

Gorgoroth's Gaahl's Gay! Power, gender and the communicative discourse of the black metal scene

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Abstract

Hegemony theory, which owes its popularity to the work of Gramsci (1971) - who elaborated at length on the difference between the dominance of a ruling class and complete cultural hegemony of the ruling culture throughout the ruling and the ruled - is crucial to understand the role of leisure in the construction of class and gender status (cf. Butler, 1999). Carrington and McDonald (2008), for example, say that the concept of hegemony, when applied to the structures in sport, emphasises both class, gendered constructions and cultural practices. As Carton (2008) claims, leisure does not necessarily have to be a medium for the hegemony of the values of the ruling class. It can be a medium for counter-hegemonic resistance, where the ruled react against hegemony and try and overcome imposed cultural values. At the same time, researchers of popular music have theorised the development of neo-tribes as the effect of postmodernity on practices of consumption and identity formation (Bennett, 2006). Black metal is a form of heavy metal music taken to extremes of image, content and ideology, exemplified by the church burnings and murders in Norway at the start of black metal's recent history (Kahn-Harris, 2007). Previous work on black metal (Spracklen, 2006) has linked the discourses of identity in the scene to a Habermasian framework of communicative and instrumental rationalities at the end of modernity (Habermas, 1981:1984). This paper will use new research analysing publicly available comments on the fan forums to explore discussions about gender and sexuality in black metal, and in particular the decision by the singer of the band Gorgoroth to announce his homosexuality. It will be argued that such discussions are expressions of communicative discourse, in a Habermasian sense, which offers a counter-hegemonic position on some aspects (but not all aspects) of gender and identity.

Key Words: Hegemonic masculinity, sexuality, black metal, power, leisure, communicative discourse, Gorgoroth.

1. Introduction

Hegemony theory, which owes its popularity to the work of Gramsci (1971) - who elaborated at length on the difference between the dominance of

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a ruling class and complete cultural hegemony of the ruling culture throughout the ruling and the ruled – is crucial to understand the role of leisure in the construction of class and gender status (cf. Butler, 1999). Carrington and McDonald (2008), for example, say that the concept of hegemony, when applied to the structures in sport, emphasises both class, gendered constructions and cultural practices. As Carton (2008) claims, leisure does not necessarily have to be a medium for the hegemony of the values of the ruling class. It can be a medium for counter-hegemonic resistance, where the ruled react against hegemony and try and overcome imposed cultural values. At the same time, researchers of popular music have theorised the development of neo-tribes as the effect of postmodernity on practices of consumption and identity formation (Bennett, 2006). Black metal is a form of heavy metal music taken to extremes of image, content and ideology, exemplified by the church burnings and murders in Norway at the start of black metal's recent history (Kahn-Harris, 2007). Previous work on black metal (Spracklen, 2006) has linked the discourses of identity in the scene to a Habermasian framework of communicative and instrumental rationalities at the end of modernity (Habermas, 1981:1984). This paper will use new research analysing publicly available comments on the fan forums to explore discussions about gender and sexuality in black metal, and in particular the decision by the singer of the band Gorgoroth to announce his homosexuality. It will be argued that such discussions are expressions of communicative discourse, in a Habermasian sense, which offers a counter-hegemonic position on some aspects (but not all aspects) of gender and identity.

2. Methodology

This paper maps and analyses the instances of Gaahl's sexuality being mentioned over a 12-month period on one black metal internet forum (blackmetal.co.uk). This forum has been used before by this researcher in exploring ideologies of black metal (Spracklen, 2006) and reactions to National Socialist Black Metal in the black metal scene (Spracklen, 2008, 2009). There is an epistemological and methodological debate about the truth-value and utility for researchers of debates on internet forums (Fernback, 2007). There is no doubt that users of on-line forums do not necessarily represent the views of a wider population: users of forums are more likely to be passionate, opinion-setters. There is no doubt also that users of on-line forums do not necessarily post what they actually feel about a particular topic. These problems, however, should not concern us. On the matter of representation, this paper does not claim to provide a definitive scene 'response' to Gaahl's sexuality. Rather, this paper explores responses made by those fans who care enough about black metal to post on the forum

