anything that invites them to defy the interdicts and enjoy their sexuality is likely to have a powerful transgressive appeal.

Another aspect of the appeal of the transgressive is the excitement inherent in violating the interdicts. There may be something about violating cultural norms that is inherently thrilling, especially to the young. Scholars of the phenomenology of crime, especially Jack L. Katz,² have shown that for many criminals the primary appeal of the crime is not in the material rewards it may yield but in its psychological rewards—the excitement of it, the thrill of it, the challenge of mastering a potentially chaotic situation. For many noncriminals, too, taking voluntary risks is often experienced as pleasurable. Words such as exciting and thrilling can be used to describe this state, but the best description of it is a word from the French, *frisson*, which has connotations of physical/sensual excitement experienced as a consequence of taking an illicit risk. So, the appeal of the transgressive exists partly in the *frisson* that young people experience when they violate an interdict.

Why does experiencing the transgressive induce a *frisson* in the young and not the old? Or, to put it another way, why is the promise of *frisson* enough to inspire transgressive behavior in the young but not the old? One reason is that the young are newly autonomous from their parents, newly conscious of their own growing power for self-directed behavior. Consequently, behaving transgressively inspires a *frisson* in them because it is connected to their new powers, it acts as a declaration of their independence, in a way it would not for adults.

Perhaps more importantly, behaving transgressively carries fewer social penalties for the young than for adults. In American society, as in most societies, transgressive behavior is condoned for the young but not for adults. A young person who is transgressive is often tolerated, sometimes even admired, by others. She or he is simply exhibiting the natural exuberance of youth, living life to the fullest.

In contrast, an adult engaging in the same behavior as this hypothetical young person would be regarded as reprehensible, shameful, possibly psychologically disordered. Adults are supposed to have settled into the conventional, responsible, predictable patterns of behavior expected of them. For example, in my research on how people conceptualize the transition to adulthood, a majority of people from adolescence through middle age believe that becoming an adult means giving up transgressive behavior such as getting drunk or trying illegal drugs.³ Thus, few adults enjoy a transgressive *frisson* without having it overshadowed by disapproval and censure. In contrast, young people can enjoy the *frisson* of the

transgressive more fully because they know that there is an implicit cultural belief that they are at a time of life when behaving transgressively is condoned, perhaps even approved.

Although behaving transgressively means violating the interdicts, and therefore acting in a way that society regards as morally wrong, in another sense transgressive acts are imbued with virtue by those engaged in them. What makes the transgressive virtuous, a statement of moral courage, is that interdicts are often seen as suppressing our natural, healthy human urges, and consequently the transgressive is seen as true, genuine, authentic. As Robert Pattison describes,⁴ this is an idea that originated with the Romanticism of the eighteenth century, but it was adopted with enthusiasm in the twentieth century by devotees of popular music, especially rock. In both rock and Romanticism there is, in Pattison's words, a "heroism of excess" (p. 122). The heroes are those who are willing to break the limits of nature and society — those who are willing to take the risk of the transgressive.

Jazz

Jazz was the music of the youth culture from the early years of the twentieth century through the 1940s, although its dominant form changed, from New Orleans jazz to Swing to Bop. In the Lynds' *Middletown* study of the 1920s,⁵ music and radio topped the lists of interests of high school boys and girls of all social classes, and jazz was the music they listened to. Young people from the 1920s through the 1940s bought jazz records in large numbers, packed the dance halls and concert halls to hear their favorite jazz bands, and made pop icons out of musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Ella Fitzgerald, and Duke Ellington.⁶

What made jazz so popular, and to what extent was its appeal transgressive? Certainly the brilliance and creativity of the musicians played a large part in its appeal. But in addition to this, jazz was seen from the beginning by both its fans and its critics as highly sensual music, music that would stimulate sexual desire. This characteristic of jazz was due to the music qualities of the songs, not the lyrics. Many of the most popular jazz songs had no lyrics at all, and when there were lyrics they were usually innocuous. The sexual quality of jazz derived from the music, the beat of it, the energy, the intensity.

