

## PRIMITIVE FUTURE: METAL, TIME, AND NEOLIBERALISM IN SEPULTURA MUSICAL PRODUCTION (1989)

### PRIMITIVE FUTURE: METAL, TEMPO E NEOLIBERALISMO NA PRODUÇÃO MUSICAL DO SEPULTURA (1989)

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**Abstract:** “Primitive Future”, the final track from the Brazilian band Sepultura's album *Beneath the Remains* (1989), marked the global emergence of the ensemble and subsequent commercial success. Musically, the song is centered on a pulsating rhythm and horizontal motifs (riffs) developed at a rapid pace. Additionally, it lacks a defined tonal center, creating a tense atmosphere through consonances and dissonances. The lyrics also depict a post-apocalyptic future. Thus, this study explores the historical conditions that allowed the production and circulation of a pessimistic song about the future. It specifically examines the rise of neoliberalism and presentism alongside the establishment of capitalist realism and performance as a social imperative in a globalized context.

**Keywords:** metal; neoliberalism; presentism.

**Resumo:** “Primitive Future”, última faixa do disco *Beneath the Remains* (1989) da banda brasileira, Sepultura, estreou a circulação global do conjunto e o consequente sucesso comercial. Musicalmente, a canção está focada no pulso e nos motivos horizontais (riffs) que são desenvolvidos em andamento acelerado. Além disso, não apresenta um centro tonal definido, criando, assim, uma atmosfera tensionada por meio de consonâncias e dissonâncias. O mesmo ocorre com a lírica que descreve um futuro pós-apocalíptico. Logo, indaga-se aqui quais condições históricas permitiram a produção e a circulação de uma canção pessimista em relação ao futuro. Examina-se, especialmente, tanto a ascensão do neoliberalismo como do presentismo em paralelo à constituição do realismo capitalista e do desempenho enquanto imperativo social em um contexto globalizado.

**Palavras-chave:** metal; neoliberalismo; presentismo.

#### *Introduction*

What historical conditions facilitated the emergence and commercial success of a musical genre that evoked feelings of disorientation and despair about the future? What state of sensibilities provided a scenario in which this music was pertinent on a global scale? These questions come to the forefront of the historian's mind as the

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listening journey begins with the long play *Beneath the Remains* (1989), performed by the Brazilians of Sepultura and distributed worldwide by the influential Roadrunner Records. These inquiries become even more relevant when one realizes that this group of young men was just over 18 years old at the time of recording this album and that only four years prior, they were performing concerts based on some precariously recorded songs from a small label in Belo Horizonte, the Cogumelo Records.

Indeed, Sepultura made a colossal leap with *Beneath the Remains*. As a band virtually unknown to the wider Brazilian public, they became an international media phenomenon, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of fans and listeners. Transforming from a group of teenage boys exploring satanic themes in an almost childlike manner, they evolved into a band with lyrics filled with reflections on contemporaneity. From a band that was confined to the national and international alternative circuit, it transformed into one of the biggest names in heavy metal, performing large concerts all over the world.<sup>2</sup>

In comparison to the previous recordings, *Bestial Devastation* (1985), *Morbid Visions* (1986), and *Schizophrenia* (1987), *Beneath the Remains* unquestionably exhibits greater technical sophistication. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that the agreement with Roadrunner Records had several challenges: 'Sepultura would earn a pittance in royalties and would have to return to the record company all the money invested in the recordings and tours' (Barcinski; Gomes, 1999, p. 61). Nevertheless, it was a significant step that propelled the band's career on a transnational scale, as it is estimated that over 800,000 copies of the album were sold, not counting the pirated versions that are impossible to precisely map (ibid, p. 71-72). Furthermore, this experience facilitated the production by Scott Burns, a recognized American producer in the extreme *metal* genre, who worked on both instrument tones and the translation of lyrics into English.

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<sup>2</sup> For my doctoral thesis, I conducted a survey of fanzines and magazines on heavy metal published in the 1980s and 90s. Through this, I observed that starting with *Beneath the Remains*, Sepultura became increasingly cited and acclaimed as an influential and paradigmatic band within this musical genre. Furthermore, from this juncture, Sepultura's international career gained momentum as they embarked on their first tour in Europe and North America in 1989. The band received a warm welcome from fans, particularly in Germany and the United States (Barcinski; Gomes, 1999, p. 76). Finally, despite the unavailability of the total sales figures for this album, it is inferred that it achieved considerable numbers (it is estimated that, even in 1989, over 800,000 copies were sold). Roadrunner Records continued to invest increasingly in Sepultura, reaching the peak of sales with *Roots* in 1996, selling over 1 million copies worldwide within a year of its release (ibid, p. 143).

The growth of Sepultura is evident even in academic productions dedicated to the band. Idelber Avelar (2003), for example, analyzes the trajectory of the young men from Minas Gerais in light of the developments in popular music within the context of Brazilian re-democratization. Jeder Janotti Júnior (2014), in another interpretative record, explores Sepultura's sonic production to assess the aesthetic experiences surrounding *heavy metal*. However, there is a preference for analyzing Sepultura's albums that engage in hybridizations between *heavy metal* and Afro-diasporic or Brazilian elements, notably *Chaos A.D* (1993) and *Roots* (1996). Janotti Júnior (2020) himself followed this analytical avenue, as did Keith Kahn-Harris (2000) from a sociological perspective and Flávio Garcia da Silva (2019) through ethnomusicology. In addition to them, one can also mention Garcia and Gama (2021), Williams and Rocha (2017), Ferreira (2017), and Luna (2014).

