

Aesthetic Heathenism: Pagan Revival in Extreme Metal Music

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Abstract: Neopaganism, briefly defined as the attempt to reconstruct and reinterpret pre-Christian heritage, is not confined to purely religious movements. A romanticized view of ancestral religion particularly expressed through an extensive use of mythological elements adapted to a contemporary context now represents a fundamental part of certain scenes that utilize them to construct a primordialist view of the past. Pagan metal makes use of religion and mythology as a form of cultural capital to suggest cultural distinctiveness in order to create an alternative antimodern, conservative discourse to mainstream culture. Artists attempt to forge and empower a new identity shaped by language, music, style, behavior and values when they, for instance, dwell on old myths which they recontextualize according to their own agenda. Starting from an exploration of American and European pagan revivalist movements, this paper pinpoints the main characteristics of the relationship between Neopaganism and musical expression by evoking and commenting on textual and non-textual evidence in an attempt to offer a paradigm for understanding the intersections between spirituality and popular culture.

On a more or less serious note, several popular music genres explore and celebrate Pagan histories and mythologies in order to shape what can be deemed an aesthetic code rather than an ideology. They employ loose artistic expressions that make use of a constellation of images taken from ancient histories and myths in the form of a romanticized golden past. Pagan elements are used in folk, punk or metal communities in order to construct artistic as well as regional or national identities, ranging from the carnivalesque to the political extreme (such as National Socialist Black Metal, on the fringes of the metal scene). In the case of metal music, however, the ambiguity between usage and purpose can be understood in its broader cultural context, as a means to achieving controversy and transgression. In this chapter, as such, I attempt to explore the usage of Paganism in metal music, its discursive meanings and its potential for shaping cultural identity.

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Contemporary Paganism presupposes a multiplicity of interpretations and might be a religion, a way of life, a worldview or even a human trait (Weston and Bennett 1), depending on practitioners and recipients, and the various modes of dissemination. In the case of music, we need to endeavor to understand the connections between religion and art (and how the former acts as an identity tool), as well as the functions that can be ascribed to such displays of popular religion. The term ‘Pagan’ is actually a very fluid one, referring to a large number of religious alternatives, for example universalist and nature faiths (no ethnic connotations) and folkish faiths (including an ethnic element), revealing a fragmentariness that corresponds to the relativism of postmodernity itself. Practitioners tend to reject the prefix ‘neo’ in the name because it is perceived as disconnecting the faith from its past (Weston and Bennett 1). Modern Paganism comes across as a revivalist movement, but given the multitude of practices, the gaps in documentation, as well as the temporal distance we can easily speak of a construction, or more appropriately, about an invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger). What is however aspired to in such movements is the reconstruction of past rituals and the continuation of an ancestry thought to be broken by the advent of Christianity, as well as the need to recover it. The idea of ancestry as building block brings to mind the creation of imagined communities as groups that find in histories and mythologies the functional means to achieving integration and legitimation (Anderson). The deep interest in antiquity, tradition and heritage corresponds to a discourse of spirituality resembling polytheistic nature-revering religions that create a sense of a sacred locality, of a revived utopian past encompassing Pagan beliefs and rituals. These, as I have earlier suggested, have less to say about the pre-Christian past as they do about modernity. First, though, I would like to analyze the term ‘Pagan’ itself.

Broadly speaking, the term “Pagan” encompasses pre-Christian religions but nowadays it is often used with reference to non-Christian ones (e.g. Asatru, Wicca, Druidry) and defined through other terms like pantheist, polytheist, differently religious or even nonreligious (Strmiska 4). In Latin it meant peasant, rustic, someone who lived in an uncultivated landmark. The word “heathen” (Gothic “*haiþi*”, Middle High German “*Heide*”) also points out the inhabiting of an open space, which is why it is popular with modern Germanic heathenry. The occasional pejorative use of the term and the negativity encountered in dictionary definitions (Strmiska 6) are also to be found in ancient history, as people continued to worship spirits and gods deemed as idols by Christianity, despite its spread. We initially encounter the association with a religious definition in

