Alma Mater – Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies
Research Article, JISC 2025:3, 127–139
DOI: 10.29329/almamater.2025.1360.10

Saberlight Chronicles Articulations of Metal Music and Fantasy in Fellowship's Concept Album (2022)

Thales Reis Alecrim[1]

Abstract

This paper investigates the articulations between metal music and fantasy fiction as a form of cultural cross-fertilization, focusing on the creation of narratives grounded in magical themes. Within this trend, there are two distinct creative processes: bands that draw on existing literature and those that create original stories. This study focuses on the latter, particularly on the album *Saberlight Chronicles* (2022) by Fellowship, which exemplifies how metal bands craft concept albums narrating original fantasy stories. Despite the existing scholarship addressing laterally the contacts between metal and fantasy, there is no relevant discussion exploring their relationship. This paper aims to fill a gap in the literature by analyzing how metal's fantastical narratives address both contemporary anxieties and historical continuities, offering a lens to speculate on alternative realities. Hence, the paper argues that modern metal's engagement with fantasy mediates long-standing cultural tensions of the enchantment of modernity that gain nuances when sedimented in the music record form. Therefore, metal and fantasy are shown not merely as escapism but as active tools for reimagining cultural processes, illustrating the influence of alternative realities in music expression. By examining the lyrics and musical structures that evoke fantasy, this paper aims to show how these strategies operate within a dialectic between freedom and control, reification and utopia. Consequently, metal music (particularly the subgenre known as power metal), in this context, becomes a site where cultural meaning is negotiated.

Keywords: metal music, fantasy, articulation, popular music, power metal

Introduction

Saberlight Chronicles (2022) is a concept album created by the Scottish power metal band Fellowship. By building on a long tradition of articulations between metal music and fantasy fiction, each track of this album represents a chapter of a longer narrative. What is intriguing is that, unlike other concept albums which adapt literary material, *Saberlight Chronicles* follows the other way around and produced an original narrative that was later crystallized in a novel, available for free download on the band's website (Colly, 2022).

Inside the plot of both the music and the text, the band Fellowship is depicted as a caravan of traveling bards. They also embody such characters in their musical performances. In this sense, *Saberlight Chronicles* takes the articulation between metal and fantasy to its apex, transforming even the musical performance into a fictional act. I think that such artistic proposition raises interesting questions regarding the role of imagining alternative worlds in metal music productions. More specifically, I am intrigued by what historical and cultural

[1] Doctoral Researcher, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Research Centre for Communication and Culture, Lisbon, Portugal. talecrim@ucp.pt, ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-4823-9646.

How to cite this article: Reis Alecrim, T. (2025). *Saberlight Chronicles*: Articulations of Metal Music and Fantasy in Fellowship's Concept Album (2022). In: *Alternative Realities, Special Issue of Alma Mater – Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies, 2025:3, 127–139.*
Submitted: 21.06.2025
Accepted: 07.07.2025

This article is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

conditions allow the emergence of *Saberlight Chronicles* and which ideas shape the construction of the meaning of this album.

To address such problems, in this paper, I approach *Saberlight Chronicles* to investigate the relationship between metal and fantasy. I aim to demonstrate how this specific cross-fertilization between music and fiction encompasses more than just the adaptation of material that informs the lyrics. As I suggest, it is an articulation, a cultural and historical process, that allowed the association between music and literary genre. More than a formalist or intertextual interpretation of how music can incorporate elements of fiction, I analyze *Saberlight Chronicles* as a symbolic practice that emerges to address cultural anxieties. By all means, while this study offers specific interpretations, it does not seek to foreclose other possible readings – instead, it hopes to open new avenues for critical discussion regarding the cultural role of imagining alternative worlds through music.

Furthermore, I suggest comprehending the relationship between metal and fantasy as an articulation. As Stuart Hall argues, "a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects" (Hall, 1986, 56). In popular music, Richard Middleton argues that articulating principles "operate by combining existing elements into new patterns or by attaching new connotations to them" (Middleton, 1990, 18). Therefore, in line with this theory that aims to understand how different cultural formations come into a relationship and what historical forces allow them to combine, I argue that the cross-fertilization between metal and fantasy is neither deterministic nor natural but a historically contingent cultural negotiation.

To demonstrate such claims, this study is divided into three sections. The first one historicizes the relationship between metal and fantasy by proposing a dialectical reading of both genres. However, my scope of investigation only encompasses the British and American contexts, since they are more immediately crucial to the present exploration. Following that, the next section analyzes *Saberlight Chronicles*, considering how the musical material and the structure of the novel follow a specific form of storytelling particular to metal music. Finally, the third segment coincides with the conclusion and proposes a theoretical reading of this album, arguing how the alternative world that emerges from its storytelling techniques expresses different layers of reification and utopia that mirror the cultural anxieties of late capitalism.

