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Nicola MASCIANDARO (ed.): *Hideous Gnosis. Black Metal Theory Symposium I*

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L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

Théorie

ment influent. Obtenant leurs données d'entretiens avec des musiciens, les chercheurs montrent que les deux mouvements ont des constantes dans leur vision du monde (imaginaire du Nord, mythologies païnistes) et dans le rapport à l'underground vs mainstream. Les spécificités du black metal anglais viennent notamment d'une appartenance marquée aux classes populaires.

Ces contributions particulièrement intéressantes et pionnières montrent l'ampleur du travail encore à effectuer pour sortir des stéréotypes des médias et de la société civile sur le sujet et comprendre une tendance musicale et culturelle qui, bien que longtemps restée dans l'ombre, concerne aujourd'hui une part non négligeable de la population internationale.

Gérôme GUIBERT

Nicola Masciandaro (ed.), *Hideous Gnosis. Black Metal Theory Symposium I*, Charleston, Createspace, 2010.

METAL STUDIES is an ever-growing field within academia, with annual conferences being held and new publications appearing fairly regularly. However, theory and methodology are two fields of research that have not yet been much discussed. Frequent criticism of metal studies often focuses on a lack of theoretical as well as methodological engagement – an accusation of being unscientific. There has been some work focusing on this problem and trying to deal with it – mostly sociological and musicologist publications as well as the *Hard Wired* workshops in Germany and Switzerland, for instance – but book-length analyses of the subject are still few. Thus, a volume ostensibly focusing on theory, even if it is black metal theory in particular, is most welcome, and promises to further invigorate the field of metal studies. However, the claim that the editor and authors of this volume postulate in the book's title is not borne out by its content.

In fact, *Hideous Gnosis* is as obscure to the outsider as black metal itself: its black-and-white aesthetics and the

want of a blurb or an explicatory introduction make it difficult to access. A first glance at the publication does not tell the reader of its aims nor of the audience at which it is aimed. Nor does it give any information on how the volume came into being. Furthermore, there is no information on the authors, some of whom do not give references at all. Several essays pick up philosophical concepts and ideas without further explaining them, thereby not inviting the uninitiated reader and thus, a broader audience (Masciandaro: "teaching those who already know" (Masciandaro 2010:84f)).

Regarding a genuine theory of black metal, one's hopes are dashed: as this volume is in the nature of an anthology, there is no systematic approach to a genuine black metal theory. Instead, the essays offer a discussion of a range of aspects that black metal is concerned or associated with, such as politics and religion.

Only a few authors try to explicitly approach a black metal theory: editor Nicola Masciandaro attempts to parallel black metal with a theory of negativity

and states that black metal (or rather its followers) refuses discourse and self-reflection, thus evading theory, maybe in fear of realising themselves having a “cavedweller’s fantasy“ (ibid: 85). Scott Wilson’s essay “BASileus philosoPHORum METaloricum“ on the intersection of black metal and academic discourse, too, states that there is no such conjunction – there is no “academic illumination of black metal“ (ibid: 35) because an analysis cannot be undertaken without bias. Rather what takes place is the other way round: a ‘blackening’ of the discourse. Hunter Hunt-Hendrix develops theses on transcendental black metal as opposed to hyperborean (Scandinavian).

The essay’s focus clearly lies within the subjects of black metal’s relationship to religion/Satanism (Butler, Scott, Thacker), Nazism/National Socialism (Noys, Williams) as well as the role of nature, the failures of ‘modernity’ and the longing for a primordial past (Shakespeare, Stephanou). Negativity and decay are two other fields that are discussed (Russo, Masciandaro). Whereas Evan Calder Williams and Benjamin Noys pose the question can black metal be understood separately from its lyrics, Erik Butler argues that black metal can be better understood in relation to the history of religion (ibid: 23). He also draws a comparison between black metal and Reformation-era Jesuits in that bands like Gorgoroth take on slogans (“Ad Majorem Sathanas Gloriam“) and he hints at morphological similarities between them, for example an affiliation with radical politics. Being elitist, black metal stresses purity and “represents a return to orthodoxy“ in criteria such as purity and ascetism (ibid: 27); “the other“ can be found outside as well as inside the metal community.

