CHAPTER THREE

SON(G)S OF DARKNESS:
IDENTITIES IN ITALIAN BLACK METAL

TOMMASO FRANGIONI, FILIPPO MASINA,
GIULIO PIERONI AND MARIO VENTURELLA

Introduction

If given the resources and time to mature, it is almost a certainty that every metal scene will give rise to bands writing original material, experimenting with new sounds and singing in local vernaculars.[1]

In this chapter, we present the first results of an on-going research project on Italian Black Metal (from now on: IBM). This is the first recognition of black metal in Italy we know of, so it is necessarily descriptive, as we had to build a background about how this artistic field is structured and develop an understanding of how its contours are shaped. At the moment, a large number of bands are beginning to develop an interest in identity, and we have observed that there are some interesting phenomena of re-elaboration concerning the cultural, geographical, folkloric and historical heritage developed by some of them, with some specific traits peculiar of our country: a jagged archipelago of praxes and cultural orientations, firmly rooted in Italy's cultural backgrounds and socio-political history.

We perceive this to be a re-imagining and re-shaping of Scandinavian narrative: just like Scandinavian black metal, where we can easily spot the "back to the roots" theme, these bands began to dig into the historical origins of their native territories. We pinpointed a few main branches in IBM.

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[1] Jeremy Wallach and Alexandra Levine, "'I Want you to Support Local Metal': A Theory of Metal Scene Formation," *Popular Music History* 6.1/6.2 (2011), 121.

The first branch refers specifically and explicitly to the first-wave Scandinavian black metal, using both its grammar and symbolic/ colloquial apparatus (e.g. Mortuary Drape, Opera IX).

The second branch is in turn more explicitly related to the National Socialist Black Metal (NSBM) scene that we can find also in other European regions. This set is the one that is more heavily inspired by modern history, with references tied mainly, but not exclusively, to the more militaristic currents of the fascist period, the works and life of D'Annunzio, and the Italian Social Republic of Salò (e.g. Absentia Lunae, Frangar).

The third branch is characterized by an elitist approach that is strongly inspired by the writings of Julius Evola (e.g. Aborym, Janvs).

The fourth branch is the regionalist one, focused on re-elaborating folklore themes from local traditions on a neo-pagan background, often combined with a particular attention to the grotesque and the monstrous (e.g. Inchiuvatu, Scuorn)

Finally, we defined the fifth branch that we use to categorize those subjects who draw fully from Italian national culture, even without explicitly referencing to a geographical area or historical period (e.g. Coil Commemorate Enslave, Malnàtt).

Other branches which we are not dealing with in this paper but which are worth mentioning for the sake of completeness, include the sci-fi subgenre and those examples of black metal that are more specifically linked to the canon of "Depressive Black Metal", developed without any particular historical or folkloric attribute. Obviously, these categories do not have to be considered as watertight compartments: bands tend to move between branches, even within the same album, and even more so when considering their overall careers.

We will start with a historical perspective on the themes developed by some of these bands, trying to convey the idea of a segmented musical field. The main axes of analysis are the political content, the relationship these bands have with religion and spirituality, and the way folklore, historical narratives, and myths are deployed in an attempt to create some sort of imagined community.

Methodology

This research has been based on an approach that combined different methods and techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and discourse analysis. The cornerstone of research has been a series of in-

depth interviews (twelve) through video and email[2]. In addition to the economic advantages, email interviews allow a better understanding of the interviewee's thought flow and encourage the research group's own reflection, giving researchers the opportunity to review and discuss the answers given before intervening again with possible follow-up questions or requests for further elaboration. On the other hand, this tool's obvious shortcomings can not be underestimated, starting with the extremely mediated nature of the interaction, with the loss of all those aspects that are typical of verbal interaction between researcher and subject (proximity, mimicry, cadence of sentences, tone, silences).

Participant observation covered a total of ten concerts, in which we sought to obtain observational information related to the symbolic and scenic apparatus of some of the bands pertaining to the IBM environment, and trying to observe the interactions between bands and audiences.

Finally, discourse analysis covered two types of documents: interviews with the specialized press (mainly web) and song lyrics. Press interviews were considered as an element of public discourse, the self-image that the band consciously and actively constructs for its own audience. In this situation, even more so than in the case of email interviews, the control that the subject has on the output is significant and it can be assumed that it functions as a stage mask[3]: in other words, interviews granted to the media are fully part of the self-representation that bands want to offer to their audiences and should be treated as such by avoiding their reification, as they are not an element that portrays "reality".

In terms of song lyrics, we focused on the analysis of the register used (referring to the couples high/vernacular and culturally- connoted/not-connoted), on the symbolic elements used, especially regarding historical and folkloric aspects, and finally on the purely linguistic aspect (use of Italian, Latin, dialects, English and/or combinations of the above).

The last note that we should make concerning methodology is the composition of the research group: some of the members were (and are) black metal fans. This enabled us to find gatekeepers to get the trust of the informants.

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[2] All the excerpts from interviews and song lyrics have been translated by the authors. We would also like to thank Sebastian Rossi for providing help in translations.

[3] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Random House, 1956).

A Brief History of Black Metal in Italy

Black metal in Italy has existed since the late 1980s[4]. In its first manifestations, the character of IBM was dependent on the Scandinavian scene, reminiscent of both its musical style and iconography. This is a difference between IBM and other European scenes, like the French one in which some peculiar features were emerging e.g. in a "brutal" production style, or the use of the bands' mother tongue[5]. Necromass and Mortuary Drape, two of the Italian prime movers, are examples of this reinterpretation of the Scandinavian message. These bands are today regarded as the main source of approach to the genre in Italy (along with a handful of foreign bands)[6].

