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Bridges to Free-Standing Bridges – or – The Mutable Modular Model of Metal Music

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Heavy metal's defiance of social and musical norms has been a source of fascination since the genre's earliest days. But although scholars have been attentive to metal's unique musical expressions, little literature has been devoted to the analysis of musical form. This paper codifies common strategies in metal song forms and theorizes how metal's transgressive tendencies manifest in formal functions. Transgression implies a dialectical relationship, the negation of a normative standard. Metal composers frequently use rotational forms found throughout Western popular music but are also prone to modifying and avoiding common song forms, a behavior that can be read through *dialogic form*, "reconstructing a processual dialogue between any individual work (or section thereof) and the charged network of generic norms, guidelines, possibilities, expectations, and limits provided by the implied genre at hand" (Hepokoski 2010, 71). At the same time, metal's transgression has deeper implications for teleology. Abjection (Kristeva 1982; Dee 2009) provides a means for metal to construct dialectical identities by deferring or denying telos in favor of liminality, the state of being in-between. Whereas pop and rock usually treat the chorus as a song's most significant formal goal, metal composers' expansion of bridge sections and the distortion or omission of rotational units pushes form outside of normative confines, producing sections and song forms that complicate narratives of formal progression.

Many pop, rock and metal songs follow the template of compound AABA form, wherein each A section contains a cycle beginning with a verse and ending with a chorus, and where the

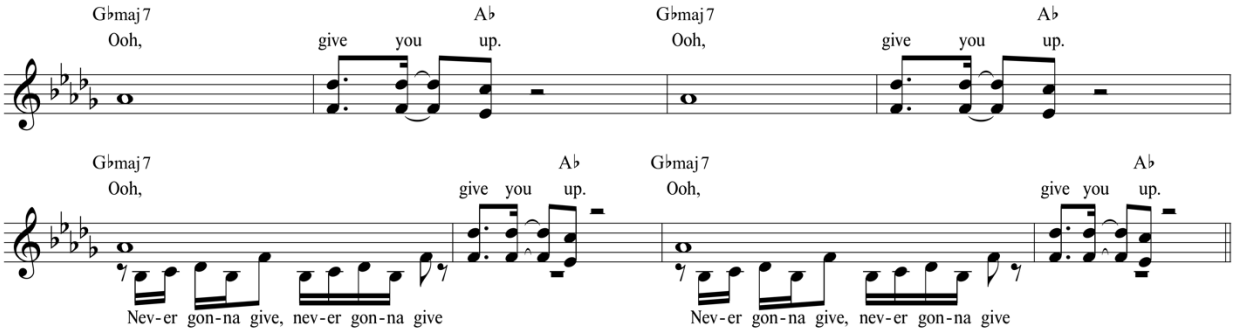
B section is analogous to the bridge or "middle eight" from Tin Pan Alley AABA pop songs, earning it the designation of "bridge section" (Covach 2005, 74; Nobile 2020, 105). Because the compound A section is repeated and contains a form-functional sequence, compound AABA form may be considered a rotational form (Van Valkenburg 2010, 29-30; Hepokoski and Darcy 2006, 16f).

Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up" (Table 1) is an ideal example of a pop song using compound AABA form not only because it conforms to the large-scale formal scheme, but because each successive rotation contains more and more repetitions of the song's infectious chorus module, with the final rotation fading out on the third time the chorus sounds. Successive repetition of the chorus within the cycle does not affect its formal-harmonic structure, but it does show which section receives the most rhetorical emphasis and therefore reveals the functional priority of the chorus (within the song and the pop genre by extension).