– these fans are not representative of all fans, but they are *de facto* serious and passionate about what constitutes true or ‘kult’ black metal. On the matter of the truth-value of their comments, it is indeed true that we do not know whether the fans actually mean what they write. They could be lying, or unclear, about their private thoughts; and it is impossible for us to be confident about the mapping of their actual thoughts on to these public opinions. This problem is especially true where fans post under pseudonyms. That said, truth-value is only a problem if we are concerned with truth. In this paper, I am not concerned about whether the fans actually mean what they say – but I am interested in what they think they have to say to be a part of black metal’s insider scene, and what they think is acceptable to post on the forum.

3. Gaahl and Gorgoroth

Gorgoroth are a Norwegian second-wave black metal band. Formed in 1992 in Bergen, the band gained a record contract on the back of the wider interest in the Norwegian black metal scene. Their orthodox sound, commitment to live gigs, and the Satanism in their imagery and lyrics, saw them gain key support slots for bands such as Enslaved and, in England, Cradle of Filth. A string of successful records and a headlining tour in 1997 led to the band signing for Nuclear Blast, one of the largest independent record labels in Europe. It was at this moment in their career that Gaahl joined as lead singer. Gaahl was another Bergen black metallor – his band Trelldom had been formed in 1993, one year after Gorgoroth. Gaahl brought an intensity and intellectual darkness to Gorgoroth’s lyrics, recordings and stagershows. With bassist King ov Hell, Gaahl began to take control of Gorgoroth’s musical and ideological direction. He was imprisoned for assault on two occasions (the last when it was claimed he drank the blood of his victim), he was involved in planning the infamous Krakow gig of 2004 (which featured naked actors on stage hung from crosses, which led to Polish politicians banning them and threatening them with legal action, and which led to Gorgoroth tearing up their contract with Nuclear Blast after the label dropped them from a tour).

In 2007, Gaahl tried to sack Infernus, the founding member of Gorgoroth, from the band. Infernus responded by taking legal action over who owned the intellectual rights to Gorgoroth. Infernus won his case in 2009 and Gaahl and King ov Hell said they would continue to play under the name Godseed. The argument over the Gorgoroth name, however, was soon overshadowed in the summer of 2008 by rumours that Gaahl was homosexual. These rumours were quickly confirmed by Gaahl himself (www.nettavisen.no/innenriks/ibergen/article2086056.ece, page published on 24 July 2008, accessed 28 September 2009) to a Bergen-based website. The story was picked up by Blabbermouth and other web-sites in the Autumn of

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2008, and Gaahl confirmed the story in a number of metal magazine interviews in the final months of 2008. As he explained in Terrorizer 178:

[Attitudes like homophobia are] exactly what we fight against actually. Narrow mindedness has never been what black metal is about, or represents. When black metal first started it was a group of young people who had strong opinions. But these things turn inevitably into organisations and societies with their own laws, and sadly people don't hold up this individuality, which is how I see what black metal is, and what I've been standing for. It is very easy to become what you hate. Personally I am not worried [about being gay affecting Gorgoroth's popularity]. I would rather have pure-hearted fans than narrow-minded ones. If we lose fans over this, then those fans were not important in the first place.¹

For Gaahl, and indeed the journalist who interviewed him in Terrorizer, homosexuality was just another way of expressing the libertarian, individualist ideology of the Norwegian black metal scene, a reaction against the orthodoxy of Christian morality. In the next section of this paper, I will outline the response from black metal fans on the blackmetal.co.uk forum, before a final section discussing the ontological tension between gender, power and sexuality, and its resolution through a Habermasian discourse of communicative action.