In this article, I will take a different approach; I will take a step back. I want to analyze precisely the album that was in greater consonance with the standardized *heavy metal* genre and, at the same time, propelled Sepultura into circulation within the globalized mass culture. *Beneath the Remains* is the phonogram with the least amount of experimentation and the largest portion of standardized songs in the late 1980s *heavy-thrash metal* convention. With effect, this album marked the professionalization of the band and its definitive insertion into the *mainstream*, that is, in the hegemonic circuit of global mass culture circulation. Both the involvement of Roadrunner in distribution and the professional production by Scott Burns are considered, as they contributed to shaping Sepultura's music according to the standards of the international market.

Among the songs on this phonogram, I want to draw particular attention to the last track, 'Primitive Future'. While this song employs the musical conventions of *metal* (accelerated rhythmic marking, aggressive timbre, and dissonant sound), the lyrics describe a glimpse of a post-apocalyptic future. Both in the lyrics and the musical structure, there are very intriguing aspects for the historian. In addition to expressing common features that run through other productions on the phonogram and in *metal* in general, there are also sounds, images, and verses that evoke a violent, desolate time with inevitable catastrophic prospects for the future. Thus, I revisit the presented question: what cultural and historical state allowed for the emergence of such a myriad of representations within the global music industry, and why did this discourse resonate so deeply with the sensibilities of millions of listeners?

In the face of this question, it becomes relevant to analyze the culture of participation in *heavy metal* as a reflective laboratory. Therefore, through the examination of this cultural circuit, one observes the unfolding, at the microlevel, of a historical process with a globalizing aspect. This occurred in such a way that, in the iconic conclusion of ‘Please close your eyes’, the South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2021) offers an interesting anecdote to argue that the perception of time in contemporary society is in continuous acceleration and that, likely, the outcome of this process will be tragic. Forcefully, the example used refers to the concert of a *metal* band.

Now, the fact that Han evokes this situation to illustrate this accelerated and inconclusive time strongly alludes to the aesthetic conventions of the genre itself, whose musical structure is built on a fast tempo, fragmented rhythm, and dissonant sound. The *metal* genre feeds on demonic and macabre iconographies with persistent lyrical references to the apocalyptic end of the world, which is approached cynically or indifferently. Thus, the lengthy quote is justified, as, in the philosopher's analysis, this concert and this music genre metaphorize the consequences of this acceleration:

A few years ago, it was possible to witness, at the CTM Festival of Experimental and Electronic Music, a *death metal* band that, before taking the stage, was seriously concerned about how they should conclude the piece to be performed. It is not truly possible to conclude in a meaningful way a piece of music that structurally lacks any resolution. The *death metal* band members were then greatly relieved when the speakers became overloaded and burned out. Salvation came, then, in the form of a catastrophe. So abruptly, yes, in an *inopportune time*, and ultimately catastrophically, our world will also end, accelerating more and more due to the missing form of conclusion (Han, 2021, p. 45-46).

Beginning with the end, one loses a bit of Han's argument, which actually suggests an examination of how the experience of time in neoliberal capitalism is no longer structured by beginnings and narrative conclusions. This is due to the constant acceleration inherent in the pace of financial performance. Therefore, the experience of acceleration obliterates the ‘proper structures of meaning and time’. At the level of subjectivity, ‘The disturbing thing about the experience of time today is not the acceleration as such, but the missing conclusion, that is, the lack of rhythm and pace of things’ (idem, p. 13).

Han's observation sets the tone for this paper, where I want to argue that *metal* (especially the extreme form) has synthesized the representations of the crisis of the

future put into circulation by neoliberalism through both capitalist realism (FISHER, 2020) and presentism (Hartog, 2021). Here, I will develop this reflection based on the song 'Primitive Future' by Sepultura. Therefore, the examination of this source takes place on two levels. On the one hand, it is a methodological exercise in interpreting a piece of music as a record of the representations of a period. On the other hand, it is based on the consideration that by investigating an artistic production and its dialog with cultural tensions, we can conclude the receptions and states of sensitivity of a given historical period.

Given that *Beneath the Remains*, due to the facilities provided by Roadrunner Records, circulated in several countries, either on the official and commercial circuit or informally (Barcinski; Gomes, 1999, p. 59-72), it can be assumed that it was widely accepted within the culture of *heavy metal* participation. In addition, we can witness positive signs of reception through institutional periodicals (*Heavy Metal Subterrâneo* in Mexico or *Kerrang* in England) or fanzines (*Metal Meltdown* in the USA and *Algema Metallica* in Portugal), which will not be analyzed here as I want to emphasize the critical examination of the song in its cultural potency. Given the above, I maintain that the 'Primitive Future' expressed a consonance of these perceptions of time and social reality in different strata that ignored the borders of the nation-state.