the 4th century AD, as Christian authorities gained unprecedented power and utilized a derogatory connotation for the term. This might also explain the attraction to the term as a form of opposition to Christianity and even modernity itself since it signifies something rejected by a given authority. In their attempt to revive, reinterpret and invent beliefs and practices modern pagans see themselves as somehow defying historical and contemporary forces of religious intolerance (Strmiska 8). At the same time, the narratives of ancestry involved, the claim of continuity with a revered ancient past are very important for understanding the phenomenon. This aspect, combined with alternative spiritualities, shapes identities in various communities which legitimate themselves by means of an affinity to a supposedly very distant revived heritage. As I will argue later, in most cases, both in Pagan circles and music, ethnicity is more often employed as an aesthetic form than as an exclusionary category.

One characteristic of Pagan movements is their eclectic nature: they combine multiple cultural resources and approaches so as to compensate for the scant information available on ancient beliefs. Essentially, this amounts to inventing a new religion. Old Norse literature is for instance used constantly as a point of reference for Asatru-like trends, but this material has been heavily influenced by post-Pagan interpretations. The difficulty of differentiating between Pagan and Christian sources severely undermines reconstructionist projects. “For reconstructionist Pagans, the older the evidence is that gives the information about the Pagan religion of the past, the better [...]” (Strmiska 19). That does not mean that reconstructionists do not take liberties with ancient traditions and perform their own interpretations and adaptations in order to accommodate modern values and lifestyles. On the contrary, it means that they consider older traditions better established, more authoritative and more authentic. Therefore, we are dealing with a type of mythical thinking whereby continuity and a strong connection to the past are absolutely essential in identity formation. Common to the various kinds of new Paganism is the invocation of a golden age which is made to fit a modern discourse grounded in primordialist views.

As an example of this, we can consider Asatru, a generic name for Nordic Paganism which encompasses various associations which do not necessarily share the same interpretation. In Iceland, the phenomenon developed in the 1970s, when a poet named Sveinbjorn Beinteinsson initiated Asatrufelagid which, despite church opposition, gained official status; in the US, Stephen McNalles and Robert Stine established the Viking Brotherhood, later transformed into the Asatru Free Assembly and then Asatru Folk Assembly. Generally speaking most differences in this area

are outlined in terms of calendars and celebrations rather than the beliefs they cherish. As expected, in the case of Iceland particular attention is given to its ancient literature, a common feature of the rest of Nordic Pagan revival associations. Some key structural elements include the “sumbel” and the “blot.” The first refers to a drinking ritual performed indoors when mead is consumed in honor of the gods, heroes and ancestors, a ritual meant to shape a collective fate for those involved. Moreover, the interest in reviving old crafts, such as mead brewing, matches the attempt to rekindle spiritualities, and thus an attempt at reviving material and immaterial heritage form a monolithic heritage. The other common ritual, “blot,” similarly involves mead, this time not passed around in a horn, but contained in a sacred bowl and sprinkled over participants, in remembrance of the old ritual involving blood and animal sacrifice. Besides such common aspects there are also serious contextual differences. In Iceland, unlike in the US where heathenism appears to be a quest for lost roots, the already agreed upon cultural conventions favor a more natural, so to speak, approach to spirituality, which may be why for instance “the issues that were contentious in the American context—who the religion is for, who should be included and excluded and whether Asatru should be folkish or universal—hardly even came up for discussion” (Strmiska 164).

The usage of ancient texts also differs depending on the cultural context: whereas Iceland resorts mainly to its rich literature, the American counterpart make use of a wide range of Nordic and continental Germanic and Anglo-Saxon sources which is why the ritual “sumbel,” because it rarely occurs in the Sagas, is less known by this particular name in Iceland . In Iceland we are also dealing with a convergence of national and cultural identities, whereas in the case of the US the focus is rather on the religious element, the connection to the gods. Nordic heathenism, like any other movement, presupposes a variety of attitudes, worldviews and organizations. Besides Asatru, there are many other groups focusing on the reinvention of heritage, such as the Odinic Rite or Theodic belief. The former defines itself as Odinism, a term used by 19th century pastor Orestes Brownson, and claims a more *orthodox* orientation, that is, a careful attention to the teachings in the “Edda,” especially to the more morally colored ones, like “Havamal” or “Sigrdrifumal” on whose basis members extracted a series of virtues that need to be respected, much like a Pagan creed.

