

BLACK METAL IN THE CULTURE INDUSTRY



Composers/pianists, Adorno and Emperor's Ihsahn

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As a student of Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno [1903-1969] continued the Marxist perspective of the Institute of Social Research [later known as the Frankfurt School]. His work on the culture industry presents cultural criticism highlighting the potential and successive failure of modern media, both that of “high” culture and of “popular” culture, to overcome the dialectic relationships established through the post-industrial social situation of capital societies.

One of Adorno’s main issues within his work on the Culture Industry [CI] was the observation that modern culture comes from the top down rather than the bottom up, that modern culture is not owned by the masses, but is rather imposed upon them. This idea is clarified in his essay “Culture and Administration” as he states: “Whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well, whether this is his intention or not.”¹ Adorno observes that what is described as culture in modern society is not culture at all, but is an expression of the industry of late capitalism. The serious issue that this clarification rises is the loss of the individuals agency and ability to subjectivity experience reality within capitalism. How can this sense of individual agency be recovered? Within this all-encompassing situation, can individuals resist the culture industry?

Sociologist Dick Hebdige examines the subculture as an expression of culture’s progressive potential. He posits that by studying the (horizontal) relationships between

¹ Theodore W. Adorno “Culture and Administration” in *The Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge), 107.

cultures and society, call for a “broader formulation of the relationships between culture and society, one which through the analysis of ‘particular meanings and values’ sought to uncover the concealed fundamentals of history; the ‘general causes’ and broad social ‘trends’ which lie behind the manifest appearances of an ‘everyday life’.”² Here the subculture serves as independent “accents” expressing different unique positions in relation to culture. Although Hebdige is careful to express Adorno’s claim that culture is an ideological field that is not at all neutral, his description of subculture allows room for a space where autonomous individuals may lay claim to their own productions.

In this paper I will be looking at Adorno’s essays on music (an area which he wrote extensively about)³ and the culture industry alongside the subculture of Black Metal. My definition of Black Metal is the underground movement in music established in Norway in the early 1980s. The first wave of Black Metal included the bands Venom, Bathory, and King Diamond. These bands (referred to as the “holy trinity” of Black Metal) initiated a new style of metal involving heavy rapid drumming, loudly shrieked and ghostly vocals, lyrics referencing Norwegian mythology, and complex and symphonic

² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 7.

³ Adorno had extensive musical training in his adolescence, once aspiring to become a composer and concert pianist. This interest led Adorno to music criticism and journalism which set foundations for the essays on music published with the Institute of Social Research and many of the essays collected in *Essays on Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

composition structures. This Black Metal style aims to create a transcendental experience supported by lengthy audio tracks that average 10 minutes.⁴

I will be focusing on the Black Metal band Emperor throughout this essay. Reigning over the second wave of underground extreme metal, the Black Metal band Emperor was formed in 1992 by three teenaged musicians: vocalist-guitarist Ihsahn (Vegard Sverre Tveitan), drummer Samoth (Tomas Thormodsaether Haugen), and bassist Mortiis (Havard Ellefsen). Though their production only include four studio records, they toured globally, had record sales in hundred thousands, and had significant influence on third wave bm. Recorded within their first year together, their demo *Wrath of the Tyrant* gained the band a record deal with the label Candlelight and helped the group establish a specific accent for themselves within Black Metal as a “symphonic black metal” band. This reputation was cemented with the album *In the Nightside Eclipse* (1994).

In this essay I will first look at the recording formats of Emperor’s their demo *Wrath of the Tyrant* which through low-fi recording, and I will pose, disrupts the artificiality of the produced album. Then, I will look at how the aesthetics of the Black Metal band Emperor favor the autonomous individual, a yearning for rebirth and a new valuation of “the new.” I will conclude by reaffirming the relation between the Black Metal subculture, and describing how it both resists and is contained by industry.

⁴For an extended description of Norwegian and international black metal musicians and discography see Garry Sharpe-Young’s *Metal: the Definitive Guide* (London: Jawbone Press, 2007).

