

NICOLA MASCIANDARO (ED.) (2010) *HIDEOUS GNOSIS. BLACK METAL THEORY SYMPOSIUM 1*, CHARLESTON: CREATESPACE. ISBN 1450572162.

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Heavy metal appears to have enjoyed its high days in the nineties. Whereas the long haired black dress code was once quasi ubiquitous it has by now become something of a curiosity on the high streets. Nevertheless, metal and its various subgenres such as black, speed, doom, death or thrash metal have managed to retain a score of adherents. *Hideous Gnosis* is the theoretical proof of this continued fascination with a music genre that for many also represents a way of life and thought. *Hideous Gnosis* attempts to shed a new theoretical light on the dark recesses of black metal culture. It unites philosophers, cultural theorist and musicians who are all in one way or another involved in writing or thinking about – or indeed composing – black metal; but instead of a musicological cultural reading of black metal as a genre or practice, the essays in this collection all set out to develop a genuine ‘black metal theory’. The question then is: what is understood by such a theory? It proves difficult to define the specifics of such a theory, since most authors do quite different things in this book, but in general terms it could be said that the ambition of *Hideous Gnosis* is to develop a theoretical framework on the basis of black metal itself.

One of the most valuable contributions to the book in this regard – and also the one that is most likely to appeal to a broader audience of cultural theorists and music practitioners – is the interview conducted by Brandon Stosuy, called ‘Meaningful Leaning Mess.’ In an excerpt from a longer conversation between several key players in the American black metal underground scene, the participants discuss whether black metal in the United States essentially differs from black metal produced in Scandinavia and elsewhere. The merit of the discussion that enfolds lies in the fact that it can be read on several levels. On a first level the reader is presented with an accessible conversation that introduces her/him to the topics and

interests of the American scene. With participants such as He Who Crushes Teeth from California based duo Bone Awl, Florida based Bestial Devotion from Negative Plane, Imperial from the New Jersey band Krieg, and Wargoat Osbcurum from Chicago based duo Cult of Daath, the conversation presents a fairly representative image of the contemporary black metal scene in the U.S.¹ On a second level, the conversation sheds a new light on black metal as a musical genre and the fascination for the occult that seemingly surrounds it. American black metal, the participants argue, is less interested in the occult and in paganism than it is in life itself. As He who Crushes Teeth puts it:

If you listen to the music, I think you can hear discernable qualities of American Life. The stance is humble and masculine [sic]. It's a strong walk rather than elegant flight. Life is enough of an explanation, like in transcendentalist writings, we don't need symbols or grandiose concepts to address the magic in life ... (145)

The link established here between American transcendentalist writing and contemporary American black metal would have been worthwhile to explore. Most essays in this collection, however, focus on the interaction between the occult, philosophy and predominantly European black metal. An exception is Hunter Hunt-Hendrix's essay 'Transcendental Black Metal', which can be read as an attempt to carve out the distinction between on the one hand a typically European black metal, which he calls hyperborean black metal and is concerned with death and destruction, and on the other hand a more recent form of black metal, which he calls transcendental black metal and which is 'the reanimation of the form of black metal with a new soul, a soul full of chaos, frenzy and ecstasy' (59). Despite Hunt-Hendrix's rather abstract approach, his argument succeeds in opening up an original way of approaching black metal; it points toward a successful way of employing a geophilosophical analysis to a musical genre that, despite appearances, is rooted in the cultural diversity of its various countries of origin.

Cultural diversity in the appropriation of black metal has not been given much attention, although a thorough study like Keith Kahn-Harris's *Extreme Music* demonstrates that most groups take their inspiration from the pagan traditions of their own country or cultural region (2007: 41). Still, despite this cultural diversity, most

black metal bands are preoccupied with Nazism and National Socialism. Not only do they appropriate the symbols of nationalist rightwing political ideologies, but also and more importantly 'in black metal these appropriations have been accompanied by discourses that are highly conducive to the incorporation of Nazi ideologies' (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 41). This topic, which would seem unavoidable on a symposium dealing with black metal theory, sits at the centre of the articles by Benjamin Noys and Evan Calder Williams in *Hideous Gnosis*. They enter into discussion concerning the question of whether black metal can be taken as a musical genre that interacts with contemporary continental thought or should rather be taken up on its predominantly rightwing ideology. The argument made by Calder Williams is that black metal can serve as a critique of some tendencies in continental thought. Black metal, he argues, by maintaining a state of pure negativity, destroys the tendency of dialectical thinking witnessed in modern philosophy. Black metal is then 'presented as auto-destructive, immanently acephalic, and, in line with the self-presentation of many Black Metal artists, deliberately self-parodic' (106-107). For Noys, however, this kind of approach to black metal is not only an ingenuous justification for the *jouissance* experienced by the leftist intellectuals when listening to rightwing extreme metal; it also denies the veritable potential of black metal by failing 'to take seriously the kind of coherence between aesthetics and politics argued for from *within* Black Metal' (107, emphasis in the original). The emphasis on 'within' seems to suggest that the endeavour to interpret black metal by making use of Deleuze, Virilio, or Lacan is a sure way of obliterating the actual potential of the music in favour of a theory-obsessed appropriation of it. This is indeed the trap which some of the essays in *Hideous Gnosis* risk falling into. While most authors succeed relatively well in avoiding such theoretical cannibalism, some of the essays do succumb to a rather gratuitous amassing of black metal with continental theory.²

