

Chapter 1

Conflicted: Moshing, Meaning, and the Dialectics of a Problematic Community

Nick Smith

Department of Philosophy,
University of New Hampshire,
Durham, NH, USA

Born in 1972, I grew up with moshing in an uncritical way as it migrated from Southern California to D.C., New York, Boston, and into middle America.¹ I remember sleeping over at my grandparent's after trick-or-treating in 1981 and enjoying the usual Saturday night television lineup: Lawrence Welk, Barbara Mandrell, The Love Boat, and Fantasy Island. Something unusual punctuated prime time: Fear performing "Beef Bologna" on Saturday Night Live (SNL). As a

¹ For excellent histories, see Blush (2001) and Azerrad (2001).

child, this looked fun and silly—but also a little scary. Were those people really fighting or were they acting? Was it a Halloween joke, like the other SNL skits? Did I just hear the F-word? When the broadcast cut abruptly, I wondered if the studio had lost control and if there was a riot. Or was that a staged disruption and part of the show, like how fake commercials are comedy segments on SNL?

I experienced moshing first-hand when a few friends erupted hearing Anthrax's "Caught in a Mosh" from a boom box in a farmhouse kitchen circa 1987, banging into appliances and collapsing into a "pig pile."² Parents sent us to the barn for the rest of the evening. One of my friends at the grocery store where I worked showed up with a Stormtroopers of Death (S.O.D.) shirt. The crew got to talking about Star Wars versus Nazi stormtroopers, and how S.O.D. were referring to the latter. One of the more sophisticated cashiers chastised the kid in the shirt along the lines of: "They say 'Speak English or Die'. They're racist and that shirt is gross." Deploying edgelord tactics common today, the S.O.D. fan pointed to his shirt: "It's a JOKE. Don't you see the anarchist symbol? Anarchists hate Nazis." I was confused, like after Fear on SNL. Metal was interesting and alternative, but also kind of wrong. I wanted to be a little "edgy," but the wrongness overflowed with ambiguity. Metal and moshing were *questionable*. What is this? Why do I like it? Should I not identify with this stuff? If I wear a death metal shirt, am I wearing it ironically—and is that an ambiguity I want to cultivate? Is this interesting and important, or juvenile and insensitive? The questions evolved through college and continue into my adulthood. I've written and presented on various kinds of metal, asking "why hardcore goes soft" through commercialization and why the "splinter in your ear" probably does not do much to transform the world.³ I've been knocked unconscious (GWAR, very slippery), had my watch bitten off when trying to help someone up (Slayer), witnessed my friend get a tooth knocked out (Melvins), and accompanied my own teenagers into the heart of some active situations where they've suffered some injuries. I've broken up fights, helped strugglers get out of pits, and administered medical aid to various people. Why do I place myself and my family in these situations?

² Anthrax, "Caught in a Mosh," *Among the Living*, Island Records, 1987.

³ See Smith (2005) and Smith (2002).

I confess to a conflicted relationship with metal, and with moshing in particular.⁴ Some of my happiest, most life-affirming moments have been in metal pits. This is embarrassing to admit in an academic context, especially as an over-50 white male philosophy professor who enjoys a very fortunate life filled with many good things. But metal pits scratch a very satisfying itch. Why does such a juvenile, alcohol and testosterone soaked, violence-glorifying scene offer such appeal? Is my enjoyment something I should avoid or outgrow, like laughing at an inappropriate joke or attending an N.F.L. game while players suffer from C.T.E.? Are there ways to preserve the best in moshing and minimize the worst without killing the spirit? In this chapter, I will make three arguments. First, moshing presents considerable negative aspects that range from literal violence and death to the sorts of absolute commodification of the semblance of alternative life that reinforces the status quo, as Adorno warned. Second, moshing can be a highly meaningful and—despite *prima facie* appearances—ethical activity. Third, measures can be taken at various levels—by individuals, by community leaders, by bands, by venues, and by legislators—to steer moshing culture toward its better angels.

I should note that this paper sometimes conflates metal and punk. Some readers will prefer cleaner boundaries between the genres and will assert that metal and punk pits differ significantly. Some will assert that metal pits tend to be more problematic than punk pits, with metal generally trending more far right. I find these complex and interesting issues—see, for example, Jello Biafra's comments below on Nazi punks—that would benefit from further studies, including how these dynamics have evolved since the 1970s. I hope readers will keep these important nuances in mind.⁵

McMoshing, WWF Aesthetics, and the Commodified Semblance of Resistance

First, the obvious: Moshing is dangerous, and the danger is inherent to the appeal. Various studies document the rates of moshing injuries, finding head injuries the most common and crowd surfing an especially

⁴ This paper sometimes conflates metal and punk. Some will prefer cleaner boundaries between the genres, and will assert the metal pits differ significantly from punk pits.

⁵ Thanks to A. Seth Young for this fruitful line of inquiry.

dangerous activity.⁶ According to one study, between 7 and 20 per 10,000 moshers require transportation to a hospital. Studying moshing injury rates presents obvious difficulties, including the fact that not all attendees enter the pit for all or even a portion of the show. Most attendees avoid the pit at most shows, so the rate of injury for “full-time” moshers would likely be much higher. Many suffering injuries will not seek medical help, in part because moshers expect “battle wounds” and seeking medical care can seem contrary to the ethos and even emasculating. Deaths and catastrophic injuries in mosh pits are more likely to be reported. Well-publicized deaths have occurred at shows from Smashing Pumpkins (two deaths, one in 1996 and another in 2007), Lamb of God, Limp Bizkit, Pearl Jam (9 dead), and the Travis Scott Astroworld “mass casualty event” (10 dead). Large gatherings of excited people present inherent risks, and even mild concerts can end in death. When teen heartthrob David Cassidy announced at a 1974 concert that he planned to retire, the ensuing mob crushed a 14-year-old girl to death. So while this is not an issue specific to hardcore shows, this genre explicitly invites and celebrates violence.

