

Crypto Logo Jihad Black Metal and the Aesthetics of Evil

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Black metal shrouds itself in the darkest of blacks. Deeply unintelligible guttural sounds, illegible logos—the bands do everything they can *not* to be understood or appreciated. Yet black metal's dedication to absolute darkness in no way hampers its increasing acceptance in the realms of visibility and the visual arts. At this rate, head bangers can look forward to a perfectly legible future in spotless white cubes.

The song is called *War*, the band, Burzum. Backed by drums, the sound of massive guitar overdrive blares from the speakers. Then, a shrieking voice joins in. It sounds like a Muppet is being strangled, although I realize that someone is in deadly earnest here. The singer is alone. Varg Vikernes, the only member of the Norwegian band Burzum, plays the guitar and drums. He is now in jail for killing Øystein Aarseth, the guitarist of black metal band Mayhem, and for setting fire to churches. In prison, he is devoting himself to the future of the Aryan race and his own *Weltanschauung*.^[1] His writings and portraits reach the outside world through a website hosted in Russia.

I first read about the Norwegian group Mayhem and their legendary demo album *Pure Fucking Armageddon* back in 1987, in the Dutch magazine *Aardschok/Metal Hammer*. It was a time when bands recorded their own demos and distributed them on tape and an intensive network sprang up between small cells of bands and youths—mostly guys—who also wanted a band of their own: holding a guitar, reinventing yourself, making lots of noise, lulling your mind to sleep. Band names were essential, but equally important were the photos, cover design and, most of all, the logo that put a band on the map.

Just like good restaurants in Rome are hard to find, the logo of an unknown black metal band is illegible—it is a symmetrical maze of jagged forms. According to the American designer Mark Owens, Mayhem was among the first bands to have such a logo.^[2] The logos of predecessors like Venom (England) and Celtic Frost (Switzerland) were still legible, albeit just barely. As Mayhem's logo took a tiny step over that line, it seems that the illegible band logo came into being around 1985. The illegible logo functions as a password; it is a boundary, behind which the secret begins.

Metal and Art

Culture likes metal. The soundtrack of Harmony Korine's feature film *Gummo*, 1998, featured music by Scandinavian black metal bands, including Burzum and Bathory. Fashion designer Lieve Van Gorp and graphic designers Experimental Jetset have also used visual elements from black metal. It is extremely hip to be seen in vintage T-shirts from Kiss, Judas Priest, and other hard rock bands. And artists like Jonathan Meese, Mark Titchner, and Steven Shearer, who borrow freely from metal aesthetic, are on the rise.

Dieter Roelstraete, a Belgian curator, philosopher, and musician in the metal-inspired grindcore genre, remarked in an article on Steven Shearer:

'The broad "cultural" attraction of grindcore is not only in the searing, destructive energy of the music (and the accompanying cathartic release) but also in the fiery passion with which this lifestyle has managed to embody a steely, evocative "NO"... and to propose this "no" as a legitimate cultural position.'^[3]

The successful artist Bjarne Melgaard collaborates with the Norwegian collective Thorns Ltd.—formerly known as Thorns when it was a black metal band—to produce black-metal inspired experimental music. So do artists like Banks Violette and Thorns' founder, Bård "Faust" Eithun, is now serving a prison sentence for murder. In 1993, Thorns band member Snorre Ruch was a witness—and according to the court,

an accessory—to Varg Vikernes' murder of Mayhem's guitarist. But Ruch has made a successful new start, performing at art biennials all over the world since 2004 when Thorns, Ltd. made its debut in *Playlist* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Roelstraete observes:

'The art world looks with great envy and longing at the bizarre excesses of a handful of spoiled Norwegian teenagers because it thinks it recognizes a residue of "realness" that can no longer be genuinely experienced in its own habitat, which has long been paralyzed by the cult of irony. Enter the "Return of the Real!" The longing for negation and/or negativity which is really and truly "bodily" experienced—that is what interests the art world in its flirtation with the metal underground.'

[4] In the art world, the citation of black metal serves as a negative symbol. Metal produces signs that are *not* meant to appeal to the masses. The artist who introduces black metal aesthetics thus refers to a phenomenon that is considered to be taking place beyond the consciousness of the viewer. This artist becomes a messenger, trading between the creative elite of viewers paralyzed by irony and a dark subculture of abject and archaic symbols. Here, the contradistinction between good and bad—beautiful vs. ugly, high vs. low culture, as rehearsed by pop art—has almost unnoticeably given way to the juxtaposition of Good and Evil.

