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Lavinia Pflugfelder

# Heavy Metal Bricolage

## Religious Imagery and “Religionized” Visual Language in Music Videos

### Abstract

Using the term “bricolage”, this article examines the articulation of religious imagery in the visual language of extreme metal. Transgression and bricolage, which describes a specific mode of reusing elements of cultural repertoire to fashion new expressions, have their own history and tradition in heavy metal. Any implementation of its visual language relies accordingly on shared knowledge of scene traditions and patterns to decode, but disembedded religious images and religious patterns are abundant in pop cultural bricolage by itself. Analysing intermedia, here using music videos as an example, shows how media characteristics restrict and expand the possibilities in implementing bricolage. In extreme metal music videos – already pop-culturally disembedded – religious images are placed in allegorical, socially critical or philosophical contexts, but can also be re-embedded into religious freeform. Any repetition of a variation of religious imagery from the cultural repertoire that relies on the religious context to empower the bricolage solidifies this application in the visual language – even as this sedimentation further removes it from specific religious meanings.

### Keywords

Bricolage, Transgression, Visual Language, Music Video, Heavy Metal, Religious Imagery

### Biography

Lavinia Pflugfelder is an academic assistant at the University of Basel, where she is working on her PhD project on “religion-productive” image discourses. She completed her master’s degree in the Study of Religion at University of Basel, with a thesis on the reception and production of satanic imagery in heavy metal.

Popular music’s use of visual media makes its listeners also its viewers. From concert posters, tickets stubs and stage design to music videos, CD covers and clothes, material visual products are utilized by bands and fans alike to

emphasize their sound, represent ideas or lyrics, self-stylize, sell the product and generate recognition for their in-group. Like other forms of popular culture, heavy metal is involved in extensive exchanges with religion. Religion can appear within popular culture in the form of explicit or implicit religious themes, content, images, symbols or language, while elements of popular culture can be appropriated into religion; popular culture can itself be analysed as religion, usually using a broad functionalist definition of religion; and finally, popular culture and religion can be in dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Even if many types of heavy metal develop their own systems of signs, heavy metal often presents itself to the outside world as a closed cultural system. Every offshoot ties itself to a shared musical tradition, recognizes fundamental “heavy metal values” and feels marginalized under real or imagined negative assessment from outside. New bands continually refer to the influence of previous bands and strengthen the “we-feeling”.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on the incorporation of religious iconography and imagery in metal’s visual language encourages us to ask questions about the particular form of bricolage and the motivations behind the selection of individual visual elements. Which factors determine this exchange? How does bricolage help us to understand the recycling and restructuring of motifs? And how does this bricolage specifically concern religious images?

To explore the interaction of image repertoire and bricolage in the visual language of heavy metal, the article is divided into a first methodological-theoretical part on bricolage and transgression and a second investigative part with two music video examples.

## Bricolage

“Bricolage”, a term coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss,<sup>3</sup> refers broadly to the restructuring of old elements in new constellations, a recycling of motifs. The audience’s shared understanding of the initial context and the reimagined context is necessary for successful bricolage.

Lévi-Strauss is concerned with a universal structure of the myth, the logic of repetition in variance in myth.<sup>4</sup> The same compulsion for repetition can be

1 Moberg/Partridge 2017, 1–3.

2 Roccor 2000, 89–90.

3 Lévi-Strauss 1989.

4 Hans Blumenberg criticizes the “Ausfällung des Zeitfaktors” (precipitation of the temporal

observed in the field of popular culture, especially in the modern myth-medium of film.<sup>5</sup> The concept of bricolage has also proved extremely fruitful for analysing the production and transformation of religious content and practices. Colin Campbell uses the term “bricolage” for his “cultic milieu”, describing it as syncretization.<sup>6</sup> Lévi-Strauss used it to describe mythical thinking in generating new myths that draws on what is already available and is restrained by the component’s initial meaning, an approach that focuses less on individual practices than on structural and impersonal processes. But over time “bricolage” has increasingly become a term for describing the users of culture. Departing from Lévi-Strauss, it “became synonymous with individual creative practices in relation to youth and queer subcultures, new musical genres and techniques, ‘spirituality’, New Age and new religions drawing on multiple sources”.<sup>7</sup> Perceiving bricolage only as “eclectic code mixing” shifts away from coherence and pattern in bricolage as organizational forces.

