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THE POLITICS, MILIEU AND MUSIC OF BLACK METAL

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ABSTRACT

The genre of black metal music and its association with violence, Satanism and paganism offers an opportunity to think through the political dimensions of music. This essay argues against Ronald Bogue's depoliticisation of black metal through Deleuzian theory, instead defending the possibility of a politics that inheres to the form of different music. Violence, I argue here, is an extension of the milieu that black metal gave rise to. Musical experience correlates with political acts of church burning, black metal music carrying with it the politics of the milieu that it created.

INTRODUCTION

In 1992, the Fantoft stave church, a twelfth century church in Norway, was burned to the ground. In the following years, more churches around Norway were burned, and the country's media and international music media began to report that a Satanic movement associated with the country's black metal scene were responsible. The Deleuzian scholar Ronald Bogue (2007) distinguishes Norwegian black metal from such acts of violence, arguing that there is no essential connection between the two. In this, he follows a long line of other scholars who have attempted to distinguish the link between heavy metal, with its chaotic sounds and evil imagery, and actual wrongdoing (Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 2000). The fact that there seems some kind of darkness at work in black metal music, Bogue claims, lies in its effects

that invoke a transcendence from the body, a 'catatonic, apersonal zero-degree of intensity' that is a model for the experience of death (Bogue, 2007). According to Ian Buchanan, Deleuze's theory implies that all music has a relationship to death. Music secures a territory against death, as it attempts to prevent its line of flight from meeting its abolition (Buchanan, 2004). I argue here that in wanting to sublimate the darkness of black metal into death, Bogue generalises its force, and thus the ability of musical forms to generate socio-political action. The ambivalence of Deleuze's terminology here obfuscates a history of music and politics.

BLACK METAL AND VIOLENCE

The most prominent figure in the history of black metal is Varg Vikernes. In 1993, he released the EP *Aske* under the name of Burzum, with an image of the burned out Fantoft church on the cover. Vikernes was later charged with its arson. While he was declared not guilty of this crime, he was imprisoned for the arsons of several other churches. He was also later imprisoned for murdering fellow black metal musician, Oystein Aarseth or Euronymous from the band Mayhem, who had been playing since the early 1980s and the biggest single influence on the emergent black metal scene of early 1990s. A second connection that Vikernes had with Mayhem was to send the band's lead singer, Dead, the ammunition he used to carry out his suicide. Subsequently, Mayhem's album *Dawn of the Black Hearts* (1995) featured an image of their former lead singer lying with his head exploded on the floor.

View image at: <https://www.discogs.com/Burzum-Inn-I-Dr%C3%B8mmens-Slott/master/4348>

Since his incarceration, Vikernes has been associated with church burnings, murders, neo-nazism, paganism and Satanism. Some of these associations can be blamed on Vikernes's own comments, while others were either invented or blown out of proportion by the media. When Vikernes was arrested for arson, for example, the newspapers in Norway carried headlines such as 'Devil Arrested' and 'Violent Satanist Caught' (Aites and Ewell *Until the Light Takes Us*, 2008). Vikernes captures many of the contradictions of black metal and the issues that it presents about the relationship of music to religiosity and violence. The burnings and the murder also rocketed the Norwegian black metal scene to international fame, turning the music into a global genre and its musicians, especially Vikernes, into international celebrities. As black metal has taken its place on the metal map next to doom, thrash and death metal as another sub-genre of the heavy metal megagenre, it carries with it these associations with violence and violent philosophies. The association was sensationalised in 2003 by Michael Moynihan and Didrik Soderlind, authors of the bestselling account of black metal violence, *Lords of Chaos* (2003). The book takes the Satanism not only of early black metal but metal itself for granted. Its introductory chapter is an account of the relationship of music to devil worship, and implicitly to violence. Yet they also give a voice to Vikernes and other black metal musicians who explain that

Satanism is a less substantial version of the paganism that they have always been more committed to, and which is rooted in an essential relationship the musicians have to the Norwegian countryside.

THE MUSIC ITSELF

Bogue's dissociation of violence from black metal is grounded in the ambivalence of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of the refrain, outlined in Chapter 11 of *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). The conceptual system of this philosophical book is notoriously complex, and has been the subject of debate among Deleuzian scholars since its publication, especially since its English translation in 1987. The refrain is the key term within Deleuze's theory of music, and relates to other concepts outlined in *A Thousand*

Plateaus, especially deterritorialisation, expression, the milieu, territorialisation and territory. One of the debates amongst Deleuzian scholars lies in whether music is a deterritorialisation of the milieu, or a territory that creates a new milieu. In his essays on Deleuze, Bogue himself oscillates between the two positions. In 'Violence in Three Shades of Metal' (2007) and 'Apology for Nomadology' (2004) Bogue argues that music is deterritorialising, while in his earlier, 1991 essay 'Rhizomusicology' he argues that music has the potential to:

- (1) mark or assemble a territory;
- (2) connect a territory with internal impulses and/or external circumstances;
- (3) identify specialised functions;
- (4) or collect forces in order to centralise the territory or go outside it. (Bogue, 1991)

The use of such terms as centralise and force, and the distinction between internal and external will disappear in Bogue's later writing. Here, however, they imply that the differences at work within Deleuze can be read to critique the movement of force. Crucially, territory is also that which is at stake in music, which plays a part in forming milieus, or blocks of space-time. Bird song is the most famous example of the way that music will stake out a milieu that will become a territory, or work to deterritorialise a territory. Here, however, it is black metal that plays an active role in forming a milieu in Norway, a milieu of human beings who

mark out certain territories whose functions are defined by the centrality of the music itself.