The other faction, born as a reaction to the growing influence of Wiccanism, is an Anglo-Saxon variant of heathenism that not only aspires to energize old beliefs but also to reorganize them in structures inspired by tribal organization. This again shows an attachment to heritage in a

discourse of imagined communities, a discourse reminiscent of Romanticism and its devotion to *emotio* encompassing history, spirituality, nature, all linked together in the image of an idealized world projected into time immemorial. The formation of nation-states together with the rise of industrialization triggered crises of identity which were sometimes countered with antimodern and conservative discourses focusing on a mythical representation of the past. Writers like Ludwig Uhland in Germany or Esaias Tegner in Sweden contributed a great deal to this idealistic counterpoint that is still noticeable in contemporary phenomena, only this time in the postmodern context of fragmentation and globalization.

Taking this historical background into account, let us now turn to the conversation between heathenry and popular music and the explanatory patterns that can be developed for the usage of such a semiotics of ancient themes. For Pagan groups, to my mind, music proves to be a binding element. On the internet, the main place where these manifestations are formed, “provides a vibrant virtual community for Pagan practitioners, and in many ways has contributed to the growth of the religion, connecting like-minded people” (Weston and Bennett 4) and favors the development of both local/national and international audiences. Arula Records, Serpentine Music Productions or Independent Pagan Music are just a few of the distributing actors, alongside a host of blogs, forums, and playlists filled with songs of polytheism, ancestry, sacredness of earth or inner divinity. However, this romanticized rhetoric works the other way around as well, meaning that it might occur first in counter-cultural scenes that have gradually appropriated elements of heritage and spirituality in order to frame a subscene based mainly on a lyrical invention of cultural collective memory revolving around ancestral representations of time and space. In the following part of my article, I will discuss the category of Pagan Metal and the ways in which one can understand its semiotics.

Pagan Metal is an umbrella term for various types of extreme metal that utilize in their lyrics, iconography and even stage performance archaic images of gods and warriors, legends, myths and histories. It is more of a conceptual genre, because, from a strictly musical point of view, the instrumentation may or may not contain folk instruments. A preoccupation with Pagan themes can be noticed very early on in the scene, in the case of Led Zeppelin, Malmsteen or Manowar, but there was no consistency in the imaginary until the massive genre split into multiple extreme subgenres beginning with the 1980s. Warfare, masculinity, occultism and mythology have been used to define the controversial nature of metal music, particularly extreme metal and its

transgressive qualities, implying “testing and breaking boundaries, invoking the joys and terrors of formless oblivion within the collective while simultaneously bolstering feelings of individual control and potency: sonic, discursive, bodily” (Kahn-Harris 30). In the cluster of subgenres covered by the umbrella term “extreme metal,” Pagan metal overlaps with other categories, such as black and Viking metal. Black metal, involving fast tempo, heavy distortion, unconventional structures and anti-Christian and misanthropic views, plays an important part in the development of the Viking/Pagan trend in the scene.

Although the British band Venom played a role in forcing genre boundaries by resorting to Satanic imagery, it was the Scandinavian bands that took this possibility more seriously and created a style striving for inaccessibility for mainstream audiences. The Norwegian black circle, as it was known, represented by bands such as Mayhem and Burzum, shaped a controversial scene spotlighting authenticity and extremity in an almost ritualized form. Its transgressive aspect was augmented to such a degree by the series of murders and church arsons in the early 1990s that the Norwegian media transformed it into a Satanic scare. At the same time, the genre caught a lot of attention and later on ended up being one of the main cultural exports of Norway. Extremity is the result not only of the anti-Christian and generally anti-religious stance but also of the theatrical props the artists use, ranging from corpse-paint, combat boots and spiked wristbands to medieval weaponry, mock crucifixions and impaled animal heads. Heathenism in the Northern world soon became another option to forge an anti-Christian and by extension anti-modern worldview, since satanic imagery, albeit its controversial nature, is nevertheless still part of the Christian tradition and merely inverts some of its elements.

