

Free Thinkers Are Dangerous!  
Millennial Counterculture and the Music of System of a Down

by

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*Heartfelt thanks...*

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## Abstract:

System of a Down is an Armenian-American heavy metal band who participated in a counterculture around the turn of the millennium, both through its music and through its members' participation in activism. I situate both the band's sound and identity portrayal through analysis of the music and the socio-historical context which made them popular.

System of a Down was labelled a "Nümetal" band primarily due to the touring circuit participated in. I investigate the sonic signifiers of this subgenre of heavy metal through examples from the band's first album. I then compare contemporary Nümetal to songs from the band's eponymous album and am able to identify what makes the band unique among its peers in terms of musical conventions used. I further situate the band historically citing the controversy around the release of System of a Down's second album *Toxicity* only a week before 9/11, as well as investigating how the band presented itself in interviews and through lyrics.

Finally, in a case study of the music video "Boom!" I further solidify my argument that the band and its members participate in a global countercultural movement. The band produced the video with famous documentary director Michael Moore, but opted to present themselves as regular protesters participating in a movement larger than themselves, rather than as celebrity rock stars supporting a cause.

Throughout the band's brief song-writing period of 1998-2005, and further through its 2015 "Wake up the Souls" tour and ongoing activist work, System of a Down participated in a culture opposed to global warfare and injustice. This thesis opens the door to further in-depth study of this band's important music.

## List of Abbreviations Used:

SOAD – System of a Down

RATM – Rage Against the Machine



## Chapter One: Introduction

*Free thinkers are dangerous.*<sup>1</sup>

September 4, 2001: System of a Down (hereafter SOAD) debuts its second album *Toxicity* at the top of the *Billboard* album charts. One week later the culturally devastating 9/11 attacks occur in New York, and on September 13<sup>th</sup>, Serj Tankian (SOAD's lead singer) publishes a controversial three-page diatribe condemning violence in all forms, while calling attention to the wrongs of the American government that may have led to the attacks. SOAD and its band members have been active members in a counterculture opposed to war and corporate capitalism, while simultaneously maintaining popular reception among hard rock and heavy metal fans around the turn of the millennium. I seek to investigate the band's musical output and its place in our understanding of heavy metal music. Are freethinkers dangerous? or are they integral to our society?

### 1.1 The Band

System of a Down is an Armenian-American heavy metal band based in Los Angeles, and presents an important research opportunity into popular music at the turn of the millennium. My intention is to lay the research groundwork for further intensive study of SOAD's work and its place in the broader hard rock and heavy metal canon. I will discuss musical, cultural, and performative sources in order to illuminate the place SOAD's music has held during their active song-writing period of 1998-2005, as well as the group's shifting reputation as they continue to tour with the same material a decade later. This focused approach on a single band allows for comparison to contemporary artists, while

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<sup>1</sup> System of a Down, "Mind", *System of a Down*, American Records, 1998, CD, track 9.

combining the approaches of scholars from diverse angles in a way that utilizes some of the most useful tools in the flourishing field of popular musicology.

SOAD consists of songwriter and guitarist Daron Malakian; lyricist and lead singer Serj Tankian; drummer John Dolmayan; and bassist Shavo Odadjian. The band released five albums together between 1998 and 2005, gaining popularity in the heavy metal tour circuit before earning mainstream recognition in 2001, and eventually becoming the first band since the Beatles to debut two records at number one in the same year (2005).<sup>2</sup> SOAD successfully navigated its rise to fame, maintaining a clear ethical position while remaining accessible to a broad audience. The band continues to use celebrity to bring awareness to violence and inequality in America, Armenia, and worldwide. SOAD's unique combination of controversial lyrics and themes with catchy, driving song-writing styles created a space in mainstream music for questioning the status quo.

## 1.2 Methods

I will use a combination of approaches to situate SOAD in the mainstream heavy metal canon, and as part of a counterculture among North American youth around the turn of the millennium. Historically, popular music has been approached by sociologists, cultural studies scholars, and ethnomusicologists. However, some of the earliest detailed analyses in popular musicology are as recent as 1990 with Richard Middleton's *Studying Popular Music*. While other musicologists have approached popular music analysis using tools developed for common practice music which focus primarily on the sounds and structures used (Walter Everett, for example, used Schenkerian analysis to interpret Beatles' songs),

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Harris, "System of a Down Make it a Double with Chart-Topping *Hypnotize*" *MTV News*, November 30, 2005, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1516656/system-of-a-down-make-it-a-double-with-chart-topping-hypnotize/>.

Middleton stresses historical contextualization as an added layer of understanding to structural and textual analysis when he says that “in order to study historically located forms of popular music, it is necessary to place them within the context of the whole music-historical field.”<sup>3</sup> This is not to say, however, that attempts to articulate ideas about popular music in the terms and vocabulary of established Western analysis traditions cannot provide new angles of insight in conjunction with broader contextual views. Using these multiple intersecting research methods, I place SOAD’s blend of sounds as conventional to heavy metal and other styles of popular music while standing out as uniquely identifiable among the band’s peers.

Following the strategies of musicologists Richard Middleton, Robert Walser, and Allan Moore, I will explore how conventions from differing genres and styles can be combined, resulting in an ongoing ebb and flow of categorical distinctions in rock and metal music. Walser provided an insightful first study into the development of early heavy metal, while Moore provides definitions of style and genre that allow for a spectrum of musical styles useful to my analysis.<sup>4</sup> In some cases I will use Western musical notation as a standard is useful for simplified representations such as those which will be present throughout, in combination with form charts, tables, and other descriptive language.

Cultural studies have been a centre for popular music studies for decades, and it is from this collection of research that a contrasting view of the music can be explored. I am drawing upon cultural and performance studies, ranging from work by Theodor Adorno in

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Everett. “Fantastic Remembrance in John Lennon’s “Strawberry Fields Forever” and “Julia,”” in *Critical Essays in Popular Musicology*, ed. Allan Moore, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007 [1986]), 391-416.

Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil*, (Hanover CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).  
Allan Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001).

the early twentieth century to Simon Frith, and Philip Auslander in the last few decades, for their insights into musician/audience interaction.<sup>5</sup> Musicologists have criticized cultural theorists for prioritizing language – over the sound – used in the music, but many studies from this discipline include excellent observations about timbre, philosophy, and affect, resulting in a solid research base.

These three research perspectives (musicology, cultural studies, and performance studies) provide the foundation for my own analysis of the music of SOAD and its contextual place in music and cultural history. I have chosen two sets of SOAD songs and one set of songs by various contemporary artists who were generally marketed and received in the same genre category and have executed my own formal and conventional analysis to compare and contrast to these research approaches. SOAD was marketed as a “Nümetal” band alongside groups like Korn, Slipknot, Limp Bizkit, and others, while also being acknowledged as socially conscious, not unlike Rage Against the Machine. This tendency in heavy metal to constantly create new genre titles has been discussed in Titus Hjelm, Keith Kahn-Harris and Mark LeVine’s recent book *Heavy Metal: Controversies and Countercultures* which will continue to be relevant to my arguments.<sup>6</sup> Through the combination of multiple research approaches with my own knowledge and experience with this music, I will demonstrate SOAD’s importance to a generation of heavy metal music.

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<sup>5</sup> Theodor Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, (New York: Urizen Books, 1978 [1938]), 270-299.

Simon Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).

Philip Auslander. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Titus Hjelm, Keith Kahn-Harris and Mark LeVine, eds. *Heavy Metal: Controversies and Countercultures*, (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2013), 1.

It is also important to take a moment to acknowledge the role my fandom plays in the selection of this subject and development of methodology. Daniel Levitin has shown that the music that one listens to during their coming of age period holds an important role in shaping future music preference, and my love of SOAD is no different.<sup>7</sup> I was fourteen at the turn of the millennium and fifteen for the nightmare that was 9/11, so my personal perspective on this time period in mainstream media culture is quite biased. I have attempted to turn this bias to my favour throughout my work, selecting contemporary examples based on songs that I remember sharing a playlist frequently. SOAD's music had a significant effect on me, encouraging me to ask for the first time, "What does it mean to be a freethinker?" Susan Fast and Glenn Pillsbury also discuss the importance of fandom in their studies of Led Zeppelin and Metallica respectively and I believe that the many years I have spent with this music will likewise positively influence my work.

There are a number of advantages and risks to combining fandom and scholarship that must be carefully navigated in order to avoid devolving into hagiography. It can be challenging to balance subjective qualities such as aesthetic value or authenticity with observations of fan response and critical reception. Hjelm et al mention in their introduction to *Heavy Metal* that "almost all of the current scholars in the field are metalheads themselves".<sup>8</sup> This trend can be traced to heavy metal's use of classical guitar sounds and virtuosic solos to legitimate itself as a valuable musical genre in the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Fan clubs and serious record collecting have long histories dating back to the 1930s, and these practices have intensified since the explosion of web-based social networking

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music*, (New York: Dutton, 2006), 225.

<sup>8</sup> Hjelm et al, *Heavy Metal*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Walser, *Running With the Devil*, 63.

platforms and archives.<sup>10</sup> However, as history has shown, attempts to canonize music must also work diligently to not erase alternate narratives, or idolize their subjects.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.3 Overview

In Chapter Two: Conventions, I will discuss how SOAD integrated popular conventions from heavy metal, hard rock, grunge, punk, and pop music resulting in widespread mainstream popularity despite lyrical content which often challenged the status quo. Allan Moore's explorations of style and genre as well as Robert Walser's heavy metal analysis will provide academic groundwork for this discussion.<sup>12</sup> Fast's and Pillsbury's case studies of Led Zeppelin and Metallica provide excellent models for this type of study, while also covering two of the most critically-acclaimed metal bands of all time.<sup>13</sup> This chapter will focus on stylistic signifiers of the music in order to establish the band's musical place in this time period of heavy metal.

In Chapter Three: Identity, I will open up the discussion to the band's self-presentation while continuing to explore examples of SOAD and contemporary artists' songs to make my points. My focus in these cases will place more emphasis on lyrical meaning, performance presentation, and audience interaction than in the conventions chapter. Interviews, reviews, and band member publications will play an important role here, as will the cultural and performance studies scholarship of Ken Goffman and Dan

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Théberge, "Everyday Fandom: Fan Clubs, Blogging, and the Quotidian Rhythms of the Internet," *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 30 (2005), 489.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Botstein, "Music in History: The Perils of Method in Reception History," Notes from the Editor, *Musical Quarterly*, (2006), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*.  
Walser, *Running With the Devil*.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music*, (Oxford University Press, 2001).

Glenn T. Pillsbury, *Damage Incorporated: Metallica and the Production of Musical Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Joy, and Hjelm, Kahn-Harris and LeVine.<sup>14</sup> I will examine the band's personal reactions to 9/11 and how SOAD's 2001 release *Toxicity* fit into the historical moment. I then discuss the band's most popular song from 2005, the ensuing six-year hiatus, and following return to touring in 2011, before ending with a discussion of SOAD's most recent tour "Wake Up the Souls".

In Chapter Four: Case Study, I will explore SOAD's "Boom!" music video in detail, using the combined approach of musical analysis with socio-historical contextualization to gain a more complete picture of the band's place in music history. A comparison to an earlier Rage Against the Machine (RATM) video by the same director will be essential here, as SOAD is often compared to RATM in terms of style and primarily subject matter. This case study summarizes all of the points made in the previous chapters while providing a detailed look at one song's place in the band's discography.

Finally, in Chapter Five: Conclusion I affirm that the music of SOAD deserves further study and a place among the pillars of hard rock and heavy metal music. By demonstrating SOAD's ability to tie timbral and musical interest with performative intrigue and identity I will also illuminate new angles on approaching popular music analysis in future studies. The band's participation in a counterculture at the turn of the millennium is explored throughout this thesis, with doors opened to further in-depth study.

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<sup>14</sup> Ken Goffman and Dan Joy, *Counterculture Through the Ages: From Abraham to Acid House*, (New York: Random House, 2004).  
Hjelm et al. *Heavy Metal*.

## Chapter Two: Conventions – Heavy Metal, Pop, and Nümetal

*The plan was mastered and called genocide  
You took all the children and then we died  
The few that remained were never found  
All in a system  
Down<sup>1</sup>*

In this chapter I place SOAD amongst contemporary bands marketed in the same generic category: Nümetal. By comparing musical qualities it is possible to see the similarities and differences that lead SOAD to mainstream popularity while promoting an attitude unique among the band's peers. I will situate SOAD's first album *System of a Down* historically by focusing on the intersection of musical conventions that result in SOAD's unique sound. In order to establish a context for an analysis of this type it is useful to look at the recent development of popular musicology, especially that which has focused on genre, style, and heavy metal.

### 2.1 Genre and Style

Allan Moore's *Rock: The Primary Text* establishes an approach to the study of rock music on a spectrum, as opposed to a binary or sub-set system. His detailed explorations of style and meaning are especially useful as he allows for a "style continuum" between "hard rock" and "heavy metal" that more effectively describes SOAD than any one categorical label.<sup>2</sup> Moore also makes important note of the variety of qualities of sound that signify in rock music, arguing that "one of the greatest problems besetting contemporary musicology (and contemporary music) is the belief that any particular domain has priority".<sup>3</sup> By

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<sup>1</sup> System of a Down, "P.L.U.C.K. (Politically Lying Unholy Cowardly Killers)" *System of a Down*, 1998, CD, track 13.