4. Fan Response on the Forum

Interestingly, the initial announcement of Gaahl's sexuality made little impact on the forum. For some time it was ignored, as if the 'true' and kult fans posting on the forum were too elite and underground to namecheck a professional band like Gorgoroth. The earliest reaction to Gaahl's homosexuality appeared in a mundane thread asking each of the forum users what black metal t-shirt they were currently wearing. A poster called Deathcult1205 responded to this thread on 15 September 2008 (20:14) with: "Gorgoroth-Pentagram girlie tee....the one that says, 'The sin of Satan is the sign of Gorgoroth' on the back. This shirt is a good boob shirt, there's no way gaahl's gay". The final sentence is meant to be a joke, of course, arguing that the garment is so well shaped for women that Gaahl (the shirt's supposed creator) must have an appreciation of the female form. This post, however, was soon followed by another, more serious one, from the poster Penrith:

gaahl is a MASSIVE bumner. Not only is it obvious, but sources confirmed him hand in hand with his pillow biting mattress muncher partner at wacken, back stage. The place where people get fondled.²

Deathcult1205 responded to Penrith's serious homophobia by arguing: "I was joking. And, I say, good for him!". In this short exchange, there are two clearly contrasting attitudes: one that allows Gaahl's sexuality to be part of the scene, embracing the announcement of his homosexuality as a statement of personal (individualised) taste; and another that sees in homosexuality a liberal step too far, an acceptance of something inferior, something articulated as less hegemonically heterosexual, less manly, less pure.

These tensions between the freedom of black metal, its rejection of convention and the heterosexism of its elitist ideologies, was seen in three other threads in 2009 where Gaahl's sexuality was eventually discussed (albeit with differences in emphasis). In the first of these threads ('Infernus wins over Gorgoroth name rights', started 10 March 2009, 07:29), Penrith copied some text from an unspecified website reporting the outcome of the court case mentioned in the previous section, then asked others to suggest the name of the new band Gaahl would be setting up with King ov Hell instead of Gorgoroth. Six minutes after this first posting, Radian Born replied with the unsubtle (and not particularly funny) answer: "Gaahl and King's Magical Bumland Adventure". Myrddin then followed (10 March 2009, 07:50) with a list of possible names, including "Norwegian Artistic Metallers' Black Luciferian Association (NAMBLA for short)", which is a reference to the fictional paedophilic North American Man Boy Love Association of the cartoon series South Park (as if homosexuality and paedophilia are the same thing, a popular Christian fundamentalist argument). In the next few days the majority of the posts were supportive of Infernus and dismissive of Gaahl and King ov Hell. Gaygoroth was mentioned by four other posters in response to Penrith's question. Then Serafima argued, over two separate posts, that "with Gaahl this band became way too popular" (10 March 2009, 09:39), and "Gaahl's voice is weak and gay like" (10 March 2009, 09:42). This view of Gaahl was backed up by other posters – Gaahl was wrong to claim ownership of Gorgoroth because he was a weak performer, his voice mocked as gay, as if he screamed his lyrics in the style of Graham Norton³. Only towards the end of the thread did some Gorgoroth fans come to his and King of Hell's defence – those who did so concentrated on Gaahl's impact on the band's music, and said nothing about his homosexuality. The gay jokes and the ridiculously phrased claim by Serafima were left unchallenged.

The second thread was started on 2 April 2009, by Tom-Aus-Nord. Entitled 'Homosexuality & Metal', his opening post included the following passage:

Some of you who follow Black Metal will know that not too long ago Gaahl came out as Gay. His boyfriend (at the time)

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understandably got death threats from some of the more moronic twats of the black metal community. I personally think its cool if he's gay and fuck what people think. I am pretty sure this will be most peoples view on the matter on this forum, although its cool if its not i don't particularly care... Its good to finally have a gay person in the metal community who can be respected as a musician and not a gimmick.⁴

This set a different tone to this discussion, compared to the one over the Gorgoroth court case. Although there were a large number of negative posts, including links to crude websites, one poster who argued "fags who flaunt their sexuality about annoy me" (Kveldulf, 3 April 2009, 06:44), and one who thought Gaahl's homosexuality "was some kind of BMUK joke" (Dying Willow, 3 April 2009, 18:51) the majority of the posters seemed to allow a space in black metal for Gaahl and homosexuality. For some, Gaahl was an exception, okay because he had proven himself as a heteronormative black metallor and did not act camp: "Gaahl is a proper homo and doesn't need to act like one" (EnglishKnight, 5 April 2009, 16:00). For others, homosexuality offered a way of continuing to transgress against the norms and orthodoxies of late capitalism. As one poster suggested: "as a thought, wouldn't you say that is Black Metal is anti-Christian, and there's no tolerance of homosexuals in Christianity, then wouldn't being gay be totally black metal?" (scale, 3 April 2009, 23:04).