Among the earliest bands pushing the genre towards partially innovative direction (along with some others which we will discuss later), was the one-man project Hesperia. They began to talk about "Italic spirit"[7] in their lyrics and interviews. And even tough Hesperia cannot really be considered part of the regionalist section their distinctive profile includes the use of Italian and Latin in lyrics, and the reference to both roman and pre-roman mythology. This serves as a good example of an auto-reflexive choice to claim the adherence to a cultural background. Around this concept of "Italic spirit" there was also a cultural association, devoted to the promotion of "Italic" metal music and folklore in Italian regions, in an attempt to build a national scene in the country.

Another noteworthy attempt to build something similar to a scene in Italy was the Black Metal Invitta Armata (BMIA), an association active between 2005 and 2008, which brought a number of bands together around a common musical style and precise ideological coordinates. In Norway,

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[4] The first Italian black metal album is considered, in an ex-post interpretation, Bulldozer's *Neurodeliri* (1988).

[5] Michael Spanu, "Global Noise, Local Language. A Socio-Anthropological Approach Of Language Authenticity In French Metal," in *Modern Heavy Metal: Markets, Practices and Cultures*, eds. Toni-Matti Karjalainen and Kimi Kärki, (Helsinki: Aalto University, 2015), 122-130.

[6] During our interviews, the most acknowledged bands inspiring the contemporary performers were: Gorgoroth, Emperor, Immortal, and Marduk.

[7] It's important to highlight the difference between the use of the term "Italian" and "Italic". While the first has a geographic referent, the latter is considered by Hesperia in our interview as a culturally denoted term, hence a deeper one: "To me italic is not Italian… Italian is a geographical and political belonging, you have your Italian citizenship and you geographically live in Italy. The term italic, instead, has got something more in it, concerning the cultural sphere, therefore the roots".

many bands were and are committed to recovering the roots of Norse culture, often ending up expressing xenophobic, homophobic, or even openly neo-Nazi ideas[8]. The same thing happened with the BMIA bands, whose "back to the roots" was centred on Italian history and culture—or at least those congruent with the aspects they intended to promote: feelings of misanthropy, nationalism, elitism, and rejection of modern bourgeois society, in an explicit reference to fascism and its imaginaries.

Fascism as a historical process has been multifaceted: in an early phase, the fascist movement born in 1919 proposed itself as revolutionary, in some respects even socialist (it was radically nationalistic, but aimed at breaking down the bourgeois society of the time)[9]. However, when Fascism violently came to power in 1922, it became a conservative force, firmly allied with the major power centres: major industries, the Catholic Church, high finance, state bureaucracy. Mussolini tried to revive the "revolutionary" instincts during the tragic experience of the Italian Social Republic (ISR), the puppet state founded in October 1943 in central-northern Italy after the armistice the king pursued with the Allied forces[10]. Obviously, every desire was crushed by the definitive defeat of April 1945. A new phase, generally called neo-fascism, began. Once again, in the (rather narrow) field of the Italian far-right, several souls coexisted. In December 1946, the ISR veterans founded the Italian Social Movement (ISM). This party was divided into at least three segments: the "centrist" majority, nostalgic of the "order" from the fascist regime; a "leftist" minority, largely linked to the "revolutionary" ideas of the 1919-22 fascist movement; finally, an even smaller minority under the Ordine Nuovo (New Order) group. Furthermore, after the '60s, several more radical groups were born, carrying out serious violence and terrorist attacks[11].

This overview, although obviously very limited, is necessary in order to capture the spectre of the ideological references made inside the BMIA,

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[8] Davide Maspero and Max Ribaric. *Come Lupi tra le Pecore. Storia e Ideologia del Black Metal Nazionalista* (Milano: Tsunami, 2013).

[9] For further information on the inception of fascism, see also: Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Rivoluzionario. 1883-1920* (Torino: Einaudi, 1965); Emilio Gentile, *Storia del Partito Fascista. 1919-1922: Movimento e Milizia* (Bari: Laterza, 1989).

[10] Francesco Germinario, *L'altra Memoria. L'Estrema Destra, Salò e la Resistenza*, (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999); Roberto Chiarini, *L'ultimo Fascismo. Storia e Memoria della Repubblica di Salò* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2009).

[11] For a more comprehensive overview on neo-fascism see: Monica Galfré, *La Guerra è Finita. L'Italia e l'Uscita dal Terrorismo, 1980-1987* (Bari: Laterza, 2014) and Vladimiro Satta, *I Nemici della Repubblica. Storia degli Anni di Piombo* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2016).

as well as those of some other bands that were ideally referring to this political milieu. This is done to avoid the categorization of a diversified movement under the "fascist" label: albeit the reference to this area is recognizable in many bands, it has been expressed in a wide range of shades and with different degrees of belief.

We will next identify four main streams of heritage in Italian Black Metal: 1) Right-wing/explicit fascist heritage, 2) Elitist/antimodernist heritage, 3) Localist/regionalist heritage, 4) Literary heritage.