<sup>2</sup> Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 148.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 155.



considering equally qualities of melody, harmony, timbre, texture, and lyrics, a more complete picture of a particular music's meaning and interpretation can be gained. This broad method of analysis is useful when looking at SOAD's incorporation of established conventions which have been combined and manipulated in a unique way to create an identifiable sound.

Fabian Holt approaches genre from the perspective of linguistics, taking the word back to its Greek and Latin origins meaning "kind and lineage" and pointing to the importance of the concept of evolution to modern Western societies.<sup>4</sup> However, cultural evolution has long been refuted and like Moore, Holt differentiates between genre and style, or "what Todorov (1976) called historical genres, as opposed to theoretical or abstract genres" which might include categories like wedding music or piano music.<sup>5</sup> The word genre continues to be useful here because it is the word used by the industry and the layman to describe musical preference and it is important to remember that "[t]he music industry daily invents and redesigns labels to market musical products as new and/or authentic."<sup>6</sup> Individual subgenres may come with some degree of flexibility due to the marketed nature of music, and that is certainly the case with Nümetal.

These flexible ways of considering musical style are crucial for considering SOAD's music which has been categorized as Nümetal, thrash metal, alternative rock, and mainstream rock. Reviews for the band's albums consistently remark on the variety of styles juxtaposed to establish SOAD's unique sound. In one *Rolling Stone* article, Evan Serpick calls SOAD "prog-metal radicals" describing 2005's *Mezmerize* as "high-octane

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<sup>4</sup> Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*, (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 2.  
Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*, 14.

prog-metal infused with delicate melodies, vocal harmonies and oddball rants.”<sup>7</sup> An *MTV* review refers to SOAD’s “formula” as one where “[u]rgent, staggered beats blend with operatic vocals; death metal tempos clash with Armenian melodies; and evocative atmospheres juxtapose with barked vocals and carnival noises.”<sup>8</sup> In order to understand SOAD’s music, it is important to consider the combination of styles, rather than attempt to attach a single unifying label to the band.

## 2.2 Metal History

Robert Walser’s 1993 *Running with the Devil* is an excellent resource for understanding the origins of heavy metal music. His discussion of the changed signification of classical music in the late twentieth century informs our understanding of the development of heavy metal as a style in the 1970s and ‘80s. Citing Christopher Small he argues that “classical music surely no longer signifies as it did originally, but neither are its meanings ahistorical or arbitrary.”<sup>9</sup> This is important in relation to popular music styles because their constant appropriation of sounds from other sources “and the push to be antithetical to these things” changes the assumed meanings of certain sounds.<sup>10</sup> He argues that the Beatles were perhaps the first popular band to use “classical” sounds in their music, but that doing so has become an important part of heavy metal, especially for the dominant figure – the guitarist.<sup>11</sup> The simultaneous use of classical signifiers and techniques combined with the attempt to represent the opposite of the genteel, “proper” associations

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<sup>7</sup> Evan Serpick, “SYSTEM OF A DOWN,” *Rolling Stone*, No. 990/991, December 29, 2005, 92.

<sup>8</sup> Jon Wiederhorn, “System of a Down Frazzled over Leaked Outtakes,” *MTV.com*, May 10, 2002. Accessed at <http://www.mtv.com/news/1453906/system-of-a-down-frazzled-over-leaked-outtakes/>.

<sup>9</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 63.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

twentieth century listeners have with classical music is important to consider when discussing SOAD's influences and stylistic markers.

Another huge shift in rock music happened in the 1990s with grunge causing ripples even into the heavy metal world. "The virtuosic guitar solo vanished from the radio as if in a single stroke" states Joshua Clover in his chapter about Kurt Cobain of Nirvana.<sup>12</sup> While certainly influenced by classic metal bands like Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin, grunge music sought to combine the anger and disdain of metal with the do-it-yourself, empowerment of punk. "Marginalized and embattled punk had finally realized its popular authority, in the form of grunge" continues Clover who compares the two styles by analogizing punk's "Here's three chords, now form a band" and grunge guitarist Cobain's statement "learn *not* to play your instrument."<sup>13</sup> While the punk phrase implies that the player just picked up an instrument for the sake of being in a band, the Cobain quote suggests that the musician already has that technical knowledge, and must now unlearn it in order to be creative. SOAD sits at the crux of these styles, maintaining a balance of technicality and simplicity which is a sign of its place in music history after both punk and grunge, as well as thrash metal.

### 2.3 *System of a Down*, 1998

In 1998, SOAD released its first album and began touring extensively, opening for bands such as Incubus and Slayer, and playing second stage at Ozzfest.<sup>14</sup> The opportunity to play at Ozzfest is crucial, as the festival was organized by the highly respected heavy metal hero

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<sup>12</sup> Joshua Clover, *1989: Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 73.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Evan Serpick, "Toxic Avengers," *Entertainment Weekly*, No. 667, August 16, 2002, 5. System of a Down Live at Mississippi Nights Club in St. Louis, September 18, 1998, video editing by Lepers TV, accessed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2TLUGSmkac>, 38:24-38:27.

Ozzy Osbourne (of Black Sabbath and also known as a solo artist, and later reality TV star), which helped to promote all of the bands chosen to play at the festival. It also resulted in many of the bands being categorized in the same burgeoning genre: Nümetal. SOAD's eponymous album set the sonic stage for the band's unique style of heavy metal, with dramatic dynamic, timbral, and temporal shifts within songs and throughout the album. Subject matter varied greatly from song to song as well, ranging from the very silly, to the very poetic, to the serious and political. The band's integration of thrash, punk, grunge, and pop forms and styles will be demonstrated by three examples from this album. These songs show both the variety and recognisability of SOAD's sound.

#### 2.4 "Sugar"

"Sugar" received radio airplay as the band's first single, and could be described as a sociopathic super-fun sugar-high. Highlighted by energetic drum rolls and dramatic tempo shifts, the forward momentum of this song makes it feel even shorter than its 2:33 length.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the majority of SOAD's songs, "Sugar" jumps right into the chorus with only a drum roll for introduction. See Table 2.1 for a standardized chart of the song's content for comparison to other songs throughout this chapter. The other standout feature of this song is the extended outro in place of a final return to the chorus. After the song's bridge, "Sugar" ends with thirty-four seconds of new material that accelerates in tempo to an abrupt ending. The song is unusual to say the least, especially for the radio, but it is a fan favorite nonetheless.<sup>16</sup> Serj Tankian's vocal timbre is highly recognizable; his voice has an

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<sup>15</sup> All time-stamps refer to CD-release versions of the songs, with the exception of the music videos discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>16</sup> Spencer Kaufman, "10 Best System of a Down Songs," *Loudwire.com*, accessed at <http://loudwire.com/best-system-of-a-down-songs/>. Andrew Demo, "System of a Down mesmerize Riot Fest audience in return to Denver." *Examiner.com*, August 29, 2015, accessed at <http://www.examiner.com/article/system-of-a-down-mesmerize-riot-fest->

almost nasal quality, supported by chest voice power, and clear enunciation for a sound I have called declarative. Features that commonly appear in SOAD songs include Tankian’s unique vocal timbre and method of enunciating words in a rhythmic and declarative manner; the straight 4/4 beat with pulse-destabilizing ornamentation in all instruments; and the shifts between sparse and thick textures.

*Table 2.1*

“Sugar”

*System of a Down*, 1998

Tempo: 132, accelerates to 260 bpm

Time	Song Section	Duration in Measures	Content
0:00-0:15	Chorus	8	Drum riff pick-up. Thick instrumental texture, and vocals.
0:16-0:26	Sugar! Interlude	6	High-hat, sparse guitar, “Sugar!”
0:27-0:48	Verse 1	12	Sparse texture, abrasive vocals
0:49-1:03	Chorus	8	
1:04-1:08	Sugar! Interlude	2	
1:09-1:29	Verse 2	12	Even faster, more maniacal lyrics
1:30-1:43	Chorus	8	
1:44-1:47	Transition	2	Hi-hat
1:48-1:58	Bridge	8	Break-down, half-tempo feel
1:59-2:33	Outro	24	Accelerando through to end

The song’s short length, fast tempo and aggressive vocals are reminiscent of a combination of punk and thrash metal. The band was immediately marketed as Nümetal alongside bands like Korn, Slipknot, and Limp Bizkit (to which I will return later in the chapter), and while each band has similarities and differences, one important feature to note is the significant lack of guitar solos. This trend away from solos was heavily influenced by the popularity of grunge, and stems from a turn away from the perceived posturing of 1980s metal guitar virtuosos such as Yngwie Malmsteen. Walser discusses the prominence of guitar solos in heavy metal at length and draws a connection between classical virtuosity and metal guitarists as a way for the musicians to fight back against

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audience-return-to-denver. In which they show that the set list for the Riot Fest performance ended with “Sugar”.

critics who claimed that heavy metal was not musical.<sup>17</sup> In a video interview from 2000, Malakian describes the trend as an attempt to be more “tasteful” than the over-the-top solos of Malmsteen and others.<sup>18</sup> When solos do appear, as in my next example, they are significantly less virtuosic and flashy than their 1980s counterparts, providing a texture break rather than a flamboyant demonstration of skill.

## 2.5 “Spiders”

In dynamic contrast to “Sugar”, “Spiders” features slow, melodic singing and poetic, even romantic, lyrical content. The second single released from *System of a Down*, “Spiders” also appears on the *Scream 3* soundtrack alongside a who’s-who of the millennial mainstream alternative metal scene.<sup>19</sup> This song does not “sound like” metal, rather, it has a melodic, almost acoustic quality to it. This matches another trend, which has been discussed at length by Glenn Pillsbury in the case of Metallica who calls it the “Fade to Black Paradigm”.<sup>20</sup> Metallica is well known for its thrash metal style, but the song “Fade to Black” contrasts the style of the rest of the album *Ride the Lightning*. After the success of this album, Pillsbury explains, it became common for thrash and heavy metal bands to include a contrasting song, and I argue that “Spiders” fits with this trend. “Spiders” (see Table 2.2) begins more slowly than most SOAD songs and picks up speed just a bit, unlike the dramatic shifts found in “Sugar” and others.<sup>21</sup> The chorus is tempered by alternating four measures of full band texture with sparse, subdued sections. The song increases in

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<sup>17</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Daron Malakian, in video interview for *Guitar.com*, Sandy Masuo, Interviewer, filmed by Jonathan Rach, 2000, retrieved from Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06h7SJTrbvI>, 11:00-11:45.

<sup>19</sup> Various Artists, *Scream 3 OST*, Wind-Up, 2000, CD.

Featured Artists include Slipknot, Incubus, Static-X, Powerman 5000, and Finger Eleven.

<sup>20</sup> Pillsbury, *Damage Incorporated*, 33.

<sup>21</sup> Such as “P.L.U.C.K.,” “Boom!” and “B.Y.O.B.” as discussed later in this thesis.

intensity throughout the bridge and extended final chorus before dropping back down for the outro. Despite all of the differences in tempo and timbre however, the song still has a driving momentum, strong declarative vocals, and dramatic changes in texture.

*Table 2.2*

“Spiders”

*System of a Down*, 1998

Tempo: 123-133bpm

Time	Song Section	Duration in Measures	Content
0:00-0:15	Intro	8	Melodic Guitar only. Theme introduced. Slow tempo.
0:16-0:46	Verse 1	16	Guitar and vocals only. Slow tempo.
0:47-1:14	Chorus 1	16	Tempo picks up, drums join. Alternating four measures of full texture with four of sparse texture.
1:15-1:42	Verse 2	16	As before but in new tempo.
1:43-2:03	Chorus 2	12	Alternating textures, full, sparse, full – leading into the Bridge
2:04-2:30	Bridge	16	Guitar solo
2:31-3:04	Chorus 3	20	Vocal soloing, leading to song’s climax. All full texture, no sparse alternation.
3:05-3:35	Outro	16	Final repetition of theme in sparse texture

Another important aspect of SOAD’s sound is easy to note in “Spiders” as the introduction of the song begins with guitar and occasional bass strums only. The band’s first three albums are in “dropped C” tuning.<sup>22</sup> Dropped D tuning became popularized in early heavy metal music as a way to emphasize the heavy sound of the lowest open string on the guitar. As outlined in detail by Andrew Cope in his book on Black Sabbath, dropped D tuning leaves all the strings in standard tuning except the lowest string which is tuned down a whole step providing a richer, darker tone, and allowing “power chords”, or perfect fifths, to be played by barring the two lowest sounding strings on the same fret. Dropped C tuning is when all of the strings are tuned down a whole step to D standard and the lowest string is tuned down an additional step to C, allowing for the same power chord hand positions, and an even darker, fuzzier tone due to the looseness of the strings caused by

<sup>22</sup> The last two albums are in dropped C#.

down-tuning.<sup>23</sup> While bands like Black Sabbath initiated the use of dropped tunings in the early years of heavy metal, the practice has become common with many bands using dropped D and some bands taking it even further than SOAD, like Slipknot who have tuned down to as low as dropped A on the album *Iowa*. The low, ringing, open-string sound of dropped C is especially effective in “Spiders” alongside the harmonic minor melody and haunting, clear tone of Tankian’s voice.

