

BEYOND THE EXPRESSION OF NIHILISM IN BLACK METAL

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ABSTRACT

As Heavy Metal music's most extreme subgenre of, motives of destruction, death and darkness are largely characteristic of Black Metal. A frequently anti-Christian message and commercially driven aim to shock the audiences have led to the impression that Black Metal is an expression of nihilism, Satanism, or simple transgression. However, this stigma does not capture the entirety of the concepts musically embodied in this genre with its distortion and screamed vocals. The aim of this work is to show that there is more to this genre, and to provide a description of the dual nature of the original motifs in this genre, how they are expressed using archetype and myth, and an alternative to nihilism. It will be seen that destruction is a prerequisite for rebuilding, death a precursor of rebirth, and darkness a call to courage so that one may conquer fear by facing it.

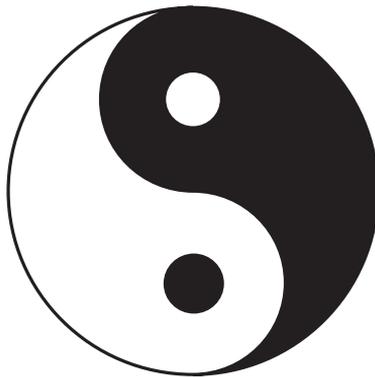
Key words: Black Metal, nihilism, paganism, mythology, duality.

INTRODUCTION

Black Metal can be defined as a subgenre of metal music, characterized by heavy distortion with lyrics that refer to chaos, death, nihilism and evil. Originating in the 1980s, this genre is often associated with anti-Christian motifs, particularly the cult of Satan (Phillipov, 2011, 153). The aim of this essay is to go beyond such a façade for which the genre has become known by a broader audience. Rather than focusing on the themes of nihilism to be found in many songs in this genre (Silva, 2016, 218), our emphasis will be on the need to express the darker aspects of human nature and the reasons why the acknowledgment of such (providing these aspects a certain palpability through song) can be beneficial rather than detrimental.

The first important concept that provides us with a key for understanding Black Metal is the concept of duality expressed in the symbol of Tao (Figure 1). In Eastern philosophy, this symbol represents the duality of things, including human nature, as well as their harmony, which does not have a clear distinction between light and darkness, but by their reciprocal presence in one another. In other words, darkness (Yin) cannot exist without its counterpart, light (Yang), which not only surrounds it but is present in its very core, and vice-versa. This principle will be applied to our analysis of Black Metal, in order to show how motifs that are ultimately positive, despite appearing negative and dark, can work.

Fig. 1. The symbol of the Tao, uniting the Yin and Yang



Our first example is the following: a love of God using the same distorted sounds and screamed vocals performed by a Capuchin friar, Cesare Bonizzi, also known as 'Fratello Metallo' ("Brother Metal"). Although his music is not Black Metal, friar Bonizzi claims that heavy metal and Catholicism are not exclusive to one another as heavy metal can transmit an energy otherwise absent in Gregorian chants. Furthermore, friar Bonizzi makes reference to the Bible, suggesting that metal music can express Christ's pain with greater vivacity, also infusing more power into the messages in his lyrics (nonsolosigle, 2008). There exists a significant link between friar Bonizzi's lyrics to those in many Black Metal songs; more than musical style, both reference God and the Bible, the former singing about love, and the latter about hate.

The Bible's most symbolic story of hatred toward God and subsequent rebellion is found in the story of Cain and Abel. According to Peterson (2007, 115), Cain expects a reward from God for his labours, yet his sacrifices and labours are not as good as Abel's, who becomes God's favoured one. Cain's disappointment leads to a loss of faith in God, and he kills Abel. Cain, thus, turns what is the absolute good into absolute evil. As God represents all creation, all can be reversed. Gorgoroth (a Norwegian black metal band) has engaged with this idea in their song "Prayer". Themes of vengeance and rebellion are central to it, its lyrics also providing a description of celestial bodies and the natural elements. However, they are described with qualities opposite to how they are commonly described: "The darkness of the sun, and the darkness of the moon, The teariness of fire, The blackness of lightning, The slowness of wind, The shallowness of sea, The ability of earth, The looseness of rocks". Without direct reference, rebellion against God is in these words describing a negation of his creation. While some condemn Black Metal for conveying messages of hatred, one would be naïve should one deny that everyone can have such feelings. Substituting God with the immanent randomness of existence, one will eventually admit that all can feel such destructive emotions, triggered by thwarted expectations, or a tragic and unexpected event. Black metal recognises such feeling, enabling the listener to make such feelings familiar, articulate them to oneself, and modify one's behaviour accordingly. Empirical studies have indeed shown how listening

to extreme music results in an increase in positive emotions after an anger induction procedure was used among metal listeners, including Black Metal fans (Sharman & Dingle, 2015).

The dark motifs in Black Metal are often associated with Satan. While some bands may genuinely worship him, and others use references to him with the intention to gain visibility and provoke, some claim that the presence of satanic imagery has its roots in the need for the symbolic representation of negative aspects in man (Silva, 2016, 219) – just as God symbolizes the positive aspects of the self. The Swiss psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung provided the term ‘archetypes’ to such symbols (Jung, 1964), defining them as the product of the part of the unconscious mind common to all individuals, i.e., the collective unconscious. In this sense they are universal symbols, present across cultures and epochs, although depicted with different depictions, as is the case in Christian culture: the universal notions of good and evil are symbolized by God and Satan/the Devil/the Antichrist.