The heavy postmodern artworks of Helmut Middendorf and Anselm Kiefer, and even the monolithic tombs of Hubert Kiecol, are distant relatives of the Wagnerian posturing of the recent wave of artists who cite black metal and Gothic aesthetics as the sources of their personal visual power.

I Was Made for Loving You

The iconography of black metal has its origins in hard rock, which referred fairly systematically to the typography of the Third Reich. It represents what Alain Badiou calls "radical evil." [5] Recall, if you will, the logo of Kiss, designed in the early 1970s by band member Ace Frehley, which unmistakably resembles the SS trademark. Yet, academics have been quick to cast doubt on any connection with Neo-Nazism. Deena Weinstein, author of *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture*, believes, for instance, that metal is apolitical, and only interested in the idea of power in the more general sense. Fans as well as musicians behave rather naively, and Frehley and the other members of Kiss see the two s's in their logo as lightning bolts. [6]

Robert Walser, professor of musicology at the University of California, qualifies that image. In *Running with the Devil*, he writes that heavy metal musicians make use of "images of horror and madness" in order to comprehend and critique the world: 'Although they are continually stereotyped and dismissed as apathetic nihilists, metal fans and musicians build on sedimented musical forms and cultural icons to create for themselves a world with more depth and intensity. If in some ways heavy metal replicates the ruthless individualism and violence that capitalism and government policy have naturalized, it also creates communal attachments, enacts collective empowerment, and works to assuage entirely reasonable anxieties.' [7]

The Utrecht professor of pop music Tom ter Bogt adds:

'Metal is a form of escapism. Naturally you see this more often in youths who are up against it. A metal concert is a celebration by people with problems. I think this is less true in the Netherlands, by the way. If you are a hard-core metal fan in the United States, you are extremely marginalized socially. Dropouts from school, if they are white, are always metal fans.' [8]

Black Metal and Guantánamo Bay

Asked about the use of metal as an instrument of torture in Guantánamo Bay prison [9], Ter Bogt replied:

'This type of music is very far from the musical idiom of the people who are imprisoned there. Even to Western ears, it can literally sound devilish. Most people will go crazy if you force them listen to that sort of music... Particularly the so-called "grunting" brings out something devilish that is probably

recognizable in other cultures too. I don't know for sure, of course, but I think that this way of singing cross culturally refers to very dark things. That is why it is so effective. It could also be music that is popular amongst the prison guards there.' This practice was painfully portrayed in *The Road to Guantánamo*, the documentary Michael Winterbottom made about Shafiq Rasul, Asif Iqbal, and Ruhel Ahmed from Tipton, England, who were considered terrorists by the American occupation forces in Afghanistan and locked up in Guantánamo Bay.[10] The chained prisoners were forced to listen to black metal with the speakers blasting at concert volume. In Winterbottom's version, it was Cradle of Filth, a black metal band from Suffolk, England.[11]

Guantánamo Bay holds prisoners without status. Neither citizens nor soldiers, they have no representation or defence, and are handed over to a judicial system that operates outside the law. Is metal the music of the "state of exception," the sovereign who can suspend the law because he is the law, the Leviathan? Is metal truly as apolitical as Weinstein claims? The problem may be her confusion of political with politics. Metal is indeed not concerned with politics in the sense of policy. Still, does not the development of metal in its most extreme forms have everything to do with being political, that is, with polarizing and articulating differences?

The Logo is a Password

For my sixteenth birthday, I wanted the debut album of the Californian metal revelation, Possessed. Devoted to human mortality, the record was called *Seven Churches*. The band members posed on the cover swathed in spikes and leather, with blood, guitars, and amplifiers. These photos expressed both their desire to astrally travel out of those teenage bodies and be adored by thousands of women—in reality, four or five stout beer drinking men—and their desire to represent the dropout's destructive energy.

Metal's "no" is more strongly connected with notions of power and violence or the imagined omnipotence of the totalitarian than with ideas about equality and anarchy.[12] This distinguishes metal from punk. According to Roelstraete, such a distinction is "typical of the 80s": 'I think that punk always had more to do with the ethics of protest, and metal more with the aesthetics of protest; however, the idea that metal could be an affirmative cultural phenomenon seems to me impossible—"reactionary" does not necessarily imply identification with power.'[13]

Possessed's logo used the Fraktur font. Prior to the illegible logos of bands like Mayhem, there was a long period in which metal and hard rock bands were primarily identifiable by their use of this Blackletter, which Bismarck had considered the only correct script at the time of the German unification, and which later served as the logotype of the anti-Semitic magazine *Der Stürmer* put out by the Nazi ideologist Julius Streicher. The German occupying forces got rid of Fraktur as their house-style letter in 1943 due to its illegibility.