Some metal artists see themselves as responsible for these harms and have discouraged or banned moshing at their shows. The Smashing Pumpkins’ Billy Corgan announced at a 1996 show that they “publicly take a stand against moshing!”⁷ Slipknot’s Chris Fehn stated that “especially in America, moshing has turned into a form of bullying. . . . The big guy stands in the middle and just trucks any small kid that comes near him.” “They don’t mosh properly anymore,” Fehn explains, “It sucks because that’s not what it’s about. Those guys need to be kicked out” (Childers 2014). At the Drive In’s Cedric Bixler-Zavalar chastised a 2006 audience: “All the guys, if you wanna go beat the shit out of each other please don’t do it at our show . . . when we write songs we don’t intend so that you guys can get out your male aggression. I like to dance” (Jonze 2012). Ian Mackaye would often lecture against moshing from the Fugazi soapbox, and Reddit boards are filled with lore of people getting kicked out of pits for being too hardcore. In an evolving artistic genre dedicated to pushing boundaries, metaphysical and definitional questions arise about the nature of moshing: what is moshing, what doesn’t count as “proper” moshing, what are

⁶ For discussions of injury rates, see Milsten et al. (2017), Janchar et al. (2000), and Pogrebin (1996).

⁷ See discussion in (MTV.com 1996).

the constitutive norms and limits, who decides, and who controls the pen when defining the limit between dance moves and assault?⁸

Many fans will, frankly, mock these concerns from the dance police as un-metal wankery. Like the people who complain about the N.F.L. becoming “too soft” for protecting players from brain damage, you can hear the Viovod anthem directed at anyone who tries to lecture on moshing safety: [Expletive] off and Die. Some bands will do everything in their power to make pits as violent as possible, for example cajoling large festival crowds into Braveheart-looking “walls of death” where hundreds or thousands of mostly young men sprint into each other from opposite directions on the band’s command. Photos and videos of these events capture the Berserkers at Ren Faire vibes.⁹ For many bands and audiences, a raging pit signifies an intense and effective performance that whips the crowd into a frenzy. The term “praise-pit” typically refers to especially enthusiastic group religious worship, but it can also recognize the relation between moshing and appreciation: the liveliness of the pit is a kind of metal ovation. Middle fingers to the band provide another common form of performatively defiant ironic appreciation.

Which brings us to Travis Scott. Building on the historical overlaps between moshing, hip hop, and rap, Scott cultivated the “raging” aesthetic of his brand to great success.¹⁰ As described by Mark Elibert in the 2025 Netflix documentary, “Hip Hop has always been going against the system. . . . [Scott] was positioning himself to be that person to be like ‘yeah. . . fuck the system.’”¹¹ Encouraging moshing, crowd surfing, stage diving, and climbing on venue structures, Scott often incited the crowd by exhorting “We want rage!” and “Rage with me!” (Williams 2021). As a child, Scott dreamed of becoming a professional wrestler, and he wanted his shows to “feel like it was the WWF” (Green 2015). Prominent critic Trent Clark explains that “Travis Scott’s whole aesthetic is about rebellion. . . . The shows have a lot of raging.” According to Clark, “with the death of punk rock, hip-hop has indeed adopted and patterned the new generation of mosh pits. . . It’s not uncommon to see a lot of crowding and raging or complete wild behavior at a Travis Scott show” (Williams 2021).

⁸ Genuine thanks to Sean Murphy for pointing out these important questions that deserve their own paper.

⁹ For photos, see Grundke (2017).

¹⁰ For a discussion of the migration of mosh pits to hip-hop, see Caramanica (2021).

¹¹ For a discussion of the origins of Scott’s rager reputation and analysis of the events leading to Astroworld’s mass casualty event, see Bamiro and Poulter (2025).

Rebellion as a profitable brand has been a well-worn theme in Adorno and other critical theorists. But while formalist rebellion in the style of Jackson Pollack or Arnold Schoenberg might induce a wave of pearl-clutching, Scott's attempts to extract profit from disaffection itself literally annihilates the alienated. Scott was arrested in 2015 at Lalapalooza and again in 2017 at the Walmart Arkansas Music Pavilion for inciting riots at performances (Coscarelli 2021). A 2017 concert in Manhattan left Kyle Green paralyzed when he was pushed off an overcrowded third-story balcony while Scott exhorted his fans to jump (Dillon 2021). Publicity along the lines of "People get carted out of my show" was well worth a few thousand dollars in disorderly conduct fines, 12 minutes of police detention, and a year of court supervision. These legendary "ragers"—note that a "rager" can also refer to a binge drinking party without any moshing—increased Scott's crossover appeal with the hardcore community, and he occupied the center of popular culture as he dated and fathered two children with Kylie Jenner of Kardashian fame. The Astroworld album launch included collaborations with Nike, Nerf, Hot Wheels, Reese's, Dior, and the Houston Astros and Houston Rockets. McDonald's offered the Travis Scott Happy Meal—apparently without crediting Happy Flowers' 1989 "Unhappy Meal" noise punk classic. Scott's "Sicko Mode" on the Astroworld album became a Billboard Number One single. His virtual concert within the Fortnite video game had 28 million viewers, a remarkable moment in the evolution of rage.