Despite being recorded in December 1988 and officially released in April 1989, *Beneath the Remains*, along with the disillusionment with the future that it carries, brought forward the fall of the Berlin Wall, which would happen later that year, in November. This event represented both the fading of the Cold War as the main geopolitical conjuncture and the dimming of the lights on the possibility of change through the socialist revolution. However, as Nicolau Sevcenko (2001, p. 35) describes, even before the crash in the early 1980s, capitalism had already taken on a triumphalist discourse that was marked by Margaret Thatcher's iconic phrase, '*there is no alternative*'. Bluntly, the album is entitled *Beneath the Remains*, under the rubble. It could be suggested that this 'rubble' was fundamentally the prospect of a utopia, of a possible future, of a coming improvement. Considering that there is a cultural circularity in which artists and the public share a common universe of signs and references, through this album, we can see that for *heavy metal* fans in the 1980s, the future was presented as a pure apocalypse.

This synthesis was not only achieved by Sepultura. Other albums released in the 1980s, especially in that symbolic year of 1989, carried out similar procedures of

representing catastrophic or even non-existent futures for the human race. Of course, this is a *heavy metal* convention: the apocalypse, the nuclear holocaust, and environmental tragedy were all common themes for bands that wanted to be part of this culture of participation (Campoy, 2010). But I maintain that it wasn't just about that. It was also about tuning in to current ideas that were circulating at that historical moment. Examples of bands and albums include the acclaimed *Practice What You Preach* by Testament (USA, 1989), *Extreme Aggression* by Kreator (Germany, 1989), *Alice in Hell* by Annihilator (Canada, 1989), *Agent Orange* by Sodom (Germany, 1989), *Handle with Care* by Nuclear Assault (USA, 1989), *Bajo Una Luna Cámbrica* by Dorso (Chile, 1989), *Searching for the Light* by Dorsal Atlântica (Brazil, 1989) and *Blue Blood* by X Japan (Japan, 1989). In short, all these *long plays* dealt with disillusionment about the future, with extensive catastrophic representations both in the lyrics and in the musical structure, thus proving to be a current topic on the cultural agenda of this historical period.

That said, methodologically, this work establishes dialogues with trends in the cultural study of popular music, as proposed by the British Allan Moore (2012), Simon Frith (2007), and Richard Middleton (2003). In this sense, it is understood that popular musical pieces are not just sequences of notes disseminated and marketed by the mass media. They go further, as they give rise to cultural practices with the power to construct meanings capable of cementing sociability and building perceptions of social reality. This understanding fits perfectly with the proposal of a cultural history that is truly concerned with 'the necessary articulation between singular works and common representations', that is, with 'the process by which readers, spectators or listeners give meaning to the texts (or images) they appropriate' (Chartier, 2016, p. 35-36).

Along with historian Tânia da Costa Garcia (2013, p. 207), we consider that urban popular music, because it is 'transmitted by the mass media' and is 'intensely present in our daily lives', manages to 'express the most diverse worldviews and mobilize different types of listening'. In this sense, music 'constitutes a privileged source for the study of modern societies'. The proposed source is therefore approached historiographically but with an eye on its musicological aspects. This approach is based on the assumption that this study necessarily involves interdisciplinarity. Thus, it is necessary to consider both the musical aspects of the song - tempo, rhythms, chords, harmony, melody, performance, analysis of the lyrics - and the socio-cultural and



technical aspects - relationship with a certain ideological current or tradition, conception and production processes, means of circulation and social meaning of the work.

However, to deal with the song as a historical source, one must consider the existence of the cultural circuits in which it is inserted, here, in particular, referring to *heavy metal* as a set of practices that are also extramusical. Different authors conceptualize the set of practices surrounding heavy music, so much so that a whole diverse and fruitful field of study has developed, thus emerging *Metal Music Studies* (Brown, 2011). It is therefore important to define a starting point and an accurate definition.

Both the British sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris (2007) and the communication theorist Jeder Janotti Júnior (2014) think of *metal* with the help of the concept of the 'music scene', that is, a way of defining the sociability surrounding the circulation of music in different urban environments. While musicologists Eric T. Smialek (2015) and Lewis F. Kennedy (2018) classify it as a media-music genre, these academics focus on the common characteristics found in musical pieces. Still, other scholars have relied on the concept of subculture (Gracyk, 2016), as they suggest that *metal* is merely a dissidence or segmentation of hegemonic culture.

All these categories aim to grasp the organic relationship between the music industry, artistic development, and the integration of fans and listeners through the production of cultural artifacts or extramusical practices. However, both the scene and the genre emphasize more precisely the commercial relationships built on sociability crossed by market principles.

These positions overlook an aspect of fundamental importance to this work. The historical and symbolic dimensions that fueled the desire of musicians and fans to participate in a cultural movement that offered forms of belonging are, at the very least, omitted from the concepts of scene or genre. In addition to these, the definition of 'culture of participation' drawn up by the American communicologist Henry Jenkins (1992) aims to understand these codes of interpretation of reality inscribed in a set of practices that construct meanings within the cultural circuits themselves while maintaining links with historical or political reality.