## 2.6 “P.L.U.C.K.”

The last example from the first album to examine here is “P.L.U.C.K. (Politically Lying Unholy Cowardly Killers)”. This song appears last on the album and was never released as a single, but its political content and unusual formal structure make it an important illustration of SOAD’s diversity. The song is referring to the American government’s refusal to officially acknowledge the Armenian Genocide of 1915. The anger stemming from this feeling of injustice fuels the song to the point of suggesting that revolution is the only “solution.” The lyrics provide a very clear image of the intended message of the song, but similarly to Paul Aitken’s discussion of SOAD’s later songs “Attack” and “Holy Mountains,” I am interested here primarily in the underlying music’s ability to communicate, or evoke feeling through sound. The lyrics “combine with the music to create an assemblage that disrupts sedimented patterns of thought in order to create the conditions for political action.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, each of these songs uses disruption between sections to influence connection to the politically motivated lyrics. Aitken and I agree that disruption is common in heavy metal conventions, and additionally he states that

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew Cope, *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 47.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Aitken, “Attack/Affect: System of a Down and Genocide Activism,” *MUSICultures*, Volume 38. Calgary, Canadian Society for Traditional Music, 2011, 68.



“[SOAD’s] music effectively de-links these conventions from a perceived apoliticism in order to create affective moments of rupture in which listeners are challenged to reflect upon and ultimately question received wisdom and dominant worldviews.”<sup>25</sup>

Tricia Rose describes a similar use of rupture in hip hop culture using Arthur Jafa’s terms, stating that “stylistic continuities between breaking, graffiti style, rapping, and musical construction seem to center around three concepts: *flow*, *layering*, and *ruptures in line*.” By building moments of disruption into their art styles, the Afro-diasporic artists Rose is referring to “suggest affirmative ways in which profound social dislocation and rupture can be managed and perhaps contested in the cultural arena.”<sup>26</sup> By providing smooth, flowing sections, disrupted by moments of silence or sudden volume, SOAD’s audience is encouraged to consider the lyrical content from a new perspective.

*Table 2.3*

“P.L.U.C.K. (Politically Lying Unholy Cowardly Killers)” *System of a Down*, Tempo: 164bpm  
1998

Time	Song Section	Duration in Measures	Content
0:00-0:11	Intro	8	Rhythmic Guitar
0:11-0:23		8	Add Bass
0:24-0:34		4	Drums, “Elimination” Beat 4
0:35-0:58	Scream	16	“Die. Why. Walk Down.”
0:59-1:03	Transition	4	Guitar and Drums
1:04-1:16	“A”	8	“A whole race, genocide...”
1:17-1:28	“B”	8	“Revolution...”
1:29-1:39	“C”	8	“Recognition...”
1:40-1:52	“B”	8	“Revolution...”
1:53-2:17	“D”	16	Down-tempo, 2 layers of lyrics
2:18-2:41	Scream	8	“Down, Down, Walk Down”
2:42-2:47	Transition	4	Guitar and Drums
2:48-3:00	“B”	8	“Revolution...”
3:01-3:32	“D” -End	16	“Down” fade out

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 38-39. Italics in original.

“P.L.U.C.K.” does away with standard Verse/Chorus or AABA forms, while still providing a beginning, middle, and end, with recognizable repeated sections, and a down-tempo bridge section labelled “D” in Table 2.3. There are many aspects of the song that coincide with heavy metal conventions: a reasonably fast tempo at 164 bpm, distorted guitars, and screamed vocals.<sup>27</sup> The sections are distinct and marked by dramatic shifts in the soundscape and polyrhythms, which constantly battle the driving 4/4 beat. Illustrated in Example 2.1, the guitar opens with a straight forward tempo-setting riff on D for eight measures before the bass enters and slightly off-sets the pulse. The guitar’s last three accented eighth notes are also slightly sharpened through the bending of the string. The drums enter eight measures later, mimicking the bass rhythm but accentuating off-beats. My example only shows the stressed beats in the percussion line, not the full texture. “Elimination” is whispered intensely at the end of the two-bar phrase for three more repetitions.

Figure 2.1 – Reduction of Additive Introductions Section in “P.L.U.C.K.”

The musical score is presented in four staves, all in 4/4 time. The top staff is for Guitar, showing a continuous eighth-note riff on the D string. The second staff is for Electric Bass, with a note indicating it enters on the 5th repetition. The third staff is for Percussion, with a note indicating it enters on the 9th repetition. The bottom staff is for Voice, with a note indicating it enters on the 9th repetition. The lyrics 'E-li - mi - na - tion.' are written below the voice staff.

<sup>27</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 9-10.

This introduction is followed by “Die. Why!?” being screamed over every second repetition of the same two-bar riff, with the guitar doubling the bassline, leaving three and a half beats of rest in every repetition. The effect is of highly contrasting moments of silence and screaming, finally becoming a solid mass of anger when, as Tankian screams “Walk down!” the bass riff starts to loop only the first measure, providing a violent, churning, forward motion. A completely different set of accompaniment starts with the guitar and builds again with the transition to the “A” section. This constant use of shifting and contrasting sounds supports the lyrical questioning and obvious emotional anguish.

Figure 2.2. Layered lyrics in “P.L.U.C.K.”

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. The top staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The melody consists of quarter notes: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4. The lyrics 'Don't want to see you a - round.' are aligned with these notes. The bottom staff has a bass clef and the same key signature. The melody consists of quarter notes: G2, A2, Bb2, C3, Bb2, A2, G2. The lyrics 'A plan was mas - tered called ge - no - cide.' are aligned with these notes. Both staves end with a double bar line.

The importance of the energy and timbre of the music is highlighted in the “D” section, during which two sets of lyrics are layered in such a way that the words are nearly indistinguishable (illustrated in Example 2.2). After being drawn in, and shuffled back and forth between the clearly enunciated lyrics and pounding rhythms of the earlier sections, the “D” section is half tempo, and the vocals are melodic and legato compared to the aggressive, marcato vocals of the other sections. The layering of these legato vocals evokes an eerie feeling and encourages the audience to listen more closely in order to make out the words and understand the song. Again, SOAD shifts abruptly back into a high speed screamed section. The use of fast polyrhythms and forceful vocals is reminiscent of power

and struggle, while the bridge is a reminder of the solemnness of the subject of the Armenian Genocide.

Through this analysis of “Sugar”, “Spiders”, and “P.L.U.C.K.” we can conclude that SOAD uses a wide variety of song-writing techniques. It is difficult to put a solid label on the band. My goal here, however, is not to define generic boundaries but to emphasize the variety of styles integrated into the band’s musical output to create a recognizable sound. The use of dropped tuning, distorted vocals, and aggressive polyrhythmic drumming originate with early heavy metal music of the 1970s. The use of Verse/Chorus structure is common across popular genres but often varied or manipulated in SOAD songs. Contrasting sections also regularly appear in many styles of music to create tension and momentum, but the dramatic use of texture changes and pattern disruption employed are comparable to the type of rupture which Rose describes in hip hop. In combination with Tankian’s distinctive vocal tone and Malakian’s guitar distortion, the band’s sound becomes highly identifiable.

## 2.7 Contemporary Nümetal – “Freak on a Leash”

A comparative look at three songs contemporary to *System of a Down* will help to establish how SOAD stands apart from other Nümetal bands. My first example is “Freak on a Leash” by the band Korn, from their 1998 album *Follow the Leader*. Korn had already established themselves as a popular Nümetal band with two previous albums, however “Freak on a Leash” catapulted them to mainstream popularity, even winning a Grammy for Best Music Video, Short Form in 1999.<sup>28</sup> The first difference to point out is that SOAD’s

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<sup>28</sup> Grammy Awards Official Website, “Past Winners Search,” *Grammy.com*, [http://www.grammy.com/nominees/search?artist=korn&field\\_nominee\\_work\\_value=&year=All&genre=Al](http://www.grammy.com/nominees/search?artist=korn&field_nominee_work_value=&year=All&genre=Al)l.

music often creates a sense of group solidarity, a feeling that the audience is part of the “we” being described by the song. Rarely are SOAD songs about individual experiences, while these contemporary examples almost always have an “I” feeling. Serge Denisoff discusses this in his book *Sing a Song of Social Significance* from 1972 stating that “one of the major functions of the song of persuasion is to create solidarity or a “we” feeling in a group or movement to which the song is verbally directed.”<sup>29</sup> Korn’s “Freak on a Leash” specifically references “I” and is an example of consistent individualism within contemporary heavy metal and Nümetal.

Korn is also known for its use of seven-string guitars. This is another method of emphasizing the lowest string and creates the opportunity for different tuning arrangements. The use of these guitars and unique distortion, creates a timbre identifiably different from that of SOAD. As a song of significant popularity, it is not surprising that “Freak on a Leash” adheres more closely to a typical Verse/Chorus structure than some of Korn’s other material. But it is interesting to note that SOAD’s first big single broke many of those expectations, while Korn faithfully repeats the chorus identically each time it returns (see Table 2.4). Each section is noticeably much more uniform than in the SOAD examples, with the song primarily breaking down into eight measure sections.

It is also noteworthy that “Freak on a Leash” is significantly slower than the average SOAD song. Even the down-tempo song “Spiders” is on average twenty to thirty beats per minute faster than this Korn song. This suggests that SOAD has roots and influences in thrash metal and punk styles that Korn does not. In the bridge of “Freak on a

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<sup>29</sup> Serge Denisoff, *Sing a Song of Social Significance*, (Bowling Greene University Popular Press, 1972), 4.

*Table 2.4*

Korn “Freak on a Leash”

*Follow the Leader*, 1998

Tempo: 100bpm

Time	Song Section	Duration in Measures	Content
0:00-0:18	Intro	8	Guitar and drums
0:19-0:37	Verse 1	8	One voice
0:38-0:57	Verse 2	8	Add alternating backing vocals
0:58-1:15	Pre-chorus	8	“Sometimes I cannot take this place”
1:16-1:36	Chorus	8	“Something takes a part of me”
1:37-1:55	Verse 3	8	Like Verse 2
1:56-2:13	Pre-chorus	8	
2:14-2:34	Chorus	8	
2:35-3:28	Bridge	24	12mms with scat vocals, 4mms instrumental, 8mms with scat vocals again
3:29-3:47	Chorus	8	
3:48-4:15	Outro – fade out	12	8mms outro, 4mms fade out

Leash” however we get a sample of a highly characteristic aspect of Korn’s music with singer Jonathan Davis using distorted scatted vocals to express himself. This heavy metal scat was used on Korn’s earlier song “Twist” and make Jonathan Davis’s vocal distortion stand out among contemporary bands. Nu-metal vocals often verge on a rap aesthetic, and Tankian’s vocals can fit that description, while at times being much more melodic.

## 2.8 “Spit it Out”

Slipknot’s 1999 “Spit it Out” was also marketed as Nu-metal, and produced by Ross Robinson, who also produced Korn’s first two albums. Slipknot uses an aggressive, distorted, even closer to rap-like vocal style, emphasized by the fast tempo (see Table 2.5). Slipknot consists of nine members including a turntablist who features prominently in “Spit it Out”. The song is also tuned an additional semi-tone lower than the previously discussed SOAD songs, providing a lower, grittier sound. The timbral shifts between the fast, growled verse sections, the sung chorus sections and the turntable-heavy bridge section provide momentum but do not offer the same kind of disruption as do the texture changes noted in SOAD’s music.

*Table 2.5*

Slipknot “Spit it Out”

*Slipknot*, 1999

Tempo: 140bpm

Tuning: Dropped B

Time	Song Section	Duration in Measures	Content
0:00-0:09	Intro	6	Highly distorted non-lyrical vocal sounds and drums count in for 2 measures, 4 mms introduction verse.
0:10-0:30	Verse 1	12	8+4 mms vocals spat/rapped
0:31-0:45	Chorus	8	Pitched vocals
0:46-0:48	Transition	2	Guitar
0:49-1:14	Verse 2	16	8+8 vocals as before
1:15-1:29	Chorus	8	As before
1:30-1:41	Instrumental Bridge	8	Turntable prominent
1:42-2:10	Vocal Bridge	16	8+8 pitched/screamed vocals
2:11-2:25	Chorus	8	Ramped energy to climax
2:26-2:38	Outro	8	Spit, Spit, Spit, it out

Consideration of Slipknot’s self-presentation is prudent as the band is well known for wearing masks and coveralls, however, it is important to consider here the overall timbre and use of melody and harmony. While the use of ♭ II and ♭ VII is common in heavy metal styles, Slipknot’s heavy use of distortion and repetition distracts from melodic or harmonic intrigue.<sup>30</sup> The melody is centred on semi-tone movement in the pitched vocal sections and movement of no more than a fourth throughout the song. The interest of the song is located in the variety of instrumental timbres, from multiple guitar lines to the abrasive vocals and contrasting turntable parts, rather than the smooth lyrical lines with dramatic disruptions in timbre and dynamics found in SOAD’s music.