The other quality that made jazz sexually charged was that it was mu-

sic to dance to.⁷ In dancing to jazz, the young demonstrated its sexually transgressive power. Jazz dancing was spontaneous, energetic, and intense, like the music, and partners grasped each other tightly and moved rapidly. The combination of jazz music and dancing was intoxicating to the young, and deeply disturbing to their elders. Both adults and young people recognized the transgressive quality of jazz, especially with regard to sexuality, but adults feared it while the young embraced it with enthusiasm. A newspaper of the 1920s represented the adult view of jazz dancing this way: "The music is sensuous, the embracing of the partners—the female only half-dressed—is absolutely indecent; and the motions—they are such as may not be described with any respect for propriety, in a family newspaper."⁸

Jazz may also have been transgressive to young whites because of its association with African Americans. It grew out of spirituals and blues, two other types of music created by African Americans, and nearly all the early jazz musicians were black. Even after white musicians discovered and embraced jazz, most of the prominent performers and innovators continued to be African Americans.⁹ Given the strict racial segregation of American society during this period, most young whites would have had little contact with blacks, and jazz being black music may have added to its allure for them as something mysterious, exciting, daring—in short, transgressive.

Rock 'n' Roll

By the end of the 1940s jazz had developed into a music form that was far different from what it had been in its early years. Improvisation had become much more daring and creative, to a point where it often retained little connection to a primary melody and rhythm, as had been the style in early jazz. This change may have made jazz more interesting and complex musically, but it also made it esoteric; and young people looking for a lively melody, a driving beat, and a song they could dance to had to look elsewhere.

By the mid-1950s they had found what they were looking for. It was called rock 'n' roll, and it was personified in a young white, former delivery-truck driver named Elvis Presley. Like jazz, rock 'n' roll was created by African Americans, and like jazz it grew out of the blues. Elvis had grown up in the South listening to early rock 'n' roll being performed

by black musicians, and he incorporated the sensuality and power of their singing styles into his own. Although Elvis was the dominant rock 'n' roll star of the 1950s, African American performers such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard were also popular.

Like jazz, the transgressive quality of rock 'n' roll was in the music, not the lyrics. The lyrics of rock 'n' roll classics like "Hound Dog," "Johnny B. Goode," and "Tutti Frutti" contain nothing offensive. But like jazz, the music of rock 'n' roll was perceived by both its fans and its critics to be sexually arousing. The pounding beat of rock 'n' roll, the loud, raw sound of the electric guitars (amplified to unprecedented levels with new technology), and the passionate vocal styles of the singers seemed like an invitation to be transgressive, to violate the interdicts that restricted the sexuality of the young.

Also, like jazz, rock 'n' roll was dance music, and the dancing styles that accompanied rock 'n' roll added to its transgressive appeal. Rock 'n' roll dance styles were largely borrowed from jazz and shared with jazz dancing high energy, frequent close contact between partners, and a reliance on spontaneous, unscripted dance movements. This style of dancing reinforced and extended the transgressive sexual power of the music.

Something in rock 'n' roll that departed from jazz and made it considerably more transgressive than jazz was the style of the performers. Jazz music may have been transgressive, but the performers usually did not dress provocatively or move provocatively on stage. On the contrary, jazz musicians usually dressed up for their performances and sat in chairs on stage except when soloing. In contrast, the performance style of rock 'n' roll augmented its transgressive quality. Elvis, influenced by black blues musicians he had seen, developed a performance style of bracing himself against the microphone stand and thrusting his pelvis back and forth in an unmistakably sexual way (hence the nickname "Elvis the Pelvis"), his legs pumping rhythmically, his body shaking with sensuality.

It was this transgressive performance style, even more than the music, that inspired alarm and antipathy among adults toward rock 'n' roll. When Elvis appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956, adolescents responded with enormous enthusiasm, but adult critics attacked his performance as lewd and obscene. Jackie Gleason, a popular TV performer of the day, sneered, "The kid has no right behaving like a sex maniac on a national show."¹⁰ Newspaper editorials expressed concern about the potential effects on the young: "When Presley executes his bumps and

grinds, it must be remembered that even the twelve year old's curiosity may be overstimulated" (p. 34). But it was precisely this "overstimulation" that made Elvis wildly popular among young people. His performance style, more than the words or the music of his songs, seemed to represent a powerful sexuality ready to burst, and the transgressive appeal of it was fascinating and irresistible to young people, not only in the United States but all over the world.