Table 1. Rick Astley, "Never Gonna Give You Up" (*Whenever You Need Somebody*, 1987)

Compound Section	Time	Section	Description
Introduction	0:00	Intro	
A	0:19	Verse	
	0:36	Prechorus	
	0:44	Chorus	
A	1:01	Verse	
	1:17	Prechorus	
	1:26	Chorus	
	1:43	Chorus	
B	2:00	Bridge	Groove bridge
A	2:17	Verse	Only voice and drums
	2:34	Prechorus	
	2:42	Chorus	
	2:59	Chorus	
	3:16 – 3:36	Chorus	Fade out

The bridge by contrast spans a diminutive eight measures, or approximately seventeen seconds, and consists of a repeated two-measure subphrase which is only marginally developed by the accumulative addition of a counterpoint (see Example 1).



Example 1. "Never Gonna Give You Up," bridge section.

Metal's compound AABA songs may seem structurally similar to their pop counterparts, but they often feature a multi-sectional bridge that I will call the *monumental bridge*. Monumental bridges are characterized by an ex-tempore quality and rhetoric of transcendence through a principally through-composed succession of bridge modules that engage listeners in liminal experiences including solos, melodic breaks, non-teleological texted sections and breakdowns. The types or variety of bridge modules used does not impact formal rhetoric so much as the serial procession of multiple bridges does; the decision to chain together bridges makes them seem less perfunctory and more deliberative, albeit in a direction uncharted by normative teleological formal functions. The monumental bridge, being a non-rotational compound section, also provides a counterbalance to the rotational verse-chorus cycle. Robert Walser may have sensed this tension in metal's narrative rhetoric through a "heavy metal dialectic" between control (represented through the ensemble and riffs) and freedom (guitar solos

and fills) (Walser 1993, 53–54). Walser's paradigm does not extend to form; without the topic of the solo—which can occur at any point—freedom fails to materialize (33–34). However, guitar solos are closely associated with bridge sections (Hudson 2019, 19), and the form-functional dialectic between cyclic and non-cyclic compound sections seems to capture the spirit of Walser's control/freedom dialectic in a compositionally tenable manner without the elitist implications of instrumental virtuosity that some bands may seek to avoid (Dee 2009, 63–67).

Monumental bridges are also spaces for subgenre identification and individualization. For instance, the presence of breakdowns in a bridge section identifies "groove-oriented thrash metal," hardcore punk, some death metal, deathcore, metalcore and djent (Gamble 2019, 339–345). Iron Maiden's "2 Minutes to Midnight" (Table 2) contains a monumental bridge featuring the signature sound of the group's two guitarists, Adrian Smith and Dave Murray, performing twin leads.

Table 2. Iron Maiden, "2 Minutes to Midnight" (*Powerslave*, 1984).

Compound Section	Time	Section	Description
Introduction	0:00	Intro	Verse riff
A	0:32	Verse	
	0:52	Prechorus	
	1:12	Chorus	
A	1:33	Verse	
	2:04	Prechorus	
	2:24	Chorus	
B (Monumental Bridge)	2:45	Bridge a	Guitar duet
	3:06	Bridge b	Guitar solo
	3:26	Bridge c	Instrumental break
	3:46	Bridge c'	Guitar solo
A	4:12	Verse	
	4:42	Prechorus	
	5:02	Chorus	
Coda	5:22 – 6:04	Coda	

The monumental bridge is just one way that metal musicians dialogue with pop/rock norms. Hudson places compound AABA form into a family of formal types he calls "rotational forms with bridge," which contains truncations (AAB, ABA) and expansions (AAABA,

AABABA, AABACA, etc.) of the compound AABA model. Judas Priest's "Painkiller" (see Table 3) is an example of an expansion (AABACA'D), with the short rotational cycles seemingly eclipsed by the much more expansive and virtuosic bridge sections. A more common situation is truncation. Death's "Out of Touch" (see

Table ***4***) uses compound ABA form. Due to its formal layout, an uninitiated listener would have no way to tell that the form of "Out of Touch" is rotational until after the monumental bridge. This means it is effectively through-composed until the second A rotation, whereupon the song *becomes* rotational. Or, put another way, the form is in a liminal state until the repetition of the verse–prechorus–chorus cycle: possessing the form-functional markers of a rotational form with bridge but lacking validating periodicity. A dialectical process is created between the mundane rotational form on the one hand and the transcendental through-composed form on the other, tending toward through-composition but ultimately resolving in a rotational form.

