

White Power, Black Metal and Me: Reflections on Composing the Nation

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Abstract

A visual analysis of English black metal (EBM) reveals a mythologised imagining of the nation. This imagery pervades EBM, and the surrounding narratives of ancient tribal history authenticate and affirm notions of a fixed ethnicity. 'White' is asserted as the naturalised national identity and domination is authenticated by narratives of 'origin' based on the ancient past. The invention and mythologisation of tradition is based upon an essentialist notion of national heritage, which has the potential to legitimise an idealised exclusionary ethnic identity. As such, the political positioning of EBM bands is highly contested, both amongst the musicians and the fans; this has led to the categorisation of some as examples of National Socialist Black Metal.

This paper will reflect upon a collaborative project involving EBM musicians, which was undertaken as part of my practise-led research into the construction of English identities in composition. This project reframed EBM within the context of a multi-media performance. It explored the ambiguous elements of EBM (interchangeable notions of English/British/Northern European identities), and the seemingly contradictory influences present in the music (e.g. the assertion of 'whiteness' through a style rooted in black music, and the influence of medieval (church) music alongside pagan elements). This study will examine the idea of power in metal, and the potential for applying Foucauldian theory as a framework for exploring power relations within composition. This will facilitate a discussion of the combination of myth-making and power, which authenticates and empowers an overtly masculine 'white' identity in EBM.

1. Introduction

"Listening to music is listening to all noise, reali[s]ing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political."¹ This quote from Jacques Attali's text *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* reminds us of the political implications of cultural production. Popular music has a long history of being used as a platform for the expression of political views and metal's provocative aesthetic has attracted and fostered some ideas positioned at the extreme end of the scale.

This paper will reflect upon a collaborative project involving English black metal musicians, which grew out of my research into the visual construction and mythologisation of nation in the imagery of English black metal (henceforth EBM). This was undertaken as part of my practise-led doctoral research into the construction of national, specifically English, identities in composition. Markers of national identity are often consciously constructed and employed to signify specific ideologies imposed upon, and asserted within conceptualisations of collective identity. These symbols become shrouded in layers of mythology, which are composed to authenticate and legitimise the objects. These narratives often refer to ancient history and sometimes allude to essentialised concepts of tribe or ethnicity. This paper will attempt to explore the combination of myth-making and power, which authenticates and empowers an overtly 'white' (and also masculine) identity in EBM. This study will examine the myths created by EBM bands and discuss how they could be perceived as encoding or endorsing a nationalist ideology. This will be contextualised with a discussion of the role of power and transgression within black metal, as well as the suggestion that Foucauldian theory could be applied as a framework for exploring power relations within a musical composition.

2. *Pat snayped Æe wylde*

This collaborative project involved working creatively with the guitarist, bass guitarist and drummer from the EBM band Winterfylleth, this entailed developing music to be included within a larger work. *Pat snayped Æe wylde* was written for electric guitar, bass guitar and drum kit (played by members of Winterfylleth) plus 2 voices, tapes, loop pedal and accompanied by visuals from a slide projector. In performance, the

ensemble is spatialised and organised into three groups, with the guitars and drums arranged as one element, the voices and loop pedal as another and the tape part as the third.

The piece attempts to explore the power relations within musical performance, internally within each group of musicians and externally in association to each other, as well as ideas of power within black metal. I also hoped to examine the ambiguities present in conceptions of national identity, as opposed to essentialised notions of national origin. For example, the tape parts feature lo-fi recordings from domestic and public situations, exploring the idea of using the everyday to make sense of the present, as opposed to concepts of history used to validate or legitimise the ideologies of the present. One of the starting points for the piece was the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Aside from similarities in thematic content between *Gawain* and EBM, the poem is of interest due to its depiction of ‘otherness’ and conceptions of Britishness with regard to relations between England and Wales at the time of the poem’s writing (circa 1400).

Bat snayped þe wylde grew out of research into constructions of the nation within the visual imagery of EBM; this involved an examination of the album covers and imagery used by five English bands: Fen; Forefather; Icen; Winterfylleth and Wodensthron. This analysis was informed by notions of the mythologisation of origin, as discussed by Marina Warner in her 1994 Reith Lecture series on contemporary mythology,² and the idea suggested in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s edited collection, *The Invention of Tradition*, that many of the traditions generally considered as rooted in history are actually contemporary constructs.³ These concepts, along with an acknowledgement of the interchangeable nature of the notions of mythology and history, may help reach an understanding of how the nationalist narrative of EBM is constructed and authenticated.