Heathenism can be thought to function better as an alternative world of escapism. These explorations owe much to the Swedish band Bathory whose 1988 *Blood Fire Death*, featuring a Romanticist painting depicting Norse gods, marked a departure from sacrilegious imagery, although the content still employed the rhetoric of fear specific to black metal. Their next two albums, *Hammerheart* (1990) and *Twilight of the Gods* (1991) feature key figures from Norse mythology, such as Odin, Valhalla, Huginn and Munnin, Thor or Sleipnir who are now a constant presence in the scene. Martial scenes of brave Vikings and powerful gods or of typically Northern landscapes frame an impression of locality and rootedness and offer, at the same time, an imagined community in the guise of an artistic, scenic identity. In the case of Scandinavia, Pagan and Viking overlap given the cultural context, but by and large the former comprises broader themes and

sources of interest. In fact, the term Pagan is a very loose one in the scene, as its meaning shifts depending on the perspective of each band. Deena Weinstein proposes a classification in three groups or tendencies: the first is related to the Neo-Paganism derived from the work of Gerald Gardner and other 19th century sources that influenced Wiccan groups in the UK and US; the second tendency within Pagan metal bands can be called “roots Paganism,” focusing heavily on ancestral pre-Christian cultures—heroic warriors and ancient gods, such as the Vikings and the pantheon of Norse gods. “A third set of bands is designated here as ‘chauvinistic Paganism,’ which scapegoats and demonizes those seen to be or who have been a threat to one’s ethnic heritage” (Weinstein, “Pagan Metal” 58).

The term itself, though, is not often used in self-designations, first of all because these bands are not particularly fond of labels and secondly due to its lack of focus on concrete musical elements. Furthermore, as within the metal scene in general, history, myth, ancestry and fantasy are all mixed up together in a bricolage or “discursive syncretism” (Francois 51). This approach of glorifying and heroicizing the past reveals a retrospective look. This follows the line of the reception phenomena of the 19th and 20th century, when history, myth, nature had been drawn together in romantic, nostalgic, emotionally charged narratives about cultural roots and primordial spiritualities. There are numerous examples here, ranging from the poems written in the Swedish Gothic Association to J.R.R. Tolkien’s universe. Fantasies about the past had become a means of criticizing and escaping modernity. Whether we refer to paintings, poems or novels popularizing Norse material, there is one common ground: a general mythological revival that provides a symbolic sense of belonging based on reinterpretations of an archaic idealized past. In the case of metal music, the rebellious symbolism of extreme metal augments the preexisting counter-cultural aspects of romanticism and paganism.

Interestingly enough, not only the North has been reinvented as a utopia. Although very popular in the Scandinavian scene, there are numerous examples of the Pagan style throughout the world, with Skyclad from the UK and Primordial from Ireland being among the first ones. Skyclad in particular, thanks to the sonic characteristics of their albums, which incorporate folk instruments and music, and to their obsession with myth and the misdeeds of the church did much to popularize the style. Today, former countries of the Soviet Bloc have quite a strong scene and even the Middle East has its representatives, which means that we are dealing with a global—between the aforementioned carnivalesque and ethnocentric. The variety of stylistic intersections is expressed

through the fact that diverse genres like folk, black or death metal can all take a Pagan turn.¹ Noteworthy here are the potential classifications in folk, Pagan, black, death and so on, corresponding to a blurring of boundaries in extreme metal. As Keith-Kahn Harris has argued, “the considerable musical and institutional overlap between these scenes allows us to talk about the extreme metal scene as a totality” (Kahn-Harris 22).

