

From Forests Unknown: Eurometal and the audio political unconscious

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Eurovision

For much of Europe, particularly Western Europe, Lordi's extraordinary hard-rock victory in Eurovision 2006 failed to disturb the contest's general function which is to continue, through its kitsch vapidity, to inoculate Europeans from any desire for a popular forum for cultural or political expression. In Finland, however, the victory constituted something of a national event. The particular staging of national culture in the Eurovision song contest is apparently taken more seriously by some nations than others, and in Finland the contest has 'evoked patriotic emotions throughout Finnish television history, even though Finland has often ranked among the lower positions' (Häyhtiö and Rinne, 2007: 340). What is seen in some nations of Europe, particularly Britain when it gets *nul points*, as the insipient nationalism of Eurovision is evident of course in the vote-rigging that has plagued the contest ever since General Franco condemned poor Cliff Richard to the runners-up spot in 1968. It continues today with the spectacle of the Baltic and Balkan countries voting for each other.

When Lordi won Finland's Eurovision vote in March 2006 and thus were selected to represent the nation, their monster masks and unconventional (for Eurovision) hard rock/soft metal form caused a degree of consternation in the nationalist press. The selection was considered a 'sacrilege and the band were accused of satanism' (H&R, 2007: 340). To circumvent these attacks, Lordi, on the one hand, supported sub- and minority cultures against nationalist intolerance, and on the other, co-opted nationalist symbols in their performance. Waving the Finnish flag, they sported nationalist symbols like traditional top hats and Sami 'Four Wind hats' (341). Their overwhelming victory in the contest was thereby

cemented as a specifically Finnish victory.

Indeed, in an essay called 'Hard Rock Hallelujah! Empowering Reflexive Political Action on the Internet' published in the *Journal for Cultural Research* (2007) sociologists Tapio Häyhtiö and Jarmo Rinne argue that the significance of this victory as a Finnish national event had political repercussions. While Finnish political leaders sought to associate themselves with the victory – even to the point of Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen making the 'devil's horn' gesture while posing for pictures with the band – it was not until a number of Finnish papers and magazines broke the taboo on publishing the unmasked face of Mr. Lordi himself that the band became the centre of a popular revolt, stirring national outrage against the media and various boycotts, 'buycotts', website jamming and other internet campaigns. I don't want to rehearsal all this now, there's a reference for the article on the hand out.

I want to make two points on the basis of this well-known example. First, the exceptional difference that was acknowledged in the record haul of points for 'Hard Rock Hallelujah', coupled with the band's subsequent status as national heroes, hints at the desire for some kind of popular forum for cultural or political expression that Eurovision generally displaces. The specific nature of Lordi's success suggests perhaps that this desire pulsates, unacknowledged and in darker forms no doubt, throughout the various metal subgenres, scenes and festivals that have proliferated throughout Europe, new and old, since the early 1990s. And, moreover, that these desires expressed in the form of hard rock or metal can have genuine popular appeal. Second, that it is perhaps this question of the mask and unmasking that lays down the terms and limits of this cultural and political desire, terms and limits that, moreover, need to be circumvented.

Good sociologists that they are, Häyhtiö and Rinne are more interested in what the public outrage surrounding Tomi Putaansuu's unmasking has to say about the use of the internet in 'empowering reflexive political action' than in speculating on what caused the

excessive response or why the papers and magazines misjudged the public so badly. After all, what really was the problem? The cartoon mask is only a gimmick, surely? Images of Alice Cooper or Gene Simmons without their make-up have never caused national outrage or anxiety in the US. Häyhtiö and Rinne acknowledge that there was a ‘deep source’ to the moral indignation surrounding the unmasking: ‘Lordi’s victory was regarded as a national heroic deed and an expression of Finnish *sisu* (toughness or “guts”, considered to be a mental characteristic of Finns), entirely comparable with the miracle of the Winter War, achievements of the greatest Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, and other cultural success stories’ (H&R: 348). Lordi can become a focus of nationalist desire because Finnish *sisu* is perceived in the relative hardness of the music and the ferocity of its refusal to be subordinated to pan-European powers such as the Soviet Union or National Socialist Germany is figured in the ‘satanic’ monstrosity of the mask. This kind of thing is at stake, then, when sections of the Finnish press tear away the ferocious mask of Mr. Lordi to reveal the studious, bespectacled, faintly geeky, naked face of Tomi Putaansuu.