Rock

Scholars who write about popular music usually make a distinction between the "rock 'n' roll music" of the 1950s and the "rock music" that began in the 1960s and continues today.¹¹ Rock is less blues-based than rock 'n' roll and more diverse musically, incorporating elements of country, folk, and even classical music, along with new instruments such as synthesizers. The beginning of rock is usually marked with the rise to prominence of the Beatles in 1964.

Rock in the 1960s and early 1970s possessed a strong transgressive appeal. As Simon Frith observed, rock offered "a collective excitement, an illicit, immediate sense of solidarity and danger, an un-bourgeois lack of caution, an uncalculated honesty . . . Rock offers the fantasy of a community of risk."¹² Rock performers exhibited their "heroism of excess" by flaunting their willingness to violate the limits of society.

Sex was a transgressive area for rock, as it had been for jazz and rock 'n' roll. Once again, the transgressiveness was not so much in the lyrics as in the music and the style of the performers. The beat became more intense and more visceral as technological advances made the electric guitars more grinding, the drums and bass guitar more pounding, and the whole thing louder. The styles of the performers became more extreme; the sexual exhibitionism of performers such as Jim Morrison of the Doors soon made Elvis's hip-shaking seem relatively tame.

In addition to sex, rock extended the transgressive into three other areas: drugs, politics, and Satan. By the late 1960s, there was a strong association between rock music and illegal drugs. Many performers were rumored to use drugs; and two well-known performers, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, died of drug overdoses. A genre of rock known as acid rock developed (*acid* being slang for the drug LSD), in which the music suggested the psychological state experienced under a hallucinogenic drug.

Although rock was transgressive with regard to sex, the link to drugs was perhaps even more transgressive because of the illegality of drug use and the potential for a deadly overdose.

Rock was also transgressive in the political views it expressed. With rare exceptions, jazz songs were not political, nor were rock 'n' roll songs. But rock came to prominence during a time of extraordinary political tension in the United States, a decade of civil rights protests, race riots, political assassinations, and the Vietnam War; and these tensions were reflected in rock songs. Some rock songs openly advocated political revolution, some protested American involvement in the Vietnam War, some expressed cynicism about the integrity of political leaders, such as the Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again." Rock songs such as these were transgressive in rejecting the authority of political leaders and political institutions.

The other form in which rock was transgressive in the 1960s and early 1970s was in its use of Satan. Satan is, of course, the ultimate transgressor, described in the Bible as a rebel against God and ever since a symbol of rebellion and resistance against what is held up by society as good, holy, and moral. The power of Satan as a symbol of the transgressive perhaps made it inevitable that he would eventually be used by rock performers. The first rock performers to exploit this potential were the Rolling Stones. Through songs such as "Sympathy for the Devil" and album titles such as *Their Satanic Majesty's Request*, the Stones promoted an image of themselves as transgressors by associating themselves with the ultimate transgressor. Bands such as Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath also used Satanic symbolism to give themselves an aura of transgressive appeal.

Punk

By the mid-1970s, rock had lost a considerable part of its transgressive power. Performance styles that seemed sexually transgressive in 1965 were tame, even comical, by 1975; thus the band Kiss became popular by carrying rock performance styles to a satirical extreme. Drug use also no longer possessed the novelty in 1975 that it had in 1965, and its transgressive appeal may have diminished with the widely publicized overdoses of several rock performers. Most political content disappeared from rock after the draft for the Vietnam War ended in 1972. Thus by

the mid-1970s, the transgressive appeal of rock had waned, and there was an opening again for something newly transgressive.

Along came punk. It became hugely popular in Britain beginning in 1976, and also had followings in Europe and the United States, although not to the same extent as in Britain.¹³ Punk was selfconsciously transgressive. Its aim was to be outrageous, to shock anyone who could be shocked, to offend everyone capable of offense, to break deliberately every taboo.¹⁴

Unlike jazz, rock 'n' roll, and rock, for which the music was more important to fans than the lyrics, in punk the music counted for little. It was loud, crude, and simple. Punk performers freely admitted their lack of musical talent or skill: not just admitted it, but wore it as bona fides of their authenticity. Rock music was perceived as having become overproduced, too smooth, too technical, too safe, a big business, and punk's crudeness was its response.¹⁵