Table 3. Judas Priest, "Painkiller" (Painkiller, 1990).

Compound Section	Time	Section	Description
Introduction	0:00	Intro	
A	0:18	Verse	
	0:45	Chorus	
A	0:55	Verse	
	1:13	Chorus	
B (Monumental Bridge)	1:22	Bridge a	Instrumental break
	1:41	Bridge b	Texted bridge
	2:09	Bridge c	Guitar solo
	2:40	Bridge d	Guitar solo
	3:18	Bridge e	Guitar duet
A	3:36	Verse	
	3:55	Chorus	
C	4:14	Bridge f	Instrumental break
	4:32	Bridge g	Instrumental break
A'	4:42	Chorus	
	5:00	Postchorus	
D	5:10	Bridge h	Guitar solo
Coda	5:33 – 6:07	Coda	Chorus-based

Table 4. Death, "Out of Touch" (*Individual Thought Patterns*, 1993).

Compound Section	Time	Section	Description
Introduction	0:00	Intro	
A	0:41	Verse	
	1:05	Prechorus	
	1:25	Chorus	
B (Monumental Bridge)	1:44	Bridge a	Bridge intro
	2:12	Bridge a'	Texted bridge
	2:20	Bridge b	Guitar solo
	2:49	Bridge c	Instrumental break ⇒
	2:58	Bridge c'	Texted bridge
	3:08	Bridge d	Retransition
A	3:12	Verse	
	3:36	Prechorus	
	3:56 – 4:23	Chorus	

Metallica's "Fade to Black" (Table 5) is in compound AAB form, featuring a terminal bridge. If compound ABA songs flirt with through-composition, compound AAB songs undermine teleology by concluding with a bridge section instead of a thematic rotation. Although "Fade to Black" does not contain a texted chorus, the cyclical design of the compound A section and the soloistic monumental bridge is clearly in dialogue with compound AABA form (Van Valkenburg 2010, 30). The materials of the A rotations also require retrospective reinterpretation to recognize their formal functions. What initially sounds like a second introduction module becomes (⇒) a vamp of the verse riff when the voice enters in a', thus creating a permeable boundary between introduction and the first A rotation (symbolized in Table 5 by a dotted line between the compound sections). The second A rotation differs from the first by the insertion of a guitar solo over the verse riff, imitating the behavior of an interlude or bridge and once again creating a permeable boundary that is only retrospectively realized to be a second A rotation when the voice enters again and the rest of the verse–chorus cycle is actualized. Trevor de Clercq refers to formal functions where "aspects of two (or more) section roles appear to exist within the

same span of music" as "blends" (de Clercq 2012, 213). Janet Schmalfeldt's processual concept of becoming captures this effect well too (Schmalfeldt 2011, 8–9).

Table 5. Metallica, "Fade to Black" (*Ride the Lightning*, 1984).

Compound Section	Time	Section	Description
Introduction	0:00	Intro a	Guitar solo
A	**0:54**	**a (Intro b ⇒ Verse Vamp)**	**Verse riff**
	1:28	a' (Verse)	
	2:02	b (Chorus)	Untexted
A'	**2:34**	**a'' (Interlude/Verse Vamp)**	**Guitar solo**
	2:50	a' (Verse)	
	3:25	b (Chorus)	Untexted
B (Monumental Bridge)	3:55	Bridge a	Texted bridge
	4:37	Bridge a	Texted bridge
	4:51	Bridge a'	Guitar solo
	5:04	Bridge b	Guitar solo
	5:45 – 6:57	Bridge b'	Guitar solo

