

Ritual Black Metal

Popular Music as Occult Mediation and Practice

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Abstract

From the creative fantasy of musicians to the fearful imaginations of concerned parents and fundamentalist crusaders, Metal music has frequently been linked to the occult. It is, however, only recently that the occult milieu as represented by initiatory orders and segments of the broader Extreme Metal scene have been brought close enough to each other to spawn an identifiable “Ritual Black Metal” scene characterized by explicit, systematic, and sustained engagements with the occult. Members of this scene, particularly the musicians involved in it, not only demonstrate an interest in occult subject matter that surpasses most of what came before, but explicitly claim their artistry to be an expression of the occult in itself—as divine worship or communion, an expression of and tool for initiatory processes, and/or an explication of seriously held beliefs. In this article I examine the Swedish Ritual Black Metal scene, with some detours to the Finnish scene when closely connected to the Swedish one, by looking at both scenic institutions and key artists.

Keywords

Extreme Metal; Black Metal; Dissection; Watain; Ofermod; Saturnalia Temple; Forgotten Horror; Jess and the Ancient Ones; The Devil’s Blood; Misanthropic Lucifer-Order (MLO); Temple of the Black Light; Dragon Rouge

Introduction

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Metal music and the occult are no strangers to each other.¹ Metal bands have frequently been accused of engaging in occultism by concerned conservative commentators, and many artists in the genre have since the beginning been fascinated by occult themes and symbols. Some artists have engaged more deeply with the occult, explicitly using their music to mediate occult philosophies or even using it as a tool for magical practice. Such artists have, however, remained isolated exceptions in a genre where most artists have claimed nothing more than being fascinated by occult symbolism. That is, until recent times. The number of Extreme Metal bands, particularly of the Black Metal variety, that frame their artistic pursuits as occult practice has increased since the 1990s, in the 2000s slowly forming its own small scene focused on the occult within the broader Extreme Metal scene. As many of the bands involved in this scene identify as Black Metal and describe their performances as divine worship, communion, or magical rituals, or in other ways connect their artistic activities to ritual magical practices, it is suitable to speak of a “Ritual Black Metal” scene.² This paper explores that scene in a particular Swedish context, by turning an eye to key scenic institutions and artists, and their connections to more conventional occult milieus. This article represents a work in progress, and thus presents initial reflections rather than a conclusive analysis.

Theoretical and Methodological Preliminaries

Before dealing with the main topic of this article a number of theoretical and methodological concerns need to be addressed. First, it may appear out of place to use the term “popular culture” in reference to such a radical and seemingly marginal phenomenon such as Black Metal. In the common understanding of popular culture the focus is on the word “popular,” framing it as “cultural activities or commercial products reflecting, suited to, or aimed at the tastes of the general masses of people.”³ Extreme Metal is,

¹ While the terms “occult” and “esoteric” have different connotations in the study of Western esotericism I will be using them interchangeably in this article.

² “Occult Black Metal” could also have been used to label the scene, but it does not sufficiently highlight the rhetoric of framing artistic activities as ritual magical *practice*. Interestingly, shortly after submitting the first version of this article, the Finnish band Deathchain, which has more and more started to link its music to magic and the occult and has members who are active in other bands discussed in this article, released its seventh full-length album with the title *Ritual Death Metal*.

³ “Popular culture,” Dictionary.com, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/popular+culture>.

however, a global phenomenon,⁴ and is one of the few musical genres that has been able to sustain a global scene rather than being divided into national ones which have no contact with each other. It could thus be argued that while Extreme Metal may not be “popular” in the meaning of being culturally dominant in any particular national context (though it could be argued that it nearly is so in Finland), it is popular with regard to its global impact. Many Extreme Metal artists and fans would also strongly object to the music being labelled “popular.” This is a result of discursive strategies inherent in *Rock*, an analytical category rather than the musically defined genre Rock, revolving around the quest for authenticity and artistic seriousness, in opposition to the perceived pursuit of mass commercial profits and lack of significant artistic aspirations in *Pop*, again an analytical category distinguished from the musical genre Pop.⁵ *Rock* is based on a “rejection of those aspects of mass-distributed music which are believed to be soft, safe or trivial.”⁶ Extreme Metal, which can be incorporated in the category *Rock*, is dependent on these discursive formations, and this explains both the aversion to the term popular and the emergence of new genres when old ones are felt to have been compromised due to having too broad of an appeal.

Beyond the common understanding, scholarly and cultural expert-discourse has conventionally defined popular culture in contrast to other cultural forms, such as “high/elite culture,” both “high” and “folk” culture, or as constituting a resource for opposing mass or dominant culture.⁷ These types of definition are problematic, and in current research on religion and popular culture the term has increasingly come to stand for “the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life in a given society.”⁸ The focus is then on new arenas and functions of religion instead of on essentially distinct and dissociated types of culture. In this perspective a conventionally defined “high culture” artefact can be part of popular culture if it is used as such by people in their everyday life. An example would be the use and interpretation of the Mona Lisa beyond the institutions of “fine art”, such as on postcards, in commercials, in Dan Brown’s *The DaVinci Code* (2003), and so forth. In the study of religion and popular culture a focus on everyday religiosity marks a shift away from theological

⁴ Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 86.

⁵ Simon Frith, “Pop Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rock and Pop*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 94–96.

⁶ Keir Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rock and Pop*, 109.

⁷ Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

⁸ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 14.

interpretations and conventional institutions, instead paying attention to uses and interpretations of religion by “non-experts.”

Second, existing definitions of and perspectives on the esoteric are not particularly well suited for the study of popular culture. This relates particularly to Antoine Faivre’s approach,⁹ which was the dominating paradigm for a long while and still exerts influence among scholars outside the study of Western esotericism. The Faivrean approach easily lends itself to making distinctions between “true” and “simulacrum” esotericism, something Faivre himself does in an article dealing with esotericism and fiction.¹⁰ Faivre looks at the intentions of authors and receptions by readers and concludes that if a piece of fiction includes elements of “proper esotericism” but no “esoteric wisdom” it represents “borrowings” from the realm of esotericism, and when the fiction in question does not include “proper esotericism” but the reader nonetheless appears to find “esoteric wisdom” in it, it is a case of “misinterpretation.” Similarly, Henrik Bogdan discusses the “[m]igration of esoteric ideas into nonesoteric materials,”¹¹ implying a division into “real” and “simulacrum” esotericism in the vein of Faivre. Other approaches, such as Kocku von Stuckrad’s discursive one,¹² while not being as problematic as Faivre’s, do tend to expect some level of “serious intent” among the subjects of inquiry. When studying popular culture it is best to forgo such expectations, which are difficult to assess anyway, and look at the whole “field of discourse on the esoteric” which includes positive, neutral, and negative uses and depictions of “traditional” esoteric symbols, themes, tropes of communication etc., as well as discourse centred on higher knowledge and the dialectic of the hidden and the revealed. What one should *not* do, however, is to attempt to determine whether the subject examined is “properly” esoteric or not. This is an area where this article could run into problems, in a potential distinction between “properly occult” Metal and Metal that simply uses the occult in a superficial way. With inspiration in Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, though not in any deeply theoretically related fashion, this can be avoided by a focus on different performances of the occult, per the perspective on the

⁹ See e.g. Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Antoine Faivre, “Borrowings and Misreadings: Edgar Allen Poes’s ‘Mesmeric’ Tales and the Strange Case of their Reception,” *Aries* 7, no. 1 (2007).