The third thread related to Gaahl's decision in August 2009 to abandon his new project with King ov Hell and to quit extreme metal to concentrate on fashion. The news was posted to the forum on by a fan called brittlebones ('Gaahl quits metal', thread started 16 August 2009, 22:49). This initial post said nothing about Gaahl's sexuality, but respondents in the thread were quick to bring the matter to the discussion – of the first ten people to respond, six were crudely homophobic in nature, such as "touring across europe in filthy vans surrounded by people you secretly want to shag but you never get the chance OR make dresses" (blackmetalisgoodforyou, 17 August, 18:39). Two of the others expressed disinterest in Gaahl – a tacit acknowledgement that they considered Gorgoroth too mainstream. However, some fans did come to his defence. One person claimed that "Gaahl was one of the last more or less 'true' men of the scene. Or at least he had some kind of presence" (Requiem, 17 August 2009, 09:29). When the homophobic jokes continued, with links to obscene images, Requiem replied:

While this is mildly funny... this sort of homophobia (haha, I wrote homo) is unwarranted. Gaahl has kept mainstream black metal

interesting for the last few years and for that I stand erect and salute him.⁵

As the debate petered out, one fan tried to move the discussion away from Gaahl's sexuality by claiming Gaahl quit "because he failed at black metal, not because of some mythical bad reaction to his official notification of cock-lusting homosexuality" (Conservationist, 30 August 2009, 22:21). This may have been some attempt to be funny, ironic even – one can imagine an older fan writing that and being pleased with its own contradiction. Any humour, though, was absent from the fan who responded to that post, who said, in an ungrammatical but just about understandable style: "he was a shit vocalist and cock sucker unlucky good riddance" (Morte Malefica, 30 August 2009, 23:48).

5.

Gender and Power in Leisure

The theoretical study of discrimination through gender is often related in discourse to issues of race and class. Yet while class has influenced the development of sociology throughout the 20th Century, both race and gender have been seen as less important or ignored altogether by the metatheorists such as Marx, Weber and Parsons. Engels (1972) derived male dominance as a consequence of male ownership of property, assigning gender inequality to the economic sphere, while Miliband (1989) - although exploring these issues - feels it necessary to subsume them under the banner of class discrimination. Masculine studies have arisen from this imbalance, and the feminist reassessment of the lack of gender directed social theory (Kimmel, 1987; Brittan, 1989). Critical feminists have pointed to a more complex relationship between gender, power, patriarchy and leisure that calls for changes in the social structure (Scruton and Watson, 2001). Connell (1987) introduces the idea of the gender order, which describes gender as a process rather than a thing. Thus we are asked to study "a historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of femininity and masculinity" (1987: pp 98-99). This gender order can be expressed through forms of cultural activity, which either maintain the gender order, or are sites of resistance to the gender order: black metal clearly maintains the gender order, but some resistance to it is also seen in the way some fans supported Gaahl.

The Gramscian solution to the paradox of leisure (Spracklen, 2009), exemplified by the theoretical work of Peter Bramham, is to argue that although some people – the well-off, the middle and upper classes, white people, men – may have some power, hence agency and freedom to choose their leisure, the working-classes and other marginalised and disempowered social groups are denied that freedom (Bramham, 2006). Furthermore, the hegemonic status of power at the end of modernity suggests that leisure, in its commodified state, is a way in which the ruling classes keep the working-

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classes ignorant of their oppression (Carrington and MacDonald, 2008). This view of leisure as the diversion of the masses is, of course, an old one. Juvenal, the Roman satirist, wrote that the people of Rome in his day were happy to be given dole (bread) and entertainment (circuses) as diversions from engaging in political debate:

... iam pridem, ex quo suffragia nulli
uendimus, effudit curas; nam qui dabat olim
imperium, fasces, legiones, omnia, nunc se
continet atque duas tantum res anxius optat,
panem et circenses. ...⁶