## 2.9 “Break Stuff”

The last iconic Nümetal song that I will examine here is “Break Stuff” by Limp Bizkit, from the band’s second album *Significant Other*, released 1999. This song rides the line between hard rock and rap, with heavy guitar distortion being the main signifier of metal.

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<sup>30</sup> See Walser, Moore, Cope, and Middleton for discussions of the use of flat-two and flat-seven in heavy metal.

Closely aligned with Korn, the song is at a slower tempo and follows a Verse/Chorus structure very closely (see Table 2.6). Similar to the Korn and Slipknot examples, the bridge takes up a large portion of the latter half of the song and features new material and the song’s climax. The similarities continue as the second half of the bridge consists of singer Fred Durst repeating one line of lyrics with increasing intensity as we saw in the second half of the “Spit it Out” bridge. Like “Freak on a Leash”, “Break Stuff” consists of primarily eight measure sections. And again, “Break Stuff”, “Freak on a Leash”, and “Spit it Out” centre on personal experience and individual frustration. “Break Stuff” highlights this with threats of physical violence in the line “give me something to break/how ‘bout your fuckin’ face”.

*Table 2.6*

Limp Bizkit “Break Stuff”

*Significant Other*, 1999

Tempo: 110bpm

Time	Song Section	Duration in Measures	Content
0:00-0:02	Intro	2	Distorted guitar, two pitches, twice.
0:03-0:21	Verse 1	8	Same guitar as intro, add drums and “rapped” lyrics
0:22-0:37	Chorus	8	
0:38-0:56	Verse 2	8	Both verses begin and end with “It’s just one of those days”
0:57-1:13	Chorus	8	
1:14-1:31	Bridge 1	8	Melodic
1:32-1:59	Bridge 2	12	“I hope you know I pack a chainsaw...”
2:00-2:16	Bridge 3	8	“Give me something to break...”
2:17-2:27	Bridge 2	4	“I pack a chainsaw...” to climax
2:28-2:46	Chorus	8	As before

The video for “Break Stuff” went on to win the MTV Video Music Award for Best Rock Video in 2000, edging out Rage Against the Machine’s video which will be discussed in Chapter 4.<sup>31</sup> All of these bands were featured on the Ozzfest line up at one point or another between 1998 and 2003, tying them together under the banner of Nu-metal.<sup>32</sup> In

<sup>31</sup> “Winners” *MTV Video Music Awards*, Official Website, <http://www.mtv.com/ontv/vma/2000/>.

<sup>32</sup> “History” *Ozzfest*, Official Website, <http://www.ozzfest.com/history.html>.



fact, SOAD's inclusion under the title Nümetal seems to have more to do with the timing and fan-base of the mainstream metal scene than close similarities in musical style.

## 2.10 Conclusions

SOAD does use the traditional metal band set up of drummer, bassist, guitarist, and singer; they play fast, hard music with angry vocals, distortion, and an attitude of being an outsider that lines up with contemporaneous bands. The dramatic shifts in tempo and texture explored in our discussion of the three *System of a Down* songs provide a different kind of disruption than those apparent in the music of contemporaneous groups. I argue that this disruption provides audience members with a different incentive to listen to the meaning of the songs than does the voracious repeated screaming of "fuck me/I'm all out of enemies" present in Slipknot's song, or the aforementioned threat of violence present in the Limp Bizkit track. While certainly all of the songs discussed here have aesthetic appeal and broad, overlapping fan bases, SOAD's songs are using slightly different musical language through texture and dynamic disruption, influencing how audiences connect to lyrics and meaning.

## Chapter Three: Identity – Armenia, Celebrity, and Protest

*We are the ones that want to choose  
Always want to play  
But you never want to lose  
Aerials in the sky  
When you lose small mind you free your life<sup>1</sup>*

While in the previous chapter, I focused on SOAD's eponymous first album and how the band established a recognizable sound in a specific generic grouping associated with time period and industry, in this chapter I will look more closely at the music's conveyed meaning in terms of identity presentation of the band. This lyric and context-driven approach will continue to use musical examples from SOAD and contemporary bands. I will focus on examples from SOAD's 2001 *Toxicity* and 2005 *Mezmerize/Hypnotize* albums in order to cover the whole song-writing period before ending with a discussion of the ten years of reception, tours, and separate projects since 2005.<sup>2</sup> With this contextual study, I will explore SOAD's ability to maintain a mainstream fan-base while bringing attention to controversial global and American subjects.

Approaching popular music from a sociological perspective has a long history. Theodor Adorno wrote about popular music as early as the 1930s, primarily demonizing it, but also providing the roots of much scholarship since. Simon Frith has been approaching popular music in this way since the 1970s, and while his arguments have changed along with the music, his work continues to influence a broad range of scholars. Recent studies on identity that have been applied to music performance will be pertinent as well. Ken Goffman and Dan Joy's discussion of counterculture, and Ryan Moore's consideration of

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<sup>1</sup> System of a Down, "Aerials," *Toxicity*, 2001, CD, track 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Steal This Album!* from 2003 will be considered in Chapter 4's case study, and will therefore be omitted here.

consumer culture will provide a basis for consideration of SOAD from a broader sociological perspective.<sup>3</sup> Finally, interviews, reviews, and musical examples will provide the support and outline for my ongoing argument that SOAD's music fits a unique place in popular culture around the turn of the millennium that continues to be relevant.

### 3.1 Counterculture

Ken Goffman and Dan Joy assign three defining principles and five nearly universal features to their definition of counterculture. The principles state that countercultures “assign primacy to individuality at the expense of social conventions and governmental constraints... challenge authoritarianism... [and] embrace individual and social change.”<sup>4</sup> The features similarly include “breakthroughs and radical innovations in art... diversity... open communication... generosity... persecution by mainstream culture... and exile”.<sup>5</sup> While SOAD managed to succeed within the structures of capitalism in which mainstream music exists, the counterculture that the band participated in fits Goffman and Joy's criteria. Anti-authoritarianism and individuality are certainly major factors in heavy metal subcultures.

Hjelm et al. use the term counterculture in relation to heavy metal as opposed to the terms scene and subculture “as a way of highlighting metal's antagonistic side.”<sup>6</sup> SOAD is even mentioned by Niall Scott near the end of the book as “another openly political metal band” highlighting the band's petitions to the American government for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide.<sup>7</sup> Ryan Moore notes the layered influence of “antecedent working-

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<sup>3</sup> Ryan Moore, *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis*, (New York University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Ken Goffman and Dan Joy. *Counterculture Through the Ages*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Hjelm et al., *Heavy Metal*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Niall Scott, “Heavy Metal and the Deafening Threat of the Apolitical,” in Hjelm et al., *Heavy Metal*, 231.

class subcultures” on the counterculture of the late 1960s, and the counterculture’s influence in turn on the heavy metal subcultures of the ‘70s and ‘80s.<sup>8</sup> While heavy metal fans primarily participate in subcultures tied to place and style, the consistent presence of political themes in SOAD songs speaks to the band’s participation in a broader counterculture not limited to individual musical subcultures, such as thrash metal, Nümetal, or punk. The turn of the millennium was a crucial moment for speaking out against the status quo, and SOAD was definitely outspoken.

### 3.2 *Toxicity*, 2001

SOAD’s second album *Toxicity* was released on September 4, 2001, seven days before the 9/11 attacks. On September 13, Serj Tankian posted a three page reaction paper called “Understanding Oil” to SOAD’s website which caused controversy for the band whose album was sitting at number 1 of the *Billboard Top 200 Albums* chart. While the original post was pulled down from the website two days later, a number of media reacted to Tankian’s words as though he were supporting the terrorists and was hateful of America. This culminated in Tankian phoning in to the Howard Stern radio show and defending himself in a very restrained way, all the while maintaining support for peace above all else.<sup>9</sup> During his 2001 interview with Tankian, Stern eventually concedes that Tankian is probably “a pretty good guy”, stating that if the album’s producer, Rick Rubin, approved of Tankian, then he must be right.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Moore, *Sells Like Teen Spirit*, 77.

<sup>9</sup> Stern is a well-known radio personality who hosted his show on syndicated American radio from 1986-2005 before moving to digital radio.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Stern Radio Show, September 20, 2001, accessed at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QM\\_zFYMCbsQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QM_zFYMCbsQ), 1:09:08-1:25:14.

This media moment probably prevented some radio stations from dropping SOAD's big first single from *Toxicity*, "Chop Suey!" and the controversy certainly did not stop the album from going triple platinum in three weeks. Hjelm et al. highlight the importance of controversy to the success of heavy metal and state that while "metal has used controversy as a tool not merely of identity, but also of marketing" it also requires "trigger moments...in the current Western cultural climate."<sup>11</sup> The trigger moment here is all too obvious and I argue that the content of this album matched perfectly the feeling of a lot of young lovers of alternative music at that time who were not directly affected by the 9/11 attacks but still felt distraught about the state of society. Despite being written, recorded, and released before the events took place, *Toxicity* nonetheless fit into the cultural moment in a crucial way.<sup>12</sup>

Tankian reflected back on the Howard Stern Show moment in the introduction to his second set of collected poetry *Glaring Through Oblivion*:

I had many things to say about the abuses of U.S. Foreign policy in the Middle East, but all would have fallen on jingoistic ears among the listeners, though I thought Howard would be amused. I live in the U.S.A. and am afraid to say what's on my mind, because of physical threats and rhetoric directed against my band members and myself in this time of confused patriotism. How ironic is that?

He then cites Noam Chomsky by saying "if you question the premise of the system in a thirty-second sound bite, you end up sounding like a madman."<sup>13</sup> So Tankian is torn between knowing the reactionary audience he was trying to cater to and trying to get his

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<sup>11</sup> Hjelm et al., *Heavy Metal*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Another example of the shift in mindset apparent in American media at this time is the turn of *Adbusters* magazine from a lighthearted jab at capitalist culture to an absolutely dark and serious publication immediately after 9/11. Sensationalism and fear of terrorism swept the nation and the globe with an overwhelming force, that we are still living with today.

<sup>13</sup> Serj Tankian, Introduction to *Glaring Through Oblivion*, (Harper Collins, 2011).

message across about the injustices of the American government's handling of the situation pre- and post-9/11. In the end, his poetry books are his way of expressing his feelings, and many of the poems include lyrics from a variety of SOAD and solo material songs. This battle with presenting one's opinions through music in an attempt to educate or startle an audience into an unfamiliar train of thought on society, while still maintaining enough appeal to have a strong fan-following is my primary interest in this chapter. Very few bands of such widespread appeal deal with political and societal issues on a consistent basis the way SOAD does.

The other mainstream group that SOAD often get compared to is Rage Against the Machine (hereafter RATM) who promoted an anti-authoritarian attitude in its music in the 1990s. RATM is widely acknowledged as influential and Serj Tankian and Tom Morello have toured together and co-founded the activist organization Axis of Justice, so making a connection between the two groups is not unfounded. However, RATM's music falls heavily into the rap metal category and the group disbanded in 2000, leaving a gap in this new market of young, counter-culturalist metal fans. This situation definitely contributed to the receptivity of audiences to *Toxicity* in 2001, along with other general tensions rising to the surface of society's awareness around the turn of the millennium.

### 3.3 "Chop Suey!"

After the success of the single "Chop Suey!" released in August 2001, SOAD released the album's title track "Toxicity" and "Aerials" as singles in January and June of 2002 respectively. The songs are twelfth and fourteenth on the album, harkening back to the strength of the last song on *System of a Down*, "P.L.U.C.K.". All three *Toxicity* singles charted on the *Billboard* Hot 100, and all three use alternating textures of full, marcato

sections, with smooth, melodic, legato sections. As popular singles these songs provided audiences with a stylistically representative, accessible set of material without hammering home some of the more politically involved topics addressed in other songs on the album. The more lyrically heavy-hitting songs appear earlier on the album, influencing the experience of listeners who purchased the album based on enjoying the popular singles.<sup>14</sup>

“Chop Suey!” was originally titled “Suicide” but the alternate name lent itself to less direct interpretation despite the chorus lyric proclaiming “I don’t think you/trust/in/my/self-righteous suicide”.<sup>15</sup> The lyrics to the verse sections are nearly unintelligible and many fans of the song admit they do not know the words.<sup>16</sup> See Example 3.1 for a visual representation of the lyrics aligned with the measures, and Table 3.1 for a structure chart. Singing at roughly 168bpm, Tankian is spitting whole lines of lyrics in the span of three beats, so it is no wonder that audiences cannot always make out the words. But the words that come through, combined with the textural shifts and use of melodic vocals followed by distorted wails captured the attention of mainstream audiences.