On Metal and Fantasy

Before proceeding, it is crucial to establish what I understand by fantasy. Unfortunately, I do not have enough space to elaborate on the pre-history of this literary genre, which encompasses myth, folk tales, religious stories, Gothic fiction, and Romanticism – see Mendlesohn and James (2008) and Attebery (2022) for a more extended discussion on the subject. For this reason, I ground my investigation in what is widely regarded as the foundation of modern fantasy – a literary movement that emerged in parallel in Britain and the United States in the early 1900s, with key contributions from J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis on one side of the Atlantic and Robert E. Howard on the other.

While fantasy has diversified into numerous subgenres since its emergence, this study focuses specifically on works that construct and narrate stories within fully realized alternative worlds. Important examples of this trend are Tolkien's Middle-Earth, Lewis's Narnia, and Howard's Hyborian Age – and later, it is also represented by Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea and Terry Prachet's Discworld. What characterizes all these examples of

alternative fictional worlds is the seeming absence of modernity; consequently, most of them embrace a medieval-like social structure, which substitutes modern bureaucracy and technology for magic and preternatural creatures.

To define his approach to worldbuilding, Tolkien (1964, 11-72) introduced the notion of the "secondary world" – an imagined realm constructed through sub-creation, drawing from myth and folklore (themselves part of primary Creation) while requiring internal historical and conceptual consistency. Building on that, Brian Attebery (2022, 42-45) argues that fantasy is a form of crafting fiction that proposes a gaze into the past, painting it in magical frames, while opposing realism and rationalism, but without abandoning modern narrative techniques. These perspectives paved the way for authors such as Anne Besson (2007), Michael Saler (2012) and William Blanc (2019) who argue that fantasy, especially stories about alternative worlds, present an attempt at re-enchanting a disenchanted world.

While recognizing these contributions, I would like to avoid binarisms – such as magic versus reason, or enchantment versus disenchantment. Instead, I propose a dialectic and materialistic reading of fantasy. To do so, I mobilize Fredric Jameson's critique (2002; 2005) to theorize fantasy as a negative space – its narrative exuberance marking the boundaries of historical possibility, its world-building exposing through compensation what material conditions render impossible. I will come back to this in the last section, where I propose the dialectic reading of *Saberlight Chronicles*.

Now, turning to metal music, it must be stated that although it is acknowledged and indicated by a few scholars in the field of metal music studies (Lusty, 2013, 101-138; Mora-Rioja, 2023, 183-184; McParland, 2016, 46; Spracklen, 2020, 75-88; Walser, 2014 [1993], 143), there is no systematic examination of the relationship between this genre and fantasy. Such a lack of interest is intriguing because, as Ruth Barratt-Peacock and Ross Hagen argue, "metal music is brimming with elsewheres, ranging from mid-twentieth century American motorcycle culture, to supernatural gothic horror, to futuristic science fiction, and many points besides" (2019, 4). Therefore, it seems that metal music has a strong connection with broader cultural trends that have been challenging the paradigms of realism and normative culture.

Nonetheless, even within the realms of popular music, metal is not a pioneer in claiming magical tropes. As early as the 1960s, English prog rock and hard rock bands began forging strong ties with speculative literature – a connection thoroughly examined in the texts of the volume edited by Chris Anderton and Lori Burns (2024). Indeed, there are some prolific, influential, and long-standing examples of this relationship.

One of the most important intertextual relationships between metal and fantasy is "The Wizard", a track in Black Sabbath's eponymous first album from 1970. This song is a direct reference to Gandalf, the wizard, one of the main characters of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. For instance, Led Zeppelin, another band that is placed as one of the founders of metal, has a long dialogue with J. R. R. Tolkien in songs such as "Ramble On", "Misty Mountain Hop", and "The Battle of Evermore".

The converse is equally valid, as exemplified by fantasy writers like Michael Moorcock, who actively engaged with rock music aesthetics and culture. Since the 1960s, he has composed lyrics in this genre for many bands of prog rock and metal, such as Hawkwind, Blue Öyster Cult, and Smoulder. Above all, Moorcock has his own rock project, a partnership with The Deep Fix.

However, it is noteworthy that the 1960s and 1970s watched an intense engagement with Tolkien's texts – and speculative fiction in general, such as the works of Ursula K. Le Guin

and Samuel Delany – in association with the counterculture and hippie movements, which saw in fantasy a critique of industrialization and technocracy (Macan, 1997, 80). In this sense, both Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin were in contact with these repertoires of ideas. However, in doing so, they also anticipated the articulations between metal and fantasy by sedimenting a range of lyrical tropes that were explored by the bands who looked to them in search of inspiration.

Yet, in the broader scope of 1970s popular culture, there are further intersections between metal and fantasy. During this decade, the world-famous role-playing game (RPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) premiered and forged strong connections with the emerging metal communities. The game was based on a fantasy setting and asked players to interpret their characters in the manner of a Tolkienesque quest. The importance of RPGs in the articulation between metal and fantasy cannot be dismissed, since bands like Twilight Force and Fellowship actively borrow from this source in their performances, in which they incorporate fictional characters.