Amon Amarth from Sweden do not play black metal, but death metal, yet when it comes to referential content the Viking theme prevails. Their use of a Tolkien-inspired name for the band, like in the case of Norwegian band Burzum, also pinpoints the aforementioned tendency towards a bricolage of fantasies and histories. Among the bands that tour internationally and are signed with well-established record labels we find Enslaved and Einherjer from Norway, Turisas and Moonsorrow from Finland, Eluveitie from Switzerland, Tyr from the Faroe Islands, Skyforger from Latvia, Heidevolk from the Netherlands, and many more. In shaping ideas of locality and rootedness, lyrical content is vital and the use of national/regional languages alternately with English suggests a commitment to the concept. Nevertheless, visuals contribute to the historicized atmosphere as well: covers and band photography generally insist on a dark, mysterious setting in nature, and on ancient symbols like runes, or mythical figures. The attire is sometimes very suggestive as well, either the more black metal look with leather garments or the more medievalist look with shirts, jackets, capes or fur to which one might add face paint, as band the Turisas prefers. Among the most common themes in the genre, battles, warfare and images of masculinity appear frequently, in relationship with the energetic sound and patriarchal tendency in metal music. The Vikings (and others) have been recovered in a very retrospective manner, drawing on both a brutal representation derived from the Christian chroniclers and an aura of heroism stemming from their idealization during the Romantic period, but also from a host of contemporary popular depictions ranging from novels like Frans Bengtsson’s *Röde Orm* to television series like *Vikings* or computer games and comic books. The genre is not neutral in terms of gender, as Florian Heesch notes in his discussion of the song “Pursuit of Vikings” by Amon Amarth, as the representation of the Vikings as warriors and raiders is linked to a male-centered worldview. Heesch notes that we do not instinctively need to explain why there are no women in Amon Amarth’s Viking world, which is centered on heroic fighters and sailors who “connect to an image which already works in this way. However they confirm this with their music. [...] the death metal style is obviously connoted to the most central themes of the genre e.g. death, aggression, violence and war” (Heesch 75). In

other words one can notice a connection between musical conventions and the way Pagans are imagined in order to reproduce a transgressive stance grounded in hypermasculinity. In lyrical texts as well, feminine figures are rare, and when they do appear, as Valkyries for instance, they are masculinized. As Heesch notes, the exscription of women is not difficult to achieve given their overall relative absence from the collective images associated with Vikings.

Transgression is further expressed in another central theme, that of anti-Christianity. Within Paganism and Pagan metal, anti-Christianity can take several forms. Sometimes it appears as a religious opposition to favored pre-Christian Pagan gods, while other times the focus is on a historical grievance against the Christian groups that defeated their ancestors, changing or replacing their original culture. As Weinstein notes, “Among Pagan metal bands focusing on a particular ethnic group, opposition can also be based on Christianity’s universalism. Yet another tendency espouses anti-Christianity as an ‘ecological position standing against Christianity’s elevation of humans above the rest of nature’” (Weinstein, “Pagan Metal” 70). Such ideas were first noticeable in black metal, whose iconographic tropes are to a certain degree based on Wagner and Nietzsche’s reception, but also on Anton LaVey’s philosophy implying a depiction of Satan as an archetype of elitism and self-assertion. Wagner is particularly relevant in the Pagan context since his theatrical Vikings, rife with an aristocratic and elitist allure, left their mark on album covers and songs. Siegfried is especially relevant here as a prototype of the powerful independent man reminiscent of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, with his radical individualism, and of Dark Romanticism’s, Milton-like interpretation of Satan (Teichert 66). A mixture of Germanomania, Satanism and even Neo-Nazism thus emerges within the frame of a taboo-breaking shock culture whose artists pose as Antichrists and create artificial identities, while othering what they perceive as an expression of non-critical homogenization (most of all Christianity, which stands for modernity in general, to which dreams of archaic virtues are opposed). What Pagan metal creates can be thought of as an aestheticized religion, a “Nordic art religion,” according to the paradigm suggested by Stefanie von Schnurbein (39). Contemporary Paganism can be understood as a conflation of spirituality and art, where religion can be experienced on a deeply personal level.

Eric Grawsiöö from the band Månegarm for example, when asked about his bonds with his roots, states that “I think many people are spiritually lost in today’s modern western world. You choose your own ways in life of course but if you don’t feel any connection at all to your own culture and heritage there’s a chance of feeling empty and lonely and that can be very destructive

for some people and can make people search their happiness in shallow and destructive things” (Papadopoulos). He goes on to say that, although he is not a religious person at all, he shows great respect, interest and fascination for culture and roots, a feeling that has grown and developed over the years. Religion as such is rarely taken as a deep commitment to rituals or dogmas. On the contrary, it seems more likely to be experienced as an artistic exploration of a heritage that is revived in a present with so many subcultural offers for identity. Similarly, this connection between past and present, music and religion, is reflected in the following quote from Roy Kronheim (of the band Enslaved): “Viking metal is all about using our mythology as lyrical metaphors concerning our daily lives and doings” (qtd. in Weinstein, “Pagan Metal” 70).