The music video for “Chop Suey!” is an adaptation of the iconic “concert footage video” that many rock bands have employed for years. In a miniature stage set up, the band is surrounded by young fans who are only mobilized during the music and are seen

*Figure 3.1 – Representation of Speed of Lyrics in “Chop Suey!”*



<sup>14</sup> Peer to peer file sharing and digital music downloads were still in their infancy at this time, thus the purchase of physical albums was still the primary means of audiences collecting their favorite music.

<sup>15</sup> The song’s original title is indicated in the first few seconds of the studio recording in which one can hear “Rolling, Suicide” before the song begins.

<sup>16</sup> This can be evidenced by numerous viral videos like the one below, replacing sections of the Verses with the braying of goats with over 1.6 million views: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atOFHAawIAA>.

motionless at the beginning and end of the video. Video effects are used making members of the band appear to morph into one another, and numerous overhead camera angles give a 360-degree view of the stage which has the stylized “System of a Down” text emblazoned on it in white on black. The effect of the video is a sense of solidarity among the band and the fans united by the music, while also acting as a lead single advertising the band.

*Table 3.1*  
 “Chop Suey!”  
*Toxicity*, 2001

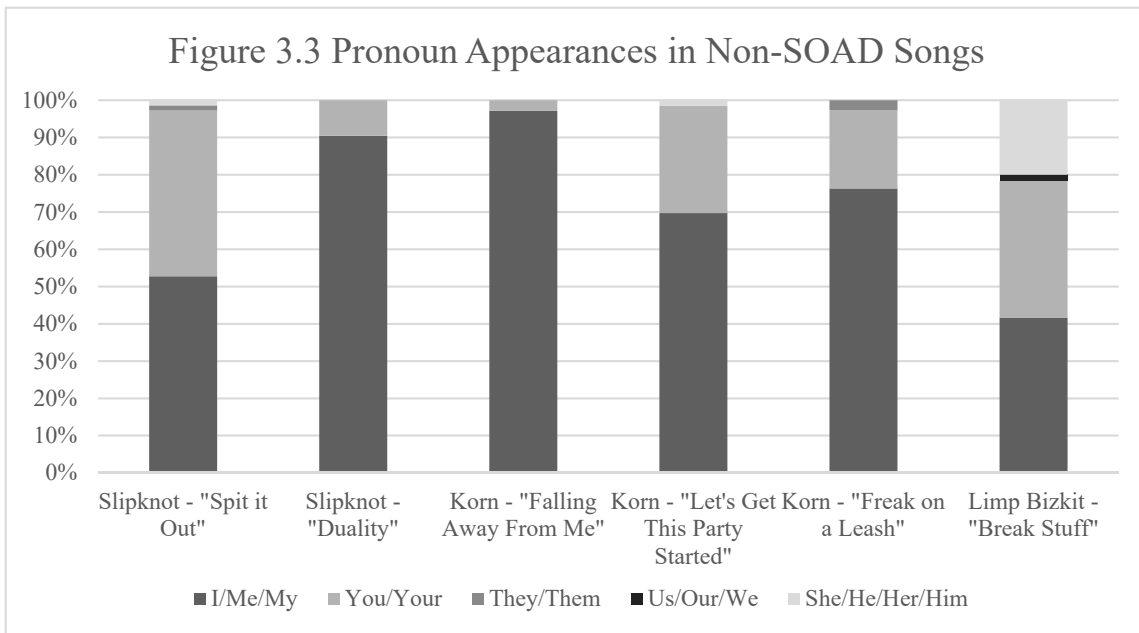
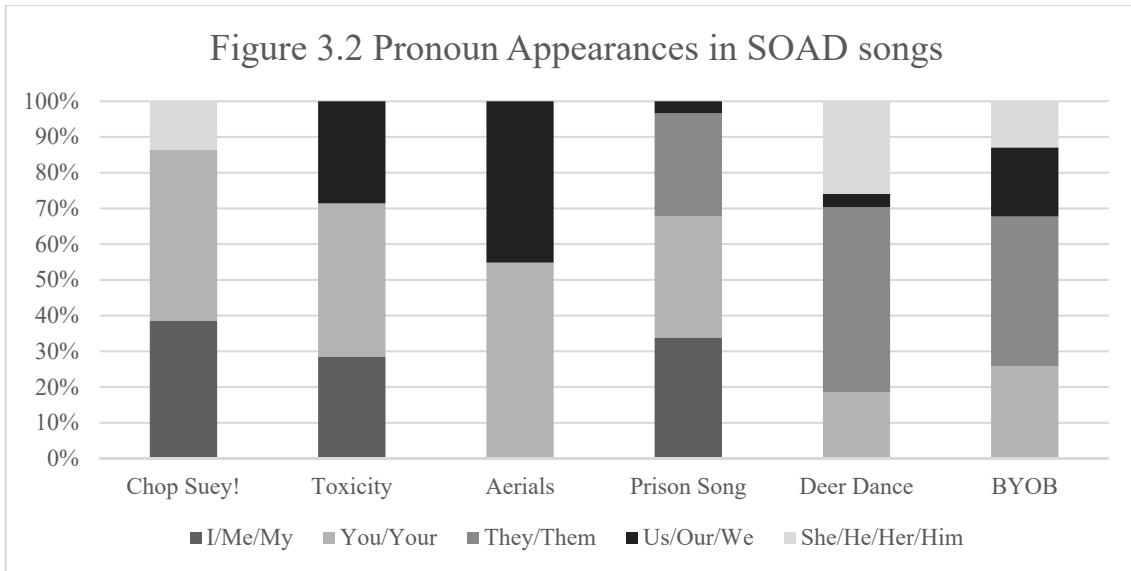
Tempo: 168bpm

Time	Song Section	Duration in Measures	Content
0:00-0:44	Intro	24	4 mms guitar 4 add guitar 2 8 add drums 8 full band, double chord movement speed
0:45-0:59	Verse	8	Fast rhythmic vocals, abrupt, marcato instrumentals
1:00-1:14	Chorus	8	Melodic vocals, legato accompaniment, half-time feel
1:15-1:24	Interlude	5	“Die!!!” scream
1:25-1:38	Verse	8	As before, same words
1:39-2:10	Chorus 2	17	Repeated twice, melodic end instead of “die” scream, half-time feel
2:11-2:38	Bridge	20	4 mms instrumental 4 “Father!” 4 transition to half-time feel 8 half-time, melodic, leads back to chorus
2:39-3:30	Altered Chorus Outro	18	Full band texture, both vocalists, and piano arpeggios

### 3.4 Solidarity

This sense of solidarity is emphasized throughout the album both subtly and blatantly through the consistent stressing of “you” and “us” pronouns. In an effort to more clearly demonstrate this effect I have counted the appearances of general pronouns in six songs by SOAD (five from *Toxicity* and one from *Mezmerize* which I will discuss later in the chapter), and six songs by other artists from the same period, including previously discussed “Spit it Out”, and “Break Stuff”. As the reader can see by comparing Charts 3.1 and 3.2, the use of “I” and “you” pronouns is more evenly distributed among other





pronouns in SOAD songs, whereas in the songs of other bands “I” pronouns are disproportionately emphasized. The pronouns are represented as a percentage of the total number of pronouns in each song. The dark grey of “I/Me/My” dominates the non-SOAD songs in Chart 3.2, whereas, in the SOAD songs in Chart 3.1, the various pronouns are much more balanced. This trend goes deeper than pure pronoun counts however, as the SOAD songs which reference “I” are always matched or exceeded by references to “you”,

implying “we” even when the word isn’t explicitly used. In contemporary songs by other bands, “you” and “I” are often referenced in opposition to one another, unlike the SOAD songs which often emphasize solidarity.

Korn is well-known for performing songs about experienced childhood abuse, and using music as an outlet for dealing with past trauma. The use of music to express anger is a common feature of heavy metal music, and Slipknot too is known for representing self-identified outcast youth in America, wearing a series of masks and coverall suits. They express unspecified angst with lyrics such as “if the pain goes on/I’m not gonna make it” without ever describing what is causing the pain.<sup>17</sup> These personalized expressions of anguish are left open enough for audiences to relate to the band members and listen to the song “in first person” as if they were singing about their own experiences.

SOAD’s music lends itself to a more inclusive interpretation while often using poetic language to reference specific ideas or occurrences in society. The last single to be released from *Toxicity*, “Aerials”, combines poetic imagery with rhythmic guitar riffs and sweeping melodic vocals to encourage open-mindedness: “when you lose small mind/ you free your life”. The song became hugely successful, peaking at 55 on the *Billboard Hot 100* chart and number 1 on the *Billboard Mainstream Rock Songs* chart.<sup>18</sup> The song appears last on the album and is followed by a bonus track unofficially titled “Arto” for the participation of Armenian musician Arto Tunçboyacıyan. After the “Fade to Black paradigm” style of “Aerials”, “Arto” is all traditional flutes, drums, and chanting set to the melody of Armenian church song “Der Vorghormia” (Lord have mercy). Although many mainstream listeners are unaware of the band’s Armenian heritage and may misinterpret

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<sup>17</sup> Slipknot, “Left Behind,” *Iowa*, Road Runner Records, 2001, CD, track 8.

<sup>18</sup> No Author, “System of a Down – Chart History,” *Billboard.com*.

these sounds as “exotic” or “tribal”, I argue that this bonus track encourages listeners to learn more about the band’s cultural background.

### 3.5 “B.Y.O.B.”

The most popular single SOAD released appeared in 2005 and became a hit party song. Titled “B.Y.O.B.” the unwritten subtitle is “Bring Your Own Bombs” and the chorus lyrics state “Everybody’s going to the party/Have a real good time/Dancing in the desert/Blowing up the sunshine”. The irony, and main point of discussion here, is the ideology of the lyrical content of the song (clearly opposing the ongoing Iraq War), versus its popular reception as a rock anthem and party song. Adorno’s early twentieth-century observations on the nature of mass culture’s consumption of popular music prove illuminating on many fronts.

In his 1938 paper “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” and further in his 1941 paper “On Popular Music”, Adorno denounces contemporary popular music industry standardization practices such as Tin Pan Alley song-writing and Jazz forms. He maintains that “the un compelling and superficial nature of the objects of refined entertainment inevitably leads to the inattentiveness of the listeners.”<sup>19</sup> The Tin Pan Alley form of AABA is important to note here as the song “B.Y.O.B.” has an overall structure that resembles this pop standard very closely (see Table 3.2). Without close attention to details of transitions and dramatic shifts between musical sections, the song can be reduced to an AA’BA’B’ form with a brief introduction. While this form is undeniably more complex than a typical Tin Pan Alley love ballad, Adorno’s “regressed

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<sup>19</sup> Adorno. “On the Fetish-Character in Music”, 283-284.

\_\_\_\_\_, “On Popular Music” in Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan, eds., *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, (Allen & Unwin, 1992 [1941]), 211-23.

Table 3.2

“B.Y.O.B.”

Mezmerize, 2005

Tempo: 200bpm and half-tempo sections

Time	Song Section	Duration in Measures	Content
0:00-0:23	Introduction	15	14mms instrumental 1m a capella screamed “why do they always send the poor?”
0:24-0:42	A	Verse 1	Two 4m symmetrical phrases, leading to next section
0:43-0:51		Transition 1	Riff is emphasized in the vocals on “la”
0:52-1:10		Chorus 1	Half-time feel
1:10-1:29	A’	Verse 2	Same symmetrical phrasing as verse 1, new lyrics
1:30-1:39		Transition 1	As before
1:40-2:15		Chorus 1	Repeated twice, in half-time feel again
2:16-2:34	B	Transition 2	Two symmetrical phrases leading to “where the fuck are you?”
2:35-2:45		Chorus 2	“Why don’t presidents fight the war/Why do they always send the poor?”
2:46-3:04	A’	Verse 2	A’ section repeated as before, same lyrics
3:05-3:13		Transition 1	
3:14-3:46		Chorus 1	
3:47-3:52	B’	Transition 2 (truncated)	“Where the fuck are you?” (x2)
3:53-4:15		Chorus 2 (extended)	Increased intensity before abrupt end

listener” could easily ignore the details and connect only to the predictable overall structure of the song.

Likewise, the emphasis of certain lyrics leaves room for listeners to ignore other lyrics which provide context. For example, in a superficial listening, one might only hear “Freedom!” emphasized in Verse 2, while the full lyric is full of sarcasm: “Hangars sitting/dripped in oil/Crying ‘freedom!’” The B sections have been heavily censored in music video and *Guitar Hero* versions of the song, reducing the impact of the “Where the fuck are you?” sections for mass market audiences significantly. Roy Shuker addresses this phenomenon in his 2013 *Understanding Popular Music* where he allows that “there is a tendency for such popular music genres, texts and their performers to be co-opted, marketed and watered-down or neutralized by the industry.”<sup>20</sup> Shuker goes on to say that it

<sup>20</sup> Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 188.