During the 1980s, the tie between metal and fantasy strengthened due to the Satanic Panic, which connected both RPGs and the music genre in the social imaginary of Ronald Reagan's USA. In fact, such articulations are so culturally crystallized in media culture that, during the 2010s and 2020s, the connections between metal, RPG and fantasy were exhaustively explored in the plot of nostalgia television series about the 1980s, such as *Stranger Things* (since 2016 until present) and *Hysteria* (2024).

Yet, it was not until the late 1980s that metal bands began to systematically incorporate fantasy themes. The emergence of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) and the global popularization of the genre (mainly in Europe and North America), championed by bands such as Manowar (USA), Helloween (Germany), Mercyful Fate (Denmark), and Dio (UK), established fantasy as a reliable source of inspiration for lyrics and imagery.

Nonetheless, the incorporation of fantasy into metal has not only impacted lyrics and performance but also the musical material. As Heather Lusty argues, "[h]eavy metal's primary distinguishing characteristic is that it embraces a literary structure more than most popular music" (2013, 103), because of that, metal can produce melodic narratives. In analyzing the adaptation of English poetry to metal, Arturo Mora-Rioja argues that

> [u]nlike the average pop song, metal music welcomes extended introductions and endings, odd metres and metre switches, fast and slow passages, instrumental sections and architectural song designs sometimes reminiscent of classical music. (Mora-Rioja, 2022, 11)

I would like to borrow from Mora-Rioja's insights and also argue that metal songs can accommodate literary and fictional material because of the openness of their musical form, which is not strictly bound to the verse-chorus structure of most pop songs. Yet, it can also be the other way around: just because metal musicians wanted to adapt literary material, they tensioned and expanded the musical form. In any case, "metal's wide dramatic range" (Mora-Rioja, 2022, 11) – these traits include guitar distortion, intense rhythms, extreme volume contrasts, high-range singing (or guttural vocals in radical styles), and lengthy solo passages – allows the songs to embrace the expressivity and emotional value of fiction. Musically, this process is equally made possible by what Robert Walser (2014 [1993], 54) defines as a dialectic between freedom and control as the defining characteristics of metal music. I will return to this point in the last section because it is also connected with how the musical material addresses the demands of the historical conjuncture.

This embrace of fiction is multifaceted and concomitant with a myriad of references from popular culture. In this way, Hollywood films of the 1980s, such as *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) and *Highlander* (1986), offered role models and behavior patterns, while the epic

soundtracks were incorporated into metal's musicality. However, it was only later in the decade, in 1988, that Iron Maiden launched the main object of interest of this thesis, that is, the concept album that draws directly from fantasy literary texts.

A concept album is one in which the tracks, rather than standing alone, contribute to a larger narrative meaning – for a history of this recording practice, see Wolfson (2024). In this sense, the first metal attempt to adapt fantasy literary material, in which each song stands for a chapter, was Iron Maiden's *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son* (1988). However, instead of a literal adaptation, the band stylized the novel *Seventh Son* (1987) by Orson Scott Card. The album addresses similar themes of magic and folklore, but through a different narrative strategy that, unlike the source material, emphasizes the psychological state of the characters.

This approach to storytelling in metal concept albums was consolidated in a different subgenre, power metal, which is specifically concerned with fantasy themes and, thus, is the inheritor of Iron Maiden's NWOBHM musical style and storytelling techniques. In fact, metal music is brimming with different ramifications (see Hillier [2020] and Smialek [2015] for further discussion), but since I have limited space, I will just focus on power metal – although some black metal bands like Summoning and Dwarrowdelf also produce fantasy concept albums based on Tolkien's work.

Emerging from NWOBHM and speed metal influences of the 1980s, power metal prioritizes melodic speed over dissonance, favoring fantasy themes and neoclassical flourishes. Its hallmark – anthemic choruses set against fantastical lyrics – cultivates an aspirational, emotionally charged aesthetic distinct from extreme metal subgenres. Consequently, power metal also engaged in a constant dialogue with prog rock, borrowing from bands like Rainbow and Yes, to create a sense of otherworldly epicness related to heroic themes (Saguar García, 2021, 37-40).

In this way, the German band Blind Guardian, in *Nightfall in Middle-Earth* (1998), which adapted Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, built on the path paved by *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son*, but incremented it with opera performance, voice acting, and symphonic modulation (Calvo, 2011). Moreover, Blind Guardian, in narrating stories through their songs, assumed the imagery of bards, a movement that started to blur the line between fiction and musical performance (Ringsmut, 2024, 113).

Helloween, another influential German band, established power metal tropes not through literary adaptations but by crafting original fantasy worlds in their *Keeper of the Seven Keys* albums (1987-1988). As the 1990s unfolded, this musical current began absorbing tabletop RPG influences. Pioneering groups such as Italy's Rhapsody of Fire and later Sweden's Twilight Force embraced persistent fantasy stage personas while constructing elaborate album-length sagas that progressed like role-playing campaigns.