Most bands from Nordic countries engage in what has been termed “roots Paganism,” the primordialist view of the past celebrating old lore, while distancing themselves, with a few exceptions, from radical politicized trends and indulging, instead, in a carnivalesque approach to history and myth. However, Paganism can sometimes be used to justify chauvinistic philosophies, like in the case of Varg Vikernes’ project Burzum and a number of other bands working within the fringe subgenre of National Socialist Black Metal in which controversial terms such as Pagan race or blood are employed. Viking/Pagan metal sometimes toys with notions of organic ancestry, homogenous representations of peoplehood and cultural uniqueness, themes that were common in the folkish Germanic trends.² At the same time, we should also take into account the controversial nature of metal music and its constant play with taboo topics. Overt racial statements are rare in the scene, yet the whole preoccupation with kinship and local religion creates an ambiguity that acts as a mark of transgression. The bands retell romanticized stories that are not that common and relevant for a contemporary globalized world. We are, as such, by and large dealing with what Keith Kahn-Harris has called “reflexive anti-reflexivity,” the desire to resist the encroachment of politics onto the scene and instead to provide a source of playful pleasures and deny ideological overtones (Kahn-Harris 144-145). The controversial aspects are part and parcel of the aesthetics of the genre overall and we might think of it as a form of dark escapism.

If one searches throughout the Encyclopedia Metallum database, one is bound to find a host of Norse material that Scandinavian bands (but not only) resort to in shaping their musical and local identity. Whereas some bands use Eddic and saga references, among other similar tropes, other bands dedicate their whole discographies to creating their own versions of Norse mythology and Pagan history. While searching for Norwegian Pagan bands, I—and this is far from surprising

since Pagan is more of a lyrical genre than a musical one—managed to find the term 6 times, used only in combination with black or Viking—an understandable term, more relevant locally—whereas a search for Viking resulted in 37 entries, also in combination with black metal. Many bands have mythically resounding names, like Einherjer, Grimnorth, Fjordfader, Nordavind, Ulvhedin, Vanaheim. On the other hand, there are many more references in albums titles, such as *Vikingligr Veldi*, *Pagan Manifest*, *Evige Asatro*, *Odin Owns Ye All* or song titles “Fimbul Winter,” “Slaget ved Hafrsfjord,” “One Eyed God,” “Fra Ginnungagap til evig tid,” “Jormundgand,” “Visions of Valhalla,” “Berserkergang,” “Norrøn kraft,” and so on. The lyrics mostly deal with Norse myth reception, Scandinavian landscapes and celebrations of Nordic heritage.

On the one hand, writings like “Völuspa” and other poems from the poetic Edda are quoted, translated or adapted. For instance, Amon Amarth in the “Arrival of the Fimbul Winter” employ in their adaptation a personal translation of stanzas 48 and 50, while in other songs they provide their own retellings of the mythical stories. In doing so, they themselves enrich Norse mythology, which is a conglomerate of narratives defined by multiple layers of reception in the course of time. The following song retells the apocalyptic episode (it is close to the sources, but with a personal poetic touch):

How are the Aesir?
How are the Alves?
Loud sounds Joutunheim
Aesir comprise
By the stonedoors dwarfs are moaning
The mountains wise men
Know you now or not?
With his shield at hand
Hrym travels from the east
The serpent is turning, enormous in rage
The serpent breaks the waves
The eagle screams
Nidhogg’s tearing corpses
Free comes Nagelfar.

The song comprises a whole constellation of Norse elements recovered from eddic poetry, such as characters (the world serpent, elves, gods, dwarves, giant Hrym), objects (ship Naglfar), places (realm Jotunheim) or nature (mountains, waves) and integrates them into an almost literal retelling of the Fimbulvetr, the great cataclysm that took place before Ragnarök, bringing hardships, terrible crimes and many wars. Beside the many nouns referring to Norse mythology, the strong verbs, most often used in the present simple and continuous forms, also contribute to shaping an idea of untamed Nordic wilderness and to creating a sense of immediacy to Pagan mythology.