Darkthrone's Gylve 'Fenriz' Pagell explains the particular refrain that centralises black metal as a riff invented by the murdered Euronymous of Mayhem:

Euronymous invented the typical and original black metal riff. It sort of derived from Bathory but it was a new way of playing a riff that had really not been done and not been stylised by anyone before. That was what Euronymous did. You have a cord. You don't play one, one; you play one one up and down, and you have the notes cling together so that you have the fucking eerie notes and they all string together and create this incredible eerie sound, like it sends chills up and down your spine. (Aites and Ewell *Until the Light Takes Us*, 2008)

On Mayhem's *Deathcrush* (1987) record it is possible to identify the features identified by Fenriz. The track *Witching Hour* produces its wall of sound in a series of plateaus that follow on from each other in quick procession. The riff that Fenriz talks about kicks in after the deep base tone that introduces the sound of the track, its speed and intensity mangling the notion of melody. It creates and accompanies plateaus simply by stopping and starting, its whine screeching down as Euronymous pulls his fingers off the guitar and allows it to scream through distortion pedals.

Black metal acts like Mayhem work with the extremes of the tonal scale, combining the low intensity of the base with the high intensity screech of the electric guitar, creating levels of sonic experience that shift over the course of a track. The experience of black metal on the ears is something of an assault, that can best be appreciated in a giving over of consciousness to the range of intensity it presents. This is very different to the experience of melodic music, for instance, that invites us to identify the way that different instruments are working alongside each other, in order to seduce us into their affective logic.

SATANISM, PAGANISM AND BLACK METAL

The misunderstanding made by the media and by Michael Moynihan and Didrik Soderlind in *Lords of Chaos* was to mistake this riff for the Satanic tritone. Philip Tagg argues that metal more generally uses the 'tritone', the augmented or flattened fourth interval that was demonised by the

Catholic Church in the Middle Ages (Kahn-Harris, 2006). The tritone is used in detective films to create a spooky soundtrack, creating an atmosphere of suspense. There is, then, a necessity to disentangle Satanism from black metal, in order to make sense of the particular milieu that black metal constructed in Norway. Vikernes is eloquent in distinguishing Satanism from paganism, when he describes Satanism as simply an image, but one that allows its practitioners to break through to paganism. He also casts Satanism as a means of provocation:

Yeah, but there's a very important thing. I never say anything to *provoke*, but I *provoke* intentionally to say something. (Cited in Moynihan and Soderlind, 2003)

Here, Satanism is the means by which other aims are fulfilled. Black metal musicians can also be distinguished from the more serious Satanism of the Church of Satan, long represented by its leader, Anton La Vey. As he points out:

Many of the so-called Black Metal 'Satanists' appear to me as essentially Christians – they're defining Satanism by Christian standards. (Cited in Moynihan and Soderlind, 2003)

Satanism is adopted for its shock value in a conservatively Christian country, an inversion of values that have been held as standard for more than a millennia.

Vikernes and other metal musicians are more articulate about their interest in, advocacy of and practice of paganism than Satanism. This is a particularly Scandinavian form of paganism, that is nostalgic for a pre-Christian Norwegian identity. What Satanism and paganism have in common is their anti-Christianity, and here Vikernes is very vocal about what he sees as a takeover of older religious forms by an imperial religion from beyond Norway's territory. Paganism is the logic behind the Church burnings. As he explains:

Our culture lies in ruins below the churches. How are we going to know our culture when they build churches on top of it? ... Like I mentioned about the Fantoft Church with the *borg* [heathen altar] which the church sits on top of – that's blasphemy, severe blasphemy. There's a natural circle there and you can see the *borg*, and the cross was put on top of it. If that's not blasphemy I don't know what is. (Vikernes cited in Moynihan and Soderlind, p.163)

Here Vikernes is responding to the view that paganism was completely obliterated in Europe after the rise of Christianity. He points to archaeological relics that remain, even in traces, on the ground of Scandinavia. The return to paganism is, then, a sort of contemporary fantasy born of these traces, and out of a dissatisfaction with a deeply Christianised European culture. There should be no mistaking the seriousness of this revival, as the destruction of Fantoft took place on the anniversary of the first Viking raid from Scandinavia on Christian villages in England. The burning commemorates and brings to life a war between beliefs and ways of life in the region.