Despite its near exclusive adoption by the Nazis, Fraktur is very widespread. Respected newspapers like *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* deck themselves out with it, as do eminent lawyers' offices, various brands of alcoholic beverages—including Warsteiner and Jägermeister—and so on. Metal and hard rock bands combine Fraktur with an *umlaut*—Motörhead—to strengthen its reference to Germany and the Third Reich. As a form, Fraktur also resembles spikes, flames, foliage, castles, scythes, church towers, and fences, and in more than one respect is related to the later generation of illegible logos. Fraktur is still widely used for diplomas and wedding invitations, for instance. No one thinks of Possessed or Motörhead when they receive an engraved invitation in Fraktur lettering from Brian and Joanne, inviting them to their wedding in Farnham Castle, Surrey on Saturday, February 28, 2004. How then can Fraktur refer to Evil, when this lettering is so widespread in practice and has so many applications?

The fact that Fraktur is used to typographically mark important, decisive, and binding moments—such as graduation or marriage—is not incompatible with its use as a symbol of power. The brewery giants' gothic logos refer to their craftsmanship, tradition, and origin, to a mode of production pretending to precede organized

industry, whose true quality can only be appreciated by connoisseurs. Fraktur's connotation of connoisseurship also strikes a note with metal fans. The American Roberto Martinelli, editor in chief of the online magazine *Maelstrom*, writes: 'A logo plays a huge part in the image of a company or product. This is also certainly the case with bands.... In black metal particularly, there is a certain revered aesthetic, like spikiness, illegibility, intricacy; to those things are added that intangible element that tells the connoisseur "this is a cult album that is worth your time."' [14]

One-Man Band

With the advent of activist, or violent, black metal, the band as a group entity disappears. The one-man collective comes into being, a single person who operates under his own logo. Music and logo become the vehicle for the distribution of highly personal ideas.

The creation of the one-man band can be traced back to punk's influence on metal at the end of the 1970s, when hard rock had degenerated into a symphonic genre for middle-aged men with ponytails and overly expensive audio equipment. Under the influence of the punk movement, metal bands became smaller, and the music louder and faster. Metal split into countless subgenres, with metaphysics as the overarching theme: the supernatural, war, and evil.

With grindcore in the second half of the 1980s, the technical mastery of metal musicians was used to transform hardcore punk into a metaphysical protest against a nameless total dominion, with the near apocalypse of Chernobyl, the deplorable living conditions in "dirty old town" under Margaret Thatcher, and the threat of nuclear war between America and the Soviet Union being thrown in as small change.

Black metal opted for the encryption of logotype and music and a further elaboration of hate, Satanism, and heathenism, and after a while, action was suited to word. People got killed.

Venom, the legendary Newcastle bratpack who invented black metal, could hardly play. In that sense, it was more of a two-man band than a trio. With its illegible logo, Norway's Darkthrone is one of the most famous and dubious of two-man groups. But the most bizarre metal band was probably the Swedish duo Abruptum, with a dwarf named "It" as frontman. Abruptum's music allegedly was produced through selftorture

and self-mutilation. The influential Swedish black metal group Bathory was in essence the one-man project of Ace Börje "Quorthon" Forsberg, who died of a heart attack in 2004. And then there is Burzum, with Varg Vikernes as the sole musician and Leviathan in his personal holy war of all against all.

Simulacrum

The illegible black metal logo developed, to some extent, analogously with typographic forms of encryption and secrecy developed for the Internet, such as the so-called CAPTCHA—Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart. CAPTCHA images are word pictures generated without human intervention, which must be retyped by a computer user—for instance, when setting up a free e-mail account—in order to guarantee that this is a person and not a machine, so as to prevent spam. As such, these word pictures must be practically illegible. The words found in CAPTCHA are often abstract and meaningless combinations of letters. Graphic designer Jeremy Jansen generated thousands of them, including words like "shehell" "castro," "blutzn," and "askednex." These eerie letter pictures recall black metal bands like Arthimoth, Horna, Myrskog, Toxocara, Tsjuder and Xasthur.