This is not to say that scene, subculture, or genre are outdated categories. They are still relevant concepts, so much so that in all my comments on the constructions of musical similarities, I will return to the concept of genre, as it offers clues for analyzing the constructions of the language of popular music both inside and outside the music

industry (Kennedy, 2018). However, based on this article's proposal, I have opted for the concept of a culture of participation, as it emphasizes the construction of communities and representations through relationships of affection around the media (Jenkins, 1992, p. 6).

These relationships of affection and the communities around these media cultural artifacts have motivated what Jenkins calls 'participation'. Fans 'in the 'borderlands' between mass culture and everyday life and that constructs its own identity and artifacts from resources borrowed from already circulating texts' (idem, p. 3). In this way, fans were not satisfied with just consuming or enjoying their media productions, they also wanted to contribute to the organization of events, the production of texts, and the carrying out of studies attentive to the aspects and characteristics of their objects of interest.

Therefore, the concept of the culture of participation becomes especially prolific when you want to analyze more subjective and symbolic issues that fed or feed a certain cultural production that involves a kind of collaboration between the hegemonic and alternative media. Considering that the focus of this exhibition is to analyze the experience of time represented in these cultural productions, a deep resonance is established between this concept and the objective of analysis. After all, the representations and symbolic negotiations that take place within a culture of participation are analyzed through their connections with social, historical, and cultural aspects that lie beyond this circuit.

Given the above, by analyzing the song 'Primitive Future' from the LP *Beneath the Remains*, a musical source inscribed on a phonographic medium, it is possible to grasp the processes of symbolic negotiation between the mechanisms of production, circulation, and reception. Therefore, the work itself holds the keys to interpreting reception. After all, both the artistic form of the music and the commercial and marketing conception were designed to dialog with the members of this culture of participation that emerged as a result of the segmentation process of mass culture (Jameson, 1995). This has contributed to the consolidation of cultural circuits with their own definitions of identity, dialectically put into action through practices and representations that are intricately related to the cultural and historical tensions that occur on a larger scale (Jenkins, 1992).

*The future won't let me look back: metal and presentism*



All the songs on *Beneath the Remains* are, according to Idelber Avelar (2003, p. 333), critical and distressing testimonies of social reality. The experience of decadence and tension is heightened when you look at the album cover. It's the illustration 'Nightmare in Red', by an important artist focused on horror representations, the American Michael Whelan, known for designing the covers of famous metal records and horror books by American authors, from H.P. Lovecraft to Stephen King. From the red skull emerge roses, ancient monuments, staircases, smoke, and a bat-like being. This creates an atmosphere of hypnotic terror that dialogues with the lyrical and musical content of the most striking songs, such as the album's opening track, 'Beneath the Remains', or 'Mass Hypnosis' and 'Slaves of Pain'.

**Figure 1** - Cover of *Beneath the Remains* (1989)



Source: Photograph by the author. Sepultura. *Beneath the Remains*. Rio de Janeiro: Roadrunner Records, 1989.

'Primitive Future' strongly closes this album by offering a series of musical and lyrical characteristics that support questions about the historical reality of the final years of the 20th century. In particular, the continuous representations of feelings of disorientation, helplessness, loneliness, impotence, and tiredness in the face of the

acceleration of a historical time that presented the future as something doomed to misfortune. Listening to this song, you come into contact with an accelerated piece, the relentless rhythm is defined by a sequence of quarter notes, eighth notes, and half notes arranged in the convention of *fast rock*, i.e., 4/4 at 252 bpm. Within the first few seconds, the rhythm guitar and drums appear, marking out the pattern of notes in the intro, E5, F5, E5, and Bb5, all *power chords* (chords that are not defined as major or minor, as they only use the tonic and fifths, which are widely used in *rock*, especially in the more fast-paced genres such as *metal* and *hardcore*).

This introduction already conveys the feeling of something unresolved and conflicting because the tonal center is very confusing and doesn't have a conventional resolution, even for modal music. There is thus a conversation between the modes of E Locrian and E Ionian, with the E5 chord being the resting point of the song, but there is no concern with the formation of the chords, in other words, the ideas of cadence or harmonic functions are not used. Therefore, the focus of this entire piece is the motif (riff) that creates the consonance between E5 and F5 and the dissonance between E5 and Bb5.

As the song progresses, there are variations in tempo that are common in *metal* songs because, as Jeder Janotti Júnior (2014, p. 12) suggests, 'they act as hooks for the listener's bodily participation in the rhythmic markings'. Compositions in this genre even focus on the pulse and equalize the voice at the same volume as the instruments, so, unlike other forms of popular music, the emphasis is not on the lyrics or the voice. Precisely, Janotti Júnior (idem, p. 12-13) also defines the basic characteristics of *metal* songs: '1) the use of the riff, sequences of striking notes repeated mainly by the guitars; 2) the reiteration of the Power chord as a strategy to create the sonic intensity responsible for the feeling of heaviness associated with the genre'. Indeed, this compositional strategy converges on a feeling of power.