It was in the lyrics of the songs that punk was most transgressive. Topics of the songs varied widely and included unemployment, racism, the British monarchy, and sex, but the undercurrent of all the songs was anger, aggressiveness, hatred, nihilism. Songs about sex went beyond the transgressiveness of rock by blending sex with hatred: "If you don't want to fuck me, fuck off," went one lyric. In other songs the anger and hatred was presented with a lighter touch, by blending it with humor. "God save the Queen/She ain't no human bein'," went the lyrics to one highly popular song by the Sex Pistols. This kind of transgressive humor, aggressively ridiculing cultural icons, was key to punk's popularity. As Michael Brake observed, "Punk offered a parody, a taunting portrayal of popular culture . . . It was healthily cynical."¹⁶

The style of punk was also blatantly and deliberately transgressive. Performers adopted names such as Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious, and spit and even vomited on stage. Performers and fans alike sought to be shockingly transgressive in their appearance. Parts of the head were shaved and the remaining hair dyed in loud colors and spiked into plumes of various designs. "Jewelry" included safety pins through the nose or ears. Stage props included articles of sexual fetishism and bondage and Nazi swastikas. Punk performers were not sympathetic to neo-Nazis—on the contrary, punk performers were active in the Rock Against Racism movement—but the swastika was useful as a transgressive device, another way to provoke outrage.

Punk may have shown the limits of the appeal of the transgressive. Its appeal in Britain was brief, and may have been due in part to the anger generated among the young by the economic recession of the late 1970s; as the recession waned, so did punk. It never achieved much popularity in the United States, perhaps because it was too transgressive. Its failure in the United States and its brief popularity in Britain suggests that the transgressive can only be enjoyed within certain limits—if it violates the standards of society but not too far. On the other hand, maybe the appeal of punk was brief and limited because the music itself had little appeal, and transgressiveness alone was not enough to carry it for very long.

Heavy Metal

Heavy metal music originated in the 1960s with groups such as Led Zeppelin, Iron Maiden, and Black Sabbath, but it reached the peak of its popularity in the 1980s when heavy metal bands such as Metallica topped the charts. During the 1980s heavy metal gained considerable notoriety when heavy metal songs were criticized by the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), a group headed by the wives of influential politicians, and the songs were discussed in Congressional hearings on whether the content of popular songs should be regulated by the government. It was also during the 1980s that heavy metal inspired the development of a distinct youth subculture, whose members were identifiable from their black concert T-shirts and their fervent devotion to heavy metal music. They called themselves “metalheads” or “headbangers.” The description of them here is based on my research, in which I interviewed them about heavy metal and other topics.¹⁷

Heavy metal was transgressive musically in its loudness and its abrasiveness. Technological advances made possible a new level of rawness in the electric guitar, a bass guitar of staggering power, a thunderous drum beat, and an unprecedented volume for all of it, including the vocals. To most people the loudness and abrasiveness of heavy metal made it offensive, but these same qualities were embraced enthusiastically by metalheads, who often used words such as *intense*, *fast*, *energy*, and *loud* to explain why they liked the music. The fact that most non-fans abhorred the music only made it more appealing to the metalheads because it placed them in an exclusive, daringly transgressive minority.

Lyricaly, heavy metal was transgressive in multiple ways. Many songs contained political content, and as in punk this content was transgressive in attacking the legitimacy of a variety of social institutions. Songs attacked corruption in politics, religion, and the legal system and deplored the destruction of the environment by multinational corporations. Metalheads admired heavy metal performers for having the transgressive courage to present the unvarnished truth about what the world is like—in all its rottenness. “I think one of the reasons people are so hard on [heavy metal] is that it really tells the truth,” one metalhead told me. “It tells the truth about everything, and people don’t want to hear it.” By being devoted fans of the songs, metalheads viewed themselves as sharing in the declaration of the messages and therefore possessing transgressive courage themselves.

Some heavy metal songs used Satan as a way of being transgressive. Slayer was the best-known band to use Satan frequently, in songs such as “At Dawn They Sleep,” which described how “Satanic soldiers strike their prey / Leaving corpses waiting for the change.” However, the use of Satanism in heavy metal songs was viewed by metalheads not as daringly transgressive but as a kind of promotional device. When I asked them about the reputation of heavy metal for promoting Satanism, the question was routinely greeted with derision. “I laugh at it,” said one metalhead. “It’s funny because it’s all a fake, a gimmick to get them ahead.” Another said “no heavy metal band really believes in Satan. It’s all a ploy to sell albums.” So, although Satan was used by some heavy metal bands in an effort to be transgressive, for most heavy metal fans he had little appeal as a transgressive figure.