“is clear that many listeners derive pleasure from such performers without either subscribing to their politics or, indeed, even being aware of them.” This, I believe was the case for many early, mainstream, fans of the song “B.Y.O.B.”: the song’s energy, timbre, and construction were enough to reach a wide popular audience. However, I argue that over many repetitions, many fans who perhaps were oblivious to the song’s political meanings would begin to become aware of them over time. As the years have passed since the release of the song, it is easier to reflect on the years surrounding the Iraq War more objectively, and perhaps audience members can better identify with the anti-war sentiment of the song now than in the moment. For many fans of SOAD however, the countercultural message was of critical importance. Whether simply as part of adolescent rebellion or a deeper understanding of global political issues, the lyrics and sounds of SOAD went hand in hand to promote a message of justice and peace over all else.

### 3.6 Hiatus and Beyond

“B.Y.O.B.” was the band’s last huge single before going on hiatus from 2006-2011. During the hiatus Tankian released three solo hard rock albums; an experimental album with Arto Tunçboyacıyan; a jazz album; and he composed a symphony, as well as other theatre, movie, and video game soundtracks. Tom Morello of RATM joined him on tour as a solo artist, and the two continue to organize Axis of Justice events. The other members of SOAD released one album as Scars on Broadway. SOAD returned to touring in 2011 and completed its most recent tour in April of 2015. Titled the “Wake the Souls” Tour, SOAD raised funds at international concert dates, to be used to put on the final concert of the tour in Armenia, free of charge, on the eve of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. The concert took place in Yerevan’s Republic Square, lasted two and a half hours and

consisted of thirty-seven songs, or more than half of the band's entire published discography.

The other tour date performances were not significantly shorter, featuring thirty-three songs and three short videos narrated by Tom Morello "that combined animation and archival film clips to educate the audience on the reality and ramifications of the Armenian Genocide."<sup>21</sup> In an interview with *Rolling Stone* Tankian states that the tour is in part about "bringing attention to the fact that genocides are still happening... I read in today's press that they discovered a mass grave in Deir Ezzor in Syria of ISIS massacres of this one tribe there, and it reminded me of all the bones that are under those sands in Deir Ezzor from the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the exact same place."<sup>22</sup> By bringing attention to one historical event, the band is forcing audiences to see the repetitive nature of culture-based violence.

SOAD has shaped its band identity around issues of global importance that hold personal connections to the members' lives. As descendants of Armenian survivors, the Armenian Genocide has played a crucial role in defining them as people and as a band. From "P.L.U.C.K." on *System of a Down* in 1998 to the "Wake up the Souls" tour in 2015, SOAD continues to bring awareness to violence past and present. Essential to the band's popularity has been the ability to combine new timbres with familiar forms while similarly using lyrics audiences can relate to personally but that still bring some new ideas or awareness to the listener.

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<sup>21</sup> Dan Epstein, "System of a Down Rage, Educate at Wake Up the Souls Tour Kickoff," *Rolling Stone*, April 7, 2015, accessed at <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/live-reviews/system-of-a-down-rage-educate-at-wake-up-the-souls-tour-kickoff-20150407> on November 4, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Kory Grow, "Genocide and Kim Kardashian: The Bloody History Behind System of a Down's Tour," *Rolling Stone*, January 8, 2015, accessed at <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/system-of-a-down-serj-tankian-armenian-genocide-new-album-20150108> on November 4, 2015.

## Chapter Four: Case Study – “Boom!” *Steal This Album!* (2003)

*Four thousand  
Hungry children  
Leave us per hour from starvation  
While billions are spent on bombs  
Creating death showers<sup>1</sup>*

Throughout this thesis I have emphasized SOAD’s ability to maintain popular appeal while bringing attention to injustice in the world through controversial lyrics and public participation in protest. In the two previous chapters I have focused on the band’s use of conventional and unique sound signifiers, and the members’ identity construction over the course of their songwriting and touring career. In this chapter I have chosen one music video to explore more closely in order to further demonstrate my emphasis on SOAD’s participation in counterculture at the turn of the millennium.

The music video “Boom!” is a collaboration between SOAD and director Michael Moore, and was filmed during the global protest of the Iraq War on February 15, 2003. This chapter will explore the video from multiple perspectives: analysis of the music, in the context of heavy metal conventions; analysis of the video, with consideration of the director; and a discussion of the band’s presentation of identity.<sup>2</sup> My goal is to further understand connections between identity, music, and the televisual, and the role of these components of the video in documenting and encouraging protest, by considering the intent, goals, and subsequent success or failure of this video, “Boom!” as protest. Two major concepts – violence and persona – drive my analysis of this video, and I will explore them briefly before moving into my analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> System of a Down, and Michael Moore, director, “Boom!” [Music Video] Digital Media, Sony Music, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the Songs of Social Protest Conference in Limerick, Ireland on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and the May 2015 IASPM Canada Conference in Ottawa.

## 4.1 Violence

Susan Fast and Kip Pegley draw on the work of John Morgan O'Connell and Slavoj Žižek, to adopt a definition of violence that goes beyond subjective, palpable examples (such as war, terrorism, or genocide). Objective violence, defined as the systemization of oppression which upholds normalcy, has two subcategories. The first, systemic violence, is exemplified by the violence of capitalism in today's society that perpetuates the wealth divide.<sup>3</sup> Žižek elaborates on this concept at length, arguing that the current version of global capitalism, which "offers no clear solution" despite its call to "act now" against the inherent inequalities in such a system, actually requires us to take a step back and "resist the temptation to engage immediately" in order to find true solutions to the systemic problems creating the underlying inequalities.<sup>4</sup> The second sub-type of objective violence is symbolic violence, which pertains to the violence done to something when being categorized. Every time a categorization or interpretation of a thing is privileged and repeated, it gains power or authority as the whole truth.<sup>5</sup> This leads to gender, class, and race discrimination, and problematizes our historical understanding of society.

These ideas are immediately relatable to music, as each performance serves as a record of musicians' interpretations of the world. The audience, in turn, interprets the music. Trends of popularity and longevity then exert their own form of symbolic violence on the work of the musicians by privileging some of their works over others, and some interpretations of individual songs over others. The power audiences hold over the long-

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Fast, and Kip Pegley, editors, Introduction to *Music, Politics, and Violence*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, (New York: Picador, 2008), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Fast and Pegley, *Music, Politics, and Violence*, 4.



term reception of music makes it necessary for artists to clearly state their own intentions in an attempt to prevent them from being lost to the symbolic violence of interpretation.

In the “Boom!” video, SOAD draws the viewer’s attention to social injustice through the use of statistics, and dramatic imagery. The music then relates to our discussion of violence in three connected ways. First, the band has its own impressions and understandings about subjective and objective violence in the world that they want to convey to the audience. Second, the music conveys a certain set of those impressions about violence to audience members who interpret the information individually. And third, the audience then forms an understanding about the impressions framed in the video, and about the band and its music, which they then perpetuate as a fan base, doing further violence to the ideas. In some cases, a broad variety of interpretations is the intended goal, however, with SOAD’s “Boom!” it is important to provide the audience with clear cues to ensure the intended message is received by listeners.

## 4.2 Persona

It follows then to consider Philip Auslander’s conception of a performer’s persona as a way for the musicians to privilege a certain interpretation of their work. Drawing on the ideas of David Graver, Stan Godlovich, and Erving Goffman, Auslander uses the term persona to describe not only a form of self-expression, but of self-representation. A person’s behavior may be different depending upon whether she is alone or in the company of colleagues, or friends. Auslander distinguishes this persona from a series of other possible layers in a person’s identity: the fluctuating private self, persona as musician, character being performed in an individual song, or character performed for a series of songs. Developing Goffman’s ideas from his book *Frame Analysis*, Auslander discusses the musician’s

freedom to apply several layers of frames to her music in order to steer the audience's interpretation.<sup>6</sup> He argues that music is a primary social frame, and that upon that frame can be layered others, such as recording, editing, and in our example, music video. I argue that, in "Boom!" SOAD effectively enact the persona of a *regular person opposed to war*, through their detailed presentation of emotive sounds, images, lyrics and text. For example, the band members are depicted as protesters rather than as celebrity musicians. Throughout the video they are never depicted playing their instruments, unlike almost all of the band's other videos over the years. This portrayal of a relatable persona invites the audience to listen closely and consider themselves as participants too.

Within this framing the audience is given a very specific set of information from which to formulate an understanding of meaning. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman correctly points out the tendency of audiences to "misunderstand the meaning that a cue was designed to convey" which results in the necessity of performers to make "sure that as many as possible of the minor events in the performance... will occur in such a way as to convey... an impression of the situation that is compatible and consistent" with the performers desired expression of meaning.<sup>7</sup> This careful consideration of miniscule meaning cues is apparent throughout the "Boom!" video.

An oft-cited example of this effect is the changing persona of Bob Dylan and resultant audience interaction, over the course of his career. When first starting out, Dylan performed an "Okie" persona, evoking Woody Guthrie's working-man folk aesthetic. His audience became thoroughly attached to this image, so much so that when he started to shift to a new style of playing (most notably by "plugging in" at the Newport Music

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 50, Issue 1, (Spring, 2006): 101-104.

<sup>7</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 51.

Festival), many audience members were disillusioned with him because of his changing persona. As Auslander notes, “[i]f one thinks of audiences not just as consumers, but also as the cocreators of the musicians’ personae... it is easy to understand why audiences often respond very conservatively... to musicians’ desire to retool their personae.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, SOAD band members have always played their personae very carefully on-stage, in interviews, and in music videos.

### 4.3 Detachment

Careful persona manipulation often results in a precarious balance between portraying oneself as an activist, and leaving room open for fans who are just “in it for the music” and uninterested in political views. Glenn Pillsbury discusses this method of “detachment” in musicians’ self-presentation in reference to Metallica in his book *Damage Incorporated*. After quoting the bands’ members as saying “we’re just stating an opinion” and “you can be documentary”, Pillsbury argues that “dropping the shield of detachment means relinquishing enough personal control *in order to be read*.”<sup>9</sup>

This desire to not be pigeon-holed as a “protest band” and to be read for their full spectrum of opinions and interests is apparent in numerous SOAD interviews. In 2002, Malakian claimed: “[w]e’re not stuck on serious issues... [w]e also write about the dirty stuff we get up to.”<sup>10</sup> While they certainly do write about a multitude of topics, this use of detachment from the impact of the band’s more “serious” songs exemplifies artists’ need to be read in a nuanced way that does not limit audience interpretation to one set of values.

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<sup>8</sup> Auslander, “Musical Personae,” 115.

<sup>9</sup> Pillsbury, *Damage Incorporated*, 81-82. Italics in original.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Rocca, “Winning System,” *The Age* (Melbourne), January 25, 2002, 8.

Tankian also expressed this desire to be acknowledged for the many facets of their music in a 2001 interview stating,

I don't understand why we have to be just one thing. If I write on one side of this lampshade, "The metropolis is too dense. It causes fear," that's a social statement. And on this side I write, "Blow me." And then here it says, "I'm hungry." And here it says, "Gee, what a splendid day." Now, those are four different things. We're all just turning the lampshade. Should I see the whole thing as political because the first statement was political?<sup>11</sup>

"Boom!" is blatantly political but the nuanced manipulation of the band members' self-representation throughout the video allows for an interpretation of the band as normal, average people with lives beyond the scope of political activism or rock-star celebrity.

#### 4.4 Musical Analysis

Further consideration of the details of the video's contents follows, but first let us turn to my own interpretation of the music, its structure, and its place among heavy metal conventions around the turn of the millennium. The music carries a great deal of the video's momentum, creating a setting in which the fast-paced scenes and quick visual transitions feel in-sync with the rhythm of the song. Set in a standard pop form, the song also adds a post-chorus "Boom!" section (see Table 4.1). This simple adaptation of AABA form makes the song easy to pick up and sing along with, allowing protesters and listeners alike to quickly join the chorus. Throughout the video, and particularly during the extended instrumental bridge section, spoken protester comments are included. In the studio recording the instrumental break is only four measures long. In the video we get more than double that length of time to hear what various protesters have to say.

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<sup>11</sup> Jenny Eliscu, "Serj Tankian of SYSTEM OF A DOWN," *Rolling Stone*, 878, September 27, 2001, 22.

Table 4.1

“Boom!” *Steal This Album*, 2003

Time (Video)	Section	Length in mms.
0:12-0:28	Introduction	4
0:29-0:52	Verse 1	8
0:53-1:05	Chorus	4
1:06-1:30	Verse 2	8
1:31-1:43	Chorus 2	4
1:44-1:46	Boom! X 7	1
1:47-2:18	Bridge	4 – Instrumental (10 in video)
2:19-2:31		4 – with Vocals
2:32-2:43	Chorus 3	4
2:44-2:46	Boom! X 8	1
2:47-2:49	Outro	1

The introduction is highlighted by the bass-line’s rhythmic alternation between C and C-sharp, characteristic of SOAD’s use of “Dropped C” tuning. The backing vocals have a tonal centre on D, and use the pitches of the G harmonic minor scale, sometimes referred to by heavy metal guitar magazines as the Phrygian dominant. The term Phrygian seems to be used to emphasize the flattened second degree because while the third degree of Phrygian is a minor third, in metal, Phrygian is used to describe songs with either major or minor thirds. Pillsbury discusses the history of the use of the Phrygian sound from the early sixteenth century to today’s common heavy metal usage, and notes its frequent (but not exclusive) use to evoke a non-Western Other or “exotic” sound. “Powerslave” uses the Phrygian dominant with the major third to “signal the mystical power of ancient Egypt”.<sup>12</sup>

While Pillsbury also makes important note of the use of this Phrygian sound without the context of exoticism, in “Boom!” the Phrygian sound serves as a cue to the listener towards the location of the Iraq War and the rich Arabic culture threatened by violence. An illustrative example takes place during the bridge in the last four measures with the lyrics “Why must we/kill our own kind?” Here the vocal harmonies that stress

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<sup>12</sup> Pillsbury, *Damage Incorporated*, 121.

major and minor thirds and perfect fifths (or consonant intervals often related with Western musics), with melodic moves dominated by minor seconds, augmented seconds, and a tritone (see Example 4.1).