This contextualizes the 10 deaths at the 2021 Astroworld Festival. Advertising emphasized storming security barricades, riotous moshing, and tightly packed aggressive pits (Sharp 2021). The documentary *Look Mom I Can Fly* shows Scott's security team warning the Astroworld event staff: "You will see a lot of crowd-surfers in general, but also you see a lot of kids that are just trying to get out and get to safety because they can't breathe, because it's so compact. . . You won't know how bad it can be with our crowd until we turn on" (Coscarelli 2021). Concert producers Live Nation sold 50,000 tickets for a venue designed for 35,000 and lost control of entry points, allowing thousands more unticketed fans to pour in by overpowering guards and easily collapsing perimeter fencing. Promotional videos glorified gate-crashing. Via Twitter, Scott encouraged "sneaking in." The postmortem videos and analysis show 50,000 people—some raging while others scream for help with compressed lungs. People call 911 from the crowd, climb onto the stage to plead for help because "people are dying," and chant to end the show. Drake joins Scott on the

stage to preen and further incite the crowd. Aware of mounting dangers and seeing people crushed and unconscious, Scott instructs the crowd to “give a middle finger to the sky” if they are ok. The show goes on, and the *New York Times* reported that Scott continued in part because of the contractual condition that he would be paid 4.5 million only if he finished the show.¹² A nine-year-old boy watching from his father’s shoulder is crushed to death. The show ends 15 minutes early. Ten died from compression asphyxia and related injuries.

Twenty years ago, I wrote on the blatant contradictions of noise metal as it became a mainstream critique of the mainstream. We can rehearse Adorno’s greatest hits applied to Scott’s latest commercialization of raging against the social order. “Even when the public does, exceptionally, rebel against the pleasure industry,” Adorno writes, “all it can muster is that feeble resistance which that very industry has inculcated in it. . .” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972, p. 145). Moshing in general and Scott’s version of raging in particular exist in an ideological semblance of resistance. As Adorno puts it, “all are free to dance and enjoy themselves, just as they have been free, since the historical neutralisation of religion, to join any of the innumerable sects. But freedom to choose an ideology—since ideology always reflects economic coercion—everywhere proves to be freedom to choose what is always the same” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972, p. 145). The “pseudo individuality” Adorno described pervades metal culture, moshing, and rager scripts. In some instances, the obviousness of the contradiction gives rise to a second-order critique: “This is not a Fugazi T-Shirt.” Adorno coined the “absolute commodity” as the art object that parades its contradictions as the priceless yet just very expensive thing of bourgeois revolutionaries. Sometimes metal’s second-order self-awareness takes an openly ironic stance. Sometimes this becomes ebullient satire, as when GWAR cosplays with Jerry Springer, Joan Rivers, and Fox News. But the culture industry easily absorbs the critical and self-reflective significance of any art, and we seem to have entered a phase where metal and its forms of expression via dance exist primarily as violent and extreme commodities reinforcing the status quo. In 2025, that status quo seems especially unsettling.

Metal and moshing have long struggled with questionable attitudes toward race and gender.¹³ Nazis and skinheads have been hanging around moshing since the early days, and reviewing posters and promotional

¹² For a discussion of the settlements, see Goodman (2024).

¹³ See Spracklen (2020).

materials from the 1980s demonstrates how even anti-authoritarian bands like SSD would stylize their “SS” with the very obvious Schutzstaffel runes of Germanic mysticism. Sometimes described as a shock value nihilistic spit in the mainstream face, metal played with fire. Fascist iconography in hardcore music attracted second-wave white power skin-heads. Aggression and Iron Cross aesthetics provided a tent big enough for both Straight Edge and Hate Edge. When both the left and right attack the mainstream, they sometimes converge. Policing boundaries became an explicit theme. When the Dead Kennedys released “Nazi Punks [expletive] Off,” Jello Biafra recognized how moshing appealed to the far right. He explained in a 2012 interview:

I wrote that song in 1981, and at the time, it was aimed at people who were really violent on the dance floor; they didn’t call it mosh pits yet. It began to attract people showing up just to see if they could get in fights in the pit or jump off stage and punch people in the back of the head and run away. I noticed some of the really bad thugs were clearly not teenagers, they looked quite a bit older, which makes me wonder if they were really undercover cops. People started asking me “Are you down with this? Things are changing, the audience is younger, hard core is coming up and it’s a more extreme form of punk,” and I liked that kind of music, but I thought if we’re gonna play this music, we need to distance ourselves from that side of the scene. The initial premise of the song was “You violent people at shows are acting like a bunch of Nazis,” and that was as far as it went. Then the real ideological Nazis began coming out of the closet. They attacked Dead Kennedys shows after that. One time, a more hardcore version of (Britain’s) National Front showed up in tandem with the road crew of a band, and that connection always creeped me out. Punk is such an extreme form of music, the most extreme form of rock and roll ever invented, and it’s always attracted different kinds of extremes.