On the other hand, we can also encounter more overt displays of Paganism, in the guise of hymn-like poems staging discourses of ancestry. For instance, “Pagan Manifest” by Ulvhedin represents a praise of the *illo tempore* filled with heroes that share a romanticized connection with the musicians:

Listen to my words
A prophecy from the past
Forgotten once by humans
Now it will forever last
Proud men of Middgard
Remember the ancient tales
Follow the mighty flames
Inside your pagan hearts
In me was written
A Pagan manifest
Let the old wisdom
Embrace your souls once again
Behold; the gods of Valhalla
Are back to lead you
Distant memories
From the time when nothing was
In me was written
A Pagan manifest

Here the focus is not so much on recovering lost lore as it is on shaping a religiously framed leisure identity. The song is imbued with a revivalist train of thought attempting to produce the memory of a divine connection to ancient wisdom. Metaphors such as “Pagan heart” might imply an essentialist, substantive view on religion, as a source of a steady identity. Moreover, the usage of a 1st person perspective increases the intimacy of the message together with a strong self-representation as authentic descendants of primeval warriors. The use of imperative calls for a greater bonding in this ideal community. As with other cultural products derived from contemporary Pagan movements, spirituality is devised as a kind of creative process, unifying heathenism and art in an alternative spirituality popularized in terms of an artificial religious paradigm.

Stephanie von Schnurbein uses the concept of artificial religion, *Kunstreligion*, to refer to the transformations taking place in Romantic and neo-Romantic contexts (von Schnurbein 42), meaning the attempts to endow artistic manifestations with an aura of the sacred. Mythology can also be expressed through art and, an idea promoted by writers such as Friedrich Klopstock or Gottfried Herder attempted to imagine the artist as a visionary priest or to ground the idea of a unified people in mythical truths transmitted via art, which became the foundation for later imaginary worlds (von Schnurbein 44). The rebirth of Nordic myth and interest for Paganism in popular music scenes can be thought of as part of a broader discourse on the Norse material, i.e. its popularization via Grimm, Wagner, Tolkien or contemporary novels with a Pagan touch, like Diana Paxson’s *Die Töchter der Nibelungen* or Cornelius Jakhelln’s *Gudenes fall*. Pagan revivals and Pagan postures in music scenes can thus be understood, to a certain extent, as an expression of the conservative revolution and of cultural pessimism.[†]

At the same time, we must also not lose sight of the powerful theatrical elements present in metal music. The imagined Viking-worlds as virtual communities leave the impression of a complex carnival, where artists themselves stage reenactments in the form of emotional escapist histories. It is precisely this aspect of carnival (re)creation that ensures the universal, transnational popularity of Pagan and, in particular, Norse elements. Metallers pose as archaic barbarians in a modern age, adopt Norse names, sing about great exploits, photoshoot in the woods, and empower

[†] Not necessarily in a political sense here, as proposed by Armin Mohler in in 1950s, but rather in a cultural sense, suggesting that the modernization of society has destroyed the old older that needs restoration.

the audience with aggressive rhythms. On theorizing the carnival, Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out that it mainly represents a world turned upside down, resulting in a new reality in contrast to the organized everyday life (Dentith). Metal artists adopt a superhuman mask and celebrate primordial masculine heathen communities linked to a utopian dimension scornful towards the social and religious establishment. They create their own memories about heritage and their own versions of mythology. In Sam Dunn's documentary *Metal Evolution—The Lost Episode. Extreme Metal*, IIsahn from Emperor notes that the lyrical themes and visuals inspired from nature, mythology and folklore were all mixed up to create an extreme impression of a larger-than-life epic. Additionally, Gavin Baddeley, author of *Gospel of Filth*, points out that the distinctive look that started with Black Metal and continued with its Pagan offspring, parading medievalized looks and attire, dramatically somber scenery, powerful images of magic and mayhem, not to mention the severe, often primitive sound, works to trigger the imagination.