It is to the point that paganism can easily be confused with Satanism because both are constructed and reconstructed out of dissatisfaction with Christianity. The two are blurred, especially when comparing versions of the two beyond the Norwegian scene. For La Vey, Satanism is a more general name for personal willpower, of differentiating one's individuality from the herd of humans (La Vey cited in Moynihan and Soderlind 2003). In this, La Vey's Satanism coincides with the paganism of black metal musicians, who also adopt a Nietzschean rhetoric of will when describing their relationships with nature, or a state of nature, and personal power. Yet here it is also possible to relate this rhetoric to a way of thinking through black metal music, and more generally to a relationship between music and noise. For the sensibility of the music, as it embeds plateaus of intensive noise rather than melodies, contains some of the tensions that play out in this opposition of Satanism and paganism. The Satanic tritone melody that lies within metal is in black metal obscured by layers of noise that hold, in their affective force, a pagan sensibility.

Here it is possible to turn to a second position in theorising black metal, a group of academics who work with what they term black metal philosophy, that finds in the music an essential relation between the music and the earth. Paradoxically, black metal theory wants to write in a way that you can't academically write about black metal, so that as Scott Wilson declares, it invites speculation on the "blackening of the earth, landscapes of extinction, starless aeon, sempiternal nightmares, black horizons, malignences, Qliphotic forces from beyond!" (Wilson, 2010) He declares black metal

philosophy to be para-academic, a group of scholars that want to throw together a "violent conjunction of theoretical ideas and Black Metal". (Wilson, 2010) These theorists are less interested in melody than in the array of tonal structures, or lack of structures, that create black metal's atmosphere and effect, that revel in the dissolution of formal musical structures into formlessness, or into a particular kind of noise. The precedent for thinking about the noise of black metal was set by Simon Reynolds and Joy Press in their 1995 book, *The Sex Revolts: gender, rebellion and rock-n-roll*, later cited by Kahn-Harris in *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (2006), that links the mutilation of accepted musical formulas to lyrics about death and mutilation.

The suspended noise that results from the acceleration of the riff becomes what Jacques Derrida defined in experience or sensation as a plentitude, an excess that then enters into a homogeneity. (Derrida, 1976) This idea of noise as a plentitude is a key to identifying it with the pagan interest in the earth, as the earth is itself a kind of plentitude, being in excess of its appearance to us, its components absorbed into a greater and incomprehensible whole, as instrumentation disappears into the black metal wall of sound. It is the feminine principle to the masculine posturing of the riff, noise always receding into a totality while the guitar riff appears as a singular particularity. The haunting sound of black metal is not that of nature as a planetary whole, however, but that of nature in Norway, which is the cold forest to which black metal musicians retreat to have their photographs taken. The genre of black metal photography often relies on snowy forests, and the props of Viking weaponry. These photographs signal the nihilism of a Nietzschean relation with nature, in deference to the greater coldness of the universe.

CONCLUSION

A second representational cluster that has become associated with black metal and its potential to inspire violence is its racism. Debates about the way that black metal listeners agree with the ideologies of white suprematism rage among fans (Spracklen, 2010; Taylor, 2010) and are not discouraged by Virkenes, who has previously identified with Nazism (*Until the Light Takes Us*, 2008). That such

a politics could exist, and be a part of the music itself, is best theorised after Jacques Attali's book *Noise* (1985). For Attali music is not apolitical, but implied in a series of historical conditions for its production. Music does not so much reflect as herald new social orders. In its attempt to recall a pagan past, black metal wants to invoke a social order different from what Attali calls the repeating mode of musical production, defined by its consumption in twentieth century capitalism (Attali, 1985). Thus it is that music does represent a politics, but one of economic rather than sectarian or national representations. After Attali's theory of music, the milieu that has been enabled by black metal is a part of the greater pattern of consumption installed by this consumptive regime. The agency of music remains, however, in a double articulation with capital here, so that music can engender politics of a kind, here being the politics of the black metal milieu.

While Attali's book lends itself to a critique of the representations of black metal, Deleuze's ideas were constructed to elude the logic of representation. They proposed, instead, a system of bifurcation by which there is no split between signifier and signified, no separation of theory and world. For this reason, and because of the complexity of Deleuze's system, especially as outlined in his collaboration with Guattari on *A Thousand Plateaus*, it is easy to neglect its critical potential. If there is no distinction between the world and its representation, however, this only makes cultural production more a part of the action of the world. If the milieu that is created by death metal proclaims its anti-Christianity and paganism (Spracklen, 2010), then it should not be out of the question that it be associated with church burnings. If it represents itself through such burnings, or if particular bands use Nazi imagery to promote or provoke, then these representations may well be taken as actual rather than virtual in a Deleuzian sense. The metaphysical experience of black metal should not be mistaken for a transcendence of the conditions by which it comes into being, or for an apolitical event. Instead, the awakening of a pagan sensibility within the music should alert us to the political possibilities latent within it, and to the emergence of a nascent politics of the milieu.

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