Therefore, by building on both trends, that is, the intertextual dialogue with literary material and the creation of original fantasy fiction, Fellowship establishes an interesting laboratory to explore the articulation between metal and fantasy. Consequently, in the following section, I proceed with an analysis of the musical and lyrical material, concomitant with the novel, of *Saberlight Chronicles*.

The Articulations of *Saberlight Chronicles*

The following analysis of *Saberlight Chronicles* is sustained by a dialectical procedure, one that borrows elements from Theodor Adorno's (2001 [1938]; 1982) reading of the relationship between the musical material and social history. However, this repertoire of

ideas was designed to examine the canon of 19th-century Western music, later encompassing also the avant-garde of modernism in the 20th century. For this reason, it is important to counterbalance Adorno's mistrust of popular music with a theoretical and methodological framework that blends critical theory, history and cultural studies.

In this way, through a formal analysis of the musical (and lyrical) material, I argue that it is possible to address broader elements of the cultural environment in which this artifact emerged, such as the tensions between ideology and hegemony. This position is a means to investigate ideas that were culturally relevant in the shaping of the possible meanings of this album. Consequently, the analysis of the music itself is not enough, especially when dealing with concept albums, since the meaning is equally constructed against the whole cultural constructs that shape and are shaped by the musical activity. For this reason, Juan Pablo González (2023) proposes an intermedial music analysis, one that brings different references that also illuminate aspects of the process of musicking (Small, 1998), such as interviews, paratexts, and imagery.

With those parameters established, I can proceed with the analysis of *Saberlight Chronicles*, both the album and the novel. First of all, Matthew Corry, the vocalist of Fellowship, stated in an interview with the website *Angry Metal Guy* that "There will be a novella for every album that we do. I am committed to saying that" (Elitist, 2024). However, this literary material is not an imposition or something outside the formal structure of the music: "[t]he origin of the novella is as a writing tool, to keep album one lyrically fresh, and it just sprawled into a novella. I love that idea, so now we're doing it every time" (Elitist, 2004). Therefore, the novel emerged as a consequence of the narrative structure of the album.

In reality, this is very clear in the formal aspects of the literary material, since it is mostly a skeleton or a framework for a plot, lacking more sophisticated techniques common to fantasy literature like detailed descriptions of the social setting, represented thought, and manipulation of time and perspective (Attebery, 2022, 45). Therefore, the album is neither an adaptation of the novel, nor a stylization, nor a form of transmedia or intermedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006). Whereas the album presents a self-contained narrative, the novel acts as both structural reinforcement and hermeneutic guide – a paratext that binds the work together while decoding musical storytelling techniques that might otherwise remain opaque.

Moreover, a particularly compelling dimension of this album's fictional construct lies in its metafictional layering – the band members themselves embody the Fellowship characters across both musical and literary manifestations of the narrative. Every album or novel is "the tale of the Fellowship itself, which is a set of immortal storytellers, cursed to tell every story from history, that they experience whenever they are asked" (Elitist, 2004). This is a metafictional device that connects different albums within what Anne Besson (2004) defines as a cycle romanesque. Hence, each new album narrates a different story, but all of them are unified within the same universe by the Fellowship itself, not only as musicians but also as fictional characters. As Corry explains, "[e]verything exists in the same universe, where the characters of Fellowship are represented in the prologue and epilogue of every book as storytellers" (Elitist, 2004).

Indeed, both the novel and the album start and end with the events that have led the Fellowship to narrate the story that the listener/reader follows. Accordingly, the first track of *Saberlight Chronicles,* "Until the Fires Die", is the introduction of the Fellowship, the fictional band, who invite the listeners to enjoy the story – "Come with me/ I'll take you on a hero's journey/ Through the hills and spires of history's spell". It opens with a playful introduction on the xylophone, set on a major scale, followed by the distorted and bright-timbre guitar that already establishes the recurring main riff of the song, the same one used

in the chorus. In fact, the role of "Until the Fires Die" is to establish the mood of the album.

Moreover, the song employs the compound AABA, the hegemonic musical form in metal music. As Stephen Hudson (2023) argues, it is also a musical storytelling strategy that combines musical material and lyrics to produce a coherent narrative. This riff-centered AABA arrangement juxtaposes the structural cohesion of the A section (introduction, verse, chorus) against the destabilizing bridge (B section), often realized through a guitar solo. Hudson (2021, 12) grounds his assertion of AABA's prevalence in metal by referring to John Covach's (2005, 68) work, which traces the form's origins to early American 20th-century popular music.

In this way, the musical and lyrical material of the A sections presents the Fellowship while addressing and demanding the participation of the listener in the unfolding of this story. This is confirmed by the catchy chorus – "Hold your hearts up and lift them high/ Live your life with a battle cry/ Sing with us 'til the fires die/ Fellowship foretold!" – which was designed to work as a moment of sing-along. However, the B section of the song, that is, the guitar solo, builds on the long-phrased melody, reminiscent of the 1980s neoclassical metal, to create a mythical aura, grounding the perspective of the listeners as witnesses of an epic tale. After establishing the fantastic setting of the album, the song returns to the chorus and closes with the final resolution of the melody.