(Brown 2012)

In other words, extreme music attracts extremists. The lyrics of this anti-fascist anthem try to explain the difference between anti-authoritarian critical theorist punks and violent authoritarian cultist punks:

*Punk ain't no religious cult
Punk means thinkin' for yourself
You ain't hardcore, 'cause you spike your hair*

*When a jock still lives inside your head...
 If you've come to fight, get outta here
 You ain't no better than the bouncers
 We ain't tryin' to be police
 When you ape the cops, it ain't anarchy...
 Ten guys jump one, what a man
 You fight each other, the police state wins
 Stab your backs when you trash our halls
 Trash a bank if you've got real balls...
 You still think swastikas look cool
 The real Nazis run your schools
 They're coaches, businessmen and cops
 In a real fourth Reich, you'll be the first to go...
 You'll be the first to go, you'll be the first to go
 You'll be the first to go, unless you think¹⁴*

As much as I embrace the “thinkin’ for yourself” ethos and the long-held reputation of punk and metal as generally anti-authoritarian, Biafra’s need to draw this distinction speaks to how blurred the lines had become. If Biafra recognized this danger in 1981—and again in 2012 when white power musician Wade Michael Page murdered six people in a Wisconsin Sikh temple—we should wonder about the company we keep in the metal pits of 2025. I attended multiple Pantera shows in the 1990s, thinking the fan base was dodgy but the shows were worth it. By 2016, Phil Anselmo was giving the Sieg Heil, screaming “white power,” and getting shows canceled in Germany and Austria.¹⁵ Suspicion of these artists is justified, though I am fairly certain that certain hardcore artists—for example Hüsker Dü’s Bob Mould—will age gracefully.

We sometimes speak of something “glorifying violence,” but we do not need to ally with Tipper Gore to appreciate that in many senses moshing does, in fact, glorify violence. Fascism also glorifies violence according to all major accounts.¹⁶ Many metal lyrics scream and growl the praises of all manner of death, cruelty, decapitation, disembowelment,

¹⁴ Dead Kennedys, “Nazi Punks [expletive] Off,” *In God We Trust, Inc.*, Alternative Tentacles, 1981.

¹⁵ See the *Rolling Stone* interview for a discussion of the events, Anselmo’s apology, and his views on race (Grow 2016).

¹⁶ See, for example, the centrality of violence to fascism in accounts provide by Paxton (2005) and Stanley (2020).

cannibalism, and malevolence.¹⁷ This is so obvious that the cliché rises to satire, pushing into fascist and other taboo themes to test the boundaries of offensiveness. Stormtroopers of Death’s Scott Ian thought literal readings of their Nazi references were “ridiculous”: “Some people thought we were racist, and those people are stupid.” Bandmate Dan Lilker corroborated: “The lyrics were never intended to be serious, just to piss people off” (Bodenner 2016). Anselmo claimed his white power episode referred to being drunk on white wine.¹⁸ We saw a similar rhetorical strategy from Elon Musk’s raised arm salute at the presidential inauguration and his subsequent Nazi-themed puns chastising anyone who took offense. “I can’t believe he trolled so hard,” Musk’s supporters crowed, and if you take it literally, then you’re an idiot. Aesthetic negation is a readily conscripted mercenary’s weapon, and the far right and the far left both rage against the middle with whatever is at hand. Sometimes they find themselves unwitting allies collapsing the establishment.

Embodied Solidarity and the Tragic Sublime

This brings us to another Nazi-adjacent troll: Nietzsche. As with moshing, I have conflicted opinions about Nietzsche. Other than perhaps Diogenes, Nietzsche seems like the most metal philosopher. The beyond good and evil ethos, the obsession with religion, the provocative style and adversarial tone, and his “barely sane” vibes make it hard to imagine metal existing without Nietzsche. Nietzsche provided many metal-worthy passages, and you could randomly choose any Nietzsche text and probably generate viable lyrics. For example: “The great epochs of our life come when we gain the courage to rechristen our evil as what is best in us” (Nietzsche 1974, p. 168). For a more literal Pantera will to power mood: “In this state one enriches everything out of one’s own fullness: whatever one sees, whatever wills is seen swelled, taut, strong, overloaded with strength. A man

¹⁷ Sean Murphy reminds us that “emotional hardcore” tends toward very different content: “looking at emotional hardcore thematically, we see that the lyrics engage with themes like self-disappointment, anxiety, abandonment, love, loss, longing, existential emptiness, sadness, nihilism, and a slew of other emotional and existential maladies. A heavy sound for some heavy feelings.” See Murphy (2025) and Murphy (2024a,b).

¹⁸ “Anselmo’s initial reaction to the uproar was to make light of it, saying ‘white power’ was an inside joke because he’d been drinking white wine backstage. ‘No apologies from me’, he said at the time. But that changed within a couple of days” (Grow 2016).

in this state transforms things until they mirror his power—until they are reflections of his perfection” (Nietzsche 1968, p. 268). Early German existentialism sounds like a caricature of Bro-Metal manosphere, but as with Nietzsche, things are more complicated.

The *Birth of Tragedy* captures especially well how metal and moshing can provide the sort of aesthetic experience that transforms nihilism into life affirmation. Nietzsche writes, for example:

Here, when the danger to his will is greatest, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the *sublime* as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the *comic* as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity.

(Nietzsche 1967, p. 18)

In this light, metal artists have alchemical abilities of turning the darkest existential threats into joyous release. Judging by the look of it, mosh pits tend to attract those wrestling with the call of the void. Many refer to metal and moshing as cathartic, but Nietzsche better captures the ethos. Gather dreadnaughts to dance and imbibe various stimulants and intoxicants, and we have a setting fitting of young Nietzsche’s idea of a profoundly good time:

If we add to this terror the blissful ecstasy that wells up from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature, at this collapse of the *principium individuationis*, we steal a glimpse into the nature of *Dionysian*, which is brought home to us most intimately by the analogy of intoxication. . . .