Berger (1972) has outlined how the language of advertising works to create images of masculine power and feminine desirability, while Easthope (1986) describes how the 'masculine myth' present in popular culture naturalises, normalises and universalises the dominant masculinity. As popular culture, sport and the culture around sport reveal similar discourses. By masculinity it is taken to mean the processes and ideas that go towards the construction of male identity. However, the concept of masculinity is sometimes overused without any clear definition of what it is. It becomes self evident if we talk about the social construction of masculinity that there can be a number of masculinities: dominant heterosexual, homosexual, marginalised and so on (Connell, 1987, 1995; Messner and Sabo, 1990; Messner, 1992). That said, there is a hegemonic masculine identity that has been imposed so thoroughly on western culture that most observers take it as a norm: that of the dominant heterosexual male identified by Gilmore (1990), the impregnator-protector-provider. Gilmore argues that this cultural role of man, historically, has contributed to the aggressive, dominating acts of bravado that identify what Mangan (1995) calls the Ubiquitous Male in contemporary society. This idea of a masculine archetype is challenged by work done in both psychology and sociology on the fragility of male identity (Brod and Kaufman, 1994). That man was created and instinctively became the Ubiquitous Male is contested by Goldberg (1974), who explored the socialisation of boys into tough manhood, and the emotional trouble and identity crisis this engendered. Hearn (1989) suggests that the concept of masculinity is weak, and that instead we should look at how maleness is theorised, and what types of masculinity are produced. The struggle of males to define themselves has also been observed by Middleton (1982) and Horrocks (1994), who see a crisis in man over what it is to be one, what types of masculinity are acceptable. Horrocks (1995) also explores the psychology of masculinity, taking as his starting point the importance of the individual in defining his own identity from 'male myths and icons'.

6. Conclusions

This paper shows how the hegemonic masculinity prevalent in western culture is expressed in black metal: through a rejection of homosexuality and an adherence to heteronormativity, even though such acts betray the freedom of the black metal scene. The key word is expression. What the story of Gaahl reveals is how masculinity is expressed in black metal, how it is shaped and supported and understood through correct behaviour – and how the scene's attitudes to individuality can make some space for the expression of alternative masculinities and sexualities. Through this one can then see how differing expressions are in tension with each other, reflecting tensions within the imaginary community of black metal over who and what defines the boundaries: in this case male identity. Hence the conceptual problem over the use of masculinity and the realisation of differing masculinities is sidestepped. As Connell (1987) suggests, there can be competing expressions of masculinity, and the cultural setting of the masculine construction must be taken into account.

The epistemological framework of Jurgen Habermas (1981:1984) can help us understand the relationship between different notions of sexuality and power in the black metal imaginary community. Despite its homoerotic nature, exemplified by the tragicomical iconography of bands like Immortal, black metal is not an obviously welcoming scene for gay men. Gaahl's decision to make his homosexuality known to the world was a Habermasian communicative action, a decision made freely and with the intention of making a powerful point: Gaahl had the confidence of status, and self-assurance, to make his own meaning out of the identities permissible in black metal. That some fans chose to dismiss this with homophobic remarks demonstrates the hegemonic status of what Butler calls heteronormativity: even in the transgressive community of black metal, there are Habermasian instrumental rationalities at work restricting experiments with alternative masculinities.

Notes

¹ Gaahl in the magazine article: S Pambalis, 'A Decade of Aggression'. *Terrorizer*, 178, 2008, p. 24.

² Penrith, response to thread 'What Metal Shirt Are You Wearing Right Now?', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 16 September 2009, 13:28.

³ A TV presenter in Great Britain, famed for his outrageously camp manner.

⁴ Tom-Aus-Nord, initial posting in thread 'Homosexuality & Metal', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 2 April 2009, 09:02.

⁵ Requiem, response to thread 'Gaahl quits metal', blackmetal.co.uk public forum, posted 21 August 2009, 11:33.

⁶ Juvenal, Satire 10.77-81, in Braund (2004). Translated as follows: 'Already long ago, from when we sold our vote to no man, the people have abdicated our duties; for the people who once upon a time handed out military command, high civil office, legions... everything, now restrains itself and anxiously hopes for just two things: bread and circuses'.

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