Heavy metal lyrics were most transgressive in their violence. In my analysis of heavy metal songs, violence was the most common theme. The music of heavy metal was well suited to expressions of violence: the rough, distorted guitar sound, the pounding bass and drums, and the towering volume of it all was exceptionally effective in portraying death, war, destruction, and other violent themes. In the Metallica song “One,” a war casualty recalls the landmine that has “Taken my arms / Taken my legs / Taken my soul / Left me with life in hell.” In “Bloodbath in Paradise,” Ozzy Osbourne depicts the murders committed by Charles Manson and his followers, and the victims who “wake from the dead as you lie bleeding / Murdered in your bed.” Slayer, the most vio-

lent of the popular heavy metal bands, often depicted brutal violence, as in "Kill Again," which describes the singer "Lift the gleaming blade / Slice her flesh to shreds / Watch the blood flow free."

Such songs marked a new level of transgressiveness in popular music. No popular songs had depicted scenes of such violence and brutality. Heavy metal was popular for a variety of reasons, including the creativity and musical talent of the performers and the political content of the songs, but the violent quality of the music and lyrics was certainly part of its transgressive appeal.

Rap

Rap music (also called "hip-hop") began in the late 1970s as street music in New York City.¹⁸ It started out as disc jockeys "rapping" (speaking rhythmically) spontaneous lyrics to a background of a lively beat and perhaps a repeated line of music and only gradually developed into songs that were recorded. It was not until the late 1980s that rap attained widespread popularity. By the mid-1990s a wide variety of rap groups appeared on the lists of top-selling albums, and by the end of the 1990s rap equaled rock in popularity among the young.¹⁹ It is far and away the most popular current genre among young blacks and Latinos, but whites also comprise a substantial proportion of rap fans.

Music does not have a great deal of importance in most rap songs. Often, the musical background to a song consists of little more than "samples" borrowed from other, non-rap songs and set to a pounding beat. Few rap performers play a musical instrument. What matters most in rap, and what gives it transgressive power, is the lyrics. Although not all rap songs have transgressive themes, the themes that have given rap its greatest popularity and notoriety as "gangsta rap" are transgressive themes of sexual exploitation and violence.

Sexual exploitation of women was an occasional theme in rock, punk, and heavy metal songs, but gangsta rap songs carried this theme to a new transgressive extreme by adding a deeper edge of contempt and routinely blending sex with violence. Women in rap songs are often referred to as "hos" (whores) and "bitches." Rap lyrics rage and rant against women for deception, dishonesty, sexual temptation, and sexual resistance. Sexuality is frequently portrayed as the man's successful assertion of power over a woman. Women are depicted being raped, beaten, knifed, and

shot. The women are dehumanized and portrayed as deserving whatever contempt and violence they get.

In addition to sexual violence against women, other kinds of violence are the theme of gangsta rap songs. Most of the prominent rap performers are African Americans, and rap often depicts scenes of violent confrontations among young men in poor, urban, largely black areas. Performers describe murders they have committed, brag about evading others' murder attempts, and warn adversaries not to cross them or face potential violence. Certain groups such as homosexuals and Asian Americans are singled out for contempt and threats. In "Black Korea," Ice Cube warns Korean inner-city merchants, "You better pay respect to the Black fist / Or I'll burn your store right down to a crisp."

Although some rock, punk, and heavy metal songs also contained lyrics with violent themes, gangsta rap was more transgressive by putting violence at the heart of the genre. However, rap performers have generally portrayed this violence as having a political undertone, claiming the lyrics reflect the grim realities of life in American inner cities. That is, they have sought to portray the violence in the songs as transgressive politically, and therefore virtuous, rather than as simply transgressive for the sake of gaining attention and selling recordings. According to Chuck D, the leader of Public Enemy, "Rap is Black America's TV station. It gives a whole perspective of what exists and what Black life is about."²⁰ However, critics of rap have argued that rap performers contribute to the stereotype of young black men as potentially violent.²¹

In the context of the framework of the present chapter, it could be argued that a large part of the appeal of rap is the frisson that rap fans obtain from their association, through rap, with the culture of young black urban males and its perceived values of toughness, excitement, danger, and violence. For young, black, urban males, rap may be an expression of the conditions of life they experience, but for the great majority of rap fans who are not part of that culture the appeal of rap may lie in its transgressiveness, in its association with a cultural environment they perceive as more dangerous and exciting than the one they experience themselves.