(Nietzsche 1967, p. 18)

After a flurry of metalogical word salad such as “narcotic draught,” “hymns of all primitive men,” “Germanic Middle Ages singing and dancing crowds,” “emotions awake,” “complete self-forgetfulness,” “St. Vitus’s dancers,” “Bacchic courses,” “Babylon and the orgiastic Sacae,” “folk-diseases,” “poor wretches,” “cadaverous looking and ghastly,” and “glowing life of the Dionysian revelers rushes past them,” Nietzsche continues:

Transform Beethoven’s “Hymn to Joy” into a painting; let your imagination conceive the multitudes bowing to the dust, awestruck—you will approach the Dionysian. Now the slave is a free man; now all the

rigid, hostile barriers that necessity, caprice, or “impudent convention” have fixed between man and man are broken. Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, and fused with his neighbor, but as one with him, as if the veil of maya had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial unity.

(Nietzsche 1967, p. 20)

This is classic Nietzsche working both sides waxing poetic about a state of ecstatic transcendence where people from all walks of life simultaneously dissolve their individuality and also exercise their will. Music plus pro-social intoxicants drive the selfing/unselfing cultic scene, viscerally seducing us into embodied life. We experience this together in a pit, literally colliding wills while genuflecting on the unifying power of the band. As Boris puts it, a communion of “amplifier worship” arises with the “multitudes bowing to the dust, awestruck” (Nietzsche 1967, p. 20). The experience approximates a sense of both self-expression and community, both will and the negation of will. Religious themes within musical form and content reinforce the existential heaviness, invoking premodern rituals and meaning systems. “Now the slave is a free man” when he moshes and momentarily exists untethered by various boundaries and hierarchies, and feels unity in this abyss with fellow dancers. Think here of Sunn O))), droning “heady metal” in their druid robes before entranced crowds. But it is, of course, an illusion. The lights come on, we don’t actually pray to metal gods, and we have not overthrown anything. We go back to work in the morning, we buy some merchandise as we exit the play-cult exhilarated by a mild and temporary collective illusion. It is also on the verge of funny, often more Spinal Tap than political rally. If anyone takes it too seriously—for example by actually fighting, being too intoxicated, or stalking the band—they get kicked out of our heavy metal play date.

But, for a brief time, we can experience something like a superabundant ideal of life. Like Giacometti’s account of the existential thrill of being hit by a car making him feel like he was, finally, “living,” moshing can provide an intensity distinct from other art.¹⁹ Adorno spoke of certain modernist works being like a punch in the nose to habits of cognition of modernity, but for us the experience of Schoenberg does not carry the same impact. For many of us, moshing offers a proximation of a respite

¹⁹ See Lord (1985), Chapter 10.

from excessive instrumental rationality in moments of intense aesthetic engagement. When the grind and banality of existence sap energy, metal seduces us to life and raises spirits. The heavy metal play date strikes me as a funny idea, but for Nietzsche play—becoming again a child rather than a camel or lion—stands as perhaps the highest achievement for adults.

But unlike listening to metal at my desk to summon the will to grade papers or doing my taxes, moshing offers an in-the-flesh community.²⁰ If travel is life intensified, moshing distills a lot of humanity. The self-expression and the selflessness intertwine, with as much life-affirming thrill from helping someone up as from going hard. Moshers are not actual brothers in arms and aren't even Fight Club wannabees, but they are inviting each other to aesthetic physical contact outside of sport. That is rare, interesting, and a potentially meaningful form of camaraderie in this collective art game we call moshing. As Nietzsche would put it, we are “a living thing that seeks above all to discharge its strength” (Nietzsche 1966, p. 13). There are a few other relatively safe and legal places where adults can publicly “discharge” in such a frenzied manner. Many forms of dance provide similar opportunities across many subcultures, from vestiges of premodern rituals to people describing their “transcendent” experiences at repeated Phish and Grateful Dead shows.

All things considered, moshing creates a vital outlet for aesthetic engagement, especially for certain demographics of the disaffected suffering from acute cases of grappling with the “terror and horror” of the tragic view of existence in a “botched civilization.”²¹ The cultic aspects reenchant the world, providing a kind of pop-up tribe receiving musical communion. Part extreme sport, part therapy, part gallows humor, part solidarity, it makes sense that metal and moshing provide deep meaning for many. One commentator explains: “Metal is the aural representation of my spiritual need to transgress traditional boundaries, not just of music, but of general social expectation. Deeply rooted in me is a desire to search for the liminal space where the divine can still be found outside of where authority says it should be” (Coker 2025). Perhaps this takes metal too seriously, but many readers will appreciate this point. When I

²⁰ Can someone mosh alone? That presents a definitional question avoided in this paper, but I imagine many readers have enjoyed moments of enthusiastic solo dancing to metal.

²¹ “Botched civilization” is Ezra Pound’s phrase in his poem “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly.” Pound was imprisoned for treason as a fascist supporter.

mention both that moshing provides some of the happiest moments and that this fact is embarrassing, Nietzsche again captures the tension:

Perhaps such readers will find it offensive that an aesthetic problem should be taken so seriously—assuming they are unable to consider art more than a pleasant sideline, a readily dispensable tinkling of bells that accompanies the ‘seriousness of life,’ just as if nobody knew what was involved in such a contrast with the ‘seriousness of life.’” Let such ‘serious’ readers learn something from the fact that I am convinced that art represents the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life.
(Nietzsche 1967, p. 20)

Although we’re hardly Wagnerian self-creators, the pit does cultivate such “metaphysical activity.” It also provides plain old physical activity, which *Rolling Stone* documented in an article title “Why Moshing is Good for You” (McCaffrey 2017). Perhaps this is nostalgia for my own youth or desperation for activities more meaningful than screen rotting, but as a parent, I hope my children continue to have these opportunities for such existentially rich play. Are there ways to encourage the best parts of moshing while discouraging the worst, and do so without destroying it? I think so, to some extent.