Right-Wing/Explicit Fascist Heritage

These are bands that openly display Nazi-fascist ideas, in their lyrics as well as in their iconography, albums and song titles, and in interviews. One of the most prominent examples of this line is Frangar, a band professing an explicit national-fascist adherence, and also being part of BMIA.

> Mother be proud of your son
> who fights for freedom
> mother be proud of your son
> who fights for the flag
> a battalion that, like a lightning,
> advances with intrepid ardour
> [...]
> Arditi[12] under the battle sky
> running to war
> with black insignia
> bathed in blood[13]

In this case, the exaltation is directed to World War I, with Frangar glorifying the efforts of Arditi and the utterly nationalist defence of the Italian soil. Another song from the same record is 1943–XXI. The title

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[12] Arditi (literally: Daring men/ones) were a special force dedicated to assault entrenched enemy lines during WWI. They were later implicated in the conquest of Fiume (Rijeka) under the orders of Gabriele D'Annunzio. They are a persistent symbol in the mythology of the extreme right for their characteristics of bravery, patriotism, support of early "revolutionary" fascism (even if with some exceptions).

[13] "Madre sii fiera del figlio tuo/che combatte per la libertà/madre sii fiera del figlio tuo/che combatte per la bandiera/battaglione che come un fulmine/avanza con intrepido ardor/[...]/Arditi sotto il ciel di battaglia/che corrono per guerreggiare/con nere insegne/di sangue impregnate." Frangar, "Totalitarian War", in: *Totalitarian War*, The Oath, 2013.

itself is quite explicit: in 1943 Mussolini was divested and arrested by order of the king and the armistice with the Allies was signed, with Italy consequently switching sides. The use of "XXI" refers to the Fascist chronology, according to which every year from 1922 (when fascism rose to power) was written in Roman numerals, indicating the fascist era. Lyrics are fully adhering to the neo-fascist narration of those events, with its emphasis on fighting to one's death, on traitors, and on revenge:

> Fire!
> Past stories of dark years
> not too far, few are the men
> the daring ones, the worms are too many,
> the sellouts, but not us!
> So the enemy tanks landed
> welcomed as our liberators
> little by little battles were lost
> and conquered lands
> were abandoned
> Fire![14]

On the same ideological coordinates stands Absentia Lunae, a band from Trieste, who were not part of BMIA. The themes of defeat and dishonour are coupled with the camaraderie between "beautiful losers" and the myth of a "death of Europe", typical in post-war narrations according to which IRS was fighting for a supposed "Homeland Europe"[15]. The elitism is here conveyed through the sense of exclusion from the dominant historical narration of the few brave men that lost in their battle against the (post-)modern order, devoid of values[16].

Elitist/Antimodernist Heritage

In this group we included bands that, regardless of their political affiliation, are first and foremost antimodernist, meaning that they reject

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[14] "Fuoco!/Storie passate di anni bui/non troppo lontani son pochi gli uomini/quelli audaci son troppi i vermi/quelli venduti ma noi no! Sbarcarono così i carri armati nemici/accolti come nostri liberatori/a poco a poco persero battaglie/e le terre conquistate/vennero abbandonate/fuoco!." Frangar, "1943 – XXI", in: *Totalitarian War*, The Oath, 2013.

[15] Filippo Masina, "Un'Irriducibile Minoranza. La Federazione Combattenti di Salò, 1947-1963," *Studi Storici* 58, no. 3 (2017).

[16] *In Vmbrarvm Imperii Gloria* (2006) is the album where this feeling is expressed with more coherence. It's interesting to note the use of "v" instead of "u", a typical custom from the fascist era.

modern society and the ideals of the Enlightenment period. As far as politics is concerned, they are related to the fascism of New Order, which was in turn inspired by philosophers such as Julius Evola[17] and Friedrich Nietzsche[18]. Part of this branch are Janvs, who in their debut album *Fvlgvres* refer to the "aristocracy of the spirit", which is inevitably separated from the mundane earthly life. There are no explicit political references here, but a philosophical link to some far-right currents. As a matter of fact, Janvs was also part of BMIA.

We included in this branch also Aborym, probably the most famous IBM band. In the song Roma Divina Urbs, from the debut album *Kali Yuga Bizarre*[19], the Roman band blended numerous cultural and ideological references, from Hindu tradition to Latin roots, to anti-Christian hate. There were also more explicit ideological references, like the ones we can find in songs like Wehrmacht Kali Ma, and Come Thou Long Expected Jesus. In this branch, we also have the already mentioned Spite Extreme Wing (from now on SEW). This band gave BMIA its ideological ground, in example influencing the logo of the collective, a clear reference to the Flag of the Regency of Carnaro[20]. Their first LP is titled with the motto of D'Annunzio *Non dvcor, dvco*[21] ("I'm not led, I lead"). The title-track celebrated the conquest of Fiume (Rijeka), in an exaltation of the human desire of the "dreamer", leading like-minded people to a higher plane of existence through heroism and unordinary qualities of the spirit. In addition to the theme of Fiume, SEW have, throughout their career, glorified Julius Evola's ideas, in particular the concepts of antimodernism and traditionalism. Their entire discography relies heavily on the futuristic *tropos* of the overcoming of the boundaries

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[17] Julius Evola (1898-1974) authored three very influent text for the European neo-fascist milieu: *Rivolta Contro il Mondo Moderno* (*Revolt Against the Modern World*, (Rochester (US): Inner Traditions), 1995) in 1934, "Gli Uomini e le Rovine" (*Men Among the Ruins. Post-War Reflections of a Radical Traditionalist*, (Rochester (US): Inner Traditions), 2002) in 1953, and "Cavalcare la Tigre" (*Ride the Tiger: A Survival Manual for the Aristocrats of the Soul* (Rochester (US): Inner Traditions), 2003) in 1961.