Noys steers clear of this pitfall by focusing on the political aesthetic of one specific artist: Sale Famine, member of the French black metal group *Peste Noire*. In response to this claim, Calder Williams argues contra Noys that black metal can and must be read as a sustained and radical critique of transcendence, redemption and revelation. Insisting on the negativity and destructiveness of black metal, Calder Williams sees in it the potential to obliterate the dialectical tendency to overcome negativity and move toward affirmation. For him this also implies that there is no coherence (let

alone a coherent political aesthetic) to be discerned in black metal. He writes:

Always caught midflight ... black metal is the negative insistence: no transcendence, no redemption, no revelation. Yet this negation does not hack and slash open a clear spot on Armageddon's plains. It does not allow for apocalyptic *krisis*, the clarity and separation of judgment ... Black metal is the obsessive yearning lunge toward such clarity, and it is the abortive impossibility of reaching it. (141)

While Noys admits that black metal seems predominantly concerned with negativity and destruction, he argues that there is still sufficient coherence to be found in the musical genre to be able to talk about a political aesthetics. He may not go as far as Hunt-Hendrix (and some of the American bands) who sees black metal as affirmation; but Noys shares with him the conviction that black metal is a form of aesthetics which, as Hunt-Hendrix would have it, 'is a resurrection of the aura and an affirmation of the power of meaning to mean' (65).

The negativity on which some of the authors in *Hideous Gnosis* insist is really only half the story about black metal; and when not carefully dealt with it quickly risks echoing the incredulous media hype of Satanism associated with the Norwegian black metal scene of the mid 1990's. Alongside the emphasis on death and darkness, black metal also places an overarching emphasis on life and vitality. Niall Scott's essay 'Black Confessions and Absolution' is an interesting read because it revises both the nihilism of black metal and its antagonistic relation to Christianity. Scott argues that both black metal and Christianity attach great value to confession. But whereas the Christian tradition of confessing is a private matter between the confessor and the priest, the art of confessing is something that happens out in the open during black metal performances. And more importantly, he argues,

[i]n Black Metal in contrast to the Christian confession and absolution, there is no soul to be atoned no restoration to God needed; instead it is an incantation into the void. The black metal event is a confession without need of absolution,

redemption, it is a venting, a bloodletting with no prospect of consuming blood. (227-228)

Fascinating as it is, though, in order for his argument to be convincing Scott would have had to differentiate between several practices of confession (a distinction between Catholic practices and others strands of Christianity seems of particular importance here) and further analysis would have been necessary to flesh out the differences between black metal performances and other forms of metal performances (wherein lie the confessional qualities of black metal exactly during a live performance? And are these not to be found in other forms of performance?).

Probably the most important critique that can be levelled against *Hideous Gnosis* is that while most essays contain at least one interesting thought or idea, they lack the theoretical subtlety and/or concrete analysis to extend this idea. Some of the essays are simply too philosophical and pay little attention to black metal, whereas others are merely engrossed in historical analyses of black metal and its practice without further theoretical concerns. This can in part be explained by the difficulty of developing such a thing as a black metal theory, which is not the same as theory on black metal but should still be distinguishable from a more general philosophical discourse that simply shares the tropes, rhetoric and cultural references of black metal.

The most convincing specimen of such a black metal theory is the 'Black Metal Commentary' in the final section of the book and written by Nicola Masciandaro and Reza Negarestani. Consisting of a glossary of concepts, the 'Black Metal Commentary' traces the conceptual space in which black metal is situated. The glossary contains such entries as 'Vacuum/Void/Abyss' ('Black Metal ... fills voids, sounds abysses with its sonic/verbal/visual representations of them'), 'Arcana/Enclosure' ('the nexus of erudition and the esoteric'), and 'Possession' ('In Black Metal, all elements from musical to vocal and visual must reflect the voice of the outsider'). The persuasiveness of Masciandaro and Negarestani's article lies in the fact that they continuously problematize their own tendency to develop a theoretical commentary on black metal. They acknowledge that any theoretical commentary on black metal, because it relates to something that positions itself squarely outside the realm of textual commentary, must remain marginal. But, they argue, this commentary, despite its seeming inefficacy, 'spread[s] out in unending uniqueness from the page's unremarkable center,

giving witness to depths the undisturbed, undefaced surface cannot' (264). The reader might respond by saying: so deconstruction has finally reached the realm of black metal - well, good luck with that. Fortunately, Masciandaro and Negarestani are well aware of this and have no problem putting their own commentary into context by stressing the sheer enjoyment of listening to and talking about a musical genre they appreciate so much. As a consequence, *Hideous Gnosis* is enjoyable reading for anyone interested in the more extreme forms of metal and contemporary theory.

Endnotes

1. The details (including discography) of these bands can be found on the excellent *The Metal Archives*: <http://www.metal-archives.com/> In addition, another participant in the conversation, Aesop Dekker from Ludicra and Agalloch, maintains a blog through which he makes available difficult-to-come-by black metal demos and records: <http://cosmichearse.blogspot.com/>

2. Although it should be added that most essayists in this collection are well aware of this problem; and in fact the other cliché, namely that 'theory is either redundant or ... misses the point which can only be grasped in authentic, inexpressible experience,' is taken to task by Scott Wilson in his critical essay 'Pop Journalism and the Passion for Ignorance' (249).

References

Kahn-Harris, K. (2007). *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*. Berg: Oxford.