BLACK METAL BEYOND CHRISTIANITY

The strong ties between Black Metal and Christianity have been described heretofore, sometimes pro- and sometimes anti-Christian motives are used: in the latter instance Satan is the central figure. However, Satan is not the only symbolic representation of darkness in Black Metal: sometimes we find the feminine figure of the Great Mother in pagan mythology (Neumann, 1974) as counterpart to the paternal figure of God. In black metal, this feminine figure is in the Norwegian black metal band Satyricon’s “Mother North”: the Great Mother (in this case, Mother North) is described as being under threat in this song, and there is an exhortation to fight back. The song is a defence of the mythos of Nordic regions that slowly disappeared with Christianity’s spread: the anti-Christian sentiment in this song is not the worship of Satan (the Antichrist). A reawakening archetype, using the characters of myth (and what they tell us of human nature – especially its dark side) is implied in this song. These motifs are especially pronounced in songs that are not attacks on Christianity, but

focus solely on the exploration of darkness with pagan symbols. As such themes are common in the metal of Nordic countries, sometimes Viking Metal is a term used to describe such music, also justifying our statement that not all black metal is Satanic and anti-Christian.

The intrinsic interconnectedness of darkness and light, in that one is generated by the other and vice-versa, becomes clear should one have the right key interpret songs with such a theme as their basis. Windir's "Journey to the End" can be interpreted with the aid of Jungian theory, as archetypes are evoked by the symbols in this song. Acknowledging one's own darkness and an individual's rebirth are themes in this song.

- [1] A vague shadow lurking in the dark,
- [2] A sane man's worst nightmare,
- [3] A vision containing death,
- [4] As a wake in honour of himself,
- [5] For equal sane mortals, it's a nightmare becoming real,
- [6] But I, I see it as the Final clause of a neverending deal,
- [7] I embraced my vision, as it was common for me, a fate, a destiny,
- [8] Finally I'm dead, and the vision is revealed for everyone else.

In the first line [1], 'shadow' is Jung's concept for a part of one's personality. The 'shadow' may be evil in the social status, and, thus, is concealed. People hide their shadows to appear good to others, yet it is still in the subconscious. A 'sane man' is the average person, the standard to which one is supposed to adhere, yet the average man hides his 'shadow' and does not confront it. A repressed 'shadow' can make itself manifest in one's dreams, throwing light on literal meaning of the word 'nightmare' [2]. The union of the good, social self (in Jungian terms, the Persona) with the 'shadow', and their integration is that for which every person should strive in order to achieve integration, i.e., for full self-acceptance (Jung, 2011). If one is to become a new, integrated, person, the old 'I' has to metaphorically die, but the new 'I' is born from the ashes of the old, and without it cannot come into being. The concept of integration is in the word 'vision' of line [3]: 'containing [the] death' of the former self. The old Self however is not to be despised, as it is the basis for the new Self, and must be thanked yet left to

remain in the past. This process is expressed in the 'wake in honour' in line [4]. The new Self thus emerges from the remains of the old. The meaning of 'sane mortal' [5] has been mentioned earlier, and 'equal' here signifies a tendency to conform to social norms; to conformists, the integration of the shadow may seem something one should avoid. Nevertheless, it is evident that the author of this lyric is aware of what this process represents. Although the notions of 'Final clause' and 'neverending deal' [6] may seem contradictory, they are not should one recall a cyclical process: the life-cycle of the 'I' is a series of births and deaths, represented in myth in figures such as the phoenix or the Ouroboros - the dragon eating its own tail. The 'deal' is the cycle of an inner life, in which the final stage is the death of the current 'Self'. This vision of an integrated person is then 'embraced' [7]: the old Self is accepted. Thus, the shadow is no longer relegated to darkness, but manifests itself in a new integrated Self that is also part of a greater social whole, hence the line 'revealed for anyone else' [8]. This transformation also impacts one's behaviour and one's relation to wider society, no longer as Persona but as a unique and complete person.

CONCLUSION

Besides the transgression of social norms, Black Metal also represents a means for the expression of the darker aspects of human nature. According to Jung, not recognising and accepting such aspects does not allow the individual to achieve completion and balance, so that the solution is to face these aspects. As stated in the opening paragraphs of this paper, the symbol of Tao represents such a balance. Our analysis of the idea of the archetype has led us to the conclusion that although black metal, on its own, is an expression of the darker aspects of our nature, it can also exhort one to face them. Black metal has also incorporated much folklore and myth in its iconography and expression for this reason: the story of King Arthur is an example, his knights seek the Holy Grail, venturing into the darkest parts of the forest. According to Peterson (Peterson, 1999, 316), metaphorically, what this signifies is that what one needs most is located where one would least like to look for it (or listen for it, in the case of black metal), this place often being the darkest.

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ONKRAJ IZRAZA NIHILIZMA U BLACK METAL-GLAZBI

SAŽETAK

Kao *najekstremniji* podžanr *heavy metal*-glazbe, *black metal* snažno karakteriziraju motivi uništenja, smrti i tame. Česte antikršćanske poruke i komercijalno usmjereni cilj šokiranja publike pridonijeli su općoj percepciji *black metala* kao izraza nihilizma, sotonizma ili transgresije. Međutim, takva stigmatizacija ne obuhvaća cjelovitost pojmova koji su glazbeno utjelovljeni s njezinim distorziranim zvukovima i vrištećim vokalom. Cilj je ovoga rada prevladati tu predodžbu da bi se prikazao dvostruki karakter izvornih motiva žanra, kako se to izražava putem arhetipskih i mitoloških referenci i koja se alternativa nihilizmu u stvari nudi. Takvo tumačenje dopušta da se uništenje pretvori u preduvjet ponovne izgradnje, smrt u preteču ponovnoga rođenja, a tama u poziv na hrabrost suočavanja sa svojim strahovima.

Ključne riječi: *black metal*, nihilizam, poganstvo, mitologija, dualnost.