3. English black metal imagery

There were three key elements within the imagery of EBM artwork and typography, firstly the depiction of nature, secondly the character of the warrior and the imagery of battle and finally the use of logos, symbols and runes. The imagery found within the text and artwork reference and celebrate Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Norse history, as well as particular literature inspired by these histories (for example J.R.R. Tolkien) and folksongs. The imagery often refers to battles in which *great* warriors fought for England, and emphasise nature and the ancient bond between the people and the land, the ideology of ‘blood and soil’. Warner’s discussion of contemporary mythology is pertinent to a discussion of EBM as she suggests that myths are grounded in ideas of nature and the supernatural, destiny and origin, and that in conjuring up enemies and aliens these myths actually say who we are.⁴

The depiction of nature is a common trait found across different strains of metal. The artwork of EBM album covers (and often band portraits) often feature cliffs and mountains, forests, lakes and the sea, which appear to be idealised visualisations of an unchanging landscape, promoting a sense of continuity throughout time. This notion is also linked to what could be considered a post-industrial desire for connection to the land, seen through the representation of Arcadian fantasies. This theme is also reflected in some of the lyrical content, which could be interpreted as emphasising the ideology of ‘blood and soil’ and belief in the ‘essential spirit of the land’.

The character of the warrior is highly mythologised and is entangled in concepts of masculinity, heroism, violence and power, all of which resonate within the world of metal. The depiction of ancient warriors and battle are common within EBM and highlight a general thematic interest in the violent narratives of conquest and defence, which is often related to the mythology of the ancient tribes of Northern Europe. I shall return to the idea of the warrior later. There appears to be an ambiguity, or even ambivalence, in the definition of Englishness in EBM. On the Myspace.com webpage of Winterfylleth they assert their “Northern European Identity” and claim the influence of “traditional Northern European folk[.]”⁵ This appears contradictory to the desire to assert an English national identity, but may evidence the wish for a trans-national identity appealing to all of the ancient tribes of Northern Europe. The influence of folk music on EBM is quite difficult to gauge, however more generally the appeal of the darker ritualistic elements of folklore fits with its aesthetic. I believe that the folk music element is quite ambiguous within the English scene in comparison to some of the black metal from other countries, which tends to utilise more blatant musical markers of national identity.

This ambivalence led me to question the importance of the construction of a concept of ‘Englishness’ within EBM, with regard to the potential for mythologised national identity legitimising claims of naturalised

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national ethnicity. I decided to write some music using EBM musicians to explore these ideas, also relating to the role of power within the music and its relationship to concepts of noise.

4. Winterfylleth

Engaging some black metal musicians to collaborate with was straight forward due to the fact that Winterfylleth, one of the bands I had previously analysed, featured my brother on drums. Aside from some of the more predictable practicalities of working with non-professional musicians, there needed to be a careful handling of the ideologies of a band that had previously been labelled (somewhat contentiously) 'National Socialist Black Metal' (henceforth NSBM). I attempted to manage this through an exploration of the dichotomies present in EBM, for example the obscuring or absence of metal's black music roots alongside an assertion of whiteness, and the interplay between paganism, ancient Christian symbolism and the use of old church modes.

Winterfylleth is a four piece black metal band from Manchester, England. The band formed in 2007, and the current line-up contains two of the original musicians on guitar and drums, plus two newer members on bass guitar and guitar. Winterfylleth would assert the genre term 'English Heritage Black Metal', with the band's MySpace site stating "Winterfylleth play English black metal, with Northern European [f]olk and ambient overtones. Clearly displaying their proud Northern European identity and heritage."⁶ Influences also listed on the webpage include:

Northern European Heritage, and Folklore; Ancient Northern European, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Viking and Medieval History; the beautiful Mountains, Forests, Caves and Lakes of the English Countryside; Ghosts and Haunted places, as well as M.R. James and J.R.R. Tolkien.⁷

Their first album *The Ghost of Heritage*, released in October 2008 on the label Profound Lore, caused some controversy, due to the combined force of conceptions of heritage and interpretations of some of the lyrical content. This situation was exacerbated by the expression of right-wing political views by one (now ex-) band member through online forums. This led to cancelled shows, censorship from some of the mainstream metal media, and even threats of violence against band members from an anti-fascist group. The political positioning of the band as a whole and the label of 'NSBM' were debated by black metal fans on the internet. Despite the negative overall situation, this did seem to enhance their appearance and reputation as an 'extreme' band and led to higher sales of their album. This in turn has led to a better record deal with a major independent label, Candlelight records, all of which highlights the centrality of notions of extremity within the identity of EBM and Heritage Metal. Following this controversy, Winterfylleth are planning to rebrand with the replacement of two musicians and the opportunity to record a second album. They are hoping that their future work will be protected somewhat by a clause in their record contract, which states that the music put out on the Candlelight label must not be defamatory in any way.