Therefore, 'Primitive Future' is a composition that is strictly concerned with the technical premises of the genre. Conventions that have been established throughout the experience of listening to this repertoire. Here, Sepultura was dialoguing with the standards of thrash metal, a strand that employs musical elements and themes from *hardcore punk*.

According to one of the pioneering musicologists to study *metal*, Robert Walser (1993), this genre emerged within the music industry and based much of its production on a revisiting of the baroque and classical repertoire. However, with the popularization

of the pioneering bands, segmentations and breaks emerged, as *metal* began to dialogue with the lived reality and ideas that were already present in the listeners' sociability (Weinstein, 2000). The emergence of *thrash metal* reveals this tension well. After all, unlike traditional *heavy metal*, which sang about guns, cars, women, and horror stories, this split preferred to thematize 'the concrete horrors of the real or possibly real world: the isolation and alienation of individuals, the corruption of those in power, and the horrors done by people to one another and the environment' (idem, p. 50).

Sepultura, in line with other bands that emerged in the 1980s, such as Metallica, Megadeth, Testament, Kreator, Destruction, Sodom, and others, thematized social crises and, above all, the atomic war, which became a lyrical convention. 'Primitive Future' also indirectly comments on the possible consequences of a post-nuclear holocaust future. According to anthropologist Leonardo Campoy (2010, p. 151), the representation of the reality of the bands that used the *thrash* aesthetic was that:

We are all victims not because nuclear war actually happened but because of the imminence of annihilation, of having our dreams, our desires, and our desired futures devastated by the mere existence of the bomb. Those responsible for this atomic nightmare are the greedy rulers who control through fear and are the financiers of this science of death.

Right after the introduction of 'Primitive Future', you hear the opening verses of the song in Max Cavalera's hoarse voice, which, in turn, are totally in line with the synthesis presented by Campoy: 'I follow the steps in front of me/ They are deep and well-defined/ They show an undefined but straight path/ What has been will never return'. For the lyrical self, some steps force him to follow a future that is inexorable, inevitable, but difficult to characterize, confusing and that will not allow a return to the comforts of yesteryear.

After an instrumental sequence that again emphasizes the central riff and percussion, in the second verse, the description thickens, 'Future won't let me look back/ I just walk, I don't evolve'. The future appears as something inescapable and imprisoning; the experiences of the past can't be taken back, and you have to keep walking, even though there are no transformations; in other words, the present situation stretches on and doesn't allow for evolution. The sequence of riffs feeds the constant feeling of conflict and crisis, 'Animals run by my side/ They communicate, each one in its own way'. This passage is particularly interesting, it contains feelings of loneliness

and disorientation experienced by the lyrical self in the face of the future that is opening up. The tempo speeds up, and the song becomes more aggressive, reflecting the disorientation: 'But I can't understand/ I feel alone on this irrational planet'. However, the impotence provided by this environment is not total because, even if lost, his walk can be 'To create or just observe.' However, the march of time forces the walk towards uncertainty, 'I keep walking on this desert made of ideas/ Primitive future'.

Even though it describes a march into the future and is characterized by pessimism and uncertainty, all the verbs in this song are conjugated in the present tense. In this sense, I believe that the lines of an order of time that emerge through the music and written production of *metal* are expressed here. As François Hartog (2021, p. 37) argues, to analyze the experiences of time in a given period, it is necessary to use the concept of a regime of historicity. In his words:

Starting from diverse experiences of time, the regime of historicity would be intended as a heuristic tool, helping to better apprehend not time, all times, or the totality of time, but mainly moments of crisis of time, here and there, when the articulations of past, present and future come to lose their evidence (idem).

In this way, the concept emerges as a way of analyzing certain historical moments to understand how the category of time is understood, experienced, and represented at that moment. Particularly in crises, where references are lost and there are signs of a change in the temporal order. It is worth saying that 'Attention', Hartog (ibid., p. 38) insists, 'focuses initially and above all on the categories that organize these experiences and allow them to be revealed, more precisely, on the forms or modes of articulation of these categories or universal forms that are present, past, and future'. Therefore, what is at issue is the possibility of reflecting on the writing of history and on time as a discursive condition of the discipline, but also time as a historical category, variable and changeable throughout societies and eras.

Based on the concept of regimes of historicity, Hartog tries to understand the order of time in vogue, that is, how time is experienced in contemporary times. This gives rise to the hypothesis of presentism which, for him, refers to a rupture in the temporal order that occurred in the final years of the Cold War and which took root with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet world. Thus, with the exhaustion of the utopian alternative, a disbelief in the future emerged, extending to the present, which,

in the words of Hartog (2021, p. 250), 'was marked by the experience of the crisis of the future, with its doubts about progress and a future perceived as a threat'.

Of course, reflection on the future does not disappear, 'but it seems obscure and threatening' (ibid.). In 'Primitive Future', this fading of the future marked by uncertainty is even perceptible on a musical level. The verses' transitions are made up of brief riffs that increase tension and conflict at a slower tempo. There is no standard resolution of the chords in their tonal or modal harmonic functions, the sequences of notes simply die out, without conclusion, returning to the fast tempo that drives the whole song. In this way, there is a state of crisis at the musical level that won't be resolved even in the future. However, this state is not gratuitous, as it is aligned with the presentism evoked by a new political, economic, and social order: neoliberalism.