¹¹ Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 20.

¹² Kocku von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation,” *Religion* 35, no. 2 (2005); Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

whole “field of discourse on the esoteric” mentioned above. The Ritual Black Metal bands described here are thus not more occult than other bands; their performance of the occult is simply different, involving a rhetoric where musical and lyrical expressions are framed as primarily occult rather than artistic.

Third, the concept of “scene” is central to this article. This term, which is often used by members of various popular music cultures, was given a theoretical dimension developed in youth and popular music culture studies in order to provide an alternative to problems with the term “subculture.”¹³ “Scene” has several advantages over the latter. First, it acknowledges the fluid nature and varying degrees of engagement in popular musical cultures whereas a focus on subcultures tends to operate in an “all or nothing” fashion where a person’s participation in a subculture excludes him/her from participation in “dominant culture” or other subcultures. In the latter the focus is on the most immersed participants, whereas the former includes every scenic involvement of any sort, from artists to people who only occasionally go to concerts, as well as the production, mediation, consumption, and so forth, of the popular music in question.¹⁴ Second, the term takes into account the spatial and temporal localization of societal interaction, highlighting the interconnectedness of different dimensions of particular popular musical environments, and functions as a practically oriented mapping tool.¹⁵ As it goes beyond traditional musicological terms such as “genre [which] signifies a mode of producing music (e.g. ‘ballads’)... [and] ‘style’ [which] signifies a specific mode of producing those genres (e.g. ‘heavy metal ballads’),”¹⁶ it is more useful when discussing the understandings and boundary work of artists and fans which go beyond mere musical and lyrical qualifiers.

Fourth, studying popular music scenes by approaching its artists introduces a number of difficulties. Artists tend to spend much time giving interviews for both fanzines and established magazines and the time and effort required for a scholarly interview might not seem worthwhile, particularly as the benefits to the artist’s career are nearly non-existing. As with any fieldwork-based research, one needs to secure an access point to the field and find a “network” through which the research can be

¹³ Marcus Moberg, “The Concept of *Scene* and its Applicability in Empirically Grounded Research on the Intersection of Religion/Spirituality and Popular Music,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 3 (2011): 404.

¹⁴ Moberg, “The Concept of Scene,” 405.

¹⁵ Moberg, “The Concept of Scene,” 406.

¹⁶ Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 11–12.

conducted.¹⁷ As for my research, I was in the lucky position of having “a foot in the door,” so to speak. Through my previous research on and continued engagement with the Swedish occult milieu I was both familiar with a number of artists in the scene and known as someone who has a deep understanding of the occult. My musical interests and engagements established me as someone who could also understand the music, style, and rhetoric. Together, my contacts and my “dual competence” secured my access to the scene. One could say that my status as someone who is familiar with the scene gave me access in ways not possible for other scholars, whereas my status as a scholar gave me access in ways not possible for regular fans. As a consequence of my network being based on my contacts within and through the magic order Dragon Rouge¹⁸ I have had to rely on existing interview-material from fanzines and magazines when it comes to bands whose members are not aligned with the order. This is something I hope to remedy in the near future.

While granting access, this dual competence also introduces potential bias. While being fairly inactive, I have remained a member of Dragon Rouge since the start of my initial fieldwork in 2000. I have been a fan of Extreme Metal and related genres for most of my life and involved as a musician since my teens. In a combination of these factors I have come to be involved as a guitarist in one of the bands discussed in this article, Forgotten Horror. As a response to potential problems of bias, I clarify that my interest lies in social relations and matters of rhetoric and discourse and I am dealing neither with matters of doctrine nor metaphysics. As should be clear when reading this article, my goal is not to present Ritual Black Metal in a positive (or negative) light but to describe and analyze the functions and forms of scenic construction and maintenance. A trained scholar should be able to write about subjects close to him/her without undue bias, and it is up to the reader to determine whether I have succeeded or not.

A further problem in studying artists is that most of them cultivate a public image, which could be compromised by scholarship and certain kinds of journalism, and participating in research could be seen as potentially detrimental to the artist’s career. This might make it difficult to convince artists to agree to interviews, but may also result in misrepresentations in cases where the researcher takes statements in magazine interviews at face value. For example, much writing about Black Metal ignores or is oblivious

¹⁷ Michael A. Agar, *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 27.

¹⁸ See Kennet Granholm, “Dragon Rouge: Left-Hand Path Magic with a Neopagan Flavour,” *Aries* 12, no. 1 (2012).

to the intricacies and discursive strategies of the genre and consequently fails to recognize the genre-inherent aggressiveness as primarily a rhetoric device.¹⁹ Artists may thus be concerned with guarding their public personae while simultaneously being worried that scholars will misrepresent them due to being unable to comprehend the genre and its style and discourses. The issue of public persona versus private sentiments is particularly pertinent in regard to the published interviews used as a secondary material in this article, but it does relate to the primary interview material as well. For example, prior to the official interview one of my interviewees clarified that he is “answering as a Black Metal artist” and that his answers therefore might differ if we were discussing in private. However, as my focus is on the rhetoric employed in the Ritual Black Metal scene and not on “true convictions” this is not a problem.

A Brief History of Metal Music

While this is not an article on Metal music in a general sense on Metal music in general, a brief overview of the history of it, its philosophical and discursive background, and its various esoteric connections is needed in order to contextualize the particular forms and expressions of Metal this article deals with. This is particularly necessary in relation to so called Extreme Metal, not only due to relatively little research having (thus far) been done on it, but also due to developments in it being particularly pertinent to “the occult turn” in the contemporary scene.

The beginning of Heavy Metal as a musical genre is usually traced to the late 1960s, with the release of the debut albums of Deep Purple (1968), Led

¹⁹ For an example of exaggerated focus on violence in Black Metal see Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (Venice: Feral House, 1997). When violence in the Black Metal scene is discussed the church burnings in Norway in the early 1990s and Varg Vikernes’s killing of Mayhem guitarist Øystein Aarseth in Oslo, Norway, in 1993, are most often mentioned. The other examples highlighted are Jon Nödtveidt and “Vlad’s” killing of a homosexual man in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 1997, and Mayhem vocalist Pelle “Dead” Ohlin’s suicide in 1991, and the subsequent use of a photograph of Ohlin’s corpse on a Mayhem album cover – a photograph was taken by Aarseth and was in fact used as an album cover, but on a bootleg release of a Mayhem concert and not on an official album (see Ika Johannesson and Jon Jefferson Klingberg, *Blod, eld, död – en Svensk metalhistoria* (Stockholm: Alfabetabokförlag AB, 2011), 74). These acts are certainly noteworthy, and while such acts of violence are sometimes glorified (see e.g. Jon Kristiansen, “Dissection,” in *Metalion: The Slayer Mag Diaries* (Slayer 12, May 1998), ed. Tara G. Warrior (Brooklyn: Bazillion Point Books, [2011] 2012), 379) they are hardly representative of the scene as a whole.

