

6.2. Black Metal: history, trace of character and archetype

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Abstract

In this communication it is intended to realize an historical analysis on the nature of “Black metal”, considered as the most extreme subgenre and subculture of heavy metal music, and, simultaneously, to discuss its philosophical and psychoanalytical interpretations, namely through the concepts of “emotion”, “trace of character” and “archetype”. I will demonstrate that this musical style constitutes a perfect example of the psychological semi-primeval mental figure of the “Horrible Father”, a mitigation and degeneration of the symbolic fertility of the “Great Mother” (which is represented among every culture since pre-historical times). For such, the study will be framed in four fundamental authors (Erich Neumann, Malcolm Budd, Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung), orientated by three thematic moments (nature and significance of the “Great Mother” and the “Horrible Father”; Black metal anti-Christian founding ideology and the actions perpetuated in the name of the “scene”; philosophical perspectives on beauty and psychoanalytical interpretations) and having as plumb-line the major nihilistic and anti-Christian statements of the late nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, which are usually quoted ad hoc in black metal songs.

Keywords: archetype, beauty, black metal, horrible father, trace of character.

Roots of darkness

Black metal is probably the most extreme and controversial subgenre and subculture of the musical universe. Ever since its beginning in the early 1980s with bands such as Venom, Mercyful Fate, Bathory, Hellhammer or Celtic Frost – and especially after its rebirth in the early nineties, with the Scandinavians Mayhem, Burzum, Darkthrone, Immortal, Gorgoroth, Marduk or Dark Funeral – Black Metal has proven itself to be the most consistently though-provoking, aggressive, depressive, misanthropic, obscure and essentially misunderstood of all the many offshoots of heavy metal. This happens due to its differential high-pitched guitar tones with heavy distortion and fast picking, fast drum tempos and blast-beats, shrieking vocal styles – which turn into pure agony and suffering cries namely through the so-called Depressive-Suicidal Black Metal, such as Werther or Nocturnal Depression –, raw recording and production (with many musicians preferring to use the cheapest materials they find and their homes or basements as studios – as is the case of the epics “Transilvanian Hunger” by Darkthrone or Burzum’s “Filosofem”), unconventional song structures (with highly repetitive instrumental sections) and where the artists often appear with corpsepaint, dressing black-leather jackets and steel boots, adopting pseudonyms inspired in Jew-Christian demonology or Tolkien’s *Legendarium* and generally supporting anti-Christian ideologies.

Satanism, Nazism and crime: some iconic cases

Due to all of these non-mainstream musical and aesthetic aspects they are usually called Satanists or devil worshippers – as well as their fans. This denomination is, however, partially correct although many times exaggerated. It is partially correct because some of the performers – especially those of the second wave from the nineties, belonging to the “True Norwegian Black Metal” scene – were associated to crimes, murders, church burning and proclaimed themselves as Satanists, pagans or neo-Nazis.

There was the iconic case of Varg Vikernes (or Count Grishnack, named after an evil orc from “The Lord of the Rings”), the mastermind of the one-man project Burzum (which means “darkness” in the black speech of Mordor), who was convicted from murdering Øystein Aarseth (or Euronymous) – one of Mayhem’s founder and lead guitarist – in 1993. Besides this episode, and thanks to a combination of artistic innovation with personal misfortune, Mayhem achieved a truly legendary status within the genre: Per Yngve Ohlin (otherwise known as Dead), a Swedish

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vocalist and lyricist who moved to Norway in 1988 to join the group killed himself in 1991 by slitting his wrists and shooting in the head with a shotgun Euronymous owned. He was a very depressive person who was always cutting himself during the shows or smelling the rotten carcasses of dead animals, like a crow he found on tour.

Euronymous once said about him (Eide, 1987): "I honestly think Dead is mentally insane (...) Which other way can you describe a guy who does not eat, in order to get starving wound? Or have a T-shirt with funeral announcements on it?"

Another episode that has become part of Black Metal folklore consists in the fact that Euronymous (who discovered Dead's body in a Mayhem's forest house near Kråkstad) delayed contacting the police; instead he went back into town to purchase a disposable camera before returning to the scene to photograph the deceased and apparently rearranging the knife so that it lay on the top of the shotgun for dramatic effect, thus Aites & Ewell (2008) reported. This photography was then used as a cover for the 1995 Mayhem's bootleg "Dawn of the Black Hearts". It is worth to note that Dead was the first "black metallor" ever to use corpsepaint³.