Wrath of the Tyrant was cheaply created on the onset of Emperor's formation. Recorded in a "small studio basement" the recording held onto a "raw" quality that was common within Black Metal's early history when music was circulated primarily through copies of recorded copies on cassette tapes.⁵ Emperor considered their music as a new art form that ventured beyond the type of extreme death metal which preceded it. Inspired by bands such as Celtic Frost, Tormentor, and Bathory, the group developed a unique style that built upon early Black Metal qualities by adding a symphonic, atmospheric quality that was new to Black Metal. According to music journalist Garry Sharpe-Young, *Wrath of the Tyrant* "captured on a primitive 4-track machine, the rustic nature of its execution and bass that was reduced to an angry buzz could not temper the ferocity and quality of Emperor's first excursion into the studio."⁶

The low-fi qualities of this early recording have a peculiar effect upon the listener that is similar to Adorno's description of the "hear-strip."⁷ In Adorno's essay "Radio Symphony," he explores how the method of transmission of music is not transparent and that the hear-strip, or "audible current of noise," that the recording contains (esp. in radio broadcasting) further separates the possibility for an auratic experience of the actual

⁵ J Bennett, "Total Eclipse: Metal, Mayhem & Murder: The Making of Emperor's *In the Nightside Eclipse*" in *Precious Metal: Decibel Presents the Stories Behind 25 Extreme Metal Masterpieces*. (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press: 2009), 280-291.

⁶ Sharpe-Young, 210.

⁷ Adorno, *Essays on Music*, 219.

music performance and the recording that the listener experiences.⁸ Though this hear-strip is described by Adorno as a particular bursting of the seams of the culture industry, bm aesthetics seem to use the “hear-strip” qualities as a symbol of their subversion of traditional musical modes. Whereas Sharpe-Young applauded the first demo by Mayhem, he described the studio album *In The Nightside Eclipse* as “horrifically underproduced.”⁹ The album’s mixing was credited to Mr. Pytten (Eirik Hundvin) of Grieghallen Studios in Bergen. Its grander production was a result of the success of the earlier demo album and Candlelight’s support. Although Pytten was not a fan of bm, he was considered a skilled sound engineer who took the music very seriously.¹⁰ But *In The Nightside Eclipse* did not seem to live up to the underground aesthetics of bm, “as any enhancing rawness was unfortunately lost in a thoroughly amateurish mix, pitching Samoth’s high-velocity rasps against a blurred guitar quagmire, an anarchic percussive texture, and hissing bass.”¹¹

This critique, which favors the low-fi recording, disrupts the traditional intent of the music recording to create a simulated experience of the musical performance. It is a critique against the artificiality of the produced album that favors the difficulty in

⁸ I am referring to Walter Benjamin’s definition of the “aura” here. See “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. (New York: Schocken, 1969), and my previous essay “On Walter Benjamin’s ‘Aura’” for a wider definition of the “auratic experience” and its values to the Frankfurt School theorists.

⁹ Sharpe-Young, 210.

¹⁰ Pytten also produced Mayhem’s *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanan* and the first Burzum albums. Grieghallen Studios quickly became the primary studio where everyone went to record first black metal albums. See *Precious Metal*.

¹¹ Sharpe-Young, 210.

interpretation that the low-fi recording presents.¹² This quality is an identified aesthetic attributed to authentic early Black Metal scene that further exerts Hebdige's identification of subculture style as "becoming a form of stigma, tokens of a self-imposed exile."¹³ This aesthetic was commonly lost as Black Metal bands become more successful composed and reproduced music with the intention that it could be translated to wider audience through high quality sound reproductions.