Someone wearing Thor's hammer for instance is not necessarily keen on Paganism, even less Neo-Nazism, as this icon might just as well express commitment to the metal scene. As suggested, art can acquire religious character, if we don't consider religion in rigid conceptual frameworks but rather as a matter of lifestyle, collectivity and identity (although we risk loosening up theoretical concepts too much if we leave categorization on such a personal level). Still, I believe we can conceive metal as quasi-religious given the resemblance between aspects of metal and religion, especially live concerts and religious rituals (Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*). One survey about religion conducted in the UK in 2011 where respondents could also give heavy metal as an answer resulted in more people identifying with music than with scientology or Taoism. Whereas treating scenes as religions might not prove to be useful analytically, it is interesting to notice the discursive congruence of religion and metal, also as a way to better understand the meaning of Pagan themes within the scene. To my mind, Paganism in metal functions as a re-enchantment category, an aestheticized spirituality or *Kunstreligion* expressing a need for cultural diversity, as well as a universal appeal utilizing the universal language of metal. This artistic Paganism should, however, be understood not only as a postmodern quest for identity via heritage narratives, but also within a framework of leisure sites, as I will shortly discuss.

The identity form that Pagan Metal proposes is, so to speak, that of a community of mythical warriors, founded on an imaginative reconstruction of heritage and tradition somehow reminiscent of a theatrical reenactment based on a subjectivized authenticity. The Metal scene in

general functions on the basis of cultural commitment in the sense that participants agree upon certain codes that maintain identification with the scene. Codes can range from musicianship to dress codes and actions at concerts such as the moshpit and headbanging. Both musicians and audiences support grouping, the elaboration of a social identity which comprises both a self-representation, as a consequence of membership, and the values and emotional importance deriving from it. This can also be extended to the consideration of a cultural identity, as heavy metal in its many genres comprises various motifs, themes, worldviews, manifestations, in other words a significant vocabulary which the participants adhere to.

Moreover, as a form of recreation, music, and popular culture in general, invite us to take advantage of this leisure site as a playground for enacting identities. Leisure activities, even if performed only for entertainment—simply listening to the music in one’s own personal space—provide us with creative opportunities. Regardless of our backgrounds, we understand optimal experiences the same way, as a flow, a balance between concentration and involvement that we experience as valuable. Such experiences are remarkable in the sense that they differ from ordinary life: one suspends oneself from one’s reality and becomes, at the same time, immersed in another.

Themes of fantasy, the occult, mystery, journeys and history attract us into a world of escapism, where we can assume all sorts of masks and experience a different time and space. Emotional involvement is a vital component of the leisure experience and the romanticized mixture of nature and heritage encountered in Pagan metal may function as a trigger for this immersion. Participation constructs, as suggested, an identity around the leisure activity that makes a bid for emotional-symbolic meanings. The music scene too draws upon what can be deemed neotribe, understood as a very flexible and dynamic group that shares distinct tastes, patterns of consumption, which bring members together in a fluid solidarity and common habitus, providing a temporary source of identification (Maffesoli).

Nevertheless, leisure is to a great extent constituted by a set of social structures or forms of practice and, as such, we can also envision it as a system of representation where beliefs are encoded under the guise of symbols or cultural markers. Thus, the act of exploring and making sense of the semiotic system that articulates the cultural products helps reveal narratives that can be used as a source of identification. In media societies, cultural markers condense meanings (Rojek 115) and not only of physical sites, as in the case of tourism, but also of temporal sites. Considering this relation to Pagan metal, we have a site which is the Pre-Christian past, in all its

richness and dimensions, but reinterpreted through specific lenses, through the usage of a selection of gods and barbarians that constitute a very romanticized, glorified or militarized image of antiquity.

As such, we are dealing with a restaging of heritage in what can be deemed a themed environment, in the sense of a recreational place with a specific cultural or counter-cultural agenda (if we choose to see it from the perspective of deviating from the norm). Pagan/Viking metal imagines a community of warriors through a variety of markers such as the harsh sounds of instruments, the Norse laden lyrics, the iconography inspired by nature and history or the barbarian appearance of band members. All these elements combined develop and reproduce a narrative that enchants reality and dramatizes a worldview, as well as metaphorically sustain a sense of community.

¹ While Pagan rather refers to the lyrical themes, categories like black, folk, death etc. have certain musical traits that pertain more to genre.

² See for instance Swedish band Asynsja.

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