Pit Elders, Shepherd, and Counselors: Regulated Rage?

Offering “Best Practices,” “Pit Praxis,” or an etiquette guide for moshing sounds like another SNL skit. Telling people how to “mosh properly” evokes “if it’s too loud, you’re too old,” a saying apparently popularized by Ted Nugent (Sullivan 2007). I once took my 15-year-old to a show, and he got whacked in the mouth by a guy who suddenly started throwing high elbows. Seeing the shock on my son’s face and unsure if he lost a tooth (he didn’t), I told the guy, “elbows down” and pointed at the shell-shocked kid. He seemed apologetic and even sheepish, and I immediately regretted saying anything. I brought an inexperienced young person into that situation, and I scolded an adult trying to have a good time exorcising their demons. Perhaps he wasn’t moshing particularly *well* according to my vague and implicit set of standards, but too many rules can ruin the game—especially when the game is about certain kinds of freedom and

self-expression. As Nietzsche puts it in his resistance to always subordinating aesthetics to ethics, there are good reasons that the “fight against purpose in art is always a fight against the moralizing tendency in art, against its subordination to morality” (Nietzsche 1990, p. 90).

But, as discussed, there are real dangers. People die. People also die skiing, skateboarding, and in other sports that serve a similar existential purpose in embodied risk-taking. Higher risk often correlates with higher potential rewards. Skiers wear helmets. Mountains designate trails by degree of difficulty. It is difficult to imagine protective headgear in the pit, but something like labeling “double back diamond” shows might have a place. We can approach minimizing the bad and optimizing the good in moshing at different levels: by individuals, by community leaders, by bands, by venues, and by legislators.

At the individual level, it helps if people understand what they are getting into. An inexperienced and heavily intoxicated young person stumbling into a large, aggressive pit endangers everyone. Like a novice skier thinking they can handle an advanced trail and exposing others to risk as they lose control, people interested in moshing should be self-aware of their abilities. Thoughtful observation of the situation before diving in is generally a good strategy. Novices should avoid the most dangerous situations, such as large, raging crowds with limited exit paths or festival “walls of death.”

For those who would appreciate more explicit guidance on this nuanced and dynamic social situation, the Shreveport law firm Morris and Dewett provides solid advice. A southern personal injury firm dedicating a page to “Mosh Pits: Rules, Etiquette, and Everything You Need to Know about Rage Culture” might seem odd, but it attests to attorneys’ awareness of potentially lucrative cases arising from moshing-related damages. Morris and Dewett explain that “mosh pits can be seen relatively regularly at rap shows leaning into rage culture and less ragey electronic dance music (EDM) festivals. Pits can even break out in surprising places, like among Swifties” (Morris and Dewett 2025). They offer a summary of “the music world’s mosh pit rules to keep the experience safe and fun” with this preface:

Mosh pits can seem chaotic and dangerous on the surface, but they generally operate with an underlying set of unspoken rules and expectations that promote safety and fun for everyone involved. At the heart of moshing is a sense of camaraderie, respect, and surprising control.

Proper mosh etiquette keeps everyone safe from unnecessary harm. That's not to say that mosh pit participants never leave with a blackened eye or broken bones. Accidents inevitably occur when large adults play rough and throw their bodies into a pulsating crowd. However, the intention behind a good moshers does not involve harming others. The idea of community over chaos rules the mosh pit, and many veterans of hardcore music shows share stories like warriors returned from battle. At the core, a sense of wild abandon is at play. Few other events allow adults to let animalistic instincts (mostly) take over to the point of catharsis. However, a sense of community and control is at the heart of a good mosh pit. If someone falls, moshers should help them back up so they don't get injured. This communal element is one of the most important aspects of mosh pit culture that breed fun and camaraderie. Avid moshers often describe it as a feeling of "brotherhood." Sometimes, a "bad apple" or a newbie unfamiliar with mosh pit culture can jump into a pit and start swinging fists, clearly seeking to cause harm. Generally, the pit has its way of handling these misfits, but not always before damage is done. And even in a pit of the most well-meaning and experienced moshers, serious accidents can happen.

(Morris and Dewett 2025)

They follow with sections on "Helping Fallen Participants," "Respecting Personal Space," "Recognizing Exit and Entrance Points," "Creating a Positive Atmosphere" ("A smile or a well-timed head nod can let fellow moshers know you appreciate their adherence to the pit's unspoken rules"), "Keeping Anger in Check," "Allowing Exits for Others," "Safety Precautions," "Inclusivity in the Mosh Pit," and more advice on "Enjoying Mosh Pits Responsibly." They also offer some legal advice: "If you fall and suffer a blow to the head, you should speak with a blunt force trauma lawyer regarding your options. For mosh pit accidents at typical concert venues, a premises liability lawyer can answer your questions and evaluate your claim." "If you or a loved one finds themselves a victim of a mosh pit injury," they conclude, "Morris & Dewett Injury Lawyers may be able to help" (Morris and Dewett 2025). If we should have adults—and lawyers—in the room, Morris and Dewett seem like reasonable counselors.