[18] With the capital difference that the German philosopher, dead in 1900, couldn't have ties with fascism, while Evola was consciously part of the structuring of the extreme right-wing system of thought.

[19] Aborym, *Kali Yuga Bizarre*, Scarlet Records, 1999.

[20] The *Italian Regency of Carnaro* was a statual entity proclaimed by the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio on September 8, 1920 in the city of Fiume (now the Croatian Rijeka). The proclamation marked the final chapter of the "Fiume endeavour", led by D'Annunzio himself to annex the city to the Kingdom of Italy.

[21] Spite Extreme Wing, *Non Dvcor, Dvco*. Behemoth Productions, 2004.

defining the human, to become something different. SEW's lyrical style and the themes they treated influenced several bands in the IBM community, like Nova and Umbra Noctis.

Localist/Regionalist Heritage

This is surely the most versatile and heterogeneous branch of IBM (concerning both the narratives deployed and the instruments used), because it draws in the most diverse ways from local traditions, myths and legends. Basically, the approach is tied to the northern and eastern European pagan black metal found in bands like Enslaved, Drudkh, Wyrd and Nokturnal Mortum, but it focuses on typically regional subjects such as local traditions, beliefs and legends about specific places. It is important to emphasize that most of the groups in question are bringing back pre-Roman belief systems, as an explicit opposition to Catholic religion, declared state religion in 380 AC with the Edict of Thessaloniki. The folkloristic approach is part of the greater theme of the return to the origins, as a contrast to today's society and Christian values. This explains the returning references to pre-Christian cults, exemplified in the title of the Selvans song Hirpi Sorani[22], named after the priests of God Soranus, an Etruscan deity later adopted by other populations in central Italy. It is of particular interest the utilization of specific dialects to tell myths and legends of the pre-Roman civilization that lived in the territory that the band comes from, as in the case of Voltumna's Tirreno:

> Tell me, Oh Muse, about the two brothers
> who for so long wandered through hostile seas.
> Tirrenus and Tarquinius, sent by their father
> in search of a safe harbor to land.
> Many lives in their hands,
> inhuman hurdles in front of them.
> Oh Muse, talented in the oratorical arts,
> help me give voice to my memories.
> My lips will suck your bosom dry
> to sing about Tirrenus' deeds.[23]

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[22] Selvans, *Lupercalia*, Avantgarde Music, 2015.

[23] "Narrami oh musa dei due fratelli/Che tanto vagarono per mari ostili/Tirreno e Tarquinio, inviati dal padre/In cerca d'un porto dove approdare/Molte vite fra le loro mani/Davanti a loro ostacoli disumani/Oh musa, diletta nell'arti oratorie/Aiutami a dar voce alla mie memorie/Le mie labbra prosciugheranno il tuo seno/Per cantar le gesta di Tirreno." Tirreno, in: Voltumna, *Disciplina Etrusca*, Indipendent, 2015

References to folklore also include the use of typical instruments (Malnàtt, Scuorn) or even the borrowing of typical iconographies from the period or civilization in question, like Downfall of Nur, from Sardinia, who regularly dress up for live shows and promotional photos using costumes closely related to Sardinian traditional outfits. From a merely chronological point of view, one of the first examples of this Italian-style transliteration of black metal comes from the self-defined "Mediterranean scene" born around Agghiastru, a multi-instrumentalist who has been active for over twenty years and who is the founder of Inchiuvatu. A common factor for most bands in the Mediterranean scene is the use of the Sicilian dialect for song lyrics, as in Dramma (Nailed at the Mystery of Life)[24]:

> The sun Rises and Falls seeks for light and while there
> Collides with the moon goddess of fertility
> In the deepest sky the mystery is enclosed
> Among the stars you vainly look for the knowledge[25]

In some cases, however, the prior reference is made to the period following the dissolution of the Roman Empire, as is the case with Fearbringer, who have been inspired by legends and historical events around their city (Parma), or Selva Rossa, who glorify the city of Bologna through the use of medieval stories related to it.

Literary Heritage

In recent years, several bands have decided to reinterpret classical authors of Italian literature by building concept-albums around their figures or works. An example of this latest trend is Kyterion, a group from Bologna, who in 2016 released the record *Inferno I* that directly transposes pieces from Dante's Divine Comedy in lyrics for their black metal compositions. In this case, the idiom used is the original one used by Alighieri, a 14th Century archaic Italian. Another example of a band that is closely tied with a leading author of Italian history and culture is Coil Commemorate Enslave, whose musical work links to Giacomo Leopardi's figure through using the poet's favourite themes in their compositions. The main reason that drives us to consider these bands as part of an autonomous branch—

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[24] Inchiuvatu, *Viogna*. Inch Productions, 2000.
[25] "Lu suli Agghionna e Scura cecca lustru agghiri ddà/si 'nmesti cu la luna dea di la fertilità/na lu celu cchiù funnutu è ammucciatu lu misteru/tra li stiddi luminusi cecchi invanu lu sapiri."

though definitely a minor one—is that they lack explicit geographic (and political) references and consequently the lack of a relationship with the present. As if in their argumentation the past was seen from the distant perspective of the historian rather than reinterpreted through the lens of the activist who tries to provide interpretative keys for the present by forming links to a mythical past.