Other musical qualities that serve to make this song unlike others in the genre include the declarative vocals, which are not quite spoken, nor sung, but clearly enunciated, highlighting the importance of the lyrical message. Sweeping backing vocals serve as the main melodic component during the verses, and reinforce the melody of the instrumental section during the bridge. The guitar deviates from its role as rhythm carrier only occasionally, with its own short counter-rhythmic melodic line. Notably, the guitar never breaks into a virtuosic solo, going against the convention in the majority of heavy metal music, but aligning itself with the trend in Nümetal as discussed in chapter two. The use of differing rhythmic layers, supported by intricate hi-hat patterns, provide polyrhythms to the constant driving 4/4 beat of the song. By combining the use of predictable patterns and sounds with unique modal and rhythmic elements, “Boom!” provides the audience with gratification, while maintaining their attention, and – I continue to argue – encouraging close listening and critical interpretation.

Figure 4.1 – Vocal Harmonies in Bridge of “Boom!”

The figure shows two staves of music in 4/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The lyrics are: "Why must we kill our own kind".

The top staff (melody) has the following intervals labeled above it: m2 (between 'must' and 'we'), A2 (between 'kill' and 'our'), and TT (between 'our' and 'own').

The bottom staff (backing vocal harmony) has the following intervals labeled below it: P5 (between 'Why' and 'must'), M3 (between 'must' and 'we'), M3 (between 'we' and 'kill'), U (between 'kill' and 'our'), U (between 'our' and 'own'), m3 (between 'own' and 'kind'), m3 (between 'kind' and the final note), and P5 (between the final note and the start of the next measure).

## 4.5 Video Analysis

The video adds a mediated layer of information to the music; now we have not only music and lyrics to get impressions from but also images and text. During the bridge segment, after the instrumental section that in the video features input from many protesters, a cartoon sequence takes over as the vocals in Example 4.1 begin, depicting George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Saddam Hussein, and Osama bin Laden riding bombs toward villages. The bombs buck them off and turn on them as they fall from the sky and explode into peace symbols to the beat of the chorus. See Table 4.2 for a detailed breakdown of video content. Bearing in mind that the video was meant to be released before the Iraq War began, in an effort to possibly prevent it, I argue that this sequence depicts protesters' actions stopping the governments from acting without their consent. As with the constant imagery of regular protesters, the representation of defeating the warmongers in this cartoon stresses the responsibility of each individual around the world to speak up for what they believe in.

The video begins and ends with text quotations unaccompanied by music. The first is an introduction from the band, "On February 15, 2003, ten million people, in over six hundred countries around the world, participated in the largest peace demonstration in the history of the world. Because we choose peace over war, we were there too..." This sets in motion the viewer's understanding of the band as protesters, rather than as celebrity performers. The famous John Lennon and Yoko Ono quote at the end of the video, "War is over (if you want it)" connects SOAD's form of protest to those of other famous musicians, and places a historical context around their current societal critique.

Table 4.2

## System of a Down and Director Michael Moore "Boom!" Music Video

TIME	SONG SECTION	IMAGERY	TEXT
0:00-0:12		SOAD's personal introduction Text only, white on black.	On February 15, 2003 ten million people in 600 cities around the world participated in the largest peace demonstration in the history of the world. Because we choose peace over war, we were there too...
0:12-0:28	Introduction	Alternating wide shots of protests with attendance numbers and protesters comments.	LA: 30,000; Paris: 400,000; Cape Town: 10,000; San Francisco: 200,000; Rio: 30,000; Lansing: 3,000; Tokyo: 6,000
0:29-0:52	Verse 1	Lyric: "I've been walking through your streets" coincides with visual of band walking with protesters. More statistics and shots of costumes, signs, and band members shooting footage with handy-cams.	Madrid: 800,000; Melbourne: 200,000; Seattle: 75,000; Johannesburg: 10,000. No. of congressmen with a child in military: 1 London: 1.5 million; Flagstaff: 1500; Rome: 1 million
0:53-1:05	Chorus 1	Alternating shots of band members and protesters with quick glimpses of the smiling faces of what appear to be Iraqi children.	500,000 projected civilian casualties
1:06-1:30	Verse 2	Overhead and street-level shots of crowds, their signs, banners and costumes. Band member Shavo Odadjian discussing his video with a police officer, band members in the crowd. Fast flashes of many children's faces with the lyrics "4,000 hungry children..."	Iraqi oil reserves worth \$4 trillion Halliburton wins contract to rebuild Iraqi Oil fields. 4,000 hungry children leave us per hour from starvation
1:31-1:43	Chorus 2	Rocket shooting into the sky, Protesters singing "Boom!" with the Chorus. Alternating shots of children, and protesters singing, meditating, and dancing with Bush masks on.	War could cost US \$200 Billion 1 in 6 US children live in poverty.
1:44-1:46	Boom x 7	Groups shouting "Boom!" Black and white footage of a mushroom cloud transitions to the bridge.	
1:47-2:18	Bridge	During extended instrumental section, lengthier quotes come from protesters.	US weighs nuclear strike on Iraq Tel Aviv: 2,000; Durban: 5,000; Sao Paolo: 30,000; New York: 500,000
2:19-2:31		Vocal section is the political cartoon.	
2:32-2:43	Chorus 3	Crowds, band members as protesters, children, child protesters.	UN: 10 million Iraqis could face starvation
2:44-2:46	Boom x 8	Photos of missing persons from previous Iraqi wars, flashing quickly.	
2:47-2:49	Outro	Shots of band members, end with zoom into Tankian's camera lens.	
2:50-2:55		Iraqi child on a bicycle (same child appears in <i>Fahrenheit 9/11</i> ).	
2:56-3:01		White on black, text only.	War is over (if you want it) –John Lennon and Yoko Ono

The video provides a lot of information visually to accompany the music and protester dialogue. Broad shots of the various cities where the protest took place are featured throughout. Large cities and turnouts are featured such as Rome, with a million protesters demonstrating, and London with a million and a half. Cities not immediately considered global superpowers are featured as well, with thirty thousand protesters in both Rio and Sao Paolo, and ten thousand in Cape Town. Dispersed throughout the video these



images and numbers showing the vast turnout around the world educate the audience while giving a sense of the global importance of the issue being discussed.

The combination of images and text moves at the same fast tempo as the music, providing a detailed picture of the band's opinion on the Iraq War, as well as an educational-documentary feel, lending factual weight to this opinion. We see a wide variety of protesters, signs, props, and costumes, while simultaneously being provided with on-screen banners listing facts about the war and relevant American political issues. Examples include, "Iraqi oil reserves worth four trillion dollars," and, "one in six U.S. children live in poverty." Snapshots of, presumably Iraqi, children and missing persons appear only for the span of one beat each, possibly representing their fleeting lives, while still making them visible.

#### 4.6 Director Michael Moore

Also important when considering the style and imagery choices of this video is the role of its director, Michael Moore, known widely as a brash, American documentary director, and not commonly as a music video director. His documentaries are famous for critiquing American culture and politics in films like *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). His presentation of strong views about American politics has been interpreted as an example of what Joseph Nye Jr. calls America's soft power. Bjørn Olav Knutsen and Elisabeth Pettersen use Nye's term to argue that Moore represents the freedom to create media that disagrees with the government, and in doing so is a soft power force for perpetuating the American Dream.<sup>13</sup> This perspective on Moore's celebrity power ties in

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<sup>13</sup> Bjørn Olav Knutsen, and Elisabeth Pettersen, "The Arts of Michael Moore and American Soft Power," *Tamara Journal for Critical Organization Inquiry*, Volume 7, No. 4, 2009, 107-126. Italics in original.

closely to our discussion of persona, as Moore's presentation of himself as the most obnoxious documentary film maker in American history, has drawn a lot of criticism towards him in American media. It is important to consider how Moore's tirades might be understood from the perspective of a non-Westerner, even an Iraqi citizen; that America – as an ideology – might still hold some appeal despite the threat of their military might, because such a popular dissenter as Moore could exist at all.

Nicholas Ruddick discusses Moore's over-arching thesis at length and recounts that "the right rallies its troops under a banner bearing the slogan *Michael Moore is a Big Fat Stupid White Man*," but also reminds us that "although he tells painful stories about the US, he is popular, even at home, because the majority of his audiences are persuaded that his stories are true."<sup>14</sup> This dichotomy of seeing the American people as inherently decent but lazy, allows Moore to connect to his audience as human beings, force them to see hypocrisy in their midst, and in doing so, remind them that it is their duty as members of society to participate in democracy if it is to succeed in reflecting its true moral values.<sup>15</sup> While Moore's persona is often featured in his documentary films, he is absent from the music video, again focusing on the band's persona as protesters, rather than drawing attention to Moore's celebrity power.

#### 4.7 Rage Against the Machine "Sleep Now in the Fire"

It will be useful then to take a moment to look at the place of the "Boom!" video in Moore's career and compare it to a music video on which he collaborated with another

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Ruddick, "Living in Fictitious Times: Michael Moore's Awful Truth about America," *I Sing the Body Politic: History as Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature*, Peter Swirski ed., (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009), 153.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

band known as protesters, Rage Against the Machine (hereafter RATM).<sup>16</sup> Moore's first documentary *Roger and Me* was released in 1988 and brought attention to the failure of corporate capitalism in the automobile industry in Moore's hometown in Michigan. But it was not until 2002, when he released *Bowling for Columbine* that he received large-scale press attention. Moore won an Academy Award for the film in 2003 and famously used this acceptance speech to call out then-president George W. Bush for the false pretenses of the Iraq War.<sup>17</sup> During this same period the "Boom!" music video was being prepared and released. RATM's video "Sleep Now in the Fire" was released four years earlier, in 1999, before Moore's fame and before 9/11, while all of this took place before the release of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore's most heavily criticized film.

Taking into account the temporal distance between the two music videos, several similarities and differences are noteworthy. In "Sleep Now in the Fire" we are again presented with introductory and conclusion text frames; the band members are participating in a protest action; and the video is replete with "facts" in text form about poverty in America. However, this video is divided into two alternating narrative contexts, each with their own presentation of personae from the band members. See Table 4.3 for a detailed breakdown of this video. Other important distinctions from the "Boom!" video include Michael Moore's appearance in the video, and RATM's centrality as a band to the social disruption being undertaken. The primary narrative is an act of musical protest, clearly put on by Moore and RATM, outside the American Stock Exchange in order to bring attention to income inequality. The secondary narrative is a parody of *Who Wants to be a*

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<sup>16</sup> Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello and System of a Down singer Serj Tankian co-head the social activism group Axis of Justice.

<sup>17</sup> Anna Misiak, "Not a Stupid White Man: The Democratic Context of Michael Moore's Documentaries," *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 33, No. 3, Fall 2005, 161-162.

*Millionaire?* – a famous American game show where people answer multiple choice questions for prize money up to a million dollars. This juxtaposition permits the band to represent themselves both as angry protesters, disturbing the peace outside the Stock

Table 4.3  
Rage Against the Machine and Director Michael Moore “Sleep Now in the Fire” Music Video

TIME	SONG SECTION	IMAGERY	TEXT
0:00-0:11		Stock Exchange floor, and the faces of big-wig bankers.	Monday... Wall Street announces record profits, record layoffs... Tuesday... New York City decrees Rage Against the Machine "shall NOT play on Wall Street." Wednesday...
0:12-0:34	Intro	Wall St. sign, Stock Exchange floor, RATM and some fans setting up on the steps of the New York Stock Exchange to play a concert. Police asking them not to. The band performs angrily.	
0:35-0:41	Intro	The Game Show "Who Wants to be Filthy F#&%ing Rich?" begins.	
0:42-0:51	Verse1	Game Show questions begin, band performs in suits with excessively happy looks on their faces.	What letter follows "A"? A: "B" B: "Q"
0:52-1:14	Verse1	Band on Wall St. Shots of audience (some bankers, some protesters) At 1:04 a "Donald Trump for President" sign appears, ironic in hindsight as Trump runs for Republican candidate in 2015.	
1:14-1:27	Chorus	Wall St. and Millionaire scenes alternate with contestants getting questions wrong.	Number of Americans with no health care? A: 45 million B: A few old people
1:28-1:56	Verse 2	Alternation continues, we see Moore talking heatedly with police while the band performs.	The richest 10% in America own... A: 80% of all wealth B: Connecticut Women make... A: 30% less than men B: babies How many people in the world live on less than \$1 a day? A: 1 billion B: not possible!
1:57-2:13	Chorus	Band performing superimposed over images of explosions, bankers lighting cigars with money, champagne bottles being opened, and money flying around behind them.	
2:14-2:49	Bridge	Police actively trying to stop the band from playing. Moore and lead singer of RATM arguing with police. Obviously homeless black man is Millionaire contestant.	How many Americans live in poverty? A: 35 million B: what poverty?
2:50-3:29	Outro	Man wins Millionaire but won't take the money, the audience runs in and grabs what they can. Alternation with shots of the band overlaid on top of Stock Exchange images continue	Jackpot!
3:30-3:36		The Band appears to get arrested. The stock exchange closes, to sounds of metal doors shutting, fire bells sounding, and sirens wailing.	
3:37-3:52		Audio of a radio reporter: "A band called 'the machine rages on' err Rage Against the Machine, that band, is anti-family, and it's pro-terrorist"	At 2:52pm, in the middle of the trading day, the Stock Exchange was forced to close its doors. No money was harmed.