Zeppelin (1969), and Black Sabbath (1970).²⁰ These bands were influenced by Blues-based Hard Rock and Psychedelic Rock as well as the 1960s counter-culture with its penchant for rebelliousness, but the music was more extreme and messages of peace and love gave way for portrayals of a grimmer world.²¹ Sonically, Metal music is characterized by “heavy drum and bass, virtuosic distorted guitar, and a powerful vocal style that use[s] screams and growls as signs of transgression and transcendence.”²² The “New Wave of British Heavy Metal” from the mid 1970s introduced faster, heavier, and more melodic and complex forms of Metal, eventually inspiring the development of American Heavy Metal and the Extreme Metal genres that emerged in the 1980s.²³ The key Extreme Metal genres are Thrash, Death, and Black Metal.²⁴ The first of these was pioneered by bands such as Metallica and Slayer, both of whom released their debut albums in 1983, and usually revolves around complex melodic forms and socially critical lyrics. Death Metal, and often the faster and “punkier” Grindcore, usually has growled vocals and a less melodic structure, and is centred on morbid portrayals of death and decay.

The most extreme genre of Extreme Metal, Black Metal, emerged in the late 1980s to early 1990s. The genre-label is taken from the title of the band Venom’s second album from 1982 and was, primarily in hindsight, applies to bands that that incorporated overtly anti-Christian and “Satanic” themes in their lyrics and overall image from the early to mid 1980s. Besides Venom, the Swedish Bathory (debut album in 1984) and the Danish Mercyful Fate (debut album in 1983) are considered representatives of a “first wave of Black Metal.” It is, however, the Norwegian “second wave” of the early

²⁰ Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 2; Marcus Moberg, “The Internet and the Construction of a Transnational Christian Metal Music Scene,” *Culture & Religion* 9, no. 1 (2008): 85. Particularly the release of Black Sabbath’s self-titled debut album is commonly regarded as the start of Heavy Metal. See Ian Christe, *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), viii, 5–10; Marcus Moberg, *Faster for the Master!: Exploring Issues of Religious Expression and Alternative Christian Identity Within the Finnish Christian Metal Music Scene* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2011), 110.

²¹ Moberg, “The Internet and the Construction,” 85; Moberg, *Faster for the Master!*, 109.

²² Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993), 9. Walser is describing the British blues bands that he regards as the precursor to Metal music, but this applies equally well to most forms of Metal.

²³ Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 102–103, 109–110; Moberg, *Faster for the Master!*, 112.

²⁴ These three genres are usually presented as following each other in a succession but this greatly simplifies actual developments. Furthermore, Extreme Metal genres blend into each other and genre definitions have at least as much to do with the self-identifications of artists and listeners as with musical differences, complicating clear demarcations of specific genres.

1990s one most often thinks of when the term Black Metal is mentioned, and it is this scene in which a self-identification with the term first occurred. In contrast to Death Metal the vocals in early “second wave” Black Metal were commonly shrieked rather than growled, the guitars shrill with an emphasis of the high and upper mid frequency bands, and the production value intentionally low. The early Norwegian scene was represented by bands such as Mayhem (first album in 1987), Darkthrone (first album in 1991²⁵), the one-man band Burzum (first album in 1992), Immortal (first album in 1992), Satyricon (first album in 1993), Emperor (first album in 1994), and Gorgoroth (first album in 1994).

Extreme Metal and the Occult Connection

Metal has from the very beginning embraced occult notions and themes, as well as having been accused of being directly connected to occultism and Satanism by its detractors. Already the Blues that preceded it was surrounded by stories of deals between musicians and the Devil.²⁶ Black Sabbath had a certain flirtation with darker occult themes, apparent in the name of the band itself as well as in image and lyrics. Led Zeppelin referred to occultist and magician Aleister Crowley in several of its songs, largely due to guitarist Jimmy Page’s long-lasting fascination with the infamous mage.²⁷ In the 1980s Ozzy Osbourne, former lead singer of Black Sabbath, continued his exploration of the occult with the song “Mr. Crowley” on his first solo album, *Blizzard of Oz* (1980). Thrash Metal band Slayer included songs titled “The Antichrist” and “Black Magic” on the debut album *Show no Mercy* (1983) and Metallica included the instrumental song “The Call of Ktulu”²⁸ on the 1984 album *Ride the Lightning*. Swiss band Celtic Frost—two members of which started out in the “first wave” Black Metal band

²⁵ Darkthrone’s first album *Soulside Journey* is commonly not regarded a Black Metal album. From the band’s second album *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* from 1992, onwards, however, this label is commonly applied.

²⁶ A famous example concerns blues artist Robert Johnson who was said to have met Satan at a crossroads and sold his soul in order to become a great guitar player. See Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), xiii.

²⁷ At one time Page even owned Crowley’s old Boleskine House on the shore of Loch Ness in Scotland. The website <http://fusionanomaly.net/aleistercrowley.html> (accessed October 16, 2009) lists several of the influences of Crowley in Led Zeppelin, as well as other details relating to Jimmy Page’s interest in Crowley.

²⁸ This is, of course, an influence of H. P. Lovecraft’s horror literature, which is in itself immensely popular in the contemporary occult milieu.

Hellhammer—included references to alleged Satanist Gilles de Rais (1404–1440) on its first album *Morbid Tales* (1984) and to Lovecraftian beings on the 1985 EP *Emperor's Return*. The occult was a common theme in early Death Metal as well, and Morbid Angel included songs named “Immortal Rites,” “Visions from the Dark Side,” and “Bleed for the Devil” on its first album *Altars of Madness* (1989). The occult was virtually the dominating theme in the slow and brooding genre known as Doom Metal, exemplified by bands such as Saint Vitus,²⁹ Pentagram,³⁰ and Candlemass.³¹ Even Glam Metal band Mötley Crüe had allegedly planned on naming its 1983 album *Shout with the Devil*, but decided instead on *Shout at the Devil* after negative occult experiences of bass player and lyricist Nikki Sixx.³²

It is, however, largely with Black Metal that the engagement with the occult started to be more structured and sustained, with undertones that can more clearly be categorized as religious. Black Metal, at least in its Norwegian “second wave,” is commonly described as Satanic.³³ It is true that overtly Satanic themes as well as Satanic self-descriptions and self-identifications emerged relatively early, but it has been argued, on good grounds, that this was largely due to the influence of the mass media portraying the genre as Satanic. In short, in January 1992 Burzum's Varg Vikernes (1973–) gave an interview where he claimed responsibility for a number of church burnings,³⁴ which led to a moral panic³⁵ and a media

²⁹ The band's self-titled first album was released in 1984, and contains the song “White Magic/Black Magic.”

³⁰ First self-titled album in 1985. The very name of the band is, of course, an occult reference.

³¹ Candlemass's first album, *Epicus Doomicus Metallicus*, was released in 1986, and includes songs with titles such as “Crystal Ball” and “A Sorcerer's Pledge.”

³² Tommy Lee et al., *The Dirt – Mötley Crüe: Confessions of the World's Most Notorious Rock Band* (New York: Regan Books, 2002), 88.

³³ E.g. Moynihan and Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos*; Gavin Baddeley, *Lucifer Rising: A Book of Sin, Devil Worship and Rock 'n' Roll* (London: Plexus Publishing, 1999). Commentators such as Moberg (*Faster for the Master!*, 119, 123–24) do acknowledge the pagan influences and themes. Thomas Bossius, *Med framtiden i backspegeln: Black metal och Trancekulturen – Ungdomar, Musik och Religion i en Senmodern Värld* (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2003), 75, 103–105, 114, 117–20, does so as well, but seems to regard the paganism-influenced bands as distinct from Black Metal proper, which he regards as being Satanic in its essence.