To sum up this overview of IBM bands within different forms of heritage, we argue that it is not possible to speak of an all-encompassing Italian scene. The concept of scene itself is quite complex in academic terms, inasmuch it draws attention to pretty "heavy" related concepts as subculture and collective identity. As recalled in Barone[26], the paradox of this concept is "its non-essentialism, its focus on practices instead of stable identities, its explorative possibilities and elastic (however central) relation to space have at the same time been lauded and dismissed for condemning the term to useless vagueness". A fact that is well exemplified in Straw's definition of scene[27]: "that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization". It looks more useful here to draw upon the reasoning of Bennett and Peterson[28], who describe a scene as a framework where characteristics as diffusion, density of social ties, geographical spaces, practices of (auto)representation are variously configured.

Starting with the emic perspective gained from the interviews, we have concluded that the main actors do not recognize the existence of a scene. There are different discursive strategies of detachment deployed by bands: 1) "Appeal to heterogeneity", stating there is no scene, because black metal is multifaceted as far as musical style is concerned; 2) "Appeal to localism", according to which there is no national scene, but a collection of regional ones, in which the cultural element is the focal point around which the scene itself is defined; 3) "Appeal to social capital", a narrative according to which the scene is not present due to the lack of cooperation between bands and the lack of a strong fan base (perhaps more in terms of subculture than the actual number of supporters).

During the interviews, we saw the emergence of a spontaneous self-reflexivity of the actors directed towards refusing to identify as part of a

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[26] Stefano Barone, "Fragile Scenes, Fractured Communities: Tunisian Metal and Sceneness." *Journal of Youth Studies* 19, no. 1 (2016), 21.
[27] Will Straw, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music." *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (1991), 373.
[28] Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, *Music Scenes. Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004).

cultural movement. Even adopting an etic perspective, it seems hazardous to argue that there may exist a national or trans-local scene. Instead, it seems reasonable to argue that there are a number of local micro-scenes aggregated around the thematic focuses mentioned above, rather than being "clustered around to a specific geographic focus"[29]. Also, the set of characteristics listed by Wallach and Levine is ambiguous if adopted in the present case. On the one hand, local micro-scenes have indeed some of the functions mentioned by those authors (mostly, those concerning the "global circulation of metal sounds and styles"[30] and supporting the local bands. On the other hand, though, these contexts are often lacking a capacity to produce (and sustain, in the long run) the fundamental institutions like: "a record store, a hangout (which could be the record store), and at least one all-ages venue (i.e., not a bar that prevents minors from entering) that can be used on a regular basis by local bands"[31], which is even more true nowadays when construction and circulation of music is appearing mostly online, and fruition takes place mostly inside mega-events which are necessarily de-territorialized.

Identities in Black Metal

We have referred to groups that have developed the theme of identity in their work. Our analysis is therefore more about the representation of the identity emerging from the bands we have observed rather than the attempt to link this concept to black metal's ability to become a scene and offer its audience identification resources. Starting from Brubaker's analysis[32], we can understand identity as a category of speech. This element is crucial as it allows the sociological approach to the study of identity to be divided from the actual belief that identity refers to really existing categories, so avoiding reification of the concept. Thus, when we talk about bands that recover local folk roots, bending them to the artistic needs of black metal style (darkness, violence, individualism, and an *Übermenschlich* attitude), we can observe the construction of a practice through which certain actors actively build their identity. For example, the "Italic metal" category as opposed to the more undisputed category of "Italian metal", distinguishing the reference to the band's identity's cultural and mythical roots may be seen as an act of creativity which, in turn, expects the adherence to certain

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[29] Bennett and Peterson, *Music Scenes*, 6.
[30] Wallach and Levine, "I Want You": 119.
[31] Wallach and Levine, 121.
[32] Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

rules (e.g. using Italian, Latin, or dialects in lyrics).

This process is relational, inasmuch it embodies separation between an "ingroup" (based on the use of local stories and legends) and a more mainstream "outgroup"[33]. The latter is flattened by its inability to find a territorially located voice, and as such, considered to be less faithful to the original spirit of Scandinavian black metal. There is thus a reversal in dialectics between the established and outsiders[34]: it is the relatively marginal and recently "entered" group that refers to a moral superiority, against the "established", thanks to a more direct and less derivative call to the "original" black metal genre. During some interviews, there emerged a clear disdain towards derivative groups, and the capacity of linking music with local traditions was often seen as a necessary feature for the "blacksters"[35].

According to Anderson[36], the process of constituting the imagined community pivots on the production of symbols and on the capacity to assemble geographic and temporal scales to give rise to an organic concept of "community" as a totality of territory, shared costumes, and history/memory based upon the elaboration of traditions ("invented" inasmuch they are re-enactments aimed at today's cohesion[37]). Intended as such, building imagined communities is often an operation unknowingly carried out by bands with a relatively small audiences, thus not giving rise to a phenomenon capable of "bursting" outside the small peers group. However, it is more interesting to think about this activity as production of a potential discourse through which "myths and stories that are historized"[38] are produced instead of historical facts. Consider, for example, the way in which Scuorn define themselves:

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[33] Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "An Integrative Theory of lntergroup Conflict," in *The social psychology of intergroup relations*, eds. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33-47.

[34] Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry Into Community Problems* (London: Sage, 1994).