In addition to concert attendees individually arriving prepared, experienced crowd members can be extra vigilant, modeling the "help each other out" ethic and scanning for potential dangers. If you know from experience how these situations evolve, you become a Pit Elder. Pay attention to

people falling and then help them. If someone spills a drink, help with that so it does not result in a slip and fall injury. If you see tension mounting between dancers that might take a turn for the worse, dance between them. At a recent show, we saw an overzealous teenager annoying an older guy with clenched fists who seemed ready to fight. A simple solution was to befriend the young guy, dance with him, and de-escalate by steering him in another direction. We did not need to scold anyone, and this small intervention added to the fun. The vocalist of the band—an elder in the New England hardcore scene—saw this transpire, and thanked me after the show. That recognition felt genuinely meaningful for me, like blessings of the metal community. If you see something out of line, alert security and keep an eye on it. Alert others, especially those who seem to be attentive and experienced. If someone looks hurt, help get them out and get them medical attention. Sometimes people injured in pits are very intoxicated and may resist help or medical intervention. Make the handoff to professionals.

Some of the most serious injuries and deaths result from asphyxiation and crowd crush. Many of us have felt versions of this when we dance hard, start breathing heavy, and are so tightly packed that we can barely restore breath. Be alert for early warning signs, especially when people struggle to remove themselves and access less dense areas. Hold space for them or forge a path of exit if you can. Working through a crowd can be both physically and socially difficult, so an experienced “snowplow” clearing the way can be a significant and even life-saving help for people struggling to remove themselves. Areas near the stage can be especially dangerous in this regard as people pile up and compress between a barrier stage and an active pit. If you see someone struggling, it can help to “box out” people near them. Address these issues early to prevent an Astroworld situation where the pileups are hundreds deep. Sometimes security is excellent, and checking in with them as a friendly face can help. Security is often understaffed and underpaid. Sometimes security is incompetent. I believe I have a duty to do what I can in the rare situations where help is needed. If you feel that a show has become too dangerous, several bands have suggested that holding your arms over your head in an “X”—a widely recognized signal to stop and provide assistance—can be the clearest way to communicate to the band in that environment (DiVita 2021). If Pit Elders become too intoxicated, they become more of a liability than an asset on these fronts.

Audience members can only do so much, and bands, venues, and lawmakers set the structural conditions for these situations. Part of the safety challenge results from moshing transcending musical genres. Most

people know what to expect at a Napalm Death show, and the crowd has a high ratio of “elders” who know how to comport themselves and who can recognize and diffuse potential dangers. This might not be the case when masses of people find themselves in a raging crowd at a large Travis Scott or even Taylor Swift show, which can become like dropping tens of thousands of novice skiers on a double black diamond. As we saw at Astroworld, some navigated this with children on their shoulders. We do not need to parse comparative blame of concertgoers, parents, and promoters to appreciate that the artists and venues play a significant role.

Artists and venues literally set the stage. Band members monitor and orchestrate crowds. As experts in the ecosystems of their pit, they are uniquely qualified to identify and call out problems. As revered authorities, they hold a unique power to influence the behavior of their fans. If band members explicitly address an issue in the crowd, they have the microphone and the credibility. Metal theatrics calibrate the energy in a venue, slowing down or speeding up pit tempo with song selections, props, breaks, and various other levers they push and pull to create high-energy shows. If needed, the band can stop playing, turn on the lights, and drain the room. Bands can also make clear that certain views are not welcome at their shows, including racism, misogyny, and transphobia.

If, however, the band cultivates a “raging” and “out of control” identity, lifting the veil and addressing safety issues can break the fourth wall. Unmasking the “more hardcore than thou” image can undermine a band’s credibility, which can in turn have commercial consequences. “Old guard” metal bands can be less concerned about damaging their long-established *bona fides* and should have more expertise preventing, recognizing, and addressing dangers. Artists greener to the scene will have less experience, a more vulnerable image, and less financial security to face the consequences of stopping a show. Astroworld combined many of these dangers: promotional materials promising gate-crashing rager chaos, oversold tickets, 50,000 concertgoers unfamiliar with the dangers of such an environment, a young artist on stage riling up the crowd as he is paid to do, a cameo from Drake adding more fuel while screaming concertgoers are pleading *en masse* to stop the event, and the show continuing for 37 minutes after it had been declared a mass-casualty event. Before Scott even went on stage, the festival’s manager of security texted a colleague: “There’s panic in people’s eyes. . . This could get worse quickly” (Brown 2023). He followed up: “I would pull the plug but that’s just me. . . . I know they’ll try to fight through it but I would want it on

the record that I didn't advise this to continue. Someone's going to end up dead." Subsequent investigations raised questions about what and when Scott knew about the situation, and why he continued to perform. He claimed he was doing his job and awaiting instructions. "Normally if it was something drastic," he told the Houston Police Department, "someone would have to come hit the button or pull the plug." Sound engineers and other event staff on site claimed that Scott and his event producers knew of the mounting deaths, continued performing, and had expected and encouraged such "mayhem" (Brown 2023). Ten people died. No criminal indictments resulted.