OK. So there is the mask, and there is the music. They are not the same thing. The controversy over the mask points to a fairly straightforward repetition that suggests the work of a political unconscious which I will briefly rehearse. Music, however, lays down the tracks of an audio unconscious that, while it connects at certain points with the unconscious supposed to be structured like a language, operates differently.

Eurojects

First, the mask: what is the ‘deep source’ that Häyhtiö and Rinne hint is at the basis of the public expression of moral outrage that erupted from the unmasking? Morality is desire in its pure state, something evident in the very familiar ‘phallic’ logic of the mask that it is the function of the enlightened press, in its role as the representatives of the third estate, to

unveil. It is psychoanalysis, of course, that has pointed out the libidinal force of this desire to reveal truth in all its nakedness. Its structure is the effect of symbolic castration, the point being that the revelation of nakedness provides the occasion for the erection of the 'phallus' (in contradistinction to the penis) in the form of truth, logos, paternal law, moral authority in its universal form and so on. That is, precisely the power to distinguish between truth and falsity, appearance and reality, presence and absence – the power to dispel the fear of monsters and unmask them as just ordinary men. To disavow this truth, which is what the outraged Finns did, to want the mask rather than the man, is to fall prey to fetishism.

Of course there is nothing new or unique about this kind of nationalist fetishism. Every nation has to find some way of giving content to the purely empty form of the nation, filling it out with some myth or ethnic Thing or fetish. For Ernesto Laclau, it is indeed the populist means through which hegemonies are established. 'Hegemony is nothing more than the investment, in a partial object, of a fullness which will always evade us because it is purely mythical'. Prime Minister Vanhanen, with his devil's horn gesture, has clearly read some Laclau. What is odd is the recognition – or perhaps it is not recognized consciously – that there is something precisely *monstrous* or satanic about the ethnic content, the pagan symbols and objects that are supposed to fill the void hollowed out by the modern Northern European nation-state.

There is clearly continuity between the Lordi controversy and expressions of political desire, anxiety, discontent in other Northern European nations, continuity that has been articulated most clearly over the past 20 years or so by various forms of 'metal'. Metal has become the name under which multiple styles, scenes and festivals have articulated the pleasures, desires and demands of numerous people across Europe, old and new. National and regional varieties of DM, BM, battle, folk, doom, ambient have tracked the expansion of the EU and its borderlands. At the same time, the expansion of the homogenizing force of the

techno-bureaucratic EU that is itself a symptom of the failure of the nation-state in the face of global capitalism has precisely generated desires, anxieties and discontents with regard to the nation and its phantasmatic ethnic support. Everyone knows the ‘monstrous’ forms this discontent can take from the burning of churches in Norway to racism and neo-Nazism there and elsewhere. So while it might be suggested, following Laclau, that the pagan ‘*objets a*’ are the positive reverse of the absence of any European popular culture in which could be located a political alternative to ‘globalatinization’ (Derrida), it is important to recognize the dangers inherent to the forces – conscious and unconscious – that connect Northern European racism with nationalisms that seek to ground themselves in such objects.

This is even more imperative since the connection between racism and paganism is an effect of the history of globalatinization itself. This term, coined by Jacques Derrida, he defines as ‘this strange alliance of Christianity, as the experience of the death of God, and teletechnoscientific capitalism is at the same time hegemonic and finite, ultra-powerful and in the process of exhausting itself.’ (52) The sub-clause ‘Christianity, as the experience of the death of God’ perhaps needs some commentary particularly given its pertinence to the politics of Eurometal. Simply, Derrida is referring to the Kantian distinction, upon which secular law and political morality is based, between ‘the religion of cult’ that is marked by dogmatism and ‘moral religion’ that is marked by critical reflection geared towards self-improvement that must act as if God had abandoned us or were dead. For Derrida, this distinction or opposition between practical reason and ‘dogmatic faith’ defines ‘even for us today, the place of conflict, if not of war’ in a Kantian sense, but also in an ideological sense in the way that it informs and justifies the real politik of international relations. In its ‘hyper-imperialist’ Anglo-American modality, globalatinization ‘imposes itself in a particularly palpable manner within the conceptual apparatus of international law and of global political rhetoric’ (66-7).