Is Transgressive Music a Problem?

A distinct pattern is evident in the history of the transgressive appeal of youth music presented here. A transgressive music appears; young

people embrace it enthusiastically, while adults express alarm and concern; the music loses its transgressive appeal as it ceases to be novel, and/or as society's boundaries for what is considered transgressive expand enough to contain the music so that it is no longer threatening; then a newly transgressive music appears; and so on.

This progression is unmistakable, but how should we interpret it? Rieff made his own view clear. He saw the interdicts gradually failing and the transgressive gradually triumphing in American society. We now put all interdicts and transgressive terms in quotation marks, he argued, which suggests that we no longer take them seriously. The result will be that we have "made ambiguous and entirely problematic all orders in which we might conceivably live."²² He viewed the arts, including music, as contributing to the problem. "When imagination grows transgressive, then it expresses itself in brutalities, however technically refined. Even more terrible: among consumers of the products of such imaginative efforts, even the most technically-refined brutalities are transformed into direct actings-out of what the artist has only imagined" (pp. 100–101).

In contrast, most social scientists since Rieff have made light of the pattern in which what is transgressive gradually becomes acceptable, seeing this pattern as evidence that adults' concerns over the potentially damaging effects of transgressive music should not be taken seriously.²³ According to this view, the criticisms of heavy metal and rap made in recent years will, in time, look as silly and overblown as criticisms of jazz and rock 'n' roll look from our perspective today. Young people are always doing things adults do not want them to do, and adults always worry needlessly that this means the young are in moral danger. Plus ça change . . .

The research evidence on the effects of youth music, including transgressive music, are covered by Peter Christenson in chapter 5. The perspective I will offer here is based on my own research.²⁴ However, my main goal here is to emphasize the limitations of the available research, or in fact any research that might be done in the future, for casting light on some of the most crucial issues regarding transgressive music.

The focus of my research on youth and music has been on fans of heavy metal music, and the relation of heavy metal to the lives of the metalheads demonstrates the complexity of the roles that music can play in the lives of young people. One of the findings of my research is that metalheads are more likely than fans of other types of music to take part in a va-

riety of types of risk behavior. They report higher rates of risky driving, risky sexual behavior, substance use, and criminal behavior (such as theft), compared to young people who prefer other types of music. Thus the transgressiveness reflected in their enthusiasm for heavy metal music is also reflected in their participation in risk behavior.

Is heavy metal music one of the influences responsible for the higher rates of risk behavior among metalheads? Does listening to transgressive music lead them to be transgressive in other aspects of their lives? It might be tempting to see the correlation here as causation and draw this conclusion. Other evidence from my research, however, suggests quite a different interpretation. I asked the metalheads directly about the effects of the music. Specifically, I asked them, "Do you listen to heavy metal when you are in any particular mood?" and "Does listening to heavy metal put you in any particular mood?"

Most commonly, metalheads reported that they listen to heavy metal especially when they are angry. This is hardly surprising, given the angry quality of both the music and lyrics of most heavy metal songs. But the surprise comes in their responses to the second question. Typically, adolescents who said they listen to heavy metal especially when they are angry, sad, or anxious also said the music has the effect not of inflaming their anger but of *calming them down*. They consciously use the music for this cathartic effect, to purge themselves of negative emotions. "It's sort of like taking a tranquilizer," said one.

Often they described the cathartic process with considerable insight: "It kind of releases the aggression I feel," said one boy. "It's a way to release some of your pressures, instead of going out and starting a fight with somebody, you know? Or taking it out on your parents or your cat or something like that." Many spoke of a particular song or group that was especially useful for its cathartic effect. Despite the nihilistic quality of the lyrics of most heavy metal songs, not one of the metalheads I interviewed said the songs made him feel sad or hopeless.

Does this mean we should all relax, then, and not be concerned about the effects of transgressive music on young people? Heavy metal was more transgressive than jazz, rock 'n' roll, or rock, and at least as transgressive as punk. If heavy metal has a calming, cathartic effect, then arguably these other types of once-transgressive music posed even less danger. And if heavy metal is cathartic, perhaps the violent content in rap is also not worthy of concern and may even be cathartic as well.