Since the album has already introduced the storytelling role of the Fellowship, it now presents the narrative of the *Saberlight Chronicles*. The second track, "Atlas", in which the title refers to the main character of that tale, positions the listener inside the main story. Nonetheless, the lyrics present little of the plot; instead, the verses focus on demonstrating the inner conflicts of Atlas. Accordingly, the musical form develops an interesting variation of the compound AABA, switching some passages to introduce the state of confusion, resembling something like an AABABAB structure. If the B sections reflect a moment of destabilization of the narrative, they are sustained in this song to reiterate the constant state of conflict.

"Atlas" revolves around two characters who must act in the face of the upcoming invasion of the Empire. Firstly, it presents Sahn, an ancient Oldkin woman (as the name says, she is part of a giant-like elder race), who has the duty of overseeing Lar Valley, the sanctuary that protects the holy weapon, Saberlight. Her perspective is mostly introduced in the first stanza, accompanied by a melancholic melody in minor key conducted only by the bass, drums, and some piano phrases – "I am something ancient/ I am something yet to be/ This body is my chronicle and history/ Sail beyond this heart of mine/ Find life beyond its reach". This is an engaging instrumentalization that connects low sounds with the Oldkin, who is associated with the earth and knowledge.

Secondly, Atlas appears, while he watches the approach of the Empire and the Death Wizards who will raid over Lar in search of the legendary sword. The song's introduction of the character is marked by a modulation to a brighter, more vigorous guitar riff that establishes both the character's thematic motif and the chorus's musical foundation. This energized passage then lyrically articulates the protagonist's central conflicts: "Save the knowledge and the knight/ Pray that we'll be sanctified/ Hope's enough to bear the sky/ So make of me an Atlas, I/ Hold upon this bitter lie/ That sacrifice is justified/ Oh, better yet to do than die/ So bear the sky these calloused hands of mine".

Despite the heroic tone and chorus, the song is mostly about Atlas's despair, doubts, and frustration. He wants to use Saberlight to fight against the enemies, while Sahn refuses this plan; instead, she wants him to run rather than fight – the elder knows this is a battle they cannot win and would rather preserve one life than witness another needless sacrifice. To

introduce such motifs, the song enters into a very short guitar solo that ends abruptly with the question "How can I go on?". Following that, a longer guitar solo emerges, suggesting Atlas's despair facing the upcoming destruction of Lar. Much like film scores use leitmotifs to represent characters off-screen, these solos acquire narrative meaning through the novel's contextualization. This symbiotic relationship transforms the text into a hermeneutic paratext for decoding the album's musical material.

The next track, "Glory Days", is quite successful in its embrace of musical and lyrical storytelling. By adopting the compound AABA structure, it narrates how Sahn liberates the people of Lar from their oath of protecting the sword. However, instead of running, they stay and fight against the Empire. To convey this feeling of epic and melancholic self-sacrifice, this song gladly applies many conventional structures of power metal songs: orchestral introduction, galloping rhythm, chorus accompanied by a choir-like chant, and, above all, the use of the Mixolydian mode, emphasizing the V–IV–I turnaround. Although the end of "Glory Days" builds a sense of epicness – a common trait of the genre that emerges from, for example, large instrumentation, wide dynamic range, long forms or movements, sustained arpeggios, and progressions of power chords (Saguar García, 2021, 37-40) –, the outcome is tragic: the people of Lar and Sahn are killed by the Death Wizards.

Atlas tried to avoid that by taking the test of the Saberlight; this episode is addressed by the fourth track, "Oak and Ash". In the novel, this moment is almost unimpactful due to the hasty writing. In the album, however, this song plays a central role, tackling the main question of narrative: how can one be worthy amidst despair? The whole character arc of Atlas revolves around this doubt, and the chorus states it clearly: "Please help my heart release/ All of this anxiety/ Someone tell me, am I worthy?". To convey this theme, "Oak and Ash" opens with a fast and long guitar riff in a minor key that sets a tone of urgency, raising the tension of the music that finds resolution only in the chorus.

Following the plot, Atlas fails the test and, after witnessing the death of all the inhabitants of Lar, he runs to the mountains. This leads to the fifth track, "Hearts Upon The Hill", which follows the train of thought that Atlas has while he flees into the wilderness. The intro of this song – a chord progression of Dm–Bb–C–F played in 4/4 tempo – suggests the presence of the D Aeolian (natural minor), one of the most used modal structures in metal music. The qualities of this mode evoke melancholic and heroic auras – evidently, these connotations are not intrinsic to the musical material but are always relational, being historically and culturally constructed (Walser, 2014 [1993], 47). In this song, it is also conveyed by the vocal performance and the content of the lyrics.