³⁴ The interview is reproduced in English in Moynihan & Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos*, 333–35.

³⁵ For a discourse analytical approach to social problems and moral panics, see Titus Hjelm, “Religion and Social Problems: A New Theoretical Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

frenzy focused on stories about “Satanism in Norway.”³⁶ This escalated a year later with Vikernes’s murder of Mayhem guitarist Euronymous (Øystein Aarseth, 1968–1993), and the convictions of several individuals involved in Black Metal for a number of the church burnings that had occurred in Norway in the early 1990s. The Norwegian documentary film *Satan rir media*³⁷ (*Satan Rides the Media*) clearly shows how the Satanism-label was applied by the media, how dubious “cult experts” validated this, and how the number of arsons drastically increased in the process—from approximately one per year in the early 1990s to fifty arsons altogether between 1992 and 1996.³⁸ Satanism became an identity marker in Black Metal, largely due to the media-created Satanism providing a “script” that Norwegian “second wave” Black Metal musicians and fans could use for antinomian purposes.³⁹

In fact, the “first wave of Black Metal” was far more explicitly Satanic when it comes to lyrical content. To give a few examples: The debut album of Venom, *Welcome to Hell* (1981), includes songs such as “Sons of Satan” and “In League with Satan” and most songs include references to things

³⁶ For discussion of Norwegian media portrayals and constructions of Satanism, see Asbjørn Dyrendal and Amina Olander Lap, “Satanism as a News Item in Norway and Denmark: A Brief History,” in *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of Satanism*, ed. James R. Lewis and Jesper Aagaard Petersen (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007). For a similar example from Finland, see Titus Hjelm, “Driven by the Devil: Popular Constructions of Youth Satanist Careers,” in *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of Satanism*, ed. James R. Lewis and Jesper Aagaard Petersen (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007).

³⁷ Torstein Grude, *Satan rir media* (Torsten Grude/TV2, 1998).

³⁸ Bossius, *Med Framtiden i Bakspejeln*, 99, contradicts this and claims that the frequency of “Satanic activities” lessened after the conviction of Vikernes, but does not name any sources for these claims. Bossius also buys wholeheartedly into the tale of a “black circle” and a “Satanic hierarchy” consisting of leading members of the Norwegian Black Metal scene (Bossius, *Med Framtiden i Bakspejeln*, 97). Although the existence of such a circle was claimed by Black Metal artists around 1993/4, no evidence for anything but a loose gathering of friends has surfaced. The claim has subsequently been contested by members of the Black Metal scene (see e.g. Varg Vikernes, “A Personal Review of Gavin Baddeley’s Book ‘Lucifer Rising: Sin, Devil Worship and Rock ‘n’ Roll,’” August 13, 2004, http://www.burzum.org/eng/library/lucifer_rising_review.shtml). In all likelihood the “circle” was simply an unorganized group of likeminded scene participants, and not any sort of “satanic secret society.” “The Black Circle” is very similar to what has been detailed in Satanic Panics elsewhere (and other moral panics and conspiracy theories), and it is reasonably safe to assume that the pre-existing model of clandestine conspiracies and the “satanic character” of Norwegian Black Metal claimed by mass media was used by musicians to gain scenic legitimacy.

³⁹ Egil Asprem, “Heathens up North: Politics, Polemics, and Contemporary Norse Paganism in Norway,” *The Pomegranate* 10 (2008): 53–54, shows that media representations of Satanism in Norway predate the rise of “Satanic” Black Metal.

such as Satan, demons, and Hell. All the albums of Swiss band Hellhammer, including the first demo *Satanic Rites* (1983), include references to Satan. The same goes for Swedish band Bathory from its first album *Bathory* (1984) to the late 1980s,⁴⁰ as well as for most of the other important “first wave” bands such as Destruction, Sodom, Sarcófago, Tormentor, Death SS, and Blasphemy. The references to Satan in Norwegian “second wave” Black Metal are far less frequent. Mayhem and Gorgoroth are the two bands that most frequently promote a Satanist outlook, and the latter only from its 1996 album *Antichrist* onwards. Early albums by most other bands do contain references to Satan, but the character commonly is used as a representation of the pre-Christian, in a heathen framework of “longing for a long lost pre-Christian past,” “nature-romanticism,” and the “importance of a ‘folk’.”

It is for this reason, and as I consider the term Satanism to be of little analytical value,⁴¹ that I have argued that early Norwegian Black Metal should be characterized as heathen rather than Satanic.⁴² In addition to this general heathen discursive framework references to Old Norse, pre-Christian myth, religion, and culture are at least as plentiful as references to Satan in early Norwegian Black Metal. Burzum’s self-titled debut album from 1992 contains an ode to the Babylonian god Ea and seemingly a cry of sorrow for an imagined lost pagan past (in the song “A Lost Forgotten Soul”). This theme of sorrow for “lost tradition” recurs in songs such as “Det som en gang var (Was Einst War)” [What Once Was] on the 1994 album *Hvis lyset tar oss* [If the light takes us]. Darkthrone’s album *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* (1992) contains several explicit references to pre-Christian mythologies, and is infused with a similar longing for a pre-Christian past as apparent in Burzum’s “Det som en gang var.” Emperor’s 1994 album *In the Nightside Eclipse* exhibits the same romantic longing, as it contains the song “Cosmic Keys to my Creations and Times” with the following more general

⁴⁰ Bathory’s “satanic phase” started to come to an end with the band’s 1988 album *Blood Fire Death*, with heathen themes dominating from the 1990 album *Hammerheart* onwards.

⁴¹ See Kennet Granholm, “Embracing Others Than Satan: The Multiple Princes of Darkness in the Left-Hand Path Milieu,” in *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jesper Aagaard Petersen (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009); Granholm, “The Left-Hand Path and Post-Satanism: The Temple of Set and the Evolution of Satanism,” in *The Devil’s Party: Satanism in Modernity*, ed. Per Faxneld and Jesper Aagaard Petersen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴² Kennet Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness’: Heathen Influences in Black Metal and Neofolk Music,” *Numen* 58, no. 4 (2011). See also Gry Mørk, “Why Didn’t the Churches Begin to Burn a Thousand Years Earlier,” in *Religion and Popular Music in Europe: New Expressions of Sacred and Secular Identities*, ed. Thomas Bossius, Andreas Häger, and Keith Kahn-Harris (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

esoteric line of text: “They are the planetary keys to unlimited wisdom and power for the Emperor to obtain.” Even Mayhem’s *Live in Leipzig* (1992) contains the song “Pagan Fears” and Gorgoroth’s debut album *Pentagram* (1994) the song “(Under) The Pagan Megalith.” The early 1990s Norwegian Black Metal was certainly anti-Christian, but an adversarial stance towards Christianity does not automatically equate to Satanism or Devil Worship.