*Everything around me is void: metal, neoliberalism, and capitalist realism*

With the loss of political and ideological prominence during the Cold War, a new economic and cultural order called neoliberalism began to emerge at the end of the 1970s (Laval; Dartot, 2016, p. 21). The first person to take an interest in these developments was Michel Foucault, who, in 1978 and 1979, gave two courses on the genealogy of the ideas that fueled this rupture. The moment was poignant, as the neoliberal model was already in vogue in post-coup Chile (1973), and the rise of Margaret Thatcher in the UK (1979) and Ronald Reagan (1981) in the US - as well as the progressive dismantling of the welfare state in Europe and the opening up of People's China to capitalist trade (1976) - intensified and proliferated these ideas.

Foucault draws attention to the fact that neoliberalism is both a political-economic current of thought and a form of government and production of subjectivity. Because of this dual characteristic, he inferred that in the imperative to organize the state around 'governing for the market' (Foucault, 2008, p. 165), there was a change in the very way of perceiving and acting in the social world. This change in the status of subjectivity was linked to material and economic conditions.

Eric Hobsbawm (1995, p. 398-405) argues that, since the mid-1960s, there has been a rupture within the capitalist mode of production. Thus, the industrial model ceased to be the predominant form of wealth accumulation, giving way to the financial and entrepreneurial models. Neoliberalism rose in this period, imposing a weakening of the state in the light of the market economy. At the political level, these measures were

applied under authoritarian and conservative rhetoric (Laval; Dardot, 2016, p. 157-166).

As Zygmunt Bauman (2007, p. 33-60) suggests, the post-atomic bomb world no longer considers time as something successive and linear but has come to interpret it as a heap of fragmented experiences. Thus, in the absence of a grand narrative capable of organizing existence, 'small narratives' began to emerge capable of imposing certain representations that would give meaning to the lives of a certain group or individual (Lyotard, 1988). The Cold War and the full development of consumerism on a global scale enabled this fragmentation of identity, which fueled a new form of subjectivity.

In this sense, the neoliberal vogue posed various uncertainties for individuals due to the dismantling of the State and made new demands on the individual. With this change, as Byung-Chul Han (2017, p. 30) argues, the disciplinary mechanisms produced by the state have changed, i.e., they have ceased to be rigid and have become more flexible. The world of financial capitalism demands competition, and to be able to compete for work and consumer spaces, the subject must become malleable, and adaptable to any situation.

Some authors agree that the advance of capitalism in its neoliberal form has given rise to feelings of disorientation, fragmentation, and acceleration. Jameson (1997) argues that at this juncture there is a paradox that combines 'an unprecedented rate of change at all levels of social life and an unprecedented standardization of everything - feelings, consumer goods, language, space, and architecture - that could be judged incompatible with such mutability'. This transformation was mainly captured in the second half of the 1980s and spread by a globalized process of cultural massification.

In a similar line of argument, Mark Fisher (2020) suggests that to experience neoliberal capitalism is to be constantly in contact with a 'system that is unresponsive, impersonal, centerless, abstract and fragmentary'. The last three descriptions can easily be applied to the musical development of 'Primitive Future'. It's a confusing song that isn't easy to listen to, let alone identify its constituent elements. It's totally guided and commanded by a fast, fragmented rhythm that ignores the dimensions of tonal centrality.

In the third section of the song, the tense riff remains, but is crossed by a few breaks in tempo that suddenly decrease or increase the intensity of the beat. The verses 'My head is heavy but empty/ Everything around me is void/ Without movement, without perspective' are heard. The lyrical self describes a situation of exhaustion, boredom, and hopelessness in the face of the lack of a future—not a revolt, anger, or



rage, but pure acceptance and indifference to what is happening around him. 'The night invades the sky/ That darkens the dry ground/ Making my shadow join the big stain that's forming'. Faced with all the events that are taking place, the lyrical self only watches, and witnesses the degradation of the environment, feeling that he is united with the darkness brought on by an uncertain and tenebrous future, after all, he is incapable of overcoming this state, so much so that he stops walking, 'My steps become slow and agonize'.

At this point, it's worth returning to some of Byung Chul-Han's considerations about neoliberal society, which he also conceptualizes as a performance society. According to the philosopher, one consequence imposed by the financialization of capital on contemporary subjectivities is the total positivization of social life and the erasure of negativity.

In the thrust of that general positivization of the world, both man and society are transformed into an autistic performance machine. We could also say that the exaggerated effort to maximize performance drives out negativity because negativity slows down the process of acceleration (Han, 2021, p. 54).

In this way, feelings of negativity are unlearned, which would be capable of bringing about transformations, such as anger, 'which is not in line with general acceleration and hyperactivity', because it postulates 'an interruptive pause in the present', which then leads to the emergence of something new. But this isn't possible in the neoliberal or performance society, negativity is impossible, and what remains is a constant positivity that, when it doesn't become possible, emerges as apathy and indifference.