Here, a melancholic mood makes sense within the narrative of the album, which is musically sustained by the lack of a leading tone. Hence, the song avoids strong resolution tension, making the mood more tragic or introspective than dramatic. In this sense, the listener is invited into the psyche of Atlas, who sees his own survival as bittersweet. Therefore, just as the mythological Atlas was condemned to hold the celestial spheres, this character must bear the burden of living with the memory of the self-sacrifice of his people. Yet, the whole epic tone of the song and the chorus also suggests a glimpse of hope – "So comes the day we forge another storm/ And triumph in the end of things". The slow and atmospheric guitar solo also evokes such contradictory feelings between melancholy and hope.

Nonetheless, "Hearts Upon The Hill" finds its resolution (musically, lyrically and narratively) in the sixth track, "Scars And Shrapnel Wounds". This is the last song I analyze in depth because, from now on, the album starts to repeat its musical structures in a mirrored fashion. More than that, this track is a moment of inflection in the narrative, leaving the tragic events behind and embracing a more wholesome feeling. Such a change

in the mood is clear even in the harmony of the song, which modulates from G major (that creates chromatic tension) to G Mixolydian, having the G major as a pedal chord that marks the transitions from moments of tension towards comfortable resolutions.

The plot tells how Atlas finally leaves the mountains and falls into a battle between the rebels and the Death Wizards. Instead of running and crying for those whom he has lost, Atlas decides to accompany the resistance: "Cause there's always things that scream at me from the darkness/ And there's always, yet more wars left to fight." In the same spirit of these verses, the chorus reiterates the idea of acknowledging the pain while moving on with life: "All the scars and shrapnel wounds/ Well they ache with every movement/ And the battles fought for love are getting harder every day". This resolution is also the theme of the seventh track, "The Hours Of Wintertime", when Atlas realizes that he must act regardless of fear or uncertainty.

The eighth track, "Glint", undermines what was expected to be a tale of vengeance. It describes when Atlas is accepted by the Saberlight, leading him to realize that "I've always been worthy/ I know that you know me". He also discovers its true power: it is a sword of healing, not destruction. At this moment, the answer to the question of one's worth amidst despair depends on how one reacts to life. It is merely an individual choice of self-making. This point comes back at the ninth and tenth tracks, "The Saint Beyond The River" and "Silhouette", which narrate how Atlas builds alliances not with power, but through example and conviction, while his healing becomes as legendary as any weapon.

In a very fast piece of music, marked by the constant use of the drums' double-bass, "Still Enough", the eleventh track, narrates the self-realization of Atlas, resulting in self-trust and respect: "I stand within the morning lights/ With my hope and heart on either side/ I'll take a lion's share of pride/ And trust that I've got strength inside". In the novel, this passage is not narrated from his perspective, but it is rendered in an epistolary format. The album, however, by singing from Atlas's perspective, maintains the role of the bards as storytellers of a tale that finds its closure in the last track, "Avalon".

Both the chapter and the song are quite significant because they present, to use Jameson's concept (2005, 4), a Utopian investment. Avalon is a name that Atlas saw in the Saberlight's shrine. However, throughout his journey, he realized that it is not a place, but an idea: a future worth striving toward. The island of Avalon is where Arthur recovers after being wounded; it is constantly evoked throughout British history to refer to a healing utopia (Blanc, 2020, 8). *Saberlight Chronicles* embraces this idea from the Arthurian cycle to suggest how music heals and might offer "us the symbols of [a] potential society which lies still beyond our grasp" (Small, 1980, 118). For this reason, "Avalon" is a long song (9:08 minutes), spawning long melodies and instrumental sections. While it sometimes points towards community ("I'll make my empathy my pride"), this Utopian investment is embedded in heroic individualism and neoliberal subjectivity ("I will forge my own candescent life/ I'll be my father and my guide"). Herein lies the dialectic between freedom and control, reification and utopia, that revolves around the articulation between metal and fantasy.

Conclusion: Reification and Utopia, Freedom and Control

If Jameson is right, fantasy is "a celebration of human creative power and freedom which becomes idealistic only by virtue of the omission of precisely those material and historical constraints" (2002, 278). This means that, as a fictional mode, it expresses a Utopian longing for a world in which it is possible to imagine what is beyond the constraints of capitalist modernity. Nonetheless, fantasy operates as ideological reification, mystifying

capitalism's own magical thinking (as seen in commodity fetishism), while simultaneously articulating Utopian impulses that imagine alternative worlds. Thus, it exists in perpetual contradiction: reproducing yet yearning to transcend the logic of capital – in other words, fantasy is entangled within reification and utopia.

This view demands a broader Marxist cultural analysis – one that retains its critical task of exposing how artifacts reinforce power and ideology but also recognizes their utopian potential as expressions of collective unity. These functions form a dialectical totality, and they should not be regarded as competing forces (Jameson, 2002 [1981], 282). Moreover, *Saberlight Chronicles* is not only a fantasy narrative but also a metal music album. In this regard, there is a concomitant dialectic that is happening in the musical material that equally articulates within the historical conjuncture, one between freedom and control.