Through critiquing the qualities of the CI, Adorno hoped to inspire individuals to be active consumers of their daily lives and to recognize their own apperception and ability to intervene with cultural productions. This goal favors the autonomous individual whom is frequently lost within "culture," or as theorist Fredrick Nietzsche describes a similar phenomena, "the herd instinct."¹⁴ Nietzsche's heralding of the individual's will to power is commonly referred to as a major influence for Black Metal musicians who reassert through interviews the importance of their identification with the Norwegian woods, Viking mythology which celebrates the individual warrior, and the musicians ability to

¹² This style attempts to identify the low-fi and an antithesis of the hi-fi recording that is destined to be part of culture industry before it is composed, reproduced, or distributed. It attempt is to deny the exchange and demand potential that music fulfills, and to avoid the quantifying acceptance of the music by potential consumers. To read behind this style is to see that early bm musicians attempted to regain aesthetic judgment of experience that was available pre-capitalism. (Apr 23 lecture)

¹³ Hebdige: 2

¹⁴ See Fredrick Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Random House, Inc.: 1967), I 2.

reflect outside of major cities of Norway.¹⁵ In such a way they seem to illustrate Nietzsche's opening statements to *Genealogy of Morals*, "We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge [...] we are not 'men of knowledge' with respect to ourselves."¹⁶

The fantasy of the Viking warrior, recalled through Emperor's lyrics, is a romantic idea of a time pre-1000—which is when Christianity emerged in Norway—when individuals (symbolized by the Vikings) had an identity separate from society. To attempt to make this distinction is impossible, especially within contemporary industrialized Norway. This perspective, which attempts to empower the mystical (the religious) over the scientific, provides us with an advantageous perspective into the subculture as a mode to overcome capitalism. The attempt of bm to empower the mystical capabilities of music with the qualities that music had in the pre-modern era—namely that music existed as an united expression of the political, philosophical, economic, artistic, scientific, and religious spectrums—is symptomatic of the dissatisfaction within contemporary Norway not satisfy the ability of the self to both embody its traditional culture and *transcend* into an individual.¹⁷

In an interview with *Decibel* magazine, Emperor musician Samoth describes the origin of the band's name: "Emperor became a metaphor for our own entity, for the dark lord, for the devil, for the strong and the mighty."¹⁸ The "strong and the mighty" here, has an

¹⁵ Bennett, 287.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, 15.

¹⁷ From notes of lecture "Adorno on 'Culture Industry,'" March 12, 2010.

¹⁸ Bennett, 283.

alliance with the mysterious and the unknown. It is through this *unknown* that Black Metal established its ambience through its visual and audible influences. The use of the “devil” in Black Metal is not a reference to the Christian Satan, but rather an evoking of pre-Christian ideas that were seen as modes to overcome the symptoms of Capitalism. Within Black Metal’s targeting of Christianity as a “terrorist” force within Norway is the more actual threat that capitalism posed to the culture of Norway and the potential for the agency of individuals within that country.

Despite Black Metal’s attempts to subvert culture, I must return to Adorno and Hebdige’s point that, despite its original occurrence within the underground, Black Metal is very much an *expression* of the culture that it is functioning within. It is encased within the CI and continues, as such, an expression of bourgeois society. The rise of the Black Metal subculture expresses capitalism in action; the subculture’s attempts to transcend the dominant culture illustrates how capitalism expands itself into new markets and is thus integrated into every particulate of life.

Through Adorno’s writings on the CI, a psychoanalytical reading of culture is analyzed. In the case of the band Emperor, half of the musicians in the band were imprisoned before the 1994 album was released for crimes of church burning and murder. These criminal acts that mark the early history of Black Metal mark aggressive attempts by the part of the individual musicians to overcome capital by mastering themselves through their demonstrations of overpowering others (in this case Christianity and accused homosexual individuals). The “acting out” is symptomatic of an un-mastered

individuals.¹⁹ Black Metal musicians searched for the ego-ideal in the culture and found it in their interpretations of Norwegian mythology, in fantasy images, in nature, and in other bm bands.

Where the individuals of Emperor failed was in their ability to comprehend the intense complication hiding behind the society that their music attempted to subvert. As Lukas has taught us, there cannot exist an individual separate from society (or vice-versa) because the definitions of each the private and the public are rendered self-contradictory under Capital.²⁰

Did the Black Metal musicians of this underground genre ever have the power to overcome their situation under Capital? If so, was it lost once the band was recognized as expressing values which a larger audience understood and identified with? Furthermore, do subcultures truly have the power to subvert culture at all?

¹⁹ From notes of lecture “Adorno on ‘Culture Industry,’” April 30, 2010.

²⁰ Ibid, March 12, 2010.

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