Therefore, not only is presentism given as a temporal order but also capitalist realism as a cultural form under the assumptions of neoliberalism built on social performance. In 'Primitive Future', even though the lyrical self is in the first person and recounts the actions carried out in the present, there is a passivity in the face of the lack of a future. There is no proposal for transformation, this is accepted as the only possible reality. The disaster is being experienced, but there is no alternative in the face of uncertainty.

Mark Fisher precisely defines this state of sensitivity and cultural production as capitalist realism, the belief that capitalism and the consequent 'cancellation of the future' are inevitable because everything has become a commodity. After all, as Fisher

(2020, p. 13) makes clear, 'Capitalism is what remains when beliefs collapse at the level of ritual and symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, stumbling unsteadily between ruins and relics'.

Ironically, after this moment of acceptance of the 'cancellation of the future" and of indifference and apathy of the lyrical self, the song enters the guitar solo, which is the only part with a defined tonal center, namely in harmonic E minor. Emerging from the terrifying sequence of conflicting and dissonant riffs is a harmonized, palatable, and melodious section. The solo is accompanied by the aggressively advancing drums and the attack of the bass, which provide a base for the solo until it ends with the slowing of the tempo and the guitar entering the octaves.

*It's scornful the way I live: metal, reflexive impotence and acceleration*

After the solo, we hear some variations on the central riff of 'Primitive Future', which maintains the rhythmic pattern but uses G5 instead of E5 as the resting note. In this mood, the vocal begins the concluding verses of this glimpse of the future, 'I step on skulls of generations that have not formed/ I hear painful cries of wars that are to come'. As Mark Fisher (2020, p. 10-11) argues, capitalist realism offers the feeling that there are no alternatives to the situation at hand while experiencing catastrophe in the present mixed with either the uncertainty of what the future will bring or the certainty that it holds only misfortune. What's more, 'The exhaustion of the future deprives us of the past' (idem, p. 12) at the same time as it enlarges the present, because, as François Hartog (2021, p. 259) argues, it tends 'towards omnipresence and eternity', after all, it is 'at the same time everything (there is only the present) and almost nothing (the tyranny of the immediate)'. Well, you can hear that in these verses, accompanied by aggressive riffs in fast half notes.

The lyrical self bears witness to an arid, desolate, and incomprehensible future. Only the catastrophe that is lived and experienced can be expected. At the same time, the past is crushed; nothing from the past has survived, and the peace promised by the past has not been fulfilled, they are dead truths. And in this future, the lyrical self understands that he is there 'To create everything again, from the beginning/ To teach new minds/ To awaken a sleeping giant buried'. These are subversive verses within the proposal of the song because the change of chord from rest to G5 and the idea expressed

in the verses that even after the catastrophe it is possible to rebuild a life are, in a way, a dissonance to capitalist realism.

Considering that the 'realism' of the concept is 'analogous to the deflationary perspective of a depressive, who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion' (Fisher, 2020, p. 14), these verses portray a call for renewal. It calls for the emergence of a new. In a way, the lyrical self tries to go beyond the given reality by imagining what lies beyond this catastrophic future that will need to be built.

However, the song returns to the central riff in its deep tension caused by the rest in E5, and the verses 'On the ashes of disgrace/ It's scornful the way I live', reprise the typical climate assumed by subjectivities under capitalist realism, what Mark Fisher (idem, p. 43) calls reflexive impotence. Even with the desire to go further, to imagine the future, this possibility presents itself as denied because even though the lyrical self realizes the critical situation, he can't develop it, so he returns and accepts this 'self-fulfilling prophecy', since 'as this atmosphere limits our imagination, after all, 'it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism', we have nothing to put in its place' (Marques; Gonsalves, 2020, p. 181).

This acceptance is so absolute that the present drags on as the only temporality that exists, and the future is still represented as an uncertain apocalypse, there is no beyond. The last verses of the song appear as this full acceptance of the impossibility of change, 'I look well, I think I'm well/ That's all'. At the same time as we hear this conclusion, the tempo slows down, the drums start to mark the pulse only with the snare drum, and the guitars and bass abandon the sixteenth notes and play the E5 and F5 chords in semibreves.

This moment of deceleration sounds like a brief moment of final mourning for this future in tragedy, as soon afterward the drums regain their intensity and the bass and guitars line up in a dissonant central riff while the voice resumes the first verses. Lulled into a moment of returning to the beginning of the song, the speed is maintained until after the verses are sung, before reaching the end, the drums create an expectation with the use of the double pedal, while the muffled sound of the string instruments creates the tension to end the piece with the isolated and unaccompanied scream: 'PRIMITIVE FUTURE'.

The ending is abrupt, it's not a pleasant transition, and there's no resolution of the chords or the lyrics. The state of crisis remains, the present is still all that exists, and the future is lost within the limits of the catastrophe, so much so that it is primitive. It is

revealing that the song ends with the first verses, given that the future, as it is imagined, is not perceived as an advance, evolution, or improvement, but rather as a loss of utopian horizons, a regression to a primitive state. Therefore, there is no conclusion, because, as I demonstrated in the introduction, in the words of Byung-Chul Han (2021, p. 45-46), 'It is not really possible to bring to a meaningful close a song to which no conclusion structurally belongs'.