[35] This is a boundary-instituting term, which has been used by "trve" Italian black metal enthusiasts to describe themselves.

[36] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

[37] Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[38] Karl Spracklen, ""Yours Is The Earth And Everything That's In It": Myths And Narratives Of Britishness In The Construction And Consumption Of Iron Maiden," in *Modern Heavy Metal Modern Heavy Metal: Markets, Practices and Cultures*, eds. Toni-Matti Karjalainen and Kimi Kärki (Helsinki: Aalto University, 2015), 104.

> [The band] was born to worship the cult of Parthenope by revealing the most ancient legends and history of the mysterious Neapolitan lands, known over the centuries for their hellenic and roman origins and for being a fervent cradle of the Italian culture[39].

Yet again:

> Selvans was born to celebrate the inner spirit of the Italic lands, through the recreation of the cults and the folklore of the different ethnic groups that have dwelt in Italy from age to age[40].

These two descriptions highlight a similar attitude that simultaneously develops on multiple geographical (regional folklore and its interactions with national identity) and historical planes (the mythical past lost in the mist of times and the hypostatization of its spirit in the contemporary Italian identity).

The linguistic aspect is in a key role here. The use of Italian language and dialects, in contradiction with other European cases[41], does not seem to follow from any explicit demand from the record market, but instead is realised as a specific cultural and artistic choice made by the bands. Thus, we often see the use of dialects (e.g. Scuorn, Inchiuvatu), Italian (Spite Extreme Wing), Latin (Omnia Malis Est), or combinations of the above (Hesperia). One should not, however, underestimate the fact that at the same time there are also bands moving throughout this galaxy of meanings still using English, even though partially (Fearbringer). The use of these linguistic elements is normally represented as a result of an artistic and cultural need, creating a direct connection between meaning and expressive medium that tends to attribute value to the medium as such: using Italian could allow to express the profound reality the work is based on. In the same way, we could understand the relationship between landscape and its utilization as an inspiration source for musical projects, let alone lyrics:

> Well, if I should think of something really and intrinsically black metal, I think to lonely climbing trips, or ones with friends or associates with whom I often share musical projects. To these moments I would add also fall and winter atmospheres in Monferrato, up our hills, and in the mist

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[39] Description of the band on Bandcamp: https://scuorn.bandcamp.com/music, last accessed 25/03/2018.

[40] Description of the band on Bandcamp: https://selvans.bandcamp.com/, last accessed 25/03/2018.

[41] Spanu, "Global Noise".

surrounding our rehearsal studio.[42]

So, we could conclude, in accordance with O'Keefe[43], that landscape is fully part of the identity and community construction for these bands.

The cultural logic of black metal often refers to a mythical past, which is understood as a refuge. This serves as a strategy of detachment against the contemporary age, which is described (implicitly or explicitly) as mellifluous and devoid of values. In the case of European NSBM this happens through deforming lens concerning claimed opposition between the listener or the musician and the "herd" (possibly racially denoted). From this point of view, the bands that we classified as extreme right in the Italian landscape tend to be more cautious, preferring to resort to fascist imagery which in general public discourse is regarded as less extreme than Nazism: the dichotomy of authoritarianism/totalitarianism is here transposed from its character of analytical evaluation, to a normative evaluation of the "goodness" of the two regimes. The group's identity is established through an exaggeration of the individual and his ability to transcend other human beings, in a logic that recalls what Weinstein[44] calls bricolage:

> [...] a collection of cultural elements. It is not like a machine in which each part is specially adapted to contribute to the proper functioning of the whole. A bricolage is much looser than that. Its parts exist for themselves as much as they do for the whole. They are held together not by physical or logical necessity, but by interdependence, affinity, analogy, and aesthetic similarity.

Folklore in the Italian context, in short, has two modalities, responding to two discursive strategies. For some bands (like Absentia Lunae, Azrath-11) it is a rhetoric tool to criticize (post) modernity and the loss of values it is presumed to bring forth. In the face of materialistic individualism, the inebriation of Evolian transcendence is reclaimed, especially referring to that mixture of futuristic outbursts and reactionary vision that is exemplified in discs like SEW's *Kosmokrator*.

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[42] Interview with Movimento d'Avanguardia Ermetico.

[43] Tadhg O'Keefe, "Landscape and Memory: Historiography, Theory, Methodology," in *Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity: New Perspectives on the Cultural Landscape*, eds. Niamh Moore and Yvonne Whelan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 3-18.

[44] Weinstein, Deena, *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (Cambridge (US): Da Capo Press, 2000), 5.

The Evolian theme of transcendence is to be seen not only through the lens of the bands' textual apparatus, but also in the construction of a narrative of the "scene"[45] that puts the black metal band as the cornerstone of an elite (self-proclaimed, of course). Black metal is often approached by adolescents because of its raw sound and its ability to connote itself as a radical alternative in an already alternate landscape, that of metalheads[46]. As Michalewicz[47] argues,

> BM not only explores and negotiates various mythologies, but actively creates a mythology about itself. [...] this self-conscious and simultaneously self-reflexive process of mythmaking allows for its proponents to become a part of something that transcends the everyday.

As emerged during an interview, one claims an identity if: "the socio-political context is unable to express some ideas"[48].