It is not only the new composition of previously disparate elements that is important to the concept of bricolage. The interplay of these elements depends on their previous integration and their content is never completely new. It is important that the raw material is already known in the respective culture that forms the framework for the creation of the new sign. Both old sign and new sign remain decodable, with the creation recognizable as an act of transformation.<sup>8</sup> The detachment of the elements does not empty the sign of accumulated meanings, but the decontextualization enables the new contextualization. An increasing decontextualization under the influence of modern media sets many religious ideas and motifs free: “It results in a disembedding of the religious, in an omission of origin-specific barriers of access.”<sup>9</sup>

For the individual bricoleur in particular, this process of disembedding means the possibility of emphasizing subjective experience in the new con-

factor) in Lévi-Strauss’s mythical model; see Blumenberg 2006, 299–302. The interpretation of the constitution of mythologies has, however, little influence on the mode of production of the bricolage.

5 Doniger 2009, 205.

6 Campbell 2002, 15: “The fragmentary tendencies present in the milieu because of the enormous diversity of cultural items are more than counteracted by the continuing pressure to syncretization”.

7 Altglas 2014, 474–476.

8 Trummer 2011, 441.

9 Trummer 2011, 141, my translation.

textualization, while at the same time the “delimited” elements remain globally mobile and communicable. The possible return to previous embeddings of the motif or element offers authority through the construction of a line of continuity, and hence tradition: “Post-modern, eclectic bricolage has taken hold even among members of mainstream religions, so why should we expect those outside organized religion to be different?”, asks Asbjørn Dyrendal.<sup>10</sup>

The “de-limitation” of religious concepts and images can also take place strategically as “de-traditionalization” and forms of disembedding and re-embedding.<sup>11</sup> Any disembedding can release single elements from certain constraints and free them up for use. This is necessary if these restrictions could prevent embedding, such as a lack of a sense of authority over these elements. Véronique Altglas uses examples from new religious movements (NRM) to demonstrate how contemporary religious bricolage is still organized by pre-constraints. Social status, knowledge and power structures all determine the coherence (pattern) and the availability of elements for bricolage.<sup>12</sup>

Shared knowledge of the visual language in heavy metal creates an in-feeling, while the demand for authenticity requires innovation. Moreover, balance is kept between authenticity-generating transgression and marketability, reinvention and tradition. While transgression is key for heavy metal, too much “realness” is counterproductive and acceptance of authentic inauthenticity is necessary.<sup>13</sup> For example, a member of the German metal band Ketzer distanced themselves in an interview from rituals onstage, referring to them as “overloaded Kabuki”.<sup>14</sup>

The genre in which bands are writing or performing constrains their aesthetic decisions, as does the greater community and world. Likewise, each aesthetic decision made by a band is a creative repetition of the intersubjective understanding of the scene.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, despite the great differentiation within the heavy metal genre, this milieu is constituted as a subculture that has emerged with music as a centre, without ideological obligation or

10 Dyrendal 2008, 74.

11 Petersen 2009, 11.

12 Altglas 2014, 479–487.

13 Watts/Fisher 2017.

14 Esteban 2019.

15 Unger 2016, 62.

commitment. All other elements are subject to the current political, local, social and individual contexts in which the specific music is produced and consumed. These additional elements are also arranged in the form of bricolage: “[Heavy metal] is, in the broad sense of the term, a bricolage, which spans a multitude of differences.”<sup>16</sup>