The Contemporary Ritual Black Metal Scene in Sweden

Occult elements were quite clearly present in the early Norwegian Black Metal scene, but it would take some time before any engagement with the occult was more organized and systematic. From about the mid 1990s more sustained attempts to create a form of Ritual Black Metal were in place, but it was not until the final years of the first decade of the twenty-first century that the critical mass had been achieved and a scene of relative prominence, with several bands, record labels, fanzines, venues, and fans interconnected, emerged. Ritual Black Metal represents a development within an existing musical scene, resulting in the emergence of a new “sub-scene” which, while connected to the larger Extreme Metal scene, has its own identity and institutions, as well as more pronounced and focused connections and engagements with the occult milieu represented by esoteric orders. Representatives of this scene not only claim a serious religious-philosophical attitude, but frame their artistic activities as religious-occult practice. In interviews, the occult aspects are also commonly placed in the foreground.⁴³ Most bands in the scene self-identify as “Black Metal,” but musically there is considerable diversity. For example, internationally, whereas bands such as Watain and Ofermod can easily be recognized as stylistically being Black Metal, others such as the Dutch The Devil’s Blood and the Finnish Jess and the Ancient Ones are stylistically most closely related to 1970s Hard Rock, and Saturnalia Temple could be termed as Doom and/or Stoner Metal.

From my observations and discussions with scene members, confirmed by Tuomas Karhunen,⁴⁴ the Metal scene has moved towards a stronger occult and magical inclination in recent years. According to Karhunen, this might be due to a number of artists becoming more deeply involved with occultism and the practice of magic, which in turn leads to other artists

⁴³ See e.g. Wolf-Rüdiger Mühlman, “Saturnalia Temple: Im Auftrag des Drachen,” *Rock Hard* 299 (April 2012); Joel Malmén, “Ofermod” [interview], *Sweden Rock Magazine* 97 (November 2012).

⁴⁴ Tuomas Karhunen, interview, March 3, 2013.

becoming interested as well. Karhunen explains that this is a growing magical current evoking a collective energy, which leads to new musical expressions. However, while interest in practised occultism and magic has grown, opposition has increased as well, with accusations that some bands claim a magical pedigree simply in order to increase their fan base.⁴⁵

While a transnational Ritual Black Metal scene exists, and various local scenes throughout Europe and the Americas, I think that it is safe to say that the scene is most prominent in Sweden. In Sweden, Ritual Black Metal has also built scenic institutions such as networks and special venues. On the one hand, some fans may prefer Ritual Black Metal but are unlikely to limit their engagement with Metal to only this scene. On the other hand, some scene participants may be less interested in Metal in general and prefer other forms of musical expression, but participate due to their occult interests. As for scenic institutions, most bands in the scene release their records on small independent record labels—though there are exceptions to this, Ofermod’s 2012-album *Thaumiel* was released by Spinefarm Records, which is an independent business unit of Universal Music Group. To my knowledge, however, there are no record labels that exclusively focus on Ritual Black Metal in Sweden.⁴⁶ Still, there might be labels that exclusively interested in bands with occult engagements, and who then release records by artists in many different genres, including Ritual Black Metal. These aspects of the scene certainly warrant investigation, but lie outside the scope of the present article.

Scenic Institutions

The scenic institutions I will look at are two venues that are exclusively for bands engaged in the occult; the festivals Arosian Black Mass in Västerås (100km West of Stockholm) and Forlorn Fest in Umeå (in Northern Sweden). Forlorn Fest was first arranged in November 2010,⁴⁷ with the second festival on November 30 to December 1, 2012. The first Arosian Black Mass was arranged on November 11–12, 2011,⁴⁸ with the second

⁴⁵ Karhunen, interview.

⁴⁶ In the US, though, the record label/book publisher Ajna focuses exclusively on occult music (Ajna Offensive, <http://www.theajnaoffensive.com>) and also publishes ritual magical and occult literature (Ajnaound, <http://www.ajnaound.com>).

⁴⁷ Forlorn Fest, “2010,” accessed March 6, 2013, <http://www.forlornfest.com/index.php?p=5>.

⁴⁸ Last.fm, “Arosian Black Mass,” accessed March 6 2013, <http://www.last.fm/festival/1967833+Arosian+Black+Mass>.

festival on November 23–24, 2012. Neither festival is presented as a place for “fun and party” as is the case with most other Metal festivals in Sweden and elsewhere. Instead, a sombre attitude dominates. As the organisers of Forlorn Fest write:

Forlorn Fest is an annual Deathworshipping Black Metal festival ... aim[ing] to be a showcase for occult music, art, and other creative outlets. ...only bands who truly embrace Death and everything that comes with the spirit of Black Metal are wellcome [sic] through the gates.

This festival is not a place for fun and joy, it is the opposite of festivals such as Sweden Rock, House of Metal, Wacken Air or Sonisphere. Instead of aiming to get as many visitors as possible, we aim to get the most dedicated audience who will add to the overall feeling of the festival⁴⁹

The organizers of Forlorn Fest start their presentation on their Facebook page with “We welcome thee into the Church of Death”, and go on to state that the mission of the festival is “[t]o give the wanderers of the Left Hand Path, a truly one of a kind experience of what the essence of Black Metal is all about.”⁵⁰

The organizers of Arosian Black Mass present their festival in a similar manner:

Arosian Black Mass is not a ‘Black Metal festival’ but is centered around occult esoterism in art, music and dark spiritual practice. The whole event will have its focus upon an esoteric process within which all participating artists will play key roles. The visitors shall expect a complete arcane impression through visions, audio and atmosphere. It is meant to be an extraordinary experience that they will never forget!⁵¹

“Not a Black Metal festival,” as it is in quotation marks, should here probably be understood as the venue not being comparable to “regular” Black Metal festivals, and possibly even being a “true Black Metal festival” in contrast to those that do not operate with an occult grounding. Both festivals thus use an elitist rhetoric in which authenticity and an exclusive audience are valued over drawing large number of attendants.

⁴⁹ Forlorn Fest, “About,” accessed November 12, 2013, <http://www.forlornfest.com/index.php?p=3>.

⁵⁰ Forlorn Fest, “Facebook; Information,” accessed November 12, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/ForlornFest/info>.

⁵¹ Arosian Black Mass, “Information,” accessed November 13, 2013, <http://www.ariosian-black-mass.se/info.html>.

I visited both festivals in November/December of 2012. While there were similarities, for example artists at both festivals being chosen on the grounds of them framing their music as closely and authentically related to the occult, there were differences as well. Arosian Black Mass had a broad range of different acts, ranging from the experimental ritual ambient act Arktau Eos to the Black Metal of Ofermod. The festival also included occult video showings, displays of occult artwork, and vendors selling occult books and ritual supplies. In contrast, the bands playing at Forlorn were of a more conventional Black Metal variety, and while they all framed their music as occult in philosophy and/or practice, the performances at the festival did not include traditional ritual magical elements in the same way as at Arosian Black Mass. The band Ofermod was an exception, and included a magical ritual in its performance. Unlike Arosian Black Mass, no vendors of occult books and supplies or displayers of occult art were present. Arosian Black Mass also seemed to attract a more international crowd, with people having travelled from around Europe, but also from e.g. South America, in order to participate. The audience at Forlorn Fest was mostly Swedish, as well as being a more traditional Metal crowd.