In response to the accusations of racism Winterfylleth claimed that their intention was always to draw attention to part of England's history which they feel has been overlooked, and educate people about the 'truth' of ancient symbolism and its link to English heritage. Within the visual elements, it is through the use of symbols and runes that one can most easily imagine potential links to fascism, however, many of these symbols also have links with ancient history, mythology and paganism. I believe that the musicians, despite aspiring to recover these symbols from the realms of white power and skinhead culture, are fully aware of the provocation that they can stimulate.

5. English ethnicity

It could be argued that EBM thrives as an underground scene, excluded (and exclusive) from the mainstream, and its identity is centred on feelings of marginalisation due to a perceived loss of national heritage. Warner points out, that ideas of belonging are based on a mythologised notion of origin.⁸ It is precisely this concept of the narrative construction of roots and heritage that is central to the way in which EBM bands assert an English ethnic identity. Warner suggests that:

[r]oots revivalism – the politics of nostalgia – can lead to reinvigorated pride among muffled or neglected peoples or groups; but remembering sufferings like the loss of home can also be made a pretext for vengeance in the presence.⁹

The roots revivalism within English black metal leads to an empowered sense of pride amongst an audience of people who may commonly claim to feel marginalised. As described previously the imagery of warriors forging and fighting for the land enhances the empowering effect of the music, inspiring contemporary battles for this perceived lost heritage. In Robert Walser's *Running with the Devil*, he discusses heavy metal as an opportunity for fans to create communal bonds that can help “weather the strains of modernity”, by relying upon “that which is ‘other’” as a way of making sense of their own situation.¹⁰

Gerd Bayer notes, in his edited collection *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, that there is a common misconception that racism is part of heavy metal's tradition and national narrative; this is probably related to the predominance of white musicians and fans, as well as the suggestion that there has been a tendency to privilege metal's white roots over the black music influence when narrating the genre's history.¹¹ Liam Dee, in the same collected edition, describes how a desire to push Satanic nihilism to the extreme in black metal often led to a neo-Nazi politics of white, heterosexual authenticity.¹² Despite this, the political positioning of EBM bands is highly contested, both amongst the musicians and the fans.

In Alexandra Campbell's study *Making White Britishness Online*, she states that in Britain there is a “primordial belief in the antiquity and naturalness of nation, encompassing a particulari[s]ed ethnic group [...]”¹³ The construction of an English ethnicity based on a narrative of Anglo-Saxon history asserts ‘white’ as the naturalised national identity. It affirms concepts of fixed identities, with whiteness defined by notions of normalcy and domination authenticated by a mythologised narrative of ‘origin’ based on the ancient past.

Hobsbawm warns that:

[w]e should not be misled by a curious, but understandable, paradox: modern nations and all their impedimenta generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity, and the opposite of constructed, namely human communities so ‘natural’ as to require no definition other than self-assertion.¹⁴

In the case of EBM the invention and mythologisation of tradition is based on an essentialist notion of heritage, which provides a limited and exclusionary construction of identity. However there is also a degree of ambiguity in this creation, with mixed references to Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Norse mythology as well as interchangeable use of the terms ‘English’ and ‘British’. I believe that this evidences a general lack of distinction (or confusion) regarding concepts of Englishness and Britishness. One could also argue the case for the conscious construction of a broader Northern European (white) identity, which could then be positioned in opposition to a perceived threat from cultures outside of this.

6. Metal's provocative power

Steve Garner's article *The Uses of Whiteness* identifies the need to understand the structure of power relations within which whiteness is constructed and employed.¹⁵ In Foucault's *The Subject and Power* he links power relations to freedom's refusal to submit, saying:

[a]t the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential antagonism, it would be better to speak of an ‘agonism’ [...] a permanent provocation.¹⁶

Through metal's provocative construction, via the transgression of norms, EBM embodies and articulates power and extremity. Walser, in a discussion of the song ‘Running with the Devil’, states that,

the fantasy is one of escape from all social conventions; it is based on a quite bourgeois concept of the individual, who supposedly has some sort of essence that can be freed from

social constrictions. In fact [...] the social boundaries that are felt to contain are also the structure within which these very fantasies are produced.¹⁷