In a small, but highly symptomatic way, it seems to me, this conflict is played out in some Northern European genres of metal that appeal to non-Christian or pre-Christian myths, objects and symbols. For Freud, the conflict, based on the Christian experience of the death of God, has relatively long roots or goes back beyond Kant at least. In 1939, having fled the Nazi persecution of Jews in Austria and throughout Europe, Freud reflected on the roots of Northern European anti-semitism. The key problem, or 'final motive', for Freud was the problem not of Judaism as such, but rather the problem of Christianity. The conversion of the Northern European peoples to Christianity is historically too recent; it was too coercive and has remained incomplete. At best, it is disavowed in fetishistic returns to pagan polytheism, at worst resentment is displaced on to the Jews, from whence Christianity came, with all the death-driven hatred that springs from self-disgust. Freud cites the Jewish practice of circumcision which is both a sign that the Jews successfully resisted Christian conversion and a reminder of the more powerful symbolic castration to which the Northerners became subject. (see quotation on handout)

In its own very small way, then, the moral-political revolt surrounding the castration of Mr. Lordi effected through the removal of his mask is a repetition, which finds echoes throughout Europe, produced by the repression of this previous, more profound cultural trauma: the violent latinization of Northern European peoples that has become globally transnational, via a detour through the Anglo-American world, in an alliance with teletechnoscientific capitalism.

Eurosounds

It could be said that metal has provided a basis for resistance to globalatinization because of the initial displacement represented by metal's 'satanic' provocation of Christianity which, if Black Sabbath are to be credited as originators of the form, has been there from its inception

– you can go further back, of course, to rock ‘n’ roll (Jerry Lee Lewis), the Blues (Robert Johnson) etc. etc. but in metal, as I will argue, it becomes a musical principle. I do not want to go into all the paradoxes and illogicalities of ‘satanism’, here, most of which are quite well known. I’ll limit myself to three points: first, the Satanism associated with metal establishes the initial anti-Christian position that enables its adoption as a mode of pagan resistance even though Satanism and paganism are not at all the same thing. Indeed, because Satanism maintains an essential, if paradoxical relation to Christianity (and even, in a different way to Islam) it therefore sustains an important, combative, critical relation to Enlightenment and indeed globalatinization. Second, this is especially the case when the ‘satanism’ is primarily concerned with a spirit of demonic, rebellious play. Third, Satanism, and all the other evocations of evil, darkness, death, doom, apocalypse of various varieties has no function other than to evoke in language, discursively, that is in a wholly inadequate way, the limit-experiences produced by the music. In my view, it is Bataille and his notion of the limit experience and of joy before death that comes closest to conceptualizing the passion of the music which is also, always, even if you are listening to it alone, a shared passion and an experience of being-with others. So Satan is important purely as a figure, an emblem of what is essential to the music in its political dimension which is precisely that it exceeds and remains exterior to all forms of political determination. To paraphrase Bataille, our metal credo would be: ‘First of all it is impossible to define just what propels the phenomenon of metal which cannot be made to serve a master. NON SERVIAM is said to be the Devil’s motto. If this is so, then metal is diabolical’. The diabolical negativity of metal’s satanic momentum, therefore, prevents it from coalescing into any reactionary ethnic or nationalist project.

The affective power of metal arises as an effect of the joy of dissonance which is understood here not as just another term in musical vocabulary in contradistinction to, say,

harmony, but as constitutive of the subject of metal. As with the Lordi example at Eurovision, dissonance is relative, contextual and also the effect of a repetition of a purely audio unconscious that repeats the shock of a constitutive audio event in a frisson of horror-pleasure productive of desire. Metal at its most affective, I would argue, is a kind of *amusic* because it occupies the border between music and noise that is constitutive of the formation of any subject of music at any time. The formation of any subject of music necessarily involves a repression (or expulsion) of 'noise' the return of which is precisely if indefinably (precisely indefinably) what propels metal as a rebellious form. To put it abstractly: if there is a subject of metal, it is an *amusical* subject that is produced by the force of dissonance, that is an effect of repetition, that is repressed but returns as repetition in the form of a dissonance. That is: a 'new' dissonance that marks the point of innovation. The productivity of metal's audio unconscious marks out and traverses territory both psychic and real, individual and collective, and the proliferation of forms and styles (and modes of non-productive expenditure associated with pre-modern European cultures) is an effect of its *amusical* force that traces a locus of dissonance and repetition that takes it beyond modern social and political formations.