There are also scenic institutions that tread the border between occult fraternities and band activity. One example is the Luciferian Flame Brotherhood (also going by the name Serpent Flame Brotherhood), consisting of members of a number of Black Metal bands that operate on an occult basis. Mika Hakola of the Swedish band Ofermod and one of the instigators of the Brotherhood says:

I work on bringing together adepts from different Left-Hand Path-traditions for cooperation on a more mundane plane... to help spread the dark spiritual heritage and in that way help other dark-adepts to pave the way for a Draconian/Luciferian era where each tradition which is allied with the powers of darkness have a place and function.⁵²

The goal with the Brotherhood is thus not to become an initiatory order in itself, but to direct the musical expressions of the occult to align them with ritual magical practice.

⁵² Belfagor (Ofermod), e-mail interview by author, October 12, 2012; Malmén, "Ofermod."

A Closer Look at Ritual Black Metal Bands

In a more detailed look at the Ritual Black Metal scene I will focus on a number of Swedish bands that have an expressed and/or known connection to esoteric groups, specifically Dragon Rouge and the Misanthropic Lucifer Order (MLO). Dragon Rouge is a self-described dark magical initiatory order founded in 1990, and today has members throughout the Western world.⁵³ The beginnings of the Misanthropic Lucifer Order are less clear, but in its own account MLO was formed in 1995.⁵⁴ In the beginning MLO was a small group closely connected to the Black Metal scene and particularly the band Dissection,⁵⁵ but around 2006/2007, after the suicide of Dissection front man Jon Nödtveidt (1975–2006), the group was reorganized as The Temple of the Black Light and has since then strongly distanced itself from the Extreme Metal scene.

The second album of Dissection, *Storm of the Light's Bane* from 1995, is in terms of lyrics and artwork not in any significant way different from other Black Metal albums of the time and there is very little focused esoteric treatment. In 1997 Nödtveidt was arrested for being accessory to murder, and Dissection was inactive until his release in 2004. During his time in prison and after his release Nödtveidt engaged more explicitly with the philosophy of MLO, focusing his band as “the voice of MLO.” In an interview from prison in 2002 Nödtveidt assures that he is still composing music and says: “I handle my music and lyrics as powerful instruments for channelling and expressing the sinister and Chaotic energies of the anti-cosmic impulse.”⁵⁶ The original release of *Storm of the Light's Bane* contains the text “We hail you by the metal of death!” In the 2006 “ultimate reissue” of the album this text has been changed to “We hail you by the anti-cosmic metal of death!” with “anti-cosmic chaos-gnosticism” being the chosen self-description of MLO,⁵⁷ and the text “Dissection is the sonic propaganda unit of MLO” has been added. Dissection’s final album, *Reinkaos* from 2006, is full of esoteric references and symbolism related to the chaos-gnostic teachings of MLO, where physical existence is presented as a prison created

⁵³ See Granholm, “Dragon Rouge.”

⁵⁴ Jon Kristiansen, “MLO: Misanthropiska Lucifer Orden,” in *Metalion: The Slayer Mag Diaries* (Slayer 16, Fall 2001), ed. Tara G. Warrior (Brooklyn: Bazillion Point Books, [2011] 2012), 549.

⁵⁵ Fredrik Gregorius, *Satanismen i Sverige* (N.p.: Sitra Ahra, 2006), 53.

⁵⁶ Jon Kristiansen, “Dissection: Fear the Return,” in *Metalion: The Slayer Mag Diaries* (Slayer 17, May 2002) ed. Tara G. Warrior (Brooklyn: Bazillion Point Books, [2011] 2012), 548.

⁵⁷ Gregorius, *Satanismen i Sverige*, 55.

by the demiurge, and with Lucifer/Satan as the liberator.⁵⁸ Everything indicates that Nödttveidt's suicide in 2006 was directly linked to his interpretation of MLO philosophy rather than being a desperate act committed in a depressed state of mind. He released *Reinkaos* on Walpurgis Night 2006, announced the split-up of the band two weeks later, arranged a final elaborate concert with exclusive merchandise on Midsummer day and at the concert he meticulously greeted all fans who wished to meet him.⁵⁹ Nödttveidt methodically wrapped up his musical and publically religious affairs. A week later he gave his last interview, at the end of which he announced his plans to “travel to Transylvania”—which in Black Metal culture is a euphemism for suicide due to Mayhem vocalist Pelle “Dead” Ohlin wearing a T-shirt with the print “I [Love] Transylvania” at the time of his suicide.⁶⁰ On August 16, 2006, Nödttveidt was found dead in his apartment with a gunshot wound in the head, surrounded by candles and an opened “Satanic Grimoire” in front of him.⁶¹ The book was most likely *Liber Azerate*⁶²—the key text of MLO,⁶³ and Nödttveidt would seem to have committed ritual suicide, in line with MLO's view of physical existence as something one should seek escape from.

Erik Danielsson, lead singer of the band Watain, played bass in the last incarnation of Dissection and was close to Nödttveidt. The first album of Watain, *Rabid Death's Curse* from 2000, includes quite standard “third wave” Black Metal symbolism with inverted crosses, goat heads in inverted pentagrams, and numerous mentions of Satan in a general anti-Christian framework. From there on the symbolism and content gradually becomes more diverse, ambiguous, and classically occult. The standard inverted crosses and goat head-pentagrams are absent and instead we see a broader range of symbols and images such as a snake spitting in three cups with the labels “mens” (mind), “animvs” (soul), and “corpvs” (body),⁶⁴ the all-seeing eye familiar from e.g. Masonic art,⁶⁵ an animal-headed angel holding a

⁵⁸ Due to copyright laws I am unable to quote lyrics. However, access to the lyrics are readily available on the Internet. See Darklyrics, “Dissection Lyrics. Album: Reinkaos,” <http://www.darklyrics.com/lyrics/dissection/reinkaos.html>.

⁵⁹ Johannesson and Jefferson Klingberg, *Blod, eld, död*, 191–23.

⁶⁰ Johannesson and Jefferson Klingberg, *Blod, eld, död*, 191–23.

⁶¹ Deathbringer, “Dissection Guitarist: Jon Nödttveidt Didn't Have Copy of ‘The Satanic Bible’ at Suicide Scene,” September 3, 2006, <http://www.metalunderground.com/news/details.cfm?newsid=21582>.

⁶² Frater Nemidial, *Liber Azerate: Det Vredgade Kaosets Bok* (N.p.: MLO Anti-Cosmic Productions, 2002).

⁶³ Gregorius, *Satanismen i Sverige*, 52.

⁶⁴ Watain, *Casus Luciferi*.

⁶⁵ Watain, *Casus Luciferi*.

sword,⁶⁶ Hebrew characters,⁶⁷ a wolf's head,⁶⁸ a goat with its serpentine backside encircling a cross,⁶⁹ a Baphomet-like figure,⁷⁰ four triangles with each containing a ritual tool associated with one of the four elements,⁷¹ and pictures of band members engaged in rituals.⁷² The third album, *Sworn to the Dark* (2007), is dedicated to Nödtveidt and starts with the song “Legions of the Black Light” which is set quite firmly in an MLO anti-cosmic worldview,⁷³ and might possibly reflect the new name of MLO. In an interview from 2007 Danielsson also says that MLO “are the only Satanic organization I fully support.”⁷⁴ Watain’s live performances have been called “live rituals”, and Danielsson described the band’s shows in the following way:

...every WATAIN show, no matter if it is in front of 10 punks or 3000 insane Chileans, is holy to us and serves as a communion between us and the forces unto which we direct our praise.⁷⁵

As for what the band means to him he says:

To me, WATAIN is a symbol of my inhuman self, a proud monument of darkness in a world of illusive light. As such, it portrays the sides of my self that have victoriously broken the shackles of existence. ... So yes, everything in my life can be found in relation to WATAIN...⁷⁶

In discussing Black Metal as a genre, Danielsson says: “Inhuman energies is [sic] what makes Black Metal interesting, and even more so; divine,”⁷⁷ clearly defining Black Metal as something that goes beyond musical expression.