Metal's innovation in the 1980s – from NWOBHM to its transatlantic evolution – lies precisely in what Robert Walser identifies as its core dialectic: the tension between freedom and control. This manifests musically through the guitar's improvisational flights (with their liberating solos and fills) locked in dynamic struggle with the rhythm section's imposing structure (the bass's physicality and drums' metronomic violence). Crucially, this is not a mere opposition. As Walser (2014 [1993], 54) notes, the solo's transcendent virtuosity allows listeners to identify with power without feeling subjugated by it – a musical allegory that reassures survival amid capitalist modernity. The genre thus encodes in the musical material both the threat of control and the euphoria of overcoming it.

The alternative world of *Saberlight Chronicles* indeed expresses a form of utopia in which an individual can overcome their personal tragedies and achieve freedom. Musically, this is suggested by the liberating presence of guitar solos in the B sections of the songs, disrupting the rhythmic and modal control. Additionally, it suggests that any person can build their own destiny as the result of a self-making process: building oneself as an enterprise.

What is curious is that the promise of unrestricted freedom for the individual is the unfulfilled promise of neoliberal capitalism, the very hegemonic order across Western societies since the 1980s – for a historical overview of this economic form, see Perry Anderson (2025). So, is Fellowship simply reproducing the dominant values and stating that we are already living in a utopia? I do not think it is such a linear process. Furthermore, the band required an alternative world to make this possible, in which the immateriality of music supports the moments of transcendence. The album basically states that it is impossible to become a fully realized individual within the control of capitalist modernity.

On the one hand, this album presents a reification process. It invites the subjects to imagine themselves as going through a neoliberal self-making endeavor toward a commodity subjectivity. Reification is the transformation of humanity into marketable items. As Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2016, 398) argue, neoliberalism intensifies this process by emphasizing individual responsibility, market-based solutions, and the pursuit of self-interest. This is ideologically linked to the idea of freedom, which in neoliberal societies is strictly connected to consumerism and work. Hence, neoliberalism forces individuals to treat their own subjectivity as a commodity: entrepreneurs of the self are constantly striving to increase their value and adapt to the market society.

In the album, Atlas's journey is a constant struggle for self-making individuality and unrestricted freedom. When he ceases to carry the burden of grief, which linked him to his community, and assumes a heroic and triumphant individualism, he becomes a legendary example to be followed. At the musical level, the album faithfully sticks to the power metal conventions to provide a growing sense of epicness supported by comfortable resolutions for the melodic tensions. It suggests, therefore, that the genre's musical structures – with

their predictable harmonic payoffs and climactic buildups – sonically naturalize this ideological transition from collective mourning to solitary heroism. The very conventions that create cathartic release for listeners simultaneously reinforce the neoliberal fantasy of self-made transcendence, masking the social costs of Atlas's abandonment of communal ties.

On the other hand, the Utopian impulse in the narrative paradoxically champions an individual freedom that transcends its source of oppression – the Empire, which allegorizes the State's castrating role under capitalism. Atlas only achieves true agency when he wields Saberlight not as a weapon of destruction but as a tool of healing, enabling him to reconcile his subjectivity with collective liberation. His victory over the Empire establishes Avalon, a utopian community that harmonizes individualism with empathy, suggesting that magic (as a metaphor for the human potentialities) enables political reorganization beyond exploitative systems. Musically, this vision is reinforced through power metal's signature elements: liberating guitar solos against rigid rhythmic structures, while extended melodic passages evoke contemplative release. Although conventional to the genre, these features narratively mirror the overthrow of oppressive control, musically enacting the album's central dialectic – individual freedom emerging from, yet ultimately transforming, collective struggle.

As I stated in the introduction, it is not my aim to foreclose the interpretations of this phenomenon. Instead, I want this text to be read as a challenge that might open new avenues and readings of the prolific articulations between metal music and fantasy. Therefore, I questioned the simplistic claims of escapism and superficiality that are bestowed over these genres to propose a dialectical reading, which oscillates between reification and utopia, freedom and control. Nonetheless, different facets deserve more attention than I could provide here – the blurring line between musical performance and fiction; the intersections of metal music and fantasy with other popular culture artifacts; a more sustained musical analysis of how the sense of heroic epicness is evoked, etc. However, I hope to have demonstrated how *Saberlight Chronicles* is representative of a paradox: power metal is a musical genre bound by reification and control that, nonetheless, in its finest moments, offers the silhouettes of alternative worlds, allowing us to imagine what lies beyond the grasp of the logic of capital.

References

Adorno, T. W. (2010). *Le Caractère fétiche dans la musique et la régression de l'écoute*. Paris, France: Éditions Allia.

Adorno, T. W., and Horkheimer, M. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Adorno, T. W., and Paddison, M. (1982). On the Problem of Musical Analysis. *Music Analysis*, *1*(2), 169-187.