But folklore can also be seen as a way to repossess the roots of experienced suffering that is intrinsically human, thus opposed to the prototype of the Evolian transcendence that aims to overcome the material aspects of the human being. The use of the themes and myths of local folklore is inherent to the concept of black metal, dark music produced by suffering. In bands like Agghiastru's, or Selvans, pain is essentialized and translated into a perspective that is a-historical due to its position within a timeframe that is at the fringe between official history and popular legend. Ambivalence is played here between a conception of universal pain and its specific historical variations, as in the case of Christ's agony[49]:

> Be wary, the devils are ready to play
> Close the eyes in a moment
> And you'll have no sorrows
> In god's kingdom everything is good and blessed

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[45] Or rather of some partially related micro-scenes.

[46] In Italy, although metal is quite widespread as a genre, it never lost a certain "alternative" feeling. Bands that are becoming prominent in the Italian context are now formed by people who have started listening to metal in a pre-Internet era, thus being very much tied to word of mouth and tape trading in order to spread music, which had virtually no media coverage.

[47] Aleks Michalewicz, "Gods amongst Us/Gods within: The Black Metal Aesthetic," in *Super/heroes: From Hercules to Superman*, ed. Wendy Haslem, Angela Ndalianis and C. J. Mackie, (Washington D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2007), 211.

[48] Urna, interview by the authors, April 7, 2017.

[49] Inchiuvatu, "Cu sangu a l'occhi", Addisiu, Elegy Music, 1997.

You shall drag the cross with duty and respect
Wooden cross, iron cross, in this hell cross to carry
With blood in the eyes you must scream
Take off the nails I want to die
Who brought me into this world didn't think of my pain
Good son of this mother who gives you so much love
Like these flower in this vase at this point I have my feet cut away
With the sun that burns you waiting you die
With blood in the eyes[50]

This refers to a different understanding of identity. In this case, the musician's activity focuses on an ideal of immanence of the creative activity that is, first of all, an exploration into the subjective human experience. This allows to extract elements that can be understood as anthropologic. Although this declination is much less represented than occultist or nationalist waves, it presents some particularly relevant interpreters and approaches the logic of depressive black metal.

Religiosity in Italian Black Metal

There is one last aspect to cover: a brief overview on how the bands we have spoken of conceive the theme of religiosity, following the two most important traditions in this regard: Satanism and esotericism.

Since its dawn, black metal has associated itself and has been linked by the media with Satanism. Whereas this connection (often wanted and sought by its own members) can be accepted from an idiographic point of view, justifying it from an analytical point of view becomes rather complicated. The relationship between the Devil and the Catholic Church has been changing over time: Satan went from being a linchpin of catholic doctrine, around which the beliefs were organized, to being a cumbersome and almost embarrassing presence: in the years immediately following the celebration of the Second Vatican Council, 1968-1969, the first statements in the Catholic world against the existence and the objective reality of the

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[50] "Annaccura chi li riauli sunnu pronti pi jucari/Chiuri l'occhi in un mumentu/e unnai cchiuni dispiaciri/Ni lu regnu do signuri tuttu è bonu e binirittu/Tu la cruci a strascinari cu duviri e cu rispettu/Cruci di lignu cruci di ferru crui a puttari ni stu 'nfernu/Cu sangu a l'occhi tu a ddirari/Levami i chiova vogghiu muriri/Cu mi misi ni stu munnu nun pinsau a lu me Duluri/Figghiu beddu di la matri chi ti runa tantu amuri/Comu un ciuri 'nta la rasta oramai tagghiati aiu li peri/Cu lu suli chi t'abbrucia aspittannu chi poi mori/Cu sangu a l'occhi."

Devil appeared[51]. Contemporary Satanism is to be regarded as a modern invention, without "any real connection with the worn-out books of a dying cult"[52] typical of the nineteenth Century (which in turn, carried over practices that had been "imported" from two centuries earlier). We are therefore in agreement with those, like Dyrendal, who "[...] consider[s] Satanism to be a contemporary (and new) religious movement."[53], with strong ties with Laveyism. At the same time, during interviews, it emerged how there are different understandings of the relevance of Satanism. There are bands who see it either as a purely scenic instrument, an out-dated tool, or the label given to a force they perceive as different. As stated during an interview:

> I dress in black, put crosses upside down and I think I am part of something. […] and I also think that there isn't a real fascination for the darkness, the mystery, the actually initiatic aspect. These elements, maybe a bit childish or youthful were at least present twenty years ago[54].

Truzzi[55] proposes a classification of contemporary Satanism made up of two major categories: "independent or solitary Satanists" and "group-affiliated". Drawing upon this classification, we observed how, among interviewees, only rationalist Satanists were represented. The main characteristic of rationalist Satanism is "to explain the reality of evil using Satan's image as a manifestation, not as the origin or cause of evil"[56]. Hence, Satan is seen as a feature of human nature. A vision of Satanism as an element of break with self-righteousness and bourgeois values emerged also in our interviews. There is therefore a kind of continuity between the present exaltation of the Devil and the eighteenth-century black masses practiced by the English libertines in which rebellion was expressed against the dominant values, by staging a blasphemous parody of the rites

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[51] Renzo Lavatori, *Il Diavolo tra Fede e Ragione*, (Bologna: Centro editoriale dehoniano, 2000), 165.

[52] J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions, seventh Edition* (Farmington Hills: Gale, 2003), 139-140.

[53] Asbjorn Dyrendal, James R. Lewis, and Jesper A. Petersen, *The Invention of Satanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

[54] Movimento d'Avanguardia Ermetico, interview by the authors, 26 May, 2017.