⁶⁶ Watain, *Casus Luciferi*.

⁶⁷ Watain, *Casus Luciferi*.

⁶⁸ Watain, *Sworn to the Dark*.

⁶⁹ Watain, *Sworn to the Dark*.

⁷⁰ Watain, *Lawless Darkness*.

⁷¹ Watain, *Lawless Darkness*.

⁷² Watain, *Sworn to the Dark*.

⁷³ See Darklyrics, “1. Legions of the Black Light,” <http://www.darklyrics.com/lyrics/watain/sworn-to-the-dark.html#1>.

⁷⁴ Pete Woods, “Interview with Watain,” accessed November 14, 2013, <http://www.metalteamuk.net/interview-watain.htm>.

⁷⁵ Jon Kristiansen, “Watain: Black Metal Militia,” in *Metalion: The Slayer Mag Diaries* (Slayer 20, December 2010), ed. Tara G. Warrior (Brooklyn: Bazillion Point Books, [2011] 2012), 668.

⁷⁶ Kristiansen, “Watain,” 669.

⁷⁷ Kristiansen, “Watain,” 669.

As for the Dragon Rouge-inspired bands, Saturnalia Temple is led by Tommie Eriksson who is a long-time and active member of the aforementioned order, and who has published an introductory book on the order's teachings and practice.⁷⁸ In contrast to many other bands in the scene, Saturnalia Temple's first album *UR* from 2008 contains very little in the way of obvious magical sigils or symbolism, other than a magic square on the CD itself, a Babylonian statue on the front cover, and the title "UR" written in runic form. The lyrics, however, deal with initiation and are very similar to ritual magical texts familiar from a Dragon Rouge context. The second album *Aion of Drakon* from 2011 clearly references Dragon Rouge in its title, and has plenty of symbols/sigils on the cover. Musically, Saturnalia Temple is perhaps most closely related to Doom Metal, Stoner Metal, and Classic Metal in the vein of early Black Sabbath. Eriksson, however, describes the music of his band as "Black Magic Metal,"⁷⁹ which is also the title of a song on *Aion of Drakon*.

I will focus on the band Ofermod in more detail. Mika Hakola/Belfagor, the driving force of the band, is a member of Dragon Rouge⁸⁰ and all lyrics of the band relate to and interpret material familiar from the context of the order. The 2008 album *Tiamtū* contains plenty of "Demon sigils drawn by frater B.A.B.A, sorore Ararita and sorore A.J for ritual purposes and qliphotic invocations..." and the songs are described as ceremonies "lead [sic] by frater B.A.B.A (Michayah Belfagor), Master of ceremony..."⁸¹ The lyrics to the 2012 album *Thaumiel* are written by Hakola and other members of Dragon Rouge, with each song accompanied by a sigil created by the author of the lyrics in question. Hakola describes the album artwork as "the visual grimoire," and the album as a whole as "a grimoire which deals with Samael."⁸² The title itself refers to the qliphotic sphere "Thaumiel", with qliphotic kabbalah being the basis of the Dragon Rouge initiatory structure.⁸³ In the mid to late 1990s Hakola started to use the term "Orthodox Black Metal" to differentiate his music from "less serious/true" Black Metal, and the term has since then become popular with many other bands. Hakola says:

today it [Orthodox Black Metal] has evolved to be orthodox in a more proper sense as many musicians who use this term in reference to their music have

⁷⁸ Tommie Eriksson, *Mörk Magi* (Sundbyberg: Ouroboros Produktion, 2001).

⁷⁹ Personal communication with Tommie Eriksson.

⁸⁰ Malmén, "Ofermod."

⁸¹ Ofermod, *Tiamtū*.

⁸² Belfagor, interview.

⁸³ Granholm, "Dragon Rouge."

learnt esoteric ways of contacting the dark side of existence and its inhabitants and in that way can truly call themselves orthodox in their dark spirituality.⁸⁴

He also feels that Black Metal needs to have this esoteric dimension in order to be proper Black Metal, and continues: “I am also very fond of bands such as Saturnalia Temple, JATAO [Jess and the Ancient Ones], Ghost, Therion and so on, but for me these bands are Black/Death as the lyrics determine the genre.”⁸⁵

Thaumiel was released on the record label Spinefarm, which is a Finnish independent business unit of the multinational Universal Music Group, something which Hakola sees as providing “an opportunity to spread the qliphotic currents ... to a larger audience”,⁸⁶ and “...sows seeds of chaos in our listeners’ minds.”⁸⁷ He regards his band as being “different from 99% of the bands that use the same denominator [Black Metal] as it for us is a spiritual musical style dedicated to the darkest of forces which ultimately involves the Luciferian illumination.”⁸⁸ As for the music Hakola says:

... this is not only about music but in the highest possible degree magic ... each text is bound to some form of either individual ceremony or ceremonial experimentation by several adepts during a longer period ... The dark occult symbolism is what makes OFERMOD OFERMOD and not another mediocre so called ‘Black’ Metal band ... Without dark magic, where would the source to the insanity-wisdom that I must get in contact with in order to write a song be found? ... I need to turn inwards to the limitless reservoir of dimly enlightened darkness where I in the shadows which are cast from far away find a red thread that makes my fingers move in a frenzy over the neck of the guitar until the chaos is transformed into something which by human ears can be perceived as music with a structure. OFERMOD IS magic, OFERMOD IS occultism, the music we deliver is a reflection of where I am situated initiatory when I create it.⁸⁹

For Hakola and Ofermod, “music and magic are ... one and the same essence, the Great Dragon’s breath and ‘heartbeat’ as a sort of chaos-pulse that the one who listens really carefully in the silence in him/herself can become aware of.”⁹⁰ While the songs are closely aligned with Hakola’s

⁸⁴ Belfagor, interview.

⁸⁵ Belfagor, interview.

⁸⁶ Belfagor, interview.

⁸⁷ Belfagor, interview.

⁸⁸ Belfagor, interview.

⁸⁹ Belfagor, interview.

⁹⁰ Belfagor, interview.

personal initiatory process, he says that the magic of his music differs from his more private magical practice. The former is more intuitive whereas the latter is more structured. Still, Ofermod has at times used more conventional ritual elements in shows, but Hakola wants to present its magic strictly through music in the future. More conventional magical rituals will be limited to non-public pre-show preparations. For Hakola magic is always present in Ofermod, as the band's songs "can in the highest degree be viewed as rituals."⁹¹ Hakola concludes: "What else could they be when I've emptied my soul in them for so long in the creative process? It's not regular music, that's for sure."⁹²

While this article is focused on the Swedish scene and Swedish bands, the phenomenon does exist elsewhere. The Dutch band The Devil's Blood is an interesting example. The band was formed in 2006,⁹³ released its first demo in 2007, and then released a number of EPs and two full albums⁹⁴ before ending its career in January 2013.⁹⁵ Musically, the band is more akin to 1970s rock music, but it is nonetheless regarded as fitting in an Extreme Metal context, and has even played as a warm-up act for Watain, due to its occult focus in its lyrics.