There are two reasons to hesitate before reaching this conclusion. One is that a given type of music, even a particular song, can be used in numerous ways depending on who is listening to it, what they seek from it, and how they interpret it. As media researchers have increasingly emphasized in recent years, it is important to consider the uses and gratifications that media provide to those who consume them, rather than looking simply for effects. In the case of transgressive music, even if it appears to be used for harmless purposes by some or most of its listeners, there may be those for whom it interacts with their own pre-existing tendencies or psychopathology in dangerous ways.

With regard to heavy metal and rap, the violent content of the songs may have a harmless or cathartic effect on most listeners, but this does not rule out the possibility that some would respond to this content as an inspiration to violence. Currently in the California court system there is a case in which three teenage boys are accused of murdering a girl. The boys were ardent fans of the heavy metal band Slayer, and the method of the murder allegedly bore a strong resemblance to a Slayer song that exhorts the listener to murder a blonde virgin. Rieff's warning of "direct acting-out of what the artist has only imagined" seems suddenly and terribly apt.

What if heavy metal has had a harmless or positive effect on nearly all the millions of adolescents who have listened to it, but for a handful of metalheads with unusual psychological tendencies, the songs have served as a trigger to violence? Then the issue becomes a more complex one, not easily answered by the social sciences: How far does the right to freedom of expression extend, and at what point — if any — should it be abridged in order to shield those who are potentially vulnerable to content that would not incite the vast majority?

The other reason to exercise caution before dismissing concerns about transgressive music is that its effects may be subtle and gradual, difficult to measure with the methods of the social sciences. Young people may defend their enjoyment of transgressive music by saying it is "just music" or "just lyrics" without even realizing how their characters and worldviews may be shaped by it. What if heavy metal and rap have a cathartic effect on young listeners, who report the music relieves their anger; but, at the same time, listening to many songs describing violent scenes contributes to shaping their characters and worldviews, making them harsher, coarser, more brutish, more vulgar? Here again the issues become diffi-

cult for the social sciences to answer. A longitudinal study might assess changes over time in character and worldviews, but any effects of transgressive music may be too interwoven with other influences to be discernible, even though it may be genuine and enduring.

Those of us who have at least partial sympathy for Rieff's grim analysis may draw some comfort from the historical analysis presented here. The history of popular music in the twentieth century shows the allure of the transgressive to young people and how society has sometimes responded to transgressive music by widening the scope of what is considered acceptable, moving the interdicts farther out so that transgressive music becomes mainstream and loses its edge. This is what happened with jazz, rock 'n' roll, and rock. However, this history also suggests that the flexibility of the interdicts is not unlimited. As the transgressive emphasis of edge music moved from sex to violence after the early 1970s, the interdicts became more resistant. Punk flamed briefly and then died without becoming mainstream. Heavy metal had its heyday and then faded, not because it became mainstream, but because its transgressive allure withered under a barrage of scorn and satire (e.g., *Wayne's World*, *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Beavis & Butthead*). The future of rap remains to be seen, but thus far "gangsta rap" remains out of the cultural mainstream and the target of considerable criticism, perhaps only awaiting a gifted satirist to bring it down. In any case, it appears that Rieff's fear of an inexorable course from civilization to barbarism, led by transgressive music, is by no means inevitable.

NOTES

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18. Venice Berry, "Redeeming the Rap Music Experience," in *Adolescents and Their Music: If Its Too Loud, You're Too Old*, J.S. Epstein, ed. (New York: Garland, 1995); Jeffrey L. Decker, "The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, A. Ross and T. Rose, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1994).
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21. Berry, "Redeeming the Rap Music Experience"; David Samuels, "The Rap on Rap," *The New Republic*, 11 November 1991.
22. Rieff, *Fellow Teachers*, p. 39.
23. Examples are Lorraine E. Prinsky, "Leer-ics or Lyrics: Teenage Impressions of Rock 'n' Roll," *Youth and Society* 18, no. 1 (1987) and James R. McDonald, "Censoring Rock Lyrics: A Historical Analysis of the Debate," *Youth and Society* 19, no. 2 (1988).
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