[55] Marcello Truzzi, "Towards a Sociology of the Occult: Notes on Modern Witchcraft," in *Religious Movements in Contemporary America,* eds. Irving I. Zaretsky and Mark P. Leone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 628-645.

[56] Lavatori, *Il Diavolo,* 2000, 159. Our translation.

of the Catholic Church[57]. In our case, iconography comes from a form of religious syncretism that goes on to build a sort of bricolage of practices. The fertile ground in Italy is due to an earlier occultist and initiatic tradition, already present in our territory. Therefore, adoration and references to the Devil are nothing more than a sort of "psychodrama, with the purpose of releasing—through a series of violent emotions—the faithful of the satanic cult from his Christian religious and moral heritage from which, despite everything, it is always very difficult to break away"[58]. This is in contrast with an interview excerpt:

> Many of the IBM musicians I know, betray a deeply rooted Christian education, a yoke they believe to have discarded in their adolescence, but which remains firmly anchored on their shoulders.[59]

The overturned crosses, the references to the Prince of Darkness and the Black Masses are (when not merely aesthetic elements of visual representation) instruments to carry out a real cathartic process through which the subjects can free themselves from the hindrance of the Catholic religion. In this sense, the "doctrines and rhetoric of modern Satanism provide a convenient quasi-intellectual crush to antisocial rebellion and a ready-made vocabulary/mythology of opposition"[60].

Finally, there is the tradition of fascist-esoteric black metal. In 1918 Oswald Spengler published *The Decline of the West*, in which he argues that:

> Periods of cultural decay are an inevitable fact of history and an unavoidable phenomenon in the future. Capitalism and democracy will be challenged and defeated by exceptional individuals of great mental strength and vision who will gain and wield political power ruthlessly[61].

The idea of a declining culture and civilization deeply intertwines with other western esoteric traditions. Among them, the aforementioned Julius Evola is the most receptive to the theme of a return to the roots as an antidote to the modern world. He, along with Gustave Le Bon, Yukio Mishima, Savitri Devi and Miguel Serrano, shares a form of thought that is:

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[57] Massimo Introvigne, *Il Cappello del Mago* (Milano: SugarCo Edizioni, 1990), 384.

[58] Introvigne, *Il Cappello del Mago*, 383. Translation of the authors.

[59] Selvans, interview by the authors, April 23, 2017

[60] Chris Mathews, *Modern Satanism. Anatomy of a Radical Subculture* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 182.

[61] Mathews, *Modern Satanism*, 190.

opposed to democracy and its values, and instead posit a return to some form of traditionalist values of strength and elitism. Strict ideals of racial purity are prevalent, finding voice in Eurocentrism or, especially in America, staunch nationalism and adherence to racial identity.[62]

Conclusions

The picture of Italian Black Metal that emerges from our research is that of a diversified musical field. Often, in mainstream public discourse it has been represented as a satanic-esoteric magma with strong links to fascist or neo-fascist movements in which the cult of force and destructive violence reigns. While both these themes are present in IBM, and in other genres as well[63], this only captures some of the aspects of the Italian reality: what we have found is a set of networks of practices with common elements alongside major differences. A specific representation of western modernity is one of the common elements: although not necessarily elaborated at the theoretical level and not necessarily subject to self-reflection, an attitude of conflict with modern society appears to be constantly emerging from interviews and textual analysis. Paraphrasing Evola, this "revolt against the modern world" is conducted along various lines: from the return to the pre-Roman origins of the places, to the open conflict against Catholic religion (present in particularly deeply-rooted forms in Italy), from the clash against bourgeois morale to that with technology. This pattern of "back to the roots" in lyrics, ideology and iconography is ambivalent when contrasted with the innovative capacity of those groups. The current perception for many interviewees is that the innovative push of black metal has been attenuated since the early 2000s, due to the fact that black metal is partially institutionalized in the Italian metal scene:

> At first, Black Metal's misanthropic and elitist attitude broke with the rest of metal music. Today, however, this attitude is no longer real but merely forced and often carried on by genuine subhumans seeking revenge against the misfortunes of their youthful life.[64]

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[62] Mathews, 191.

[63] Satanism has been a theme also in metal (Death SS) or new wave (Litfiba), while among bands inspired by neo-fascism we recall bands like Zetazeroalfa, 270 bis, or the broader RAC ("Rock Against Communism") scene.

[64] Movimento d'Avanguardia Ermetico, interview by the authors, 26 May, 2017.

Aesthetic choices and themes became a consolidated practice, after a personal elaboration and research. The response from some bands was therefore the return to the origins, the rejection of modernity and the distancing from the practices of black metal perceived as no longer "pure". Here, the theme of identity is then used as a manner to offer a counter-narrative, which sometimes relies upon medievalism, sometimes upon folkloristic tales, sometimes upon right wing philosophies. The borders might be porous between RAC, Black Metal, and Dark Cabaret. For example, the former members of SEW are currently behind the dark-cabaret project IANVA, where they choose to follow a more explicit reference to WWI and the Fiume Endeavour. An aspect we didn't have space to develop, yet very important to understand the complexity of this phenomenon, is how band and audiences relate to each other. It would be useful to further explore this field, to investigate the level of commitment created in the fan base by these narratives, including its possible interaction with other subcultural fields (i.e. political circles, parties and movements; cultural and local associations; publishing industry).

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