Backing to Varg Vikernes, he maintained he killed in self-defense and denied responsibility for the church arsons, though supported them (Aites & Ewell, 2008). He was sentenced to 21 years in prison and during that time he became affiliated with the Heathen Front, had several writings on German paganism published and recorded and released two electronic albums ("Dauði Baldrs" in 1997 and "Hliðskjálf" in 1999) using nothing but a synthesizer. Having served almost 15 years of his sentence he was released on parole in 2009. In his website he constantly writes articles defending Odalism ideology based on the idea that white Europeans should readopt native European values, namely those belonging to the traditional paganism. Preceding Mayhem's macabre bootleg choice, Vikernes had already used in 1993 a photo of a Christian burning church as a cover for his album "Aske" – literally meaning "ashes". That church was supposedly destroyed by him.

Nietzsche's philosophy absorbed

Undoubtedly the most influential philosopher to Black Metal (and, generally speaking, to Heavy Metal) was Friedrich Nietzsche, for he consistently theorized both the human being's duplicity (the Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy) and the chance of an "Übermensch" (Superman/Beyond-Man), which constitute two main aesthetic vectors of this particular subgenre. According to Nietzsche, the tension generated between Apollo (the rational side of the human body) and Dionysus (the instinctive side) determines the field of the artistic creation and life in general. The Übermensch would be a product of evolutionism. In fact, Nietzsche accepted the "Development hypothesis" as an explanation of the origin of species but he did not halt where most naturalists have halted for he by no means regarded men as the highest possible being which evolution could arrive at; for though his physical development may have reached its limit, the same does not happen with his mental attributes. There is absolutely no limit for man's aspirations: "(...) I picked up from the path the word Superman, and that man is something that must be surpassed. That man is a bridge and not a goal" (Nietzsche, 1918, p. 220).

Nietzsche is against Socrates' philosophical revolution because that took men away from the Dionysian half, the creative half. He is also against monotheistic religions, especially the Jew-Christian tradition, for the reason that they stand in opposition to all intellectual well-being and men's freedom. He says:

I condemn Christianity; I bring against the Christian church the most terrible of all the accusations than an accuser has ever had in his mouth. It is, to me, the greatest of all imaginable corruptions (...) The Christian church has left nothing untouched by its depravity; it has turned every value into worthlessness and every truth into a lie, and every integrity into baseness of soul (Nietzsche, 1924, p. 181).

It is worth to note this is very similar to something Vikernes once said on interview (Aites & Ewell, 2008):

"Originally the place was an old pagan holy-site. It was up on the hill where our forefathers used to celebrate the sun. What the Christians did was to move this church from another place and put it not close to this holy place but on top of it, in the midst of the circle actually breaking up the circle, and on the pagan hulk they put

³ Of course before Dead some musicians and bands already painted their faces and bodies (like Celtic Frost, King Diamond, Alice Cooper or KISS); nevertheless, they just did it for aesthetic and marketing purposes (to look "cool" or "evil", ...). Dead was the first one that actually used paint to look like a corpse in decomposition.

a big stone cross. So, if they have no respect for the Norwegian culture, why on Earth should Norwegians respect their culture?”.

Nature of Black Metal and the mainstream devil

Analysing these passages one can easily understand what Black Metal is essentially about: rebellion against those who don't respect one's own heritage and culture. There is a strong sense of parenthood, personhood and sometimes loneliness that turn Black Metal into non-mainstream or even anti-mainstream – and this is the basic transversal philosophical line. What is going to properly differentiate between bands will be the aesthetics adopted as well as the personal experiences, beliefs, emotional balance and eventually psychopathological issues of their musicians. Of course we cannot hide, depreciate neither dismiss the fact that its social view is generically awful (like many other genres and artistic movements were before, as Tango, Blues, Rock or Punk) due to the common headline-grabbing “Satanic terror” that takes place on press from time to time. The reasons for that may vary but sometimes they are completely intentional and commercial.

For instance, Gorgoroth (also a *Tolkienesque* inspiration) performed a show in Poland displaying sheep heads on stakes, a bloodbath using 80 litres of sheep's blood and four naked crucified models on stage (Black Mass Krakow, 2004). This particular band is a good example of what is going on within the industry of shock-entertainment, violence and gore. The key-point here is not if they transmitted their message or even if what they did was morally correct but the fact they became much more known by the mass media and they sold more albums. This happens because people usually fear or become curious when listening about those things once the biggest part of them have religious beliefs where Satan and the devil pacts are undisputable truths or simply because they just want to have fun with bizarre discoveries.