Those who seek to portray Evil resort to signs and symbols that represent evil in its most radical form. Black metal uses them to develop new symbols: encrypted word pictures that are illegible and unknowable. These correspond to, and function in, the age of individualization. Whereas the Third Reich's symbols and propaganda were mass communicational devices meant for entire populations, black metal logos symbolize the hate of individuals and small groups for more or less specifically

named others. Alain Badiou writes about this very process when he calls Evil a “simulacrum of truth”:

‘When a radical break in a situation, under the names borrowed from real truth processes, convokes not the void but the “full” particularity or presumed substance of that situation, we are dealing with a simulacrum of truth.... Fidelity to a simulacrum, unlike fidelity to an event, regulates its break with the situation not by the universality of the void, but by the closed particularity of an abstract set (the “Germans” or the “Aryans”). Its invariable operation is the unending construction of this set, and it has no other means of doing this than that of “voiding” what surrounds it.’ [15]

Metal has been under ideological fire for over twenty years now. Some people hear the devil’s voice in metal and wish to forbid it on grounds of ethics and religion. Equally moralistic—with their unlimited tolerance for anything different—are the arguments defending metal as a form of innocent teenage rebellion, which point to the positive catharsis that metal fans experience during concerts. Both views of the situation are too simple. From Kiss to Burzum, black metal is the privileged subcultural development of an aesthetic of evil. This development has lasted for decades and has been applied to signs (logos), group identities (bands), music (noise), and people (murder). This has occurred against the background of an increasingly advanced information and network environment,[16] which offers possibilities to build groups from totally individualized cells or single-person collectives continually altering their own partially fictive identities with ever new combinations of revelation and encryption. Black metal is used as an audio torture instrument by the military, making it symbolic for the state of exception in Guantánamo Bay and other prisons. In that sense, black metal ultimately has exited the realm of aesthetics. It has become political. •

Notes

1. Michael Moynihan, Didrik Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*, Los Angeles: Feral House, 1998. Varg Vikernes took the life of Mayhem founder and guitarist Øystein Aarseth a.k.a. Euronymous in 1993; this was after the band already had had to bid farewell in 1991 to singer Per Yngve Ohlin a.k.a. Dead, who committed suicide with a hunting gun. In addition to being the guitarist of Mayhem, Euronymous was the owner of the Helvete record store in Oslo and the record label Deathlike Silence Productions, on which he brought out his own and other people’s music. A key figure in the underground black metal network, Aarseth worked on a highly personal view of world history, cultural anthropology, and religion.
2. Mark Owens, email to the author, July 2006.
3. Dieter Roelstraete, “Death Drives, Différence, and Nothingness,” *A Prior* 12, 2005
4. Dieter Roelstraete, email to the author, April 2007.
5. ‘Although the idea of a radical Evil can be traced back at least as far as Kant, its contemporary version is grounded systematically on one ‘example’: the Nazi extermination of the European Jews. I do not use the word ‘example’ lightly. An ordinary example is indeed something to be repeated or imitated. Relating to the Nazi extermination, it exemplifies radical Evil by pointing to that whose imitation or repetition must be prevented at all costs—or, more precisely: that whose nonrepetition provides the norm for the judgement of all situations.’ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: an Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, London: Verso, 2002
6. Deena Weinstein, email to the author, July 2006.
7. Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Hannover: Wesleyan/University Press of New England, 1993.
8. Tom ter Bogt, all quotes from conversation with the author, August 2006.
9. See for example <http://foia.fbi.gov/guantanamo/122106.htm>: “Rumors that interrogator bragged about doing lap dance on defendant, another about making defendant listen to satanic black metal music for hours.” Accessed October 1, 2007.
10. See also the website of the Center for Constitutional Rights, New York, for the statement of the “Tipton Three”:

http://www.ccrny.org/v2/legal/september_11th/docs/Guantanamo_composite_statement_FINAL.pdf, accessed October 1, 2007.

11. Suzanne G. Cusick, "Music as Torture, Music as Weapon,"

<http://www.cageprisoners.com/articles.php?id=19404>, accessed October 1, 2007.

12. The late Mayhem guitar player had been a supporter of the Romanian dictator Ceausescu.

13. Dieter Roelstraete, email to the author, March 2007.

14. See http://www.maelstrom.nu/ezone/interview_iss7_74.php, accessed October 1, 2007.

15. Badiou, *Ethics*

16. Think of MySpace and Second Life, for example.