The idea of the normalising judgement is found in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in which he discusses the process of differentiation that occurs through the various apparatus of society, which measures value defined by the limits of difference – abnormality.¹⁸ He suggests that “the power of normali[s]ation imposes homogeneity; but it individuali[s]es by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels[.]” EBM's empowering effects can be seen in its departure from the constraints of the societal norm, in controversy, excess and extremity. Attali's discussion of noise control is reminiscent of Foucault's ideas about the control of individuals through the microprocesses of power, such as regulation and surveillance:

The repetitive machine has produced silence, the centrali[s]ed political control of speech, and more generally noise. Everywhere, power reduces the noise made by others and adds sound prevention to its arsenal. Listening becomes an essential means of surveillance and social control.¹⁹

Foucault's reflection on Bataille's writing on transgression links with his ideas about the construction of the boundaries of 'self' and 'other' and stresses the relationship between transgression and the limit. In *A Preface to Transgression* he states that,

[t]he limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows.²⁰

Karl Spracklen's paper *True Aryan Black Metal* suggested the need for transgression to be recognised by the outside world,²¹ suggesting again the importance of provocation and controversy as a reaction providing authentication for EBM.

Extreme Metal, written by Keith Kahn-Harris, discusses the centrality of transgression to notions of extremity in black metal. He outlined three forms of what he labelled 'scenic transgression' relevant to extreme metal genres: sonic, discursive and bodily transgression.²² In my music these ideas are explored through a number of means, the different levels of freedom and constraint placed upon the musicians; the extremes of dynamic range within the piece; the use of modes and the creation of new modes; the fragmentation of vocal parts; as well as an exploration of the piece within different performance settings and spatialisations.

7. Some conclusions

The perception of a band's politic is dependent on particular readings of the many layers of meaning employed in the creation of music and the construction of identity. These narratives can easily become empowering building blocks in the construction of sometimes radicalised contemporary identities of belonging. It is the combined force of power, the exploration of limits and their transgression within the music, the imagery, the text and the discourse surrounding EBM that constructs such a provocative discourse. It is with these conditions that notions of heritage become positioned at the boundaries of mainstream politics, and attempts to construct and assert limits of normalcy - through ideas of belonging and origin - are interpreted as being situated at the limits of the norm.

Notes

¹ J Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p.6.

² M Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time*, Vintage, London, 1994.

³ E Hobsbawm and T Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

⁴ M Warner, 1994, p.xii.

⁵ C Naughton, Winterfylleth, Myspace.com, <<http://www.myspace.com/winterfylleth>>, (accessed [15/05/09])

⁶ C Naughton, Winterfylleth, Myspace.com, <<http://www.myspace.com/winterfylleth>>, (accessed [15/05/09])

⁷ C Naughton, Winterfylleth, Myspace.com, <<http://www.myspace.com/winterfylleth>>, (accessed [15/05/09])

⁸ M Warner, 1994, pp.81-94.

⁹ M Warner, 1994, p.85.

¹⁰ R Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, University Press of New England, Hanover, 1993, p.162.

¹¹ G Bayer, 'Rocking the Nation: One Global Audience, One Flag?', in *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, G Bayer (ed.), Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Farnham, 2009, p.185.

¹² L Dee, 'The Brutal Truth: Grindcore as the Extreme Realism of Heavy Metal', in *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, G Bayer (ed.), Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Farnham, 2009, p.60.

¹³ A Campbell, 'Without "you" I'm nothing: making white Britishness online'. *Social Semiotics*, vol.18iv, December 2008, p.411.

¹⁴ E Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition*, E Hobsbawm and T Ranger (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p.14.

¹⁵ I am indebted to Karl Spracklen's paper 'True Aryan Black Metal: the meaning of leisure, belonging and the construction of whiteness in black metal music', presented at the 2008 Heavy Fundamentalisms Conference, which brought the work of Steve Garner to my attention. S Garner, 'The Uses of Whiteness: What Sociologists Working on Europe Can Draw from US Research on Whiteness'. *Sociology*, vol.40, 2006, pp.257-275.

¹⁶ Agonism – implying combat from Greek *Agonisma*. M Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Power*, JD Faubion (ed.), Penguin, London, 2002, p.342.

¹⁷ R Walser, 1994, p.52.

¹⁸ M Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, A Sheridan (tr.), Penguin, London, 1991, p.182-183.

¹⁹ J Attali, 1985, p.122.

²⁰ M Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression' in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Aesthetics*, JD Faubion, (ed.), Penguin, London, 2000, p.73.

²¹ K Spracklen, 'True Aryan Black Metal: the meaning of leisure, belonging and the construction of whiteness in black metal music'. Inter-Disciplinary.Net, <<http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/ci/mmp/mmp1/spracklen%20paper.pdf>>, (accessed [23/09/09]).

²² K Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Berg, Oxford, 2007, pp.27-49.

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