But this is not a creation of Black Metal. Actually, and remembering the legendary “27 Club” (with musicians as Robert Johnson, Jimmy Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Kurt Cobain or Amy Winehouse who died under off-pattern circumstances, as homicide, suicide, alcohol and drug abuse), we can perfectly measure the social reach of the supposed diabolical pacts. The internet is full of such theories. Or, concerning the above-mentioned shock-entertainment industry, we just need to look at Marilyn Manson, Lady Gaga or Miley Cyrus to understand the phenomenology that lies behind.

What Black Metal really does is a harsh exploration which destroys, recreates and takes into an extreme these very sensible topics. Gorgoroth's anti-Christian Nietzschean ideology becomes clear just by reading the titles of their albums: “Antichrist” (1996), “Destroyer” (1998) – inspired in Nietzsche's book “Destroyer, or About How to Philosophize With the Hammer” – or “Twilight of the Idols” (2003). Nevertheless, it is also worth to mention here a distinctive fact: the vocalist Kristian Espedal (or Gaahl, one of Gorgoroth's members and a notorious man in the scene) openly assumed his homosexuality, something that appears to reinforce the sense of personhood, self-thinking and – somehow in a strange way – tolerance of this subculture.

The main emotions of the scene

“Pride”, “anguish” and “hate” seem to be the predominant emotions of Black Metal: “pride” of the ancient days; “anguish” for that long-gone past and “hate” for those who took it away. Gylve Nagel (also known as Fenriz), one of Darkthrone's founder, seems to agree with this view, as shown by Aites & Ewell (2008): “This is Black Metal, this is what Black Metal is supposed to sound like...all cold”. In fact, and analysing one of Mayhem's main songs named “Freezing Moon” (with Dead on vocals), we reach the very same conclusion:

“Everything here is so cold/Everything here is so dark/I remember it as from a dream/In the corner of this time/
Diabolical Shapes float by/Out from the dark/I remember it was here I died/By following the freezing moon (...)
Darkness is growing, the eternity opens/The cemetery lights up again/As in ancient times/Fallen souls die behind
my steps/By following the freezing moon” (Mayhem, 1994).

Thus, from the point of view of the listener, we can say the value of music is intrinsic and not merely instrumental; it results from a combination of things which are presented through the sound waves, the rhythm and the symphonies and his self-psychological experience, his inner world, his subjectivity. This happens not only in Black Metal but in all musical genres.

In fact, the philosopher Malcolm Budd (1992, p. 109) claims a similar opinion:

“A musical work is therefore a presentational symbol. But if it is a symbol it must possess a structure analogous to the structure of the phenomenon it symbolises: it must share a common logical form with its object. And the way in which a musical work can resemble some segment of emotional life is by possessing the same temporal structure as that segment (...) Music is a presentational symbol of emotional life”.

This means that in the case of Black Metal must be some continuous – even unconscious – segment between the musical structure and the bands’ lyricism and aesthetics with the emotional life of the subject in a way that, for a certain period of time, they both coincide: we have a double “pride”, a double “anguish” and a double “hate”. We shall note that this does not turn Black Metal into an undesirable field once every musical genre has its own amount of “pride”, “anguish”, “hate” and many other uncountable emotions. The same happens with Black Metal, which has also “love”, “envy”, “remorse” or “fear”. What really differentiates generic Black Metal from other musical genres is merely the fact that those three main emotions assume the role of traces of character – although some bands prefer to emphasize simply one of them (as the Depressive-Suicidal Black Metal bands which dig deep in anguish and melancholy or the National-Socialist Black Metal bands that overuse the ethnical hatred-factor).

Freudian traces of character

A trace of character to Freudian psychoanalysis is simply a mental formula in which character in its final shape is formed out of the constituent “drives” (*Triebe*) – “death drives” (*Todestriebe*) and “life drives” (*Lebenstriebe*). Freud (1924a, p. 267) says: “The permanent traces of character are either unchanged prolongations of the original drives, or sublimation of those drives, or reaction-formation against them”. This means that they constitute products of what happened to the subject during his babyhood and puberty. They do not suddenly appear from nowhere; they have an ancient and primary origin.