If artists, promoters, and venues stand to profit from such dangerous events without facing criminal liability and if insurance covers civil exposures, it begins to resemble another Houston-based disaster: the Deepwater Horizon explosion killing 11 and causing immense environmental damages. In both situations, warning alarms were sounded, the show went on, people died, no one went to prison, and insurance covered losses. When incentive structures prioritize profits over lives, governmental regulators can increase safety standards, compliance, and civil and criminal penalties for violations of crowd management laws. This can include stricter occupancy and crowd density limits, staffing and staff training requirements, unreserved and open seating restrictions, banning stage diving and crowd surfing, and concert-specific safety approvals.²² Video surveillance of crowds and mosh pits to identify offenders and enforce restrictions has predictably gained support, so concert attendees should be aware that they are on camera—a panoptical reality spreading throughout private and public life (Milsten et al. 2017). Such laws, however, have proven difficult to establish and vary considerably by jurisdiction (Milsten et al. 2017). Crowd-surge, hooligan, and white-supremacist violence in international soccer stadiums present similar challenges in fanatical event management, and the United States could learn from the international crowd management community.

The regulatory path faces many obstacles in the United States. Of course, monied interests who own venues and profit from concerts generally support limiting their civil and criminal liabilities for concert injuries and deaths. Culturally more "freedom-loving" and less paternalistic than comparator nations, the moshing demographic in the United States seems unlikely to lobby for political action for safer

²² See safety discussions in Milsten et al. (2017).

shows. Artists surely do not want to be held personally liable for injuries and deaths at their shows, and in one case the difference between United States and European attitudes played out rather dramatically. In 2010, Lamb of God's Randy Blythe "threw" teenager Daniel Nosek off a stage in Prague. Reading the testimony and viewing the video, Blythe's actions looked rather typical of metal shows. Fans often rush the stage, and it is common to see energetic dancers try to climb up onto the stage to almost immediately jump off—classic "stage diving." Band members often give them a "push," sometimes in good fun that looks more like a pat on the back as they rile up the crowd and sometimes more firmly with annoyance because someone has overstayed their welcome or is getting in the way. In the heat of performances with frenetic body contact all around, there are many context-specific nuances that can blur the line between assault and performance. The artist, the venue, the crowd, the region, and other factors all impact the mood and norms. The situation also speaks to the need of metal artists to protect themselves after Pantera's Dimebag Darrell was shot to death mid-performance in 2004 by an obsessed fan who rushed the stage. When Blythe pushed Nosek, the young fan hit his head and subsequently died. The Czech police charged Blythe with manslaughter. With Blythe having returned to Richmond, Czech authorities unsuccessfully sought cooperation from the United States. Upon returning to the Czech Republic in 2012, he was arrested and tried. The United States metal community rallied in support of Blythe's innocence, generating a petition with 27,500 signatures and public statements from Dave Brockie of GWAR and others.²³ Within the United States, it seemed unthinkable that pushing someone off a stage could land a famous artist in a former Nazi and Iron Curtain prison. Ultimately acquitted, Blythe committed to becoming "a spokesperson for safer shows." The lesson for the community, however, remains unclear. Even with 10 dead at Astroworld and Travis Scott and Live Nation executives allowing the show to go on while watching dead or dying bodies passed overhead in the most macabre crowd surfing, no one received criminal penalties. "Caveat Emptor" could make a good libertarian metal band name, and the "assume the risk" mentality runs deep. This cocktail of radical individualism plus financial disincentives makes significant state intervention into concert safety unlikely.

²³ See discussion in Michaels (2023).

Especially in the United States, moneyed interests design these laws to protect moneyed interests.

In conclusion, moshing is problematic, and much of its meaning is a function of its problematicness. I recently attended a Deftones show at TD Garden with mostly reserved seating—reserved both in the sense of a pre-purchased spot to occupy and reserved as quiet and mostly keeping to oneself. From the bleachers, I envied the moshing general admissions crowd on the floor. But those tickets were going for over \$300, a considerable premium to upgrade my metal experience to first class. Like Satanic Panic, the nearly ungovernable thrill of metal and moshing only increases its desirability—and its commercial value. Travis Scott’s 2024 follow-up tour to Astroworld became the second highest grossing rap tour of all time, suggesting that Scott and Live Nation executives suffered little in the court of public opinion for the 10 deaths (Frankenberg 2024). The confidential settlement agreements with the families of the dead—sums covered by event insurance rather than from the pockets of culpable executives—now seem like worthy investments to commodify the chaos of Scott’s brand. We can wonder if GG Allin could have been a commercial success in the general social and political context of 2025, perhaps opening at Astroworld with a Live Nation budget. What would we pay to see that, in person or from a distance on pay-per-view?

The norms and regulations guiding moshing vary by genre and region, and especially in the United States, it is unlikely that governmental or other collective action will do much.²⁴ So we’re probably on our own, with some counsel from lawyers who will continue to sue promoters until market forces make shows safer. Most of the mosh pit injury litigation, however, ends in confidential settlement agreements paid by insurers. This does little to make shows safer when insurance premiums are less than the profits to be gained.²⁵ So the next time you or your loved ones attend a show, you should not expect the artist, the promoter, the venue, or the government to ensure your safety. This leaves us mostly as individuals convening to consider the force of Slayer’s categorical imperative and social contract of grace in the pit: “That’s what you’re here to do, help each other out. This is a song called *War Ensemble*. . . .”²⁶

²⁴ For a collection of essays on global metal culture, see Wallach et al. (2011) and Varas-Díaz et al. (2023).

²⁵ See discussion of tort liability in mosh pits in Kim (2023).

²⁶ This appears in the introduction to the live version of “War Ensemble,” Slayer, *Decade of Aggression*, American Records, 1991. It can be heard at <https://youtu.be/-zy-80RQUis>.

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