Aspasia Stephanou’s piece on patriarchy and femininity in black metal analyses the trope of the wolf “that seeks to destroy subjectivity“ (ibid: 159) and thus, a loss of humanity. Referring to the past as well as

Norse mythology’s symbols, black metal mourns for an original past and purity that never existed that way, interpreted as an act of affirmation of masculinity. Stephanou employs the image of Red Riding Hood and the wolf to explain the threat of female masculinity that must be consumed by the wolf figure. The women in black metal (illustrated here by Astarte), she explains, reclaim the realm of female desire by challenging the patriarchal structures of black metal by turning the wolves into servants.

In “Meaningful Leaning Mess“, Brandon Stosuy presents an (nearly) uncommented discussion excerpt of members of American black metal bands that allows insight into specific characteristics of this community as opposed to the Scandinavian scenes, for example their interest in life and philosophical questions surrounding it, rather than being preoccupied with anti-Christian forms such as Satanism.

All things considered, *Hideous Gnosis* is a *gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) that is difficult to access. In addition to the essays, there are symposium photographs (including photos of referees and of art) and various forms of expression surrounding the black metal subject (blog comments, a letter, drawings). It remains unclear if it is the intention of the publication to contribute further to metal studies within an academical frame. Juliet Forshaw, in her discussion of three works of metal studies, admits that it is a “different kind of scholarship [...that] indulges in a level of obscurantism that is only possible among members of a tiny occult sect who are unconcerned with courting a broader audience“ (Forshaw 2011). Apart from “Metallic blackening of theory“ (Masciandaro 2009), the aims of this project remain unclear. A summing up of the discussion, to find out if there is indeed a consensus on a Black Metal Theory, would have been helpful. Otherwise, *Hideous Gnosis* offers interesting sugges-

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tions for thinking further about already acknowledged topics in (black) metal studies and discusses quite a lot of underground bands. In addition, it is an appealing artistic collection in a new form of engaging with the subject of metal studies.

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Imke VON HELDEN

Colin A. McKinnon, Niall SCOTT & Kristen SOLLEE (eds.) *Can I play with madness? Metal, dissonance, madness and alienation*. Critical Issues Series. Oxford: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2011, 192 p.

Available at: <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/publishing/id-press/ebooks/can-i-play-with-madness/>, [viewed: 15.oct.2012]

THE WORD "METAL" is like an umbrella: it encompasses a set of musical sub-genres that are known as *heavy metal* by the common sense. Although grouped under the same term, these sub-genres differ in aspects of ideology, to a greater or lesser extent, resulting therefore in different rules of sound, aesthetics and socialization among fans. One's lack of emic experience may be denounced by details and filigrees. Definitely, it is not a task for beginners.

Not too long ago, in the early 2000's, researchers of all areas who wished to devote themselves to metal would not find much academic material on the subject, even in an international context. However, from the second half of the decade onwards, one has witnessed a significant development in metal studies

under different approaches,¹ as though researchers were only waiting for an opportunity to come out of hiding. Nine (if not ten) out of ten of them are fans of at least one metal sub-genre. Metal fans "metallise their lives".² The affective investment is great.

One can speculate that a new generation of supervisors has been accepting post-graduate academic proj-

1. Case studies of Brazil, Canada and USA show that especially from 2006 onwards, scholarly production on metal doubled. The same does not apply to the UK. (Azevedo, Hickam & Spracklen, 2011).

2. *Métalliser sa vie*: I borrow this expression from Hein (2003: 249) who, by his turn, borrowed it from Rocco (2002: 218).