Compound AAB songs challenge the very concept of a bridge, and indeed the sectional terminology of popular music is disputed particularly where the bridge is concerned. Christopher Endrinal criticizes the term "bridge" because of the semantic implication of formal linkage (a point I agree with), and instead suggests "interlude" and "interverse" to replace instrumental and vocal bridges respectively (Endrinal 2008, 74–75). Drew Nobile points to the harmonic instability of many bridges as integral to "setting up a climactic return to the main material" (Nobile 2020, 154), implying that bridges must necessarily link two sections. Both authors assume the interiority of bridges/interludes/interverses—that is to say that these sections are located *between* rotations of verse-chorus cycles. I retain the "bridge" label in the case of all rotational-forms-with-bridge—AAB included—because historical provenance is relevant to a dialectical conception of song form.[1] At the same time, I reject formal linking and sectional contrast as essential features of bridge sections. A first-time listener to "Fade to Black" who is

[1] For this reason, as well as the lack of a terminal climax, Brad Osborn's terminally climactic form is not a good fit for compound AAB forms (Osborn 2013; Hudson 2019, 21-22).

familiar with rock and metal's compound AABA normativity may realistically expect the materialization of a concluding verse–chorus rotation which, of course, never happens.

If metal's rotational forms can tend toward through-composition, and if metal bridge sections do not have to fulfill the traditional functional role of bridges in pop/rock music, it would seem the inherent aim—the telos—of metal songs reaches beyond the hermeneutic of arriving at a chorus section. Monumental bridge sections can serve as a basis for non-rotational, through-composed forms. The proposition of a non-rotational form that references a rotational form may seem doubtful from a functional-analytical perspective. However, metal has always trafficked in liminal states and dialectical processes. Deena Weinstein notes that extreme metal defined itself in fundamentalist terms, resisting (in the view of the scene) hegemonic culture by selectively rejecting or retaining components of existing musical practices (Weinstein 2000, 43–45, 51–57). Julia Kristeva describes such rejection as instrumental in the creation of identity.

> The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject, is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject, has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning ... what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain "ego" that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. (Kristeva 1982, 3–4).

The abject is also dialogical in nature: it must be defined within and against the subject, and between the subject and object. Zachary Wallmark finds abjection in extreme metal timbre

through "a dialectical relationship between the binary poles of chaos and control," which summons the chaotic element of noise and viscerally shocking sounds only to master them through a ritual of performance, enacting a ritual sonic sacrifice (Wallmark 2018, 77–79).[2] In the realm of form, nothing could me more chaotic and seemingly beyond the mastery of analysis than through-composition.

Songs that are through-composed in their entirety or that feature through-composed sections (as we have seen throughout this paper) are not uncommon in metal. Some of these songs hang on to a semblance of coherent design through the use of framing functions. Yet, framing functions suggests that recapitulatory material may be considered secondary to the total form of a song. William Caplin describes framing functions as boundary materials, occurring "before the beginning" or "after the end" (Caplin 1998, 15–16). Several songs using framing functions are shown in Figure 1. Framing functions sometimes consist of the same material (as in The Black Dahlia Murder's "I Will Return" and Opeth's "The Drapery Falls") and they may seem to inject recapitulatory material into ideally through-composed monumental bridges (as in Iron Maiden's "Aces High" and Death's "Voice of the Soul"). But I, like Caplin, consider framing functions to be extrinsic to the formal unit and thus do not interfere with formal structure. In Opeth's "The Drapery Falls," the identical introduction and coda material verge on placing the through-composed multi-sectional form into the context of a ternary form. However, the frame in this case is untexted, consists of a single section (as opposed to a form-functional cycle), and does not carry any specific form-functional identification (as verse or choruses do). In other words, the entire song is quite nearly a free-floating monumental bridge section.

[2] Wallmark's dialectic of chaos and control is not to be confused with Walser's dialectic of freedom and control. For Wallmark, chaos is summoned to be controlled. For Walser, freedom transcends control.

Figure 1. Several songs containing framing functions.