In addition to presentism, which enlarges the present, and capitalist realism, which doesn't allow us to imagine a future beyond catastrophe, another aspect of time under neoliberalism is the experience of acceleration. Historian Nicolau Sevcenko (2001, p. 16), in a thought-provoking metaphor, suggests the image of a rollercoaster to understand the changes that modernity has undergone as the 20th century has unfolded. The last phase he analyzes is the so-called *loop*, 'the final and definitive syncope, the climax of precipitous acceleration, under whose extreme intensity we relax our impulse to react, surrendering our numb points, resignedly accepting being led to the end by the titanic machinery'.

Sevcenko marks the rollercoaster transitions that took place in the 20th century through industrial and technological transformations, and the Microelectronics Revolution, which was consolidated in the 1970s, characterizes the contemporary period. In this period of *the loop*, which coincides with the advance of neoliberalism, technological innovations multiply and undergo intense changes over shorter intervals of time. This has contributed to an increase in the transformative potential of societies that have multiplied faster than the time taken to assimilate and understand them, which is perceived as pure acceleration. What's more, these transformations have not necessarily led to an improvement in the lives of the majority of people. Even neoliberal rhetoric has failed to conceal this:

[...] the rapid concentration of income, mass unemployment, exploitation and infant mortality, the spread of destitute poverty, the growth of drug trafficking, the increase in crime and violence, the financial instability that makes the world order increasingly volatile and insecure (Sevcenko, 2001, p. 42).

Sevcenko (idem, p. 52) goes on to say that 'These are painful lessons for those who imagine that history is driven by the forces of progress and that the future will always be more promising than the past'. The members of Sepultura, at the time of writing 'Primitive Future', were in line with this awareness. The *thrash metal* scene was

also aware of this reality. In the 1980s, 'capitalist realism established itself, with much struggle, and took root' (Fisher, 2020, p. 17), and neoliberalism, supported by technological changes, postulated the rule of competition, of governing for the market and of social insecurity (Laval; Dardot, 2016). *Metal* was the soundtrack to these transformations, and not for free; it is fast-paced, aggressive, conflictive, and tense music, thus dialoguing with the historical reality of the final years of the 20th century.

### *Final considerations*

Musically, 'Primitive Future' is a challenge for the interpreter, as it requires a lot of concentration. The structure is fragmented, some sections are repeated twice, while others are repeated three, four, or five times, and at all times the pulse is above 200 bpm, varying at various times to something slower or faster. There is a technical complexity to metal that stems from the experience with this genre, in line with the aesthetic presuppositions of this culture of participation.

However, in light of what has been said throughout this work, I argue that there were alignments between *heavy metal* and the tensions created by neoliberalism in the 1980s about representations of time, especially the future. In particular, the transformation of a society that becomes focused on performance, the emergence of capitalist realism as a cultural form, the experience of acceleration due to the advance of technologies, and the expansion of presentism.

As you can see, this work is an exercise in historical interpretation based on a musical source, which is why I chose not to include an analysis of fanzines or receptions by the hegemonic media, something I do with more force in certain chapters of my doctoral thesis. In addition, although the research here explores *Beneath the Remains* as an exponent of the consequences of the advances of neoliberalism and capitalist realism in terms of representations of time, Sepultura's other albums put these forms into tension, thus constructing alternatives and criticisms of the current system, while still respecting the molds of *metal*. In this way, together with Jameson (1995), it is possible to see that even in mass culture, however difficult it may be, elements of utopia resist reification. Particularly on the albums *Chaos A.D.* (1993) and *Roots* (1996), which tied together elements of Brazilianness as signs of resistance, there are pertinent reflections on the potential of *metal* as a means of disseminating anti-capitalist discourses, both practically and reflectively.

However, the predominant cultural climate in the 1980s was neoliberalism in the form of capitalist realism and presentism. Therefore, this way of perceiving temporal reality as an extended present that will never reach its conclusion due to uncertainty about the future was not specific to metal, as it was a central topic on the cultural agenda of the final years of the 20th century. In the introduction, I referred to some albums released in 1989 that were in line with Sepultura's proposal. In addition, this perception appeared in films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) or *Terminator* (1984), in cyberpunk literature, *Neuromancer* by William Gibson (1984), and in comic books, *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons (1986-1987).

In line with Fredric Jameson (1995), Mark Fisher (2020) argues that mass culture, from the 1980s on, abandoned the dialog with modernism. Art is no longer seen as an instrument for transforming the world. Capitalism even succeeded in absorbing the criticism and critical instruments of modernism, converting them into merchandise, and infiltrating subjectivities (Jameson, 2006, p. 45). For this reason, it was difficult to escape this wheel 'in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible', so 'all that remains is to imitate dead styles'. In fact, at the beginning of their international career, Sepultura couldn't come up with any proposals for aesthetic innovation, as they necessarily had to dialog with the hegemonic cultural logic. This investigation shows that these were not merely artistic choices, but also a marketing strategy, driven by Roadrunner Records and ratified by the state of subjectivities during this period that began in the 1980s, but has spread its structures in mass culture to the present day.

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