Thus, according to Freudian perspective, it is quite probable that those self-harming Black Metal musicians like Dead have a psychopathological disorder. But Amy Winehouse and Kurt Cobain also harmed themselves with alcohol and drugs – and they were mainstreamed –, so we must not be hypocrite. There are people mentally insane everywhere, in every single musical spectrum.

What really makes a distinction in Black Metal is the exacerbated nihilism which frequently appears as a background structure for the melodies and the unbounded criticism engaged to sensible topics as religion, both supported by furious fast drumming, guitar picking and screaming voices. Burzum’s song “Erblicket die Töchter des Firmaments” (translated as “Beholding the Daughters of the Firmament”) perfectly shows this nihilistic overview:

“I wonder how winter will be/With a spring that I shall never see/I wonder how night will be/With a day that I shall never see/I wonder how life will be/With a light I shall never see/I wonder how life will be/With a pain that lasts eternally/In every night there’s a different black/In every night I wish that I was back/To the time when I rode/Through the forests of old/In every winter there’s a different cold/In every winter I feel so old/So very old as the night/So very old as the dreadful cold/I wonder how life will be/With a death that I shall never see/I wonder why life must be/A life that lasts eternally(...)” (Burzum, 1996).

The quasi-omnipresent Nietzschean nihilism

In fact, and if we already talked about Nietzsche’s importance to the scene (namely through the Dionysian appealing, the anti-Christianity ideology and the *Übermensch* concept), we shall not forget his nihilistic impression on mankind. Nietzsche (1924, p. 47) wrote:

“Life itself appears to me as an instinct for growth, for survival, for the accumulation of forces, for power: whenever the will to power fails there is disaster. My contention is that all the highest values of humanity have been emptied of this will; that the values of decadence, of nihilism, now prevail under the holiest names”.

One of those holiest names is precisely God, and that is why Black Metal sings against him. Proclaiming Satan it is proclaiming the restoration of a different and primordial phenomenology; it is a returning point to the beginning of the world, a world without God and a world full of creative possibilities. The nihilistic or homicidal/suicidal

summons are nothing but a factual assumption of world's void; certainly sometimes the musicians are deeply emerged in psychopathological issues so they really want to inspire people to commit those actions but, generally speaking, they are just painting reality with their dissonance.

Freudian prototypes and Jungian archetypes

Thus, Satan can be perfectly understood as Freud once analysed:

“If the benevolent and righteous God is a substitute for his father, it is not to be wondered at that his hostile attitude to his father, too, which is one of hating and fearing him and of making complains against him, should have come to expression in the creation of Satan. Thus the father, it seems, is the individual prototype of God and the Devil. But we should expect religions to bear ineffaceable marks of the fact that the primitive father was a being of unlimited evil – a being less like God than the Devil” (Freud, 1924b, p. 424).

Nevertheless, and more than a “prototype”, Satan works as a Jungian “archetype” (*Archetyp*), an “instinctive trend” (Jung, 1988, p. 69)⁴ within Black Metal. He is a shadow of God, the good father – as Freud said – or, more remotely, a shadow of the primitive “Great Goddess” (or “Great Mother”), a symbol of fecundity for animals and farming whose cult preceded the monotheistic religions – something amazingly conceptualized by Erich Neumann (1974). As C. G. Jung (1969, p. 4) argues:

“Although the attributes of Christ (...) undoubtedly mark him out as an embodiment of the self, looked at from the psychological angle he corresponds to only one half of the archetype. The other half appears in the Antichrist. The latter is just a manifestation of the self, except that he consists of its dark aspects”.

Defining the nucleus of Black Metal

To conclude, we must say Satan is a Terrible Father that appears not to nurture and comfort but to challenge his own sons, kicking them out of docility and spiritual dependence and forcing them to face reality without any protection. This is why Black Metal is “cold” – as Fenriz assumed – and this is why “black metallers” need to build up their own armours, weapons and shelter. In the end, people just need to release their aggression from the mundane life: and this is what Black Metal does.

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⁴ According to Jung (1988, p. 69): “What we properly call instincts are physiological urges, and are perceived by the senses. But at the same time, they also manifest themselves in fantasies and often reveal their presence only by symbolic images. These manifestations are what I call the archetypes. They are without origin; and they reproduce themselves in any time or in any part of the world – even where transmission by direct descent or “cross fertilization” through migration must be ruled out”.