The Black Dahlia Murder, "I Will Return" (*Deflorate*, 2009)

Intro	A	B (Monumental Bridge)	A	Coda
Frame a	VPC	Solo a Solo b Solo c	VPC	Frame a'

Iron Maiden, "Aces High" (*Powerslave*, 1984)

Intro	A	B (Monumental Bridge)	A	Coda
Frame a	VPC	Frame b Solo a Solo b Frame b	VPC	Frame c

Death, "Voice of the Soul" (*The Sound of Perseverance*, 1998)

A (Monumental Bridge)	B (Monumental Bridge)
Duet a Duet b Duet c Duet d	Frame a Duet e Duet e' Frame a

Opeth, "The Drapery Falls" (*Blackwater Park*, 2001)

Intro	A (Monumental Bridge)	Coda
Frame a	A B B C C' D D' E F G H	Frame a

Some artists write completely through-composed pieces with the same features and design as their monumental bridges, such as Death's "Cosmic Sea" (within the rotational-forms-with-bridge model.

Table 6). Here, a series of solos and duets characteristic of metal bridges is effectively separated from any rotational form. The synthesizer ambience in the middle separates "Cosmic Sea" into two distinct parts, conforming with Brad Osborn's typology for *multi-part polythematic through-composed form* (Osborn 2011). However, I am interested in the profusion of solos that are more rhetorically characteristic of metal bridges rather than a generalized succession of sections, as solos identify bridge sections within the rotational-forms-with-bridge model.

Table 6. Death, "Cosmic Sea" (*Human*, 1991).

Hypercompound Section	Compound Section	Time	Section	Description
Introduction	Introduction	0:00	Intro	
A (Monumental Bridge)	A (Monumental Bridge)	0:10	A	
		0:29	A'	Guitar solo
		1:05	B	Guitar solo
		1:23	C	Guitar duet
		1:41	C'	Guitar duet
	Interlude	2:03	D	Synthesizer ambience
	B (Monumental Bridge)	2:32	E	Bass solo
		2:49	E'	Guitar solo
		3:19	F	Guitar solo
		3:40 – 4:28	F'	Synthesizer solo

The last part of my paper addresses the capacity of formal modules to undergo change or be reinterpreted over the course of a song, what I term *modular mutability*. This may occur through Schmalfeldt's notion of retrospective reinterpretation, or de Clercq's sectional blends, as we saw in "Fade To Black" (Table 5, above). Modular mutability may occur more radically through drastic changes to formal functions within rotational thematic groupings or omission of certain formal functions altogether. In Adagio's "Seven Lands of Sin" (

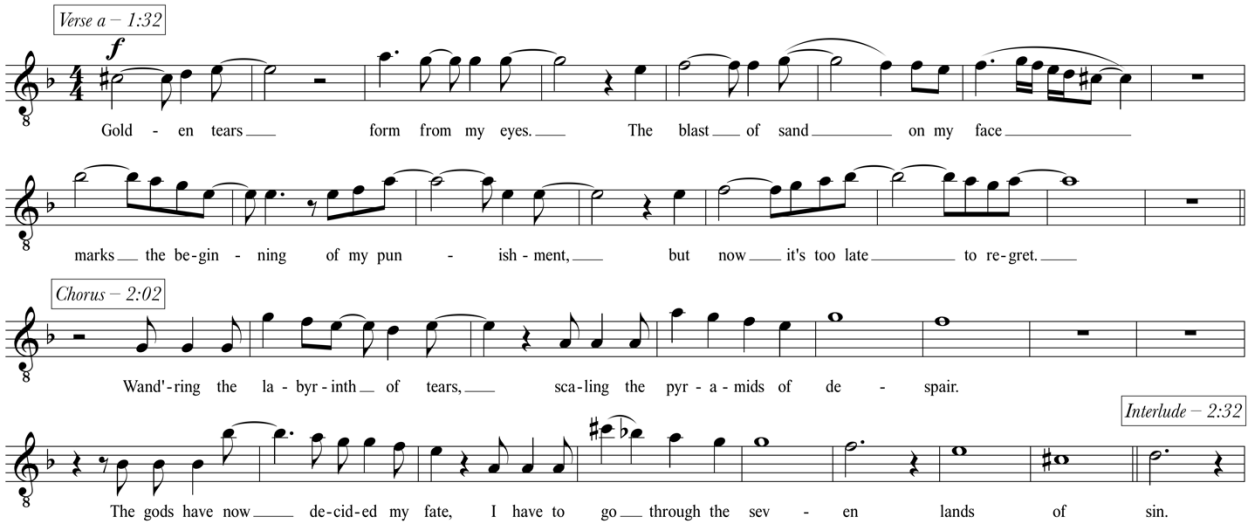
Table 7), the verse undergoes a *form-functional substitution*, a situation wherein the theme changes between thematic rotations but the formal function of the replaced section is comparable or identical to the one it is replacing.