I will end this article with a short discussion of two bands, which though being Finnish and not Swedish are connected to the Swedish occult milieu through one particular member. Tuomas Karhunen is lyricist, composer, and guitarist for both Jess and the Ancient Ones and Forgotten Horror.⁹⁶ The former was conceived as an idea in 2008 and realized as a band in 2010,⁹⁷ and while it has been compared to Devil's Blood due to both being musically inspired by 1970s and early 1980s rock and pop music, having an occult focus in lyrics and symbolism, and having a female lead singer, there are significant differences in both music and approach. Jess and the Ancient Ones is particularly interesting due to having garnered an impressive following in a very short time, demonstrating that the occult interests fairly large audiences. The band's self-titled first album reached number seven on

⁹¹ Belfagor, interview.

⁹² Belfagor, interview.

⁹³ Eduardo Rivadavia, "The Devil's Blood: Biography," accessed March 4, 2013, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/the-devils-blood-mn0001021127>.

⁹⁴ The Devil's Blood, "Incantations," accessed March 4, 2013, <http://thedevelopsblood.com/incantations>.

⁹⁵ The Devil's Blood, "Declarations," accessed March 4, 2013, <http://thedevelopsblood.com/declarations>.

⁹⁶ While I do not write lyrics or music for the band, I play guitar at live shows.

⁹⁷ Karhunen, interview.

the Finnish official album sales list⁹⁸ and number one on the list of Finnish music magazine *Rumba*,⁹⁹ which collects sales statistics from specialist music shops, and its most recent mini album *Astral Sabbath* reached number fifteen on the Finnish official sales list.¹⁰⁰ The official video for the song “Astral Sabbath” had been viewed 16,196 times a month after having been uploaded to YouTube.¹⁰¹ Similarly to *The Devil’s Blood*, *Jess and the Ancient Ones* has been accepted in the Extreme Metal scene and frequently plays at Metal venues—even though its musical style is more closely related to 1970s Surf Music, Occult Rock, and Folk Rock than to any form of Extreme Metal.

Forgotten Horror was founded in 2004 by Karhunen, released its first demo in 2007, and its first album, *The Serpent Creation*, in 2011. A second album is scheduled to be released in 2013. Musically the band can be characterized as Black Metal, but with strong influences from Thrash Metal, leading some commentators to define it as “Blackened Thrash.” According to Karhunen both Forgotten Horror and *Jess and the Ancient Ones* are deeply immersed in the occult and magic, including lyrics dealing with occult themes, occult symbolism being prominent on album artwork, and live shows sometimes described as rituals.¹⁰² There are differences as well, though. *Jess and the Ancient Ones* deals with the occult in a relatively subtle way, not hiding its interests but not directly announcing them either. Forgotten Horror, however, engages with magic and the occult in a far more direct way, representing Karhunen’s personal explorations of the Left-Hand Path, dealing with and expressing his own initiatory process, as well as functioning as a tool for magical work. While Karhunen is a member of *Dragon Rouge*, he is careful to stress that neither of his bands is any kind of “propaganda unit” for the order. Forgotten Horror does, however, function as a voice for Karhunen’s personal approach to magical practice and his initiatory process within *Dragon Rouge*.

⁹⁸ Musiikkituottajat, “Suomen virallinen lista – Albumit 22/2012,” <http://www.ifpi.fi/tilastot/virallinen-lista/albumit/2012/22>.

⁹⁹ *Rumba*, “Todellinen superyllättäjä Rumban listan keulille,” accessed March 4, 2013, <http://www.rumba.fi/todellinen-superyllattaja-rumban-listan-keulille-30952>.

¹⁰⁰ Musiikkituottajat, “Suomen virallinen lista – Albumit 09/2012,” <http://www.ifpi.fi/tilastot/virallinen-lista/albumit/2013/09>.

¹⁰¹ *Jess and the Ancient Ones*, “Astral Sabbath,” YouTube, accessed March 4, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hgWxb1bXkE>.

¹⁰² Karhunen, interview.

Conclusion

In this article I have discussed the emergence of an occult-focused scene of Extreme Metal which I have termed Ritual Black Metal. I have provided a background to the occult in Metal music and an overview of some key scenic institutions and artists in a Swedish context. One interesting fact about the Ritual Black Metal scene is the tendency to focus so strongly on an “occult core” as the defining feature that musical attributes are overshadowed. Consequently, the scene involves bands such as Ofermod and Watain that can in a musical sense easily be identified as Black Metal, as well as bands such as Saturnalia Temple and The Devil’s Blood that have closer musical affinities to other genres of Rock and Metal. Another interesting factor is that many of the bands in the scene, at least in Sweden, have ties to occult orders. There are thus connections between the occult milieu and the Black Metal scene in which certain magic orders become scenic institutions in the Ritual Black Metal scene.

I have earlier written about a convergence of Black Metal and Neo-folk scenes, primarily with Black Metal artists turning to musical expressions derived from Neo-folk.¹⁰³ My contention was that this can in part be explained as attempts to re-radicalize a musical genre which was seen to have become too “safe” due to its growing appeal for broader audiences, and the turn was to non-Metal musical expressions with a religious emphasis, as Black Metal could not be made more radical in terms of music. Ritual Black Magic represents a similar development, a re-radicalization of Black Metal through a “religionization” of it, in the course of which musical style becomes secondary to lyrical expressions and the rhetoric of occult and magical engagement as the core of the genre. The other side of the coin is that some artists are uninterested in labelling themselves as Black Metal, expressing the sentiment that most bands in the genre have little to do with (true) occultism, implying that while their music may be called Black Metal by others it is distinguished from the majority of the bands so labelled.¹⁰⁴ For some fans, artists making such assertions are seen as more authentic than others, authenticity being the main currency for “subcultural capital”¹⁰⁵ in Extreme Metal, while others accuse them of simply “flashing the occultism card” in order to gain attention.¹⁰⁶ However one chooses to label

¹⁰³ Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness’.”

¹⁰⁴ Karhunen, interview.

¹⁰⁵ Sara Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁶ Karhunen, interview.

specific bands, the Ritual Black Metal scene is characterized by involving artists with vastly differing musical styles which nonetheless are seen as embodying the same essence and thus accepted as worthy participants on same the playing field. Assessing the “seriousness” of Ritual Black Metal is neither of interest nor possible in the analytical framework of this article, but some conjectures of the personal occult careers of artists in the scene can be made. It is clear that many of the artists involved in the Ritual Black Metal scene identified as Satanists in their youth and were primarily engaged in a rebellion against both Christian and dominant secular sensibilities. As they have grown older, rebellion for the sake of rebellion has lost its appeal, and a youthful fascination with occult themes has grown into a more conscious and sustained engagement with occult philosophy and ritual magic. This has, in turn, provided new models for younger artists and fans to follow.

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