Anderson, P. (2025, April 3). Regime Change in the West? *London Review of Books*, *47*(06). https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v47/n06/perry-anderson/regime-change-in-the-west

Anderton, C., and Burns, L. (2024). *The Routledge Handbook of Progressive Rock, Metal, and the Literary Imagination*. London, England: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Attebery, B. (2022). *Fantasy: How It Works*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Besson, A. (2007). *La Fantasy*. Paris, France: Klincksieck.

Blanc, W. (2019). *Winter is Coming: Une brève histoire politique de la fantasy*. Paris, France: Libertalia.

Blanc, W. (2020). *Le Roi Arthur, un mythe contemporain*. Paris, France: Libertalia.

Blind Guardian. (1998). *Nightfall in Middle-Earth* [CD]. Virgin Records.

Calvo, M. (2011). Nightfall in Middle-Earth: Un Disco de Blind Guardian Inspirado en 'El Simarillion' de J. R. R. Tolkien. *Revista DIGILENGUAS*, *10*, 48-57.

Card, O. S. (1987). *Seventh Son*. New York, NY: Tor Books.

Corry, M. (2022). *The Saberlight Chronicles*. N. P. https://www.fellowshipmetal.com/novels

Covach, J. (2005). Form in Rock Music: A Primer. In D. Stein, *Engaging Music: Essays in Music Analysis* (65-76). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Dardot, P., & Laval, C. (2016). *A nova razão do mundo: Ensaio sobre a sociedade neoliberal*. São Paulo, SP: Boitempo.

Elitist, E. (2024, December 2). Interview with Fellowship's Matthew Corry and Callum Tuffen. *Angry Metal Guy*. https://www.angrymetalguy.com/interview-with-fellowships-matthew-corry-and-callum-tuffen/

Fellowship. (2022). *The Saberlight Chronicles* [CD]. Avalon.

Frith, S. (1996). *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press.

González, J. P. (2023). *Música popular autoral de fines del siglo XX: Estudios intermediales*. Santiago, Chile: Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado.

Hagen, R., and Barratt-Peacock, R. (Eds.). (2019). *Medievalism and Metal Music Studies: Throwing Down the Gauntlet*. Bingley, England: Emerald Publishing.

Hall, S. (1986). On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *10*(2), 45-60.

Hall, S. (2011). The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees. In D. Morley and K.-H. Chen (Eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. London, England: Routledge.

Hillier, B. (2020). Considering genre in metal music. *Metal Music Studies*, *6*(1), 5-26.

Hoad, C. (2021). *Heavy Metal Music, Texts, and Nationhood: (Re)sounding Whiteness*. London: England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hudson, S. (2023). Song form and storytelling in mainstream metal. *Metal Music Studies*, *9*(1), 7-26.

Hudson, S. S. (2021). Compound AABA Form and Style Distinction in Heavy Metal. *Music Theory Online*, *27*(1), 1-31.

Iron Maiden. (1988). *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son* [LP]. EMI Records.

James, E., & Mendlesohn, F. (2008). *A Short History of Fantasy*. Oxford, England: Middlesex University Press.

Jameson, F. (2002). Radical Fantasy. *Historical Materialism*, *10*(4), 273-280.

Jameson, F. (2005). *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London, England: Verso.

Jameson, F. (2007). *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Repr). London, England: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Lowy, M., and Sayre, R. (2016). *Revolta e Melancolia: O romantismo na contracorrente da modernidade*. São Paulo, SP: Boitempo.

Lusty, H. L. (2013). Rocking the Canon: Heavy Metal and Classical Literature. *Latch*, *6*, 101-138.

Macan, E. (1997). *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and Counterculture*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Middleton, R. (1990). *Studying Popular Music*. London, England: McGraw-Hill Education.

Mora-Rioja. (2023). *Poetry in English and Metal Music*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ringsmut, M. (2024). Into the Storm: Blind Guardian's Nightfall in Middle-earth and the Tolkien Reception in German Metal Music. In C. Anderton & L. Burns (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Progressive Rock, Metal, and the Literary Imagination* (107-116). London, England: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Saguar García, Amaranta (2021), "¿Héroes modernos? Una lectura neotradicionalista de lo épico en el heavy metal", *Ínsula*, *900*, 37–40.

Saler, M. (2012). *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Small, C. (1980). *Music, Society, Education: A radical examination of the prophetic function of music in Western, Eastern and African cultures & its impact on society & its use in education*. London, England: John Calder.

Small, C. (1998). *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Smialek, E. (2015). *Genre and Expression in Extreme Metal Music, ca. 1990-2015*. Montreal, Canada: McGill University.

Spracklen, K. (2020). *Metal Music and The Re-Imagining of Masculinity, Place, Race and Nation*. Bingley, England: Emerald Publishing.

Tolkien, J. R. R. (1964). *Tree and Leaf.* London, England: Unwin Books.

Walser, R. (2014). *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Wolfson, E. (2024). *Fifty Years of the Concept Album in Popular Music, from The Beatles to Beyoncé*. London, England: Bloomsbury Academic.