a and 2b show verse a and its substitute, verse b. The two verses differ in tonality, meter, dynamics and vocal production, so the substitution is quite drastic. Under form-functional substitution, analogous modules may be stretched seemingly to the point of incomparability, yet reference to normative rotational forms allows listeners to readily identify their formal functions. Thus, functional modules have the option of being mutable.

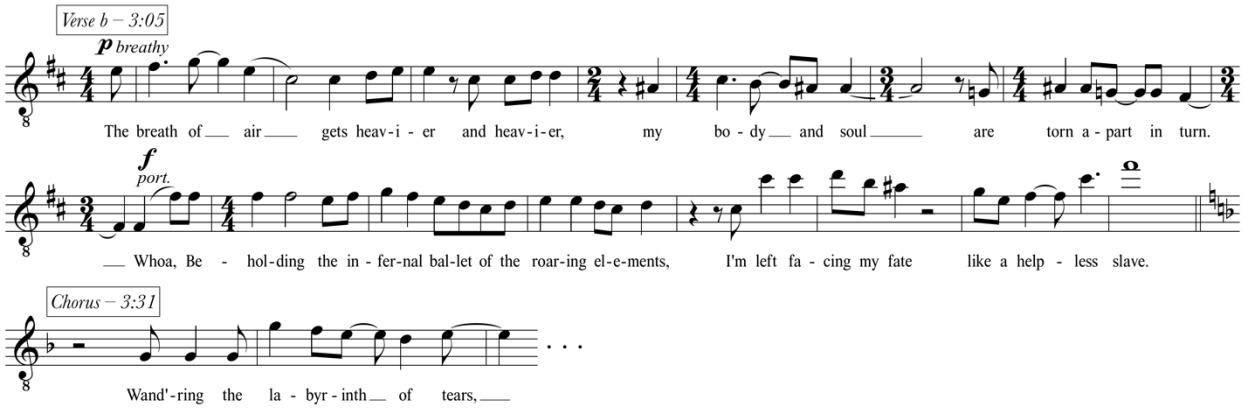
Table 7. Adagio, "Seven Lands of Sin" (*Sanctus Ignis*, 2001).