Exchange, and as cheery, suit-bedecked fat-cats – still playing their instruments – in the *Millionaire* scenes. The RATM video promotes the band directly as rebellious social disrupters and musical celebrities, and includes humour and sarcasm within the alternating narratives.

In contrast, the “Boom!” video depicts SOAD members as a single persona akin to the stereotypical “man-in-the-street” side by side with other protesters at one event in a significantly larger demonstration spanning the whole globe. The SOAD members are easily perceived as regular protesters in “Boom!” as they carry handheld cameras throughout the crowds, they never play their instruments, and Moore does not appear in the video. There is only the animated bridge section to suggest humour, while contrastingly supporting the lyric “why must we/kill our own kind?” The rest of the video is purposefully documentarian, suggesting a realness for the audience to participate in.

#### 4.8 Industry

The need to evoke a true representation of yourself while remaining appealing to a broad audience can be challenging. In the introduction to his book *Unfree Masters*, Matt Stahl argues that successful artists enjoy autonomy, and emphasizes the duality of successful artists’ contractual obligations, such as a set number of recorded releases, or specific tour and merchandise commitments.<sup>18</sup> Mainstream musicians often represent a freedom and autonomy to make music the way they want to, while still being required to fulfill contractual obligations. This autonomy is evidenced in an interview with Tankian from 2001 in which he is asked what he would think if only fifty people bought SOAD’s next album. He responds “Great. That would get me out of my record deal and I could do other things... [financial] success is positively earmarked... [b]ut ultimately, you gotta do what’s inside of you...”<sup>19</sup> After three more albums together, the band went on indefinite hiatus and Tankian did produce several other projects on his own, but despite the necessary effort the

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<sup>18</sup>Matt Stahl, “Popular Music & (Creative) Labor,” *Unfree Masters: Recording Artists and the Politics of Work*, (Duke University Press Books, 2012), 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Eliscu, “Serj Tankian”, 22.

band continued to portray themselves as nuanced ordinary people in the midst of mainstream success.

Auslander argues that it is possible for artists to manipulate their personae over time. He relates the interaction between performer and audience as a negotiation of personae within the constraints of genre framing, and uses the example of Bob Dylan's "Okie" persona, mentioned earlier, which was carefully assembled early in his career. Dylan later struggled with the expectations and demands of his fans as he attempted to change aspects of his persona over time.<sup>20</sup> Conrad Amenta also uses the example of Bob Dylan while discussing the state of protest music in post-9/11 America. He argues that certain albums gained iconic status as protest music in the 1960s and '70s, but that due to how those albums functioned within a consumeristic society, they can no longer teach us how to protest in today's political climate. When you bought a Bob Dylan album it was as if you could "possess some portion of Dylan's principles."<sup>21</sup> A survey of the *Billboard* "Best-Selling Albums of the 2000s" reveals that none on the list fit into a protest, or overtly rebellious category, but this does not mean that protest music is unpopular, or that there is no mass culture movement for change. As Amenta suggests, a large part of protest in today's culture consists of a "mass exodus from systems of music consumerism where trends are artificially inseminated," to new socially networked emergent systems.<sup>22</sup>

Today, audiences stream and share music relentlessly, and although not captured on a *Billboard* chart, this activity must be recognized when accounting for music popularity.

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<sup>20</sup> Auslander, "Musical Personae," 114.

<sup>21</sup> Conrad Amenta, "Why Protest Albums Can't Teach Dissent: The Emergent Complexity of Post 9/11 Protest," *The Politics of Post-9/11 Music: Sound, Trauma, and the Music Industry in the Time of Terror*, Joseph P. Fisher and Brian Flota, eds., (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 57.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 58-59.

In this reality, Amenta argues, we must shift how we calculate “success” in the music industry and re-think how we gather information regarding reception. Audiences no longer require something physical to hold on to, and are not bound to the track-listings set by albums. This socially networked system allows for the creation and distribution of vastly larger amounts of music, creating many more sub-categories than researchers have ever had to deal with before. Examples of these systems include Youtube, Facebook, Reddit, SoundCloud, and the now defunct GrooveShark, and largely ignored MySpace. Music technology for home use is also making sound production by amateurs easier than ever. By taking the corporate scripting out of everyday entertainment, most people (with an internet connection) can choose from a vast array of media, which caters to their particular ideology.<sup>23</sup>

SOAD’s 2003 album, on which “Boom!” can be found, did not appear on any Billboard lists despite the band having achieved huge success with their 2001 album *Toxicity*, which went triple platinum in the U.S. The song “Chop Suey” from *Toxicity* even charted on *Billboard*’s mainstream “Top One Hundred”.<sup>24</sup> The circumstance surrounding the release of their 2003 album demonstrates the inaccuracy of sales lists at a time when peer-to-peer file sharing was just becoming popular. After the success of *Toxicity*, a number of demo tracks were leaked on the internet under the title *Toxicity II*, and illegally downloaded in large enough numbers that the band was prompted to go to the studio to master the tracks sooner than planned, and *Steal This Album!* was released with very little marketing. “Boom!” appears on this album alongside many other fast-paced critiques of the American social and political climate around the turn of the millennium. This combination

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> No Author, “System of a Down – Chart History,” *Billboard.com*.

of success and apparent discontent with capitalism maintained audience intrigue and prevented accusations of “selling out” so commonly thrown at successful rock stars.

#### 4.9 Case Study Conclusions

“Boom!” helps perpetuate the memory of the global protest of the Iraq War in 2003 through its documentary effort. Despite not actually preventing the Iraq War from taking place, this protest, helped in part by this video, lives on in global memory as the largest international protest ever staged. The combination of lyrics, music, visuals, and text, provides the audience with a specific set of impressions to draw their interpretation from, influencing main-stream audiences’ understanding of protest and politics in America. The music is a catchy, driving force for drawing the audience into the message by focusing on declarative vocals rather than virtuosity. The presence of the band as protesters and not celebrity musicians presents an image of American civil freedom and the obligation to exercise that freedom. Their status as successful protest rockers made possible the collaboration with Michael Moore, and allowed them to insert their message into the public sphere while maintaining their identities as hard-rockers, Armenians, protesters, and regular human beings.



## Chapter Five: Conclusion

*You and me  
We'll all go down in history,  
With a sad Statue of Liberty,  
And a generation that didn't agree.*<sup>1</sup>

SOAD's participation in and impact on a counterculture trend at the turn of the millennium which continues to be relevant has undergirded this thesis. There is a great deal more to gain by continuing further research and analysis into the band's discography and the current study has opened the door to many paths that there has not been room to fully explore. I have focused on providing an introduction to the band's discography through popular singles and unique identifying songs. SOAD filled a market gap during the band's 1998-2005 active songwriting period by providing young metal fans with a socially conscious collection, while also catering to irony, sarcasm, and humour. The shift in attitude among North American youth after 9/11 was palpable and this countercultural trend reached its apex with the 2003 anti-Iraq War protests, but remains relevant after the Occupy movements and looking forward in this volatile time. Throughout this thesis I have used analysis of a selection of SOAD songs to situate the band's music within that social relevance.

In chapter two, I emphasized the unique combination of popular styles' conventions used by SOAD, which became so effective at disrupting the listener's experience. The single "Sugar" exemplified this outrageous style, while the final track on the album "P.L.U.C.K." made apparent the band's connection to Armenian heritage. I then discussed some of the differences and similarities between SOAD's music and songs by other

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<sup>1</sup> System of a Down, "Sad Statue," *Mezmerize*, Sony BMG Music Entertainment, 2005, CD, track 9.

contemporary bands Korn, Slipknot, and Limp Bizkit. Hjelm et al. codify metal as “distorted guitars, aggressive vocals, denim, leather and spikes” and refer to “the commercially successful ‘nu’ metal of the mid to late-1990s, in which metal was fused with hip hop” as contrasted with more experimental and underground metal scenes.<sup>2</sup> I have demonstrated that SOAD both met and surpassed these expectations of Nümetal, and have looked more closely at the sonic signifiers of the genre including the use of rap-like vocals; slower tempos; down-tuned, rattling, distorted guitars; and straight-forward song forms. SOAD stepped outside of these expectations with song-writing that fused thrash metal, punk, and pop styles, while providing melodious – even harmonized – vocals intermixed with the aggressive, distorted screams, and fast, rhythmic ramblings. The importance of disruption, rupture, and constant change to the band’s music and place within a counterculture, cannot be understated.

The identity of the band was more fully explored in chapter three, with examples primarily from the break-out album *Toxicity*. Important here is the release of singles which did not emphasize a politicized message, while featuring highly political songs early on the track list of the album. The controversy surrounding Tankian’s post-9/11 diatribe participated in the album’s success as *Toxicity* catered to countercultural ideals about American government and promoted the band as anti-authoritarian and politically aware at a time when the album was already at number one on *Billboard*’s album chart. Looking at the band’s most popular singles “Chop Suey!” and “B.Y.O.B.” it is clear that the political message was not always the audience’s priority, however, I maintain that repeated listening

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<sup>2</sup> Hjelm et al., *Heavy Metal*, 1.

to the albums after initial enjoyment of the singles consistently exposed listeners to countercultural ideologies and promoted interest in global politics among fans.

In my “Boom!” case study, I dig deeper into the creation of a single music video in order to demonstrate SOAD’s real world participation in activism. The song appears on the band’s least acclaimed album, which was treated as an album of “rejects” from *Toxicity*, despite band members insisting that the tracks were being saved for later release.<sup>3</sup> The video, however, shows the band members as regular protesters at the Los Angeles location of the largest international protest in history. Despite being celebrity rock stars still coasting on a wave of fame and royalties from *Toxicity*, the video portrays the band members as merely the source of one of many anti-war chants during the demonstration. The only moment when any of the band members plays an instrument is when drummer John Dolmayan is seen playing a giant bass drum with a peace symbol on it while leading the crowd in another chorus round of “Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!”

The director, Michael Moore, is also a celebrity documentarian, but he is conspicuously absent from the music video. Unlike the video for “Sleep Now in the Fire” which Moore directed with RATM in 1999 which portrays Moore and the band as leaders of an act of civil disobedience, the SOAD video clearly focuses on the representation of the band members as part of the crowd participating in a global event. I argue that this portrayal situates the band in the midst of a larger countercultural movement. This song, as well as many others in SOAD’s discography (as demonstrated by chart 3.1), encourage participation in activism as an act of solidarity. In the lyrics from “Sad Statue” that open

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<sup>3</sup> Todd Martens, “Online Leaks Force System of a Down’s Hand,” *Billboard*, Vol. 114, Issue 51, December 21, 2002, 12.

this conclusion, the band acknowledges this group mentality that has left an imprint on American millennial culture.

Many doors have been opened up to further intensive study of this band and its music. I hope one day to expand this current research to include more songs, more contemporary comparisons, band interviews, and fan surveys. Further exploration of how the conventions of a variety of styles and genres are blended to create SOAD's unique sound offers a useful perspective on mainstream hard rock and heavy metal at the turn of the millennium. Detailed analysis of melodic and harmonic practices could also be engaged in for a clearer understanding of how these styles interact. A comparison study to the solo material of Serj Tankian would also provide additional analytical interest. I look forward to any opportunity to expand upon the current study.

When I was thirteen years old, my older brother gave me a hard rock mixed CD which included the song "War?" from SOAD's eponymous 1998 album. This was the same brother who discouraged me from listening to the more profane music of Korn and Slipknot. The following year, at 14, my teenaged "freak clique" friends introduced me to "Sugar" with much greater enthusiasm than for other songs. It was only after buying my own copy of the album and listening to it all the way through that I realized that both songs were by the same band. This zany, hyperactive, punk-metal song "Sugar" came from the same minds that questioned the validity of global warfare. It was through my fandom of this band that I realized that freethinkers are only dangerous to those in power who fear change.

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