Compound Section	Time	Section	Description	Pitch Collection
Introduction	0:00	Intro a	Accumulative	E minor
	0:52	Intro b		
	1:06	Intro c		
	1:17	Intro d		
A	**1:32**	**Verse a**	**Full band**	**D minor**
	2:02	**Chorus**	**Full band**	**(D minor)**
Interlude	2:32	Interlude a	Guitar solo	
A'	**3:05**	**Verse b**	**Full band**	**F# phrygian dominant***
	3:31	**Chorus**	**Full band**	**D minor**
B (Monumental Bridge)	4:00	Bridge a	Bridge intro	E phrygian dominant
	4:20	Bridge b	Accumulative	E♭ nikriz**
	4:59	Bridge c		
	5:29	Bridge d		G hijazkar***
	5:43	Bridge d'		
	5:58	Bridge e	Synthesizer solo	G phrygian dominant
	6:27	Bridge f	Guitar solo	A# phrygian dominant
	6:43	Bridge g	Guitar solo	F# minor
	6:58	Bridge h	Guitar solo	G# nikriz
	7:13	Bridge i	Guitar solo	G# phrygian dominant
	7:20	Bridge j	Guitar duet	A lydian
	7:26	Bridge k	Vamp	A♭ lydian
	7:54	Bridge l	Texted bridge	G minor
	8:24	Bridge m	Codetta	E–F octatonic → E whole tone
A''	**8:42**	**Chorus'**	**Voice + piano**	**C minor**
	9:12	Chorus extension		
	9:32	**Postchorus**		**C phrygian dominant**
Coda (Monumental Coda)	9:50	Coda a		B minor → F# minor
	10:05	Coda b	Guitar duet	F# minor
	10:19	Coda c	Texted coda	
	11:04 – 11:42	Coda d	Synthesizer solo	

* F# G A# B C# D E ** E♭ F G♭ A B♭ C D♭ *** G A♭ B C D E♭ F#



Example 2a. Adagio, "Seven Lands of Sin." First rotation of VC module (A) containing *verse a* (in D minor).



Example 2b. Adagio, "Seven Lands of Sin." Second rotation of VC module (A') containing *verse b* (in F# phrygian dominant), constituting a form-functional substitution.

A related concept in modular mutability is addition and omission, wherein functional components of a module can change in number. This is common even in commercial popular music where the verse is omitted from the final thematic rotation, leaving only the chorus. In the final rotational cycle of "Seven Lands of Sin," the verse has been omitted, the chorus appears in C minor rather than D minor, and a postchorus has been added too, so it's quite different from

the previous rotational modules although they are all different from each other. Modular mutability also makes continuity between rotational and through-composed forms possible.

"Sets" by Car Bomb (see **Table 8.** Car Bomb, "Sets" (*Meta*, 2016).Table 8) contains another instance of verse substitution, and potentially an added prechorus as well. The ternary form and monumental bridge, combined with an indeterminate tonal language and form-functional substitutions, make it difficult to assign form-functional labels. The chorus, which contains a recognizable instrumental hook in the form of a wedge motive, does establish a rotational form, however. Upon closer inspection, a problem arises whether there are two or three sections in the final rotational unit: did we gain a prechorus, making the A' rotation a complete verse–prechorus–chorus cycle, or is the material labeled "Prechorus?" in Table 8 actually a verse and the section before it (labeled "Verse b?") part of the monumental bridge? Whereas compound ternary form is functionally through-composed until the repeat of the final A section by design, modular mutability has ambiguated the boundary here: it is not until the *final chorus* that the rotational design of the song becomes apparent.

Table 8. Car Bomb, "Sets" (*Meta*, 2016).

Compound Section	Time	Section	Description
Introduction	0:00	Intro a	Wedge motive
	0:11	Intro b	⇒
A	0:41	**Verse a**	
	1:15	Chorus	Contains wedge motive
B (Monumental Bridge)	1:50	Bridge a	Texted bridge
	2:43	Bridge b	Clean instrumental section
A'	**3:08**	**Verse b?**	**Possibly bridge c**
	3:27	**Prechorus?**	**Possibly verse b**
	3:43 – 4:08	Chorus	Contains wedge motive

An important insight from these analyses is the continuity between rotational and through-composed forms in metal, as well as the ways in which transgression and abjection affect teleology. Furthermore, modular form emphasizes interchangeability and metal's local,

genre-specific teleologies in ways formal theories focusing on large-scale processes often neglect. Yet, analyzing metal sections as autonomous units with characteristic behaviors reveals metal's myriad dialogic departures to be coherent within a dialectical practice of stylistic dialogue and abjection, even if seemingly at the expense of analytical comprehensibility.

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