The field of shared knowledge includes ideas of religion and, in a broader sense, spirituality. Cultural conformity, here specifically Western and historically Christian, on what constitutes religious images concerns not only the iconography of specific religions but also the “paradigm” of religious or spiritual aesthetics. The first is used in altering or restructuring religious iconography in transgressive bricolage. The second, the shared understanding of the religiosity of any motif not assigned to a specific religious tradition – for example the vastness of nature, the ritualism of processions or sacrifice, or the dichotomies of above and below, light and dark – can lend a bricolage a numen. Heavy metal and especially black metal are set in relation to what is called “religion” but is above all the popular cultural reception of religious codes.<sup>17</sup> The elements available for bricolage are designated and limited by the pre-constraints of the user and their audience as mentioned, but also by the intended form of the product. The cultural context or environment may provide entitlement to some elements and not others, while the visual repertoire may lack reference points to some motifs. The selection is driven by the availability and fit of the images.

The analytical frame of bricolage is especially revealing when applied to intermedia<sup>18</sup> like CDs, which combine songs, lyrics, a booklet, the cover etc., or music videos, where chronology, framing, the song itself, the lyrics, sometimes the musical performance, and even the possibility of complex narrative can be used to structure visual elements in this bricolage. Learning to read the visual language of these intermedia is another form of expertise practised by the insider.

Bricolage is simultaneously the process of assembling these elements at hand coherently and a way of describing the product. The approach in this article focuses on the need to refer to the preceding motif occurrences to achieve new meanings as well as the creation of new meanings by juxtapos-

16 Weinstein 1991, 22.

17 Höpflinger 2018, 68.

18 Heesch/Kopanski 2018.

ing or combining images. Music videos present, structure and combine images in multiple dimensions. Camera perspective puts the viewer in differing relations to the picture; the chronological succession relates any image to its preceding and following images. Intercutting similarly framed motifs creates an analogy or contrast. The sound, the very reason for the video, structures the cutting speed, visual repetitions and emphasis.

## Profaning the Religious

Heavy metal is a musical genre as well as a subculture or, following Keith Kahn-Harris's terminology, a "scene". Music, content and images follow certain genre-constituting guidelines. To genre tradition and a stable canon of artists, we can add the crossing of boundaries (transgression<sup>19</sup>) as such a guideline. Transgression as a category transcends themes, but as a discourse of groups, authority and identity it is also a defining category for metal.<sup>20</sup> While transgression is directed outwards, it produces internal subcultural capital. Too great uniformity or repetition allows those transgressive acts or images to flow into the larger hegemonic structure and thereby lose their transgressive effect and the power to produce the same subcultural capital. Mainstream success may become selling out, and the earlier authenticity is now perceived as inauthenticity. As mundane subcultural capital that refers to traditional powers of discourse and functions as a unifying force is needed, heavy metal bricolage fluctuates between unifying the code of its visual language and fragmenting its own traditions.<sup>21</sup>

Deena Weinstein also identified the theme of power as essential for understanding and analysing heavy metal.<sup>22</sup> In conjunction with blasphemy, we must note abjection<sup>23</sup> and defilement.<sup>24</sup> Defilement and abjection are striking

19 Kahn-Harris 2007.

20 Hjelm/Kahn-Harris/LeVine 2013, 10.

21 Kahn-Harris 2007, 27–51.

22 Weinstein 1991: "The essential sonic element in heavy metal is power, expressed as sheer volume" (23); "The sonic power of metal is supported and enhanced by a wide range of visual artifacts and effects that display its inherent meaning" (27); "What heavy metal takes seriously is power. The sonic power of the music—its inherent meaning—contributes to every delineated meaning that appears in its lyrics. Any lyrical theme, even despair or suicide, is empowered by the heavy metal sound" (35).

23 Kristeva 1982.

24 Unger 2016.

in the profaning of explicitly religious symbols in a performative act of religious transgression, as in the example of the cross built of dismembered body parts in Behemoth's *SABBATH MATER*.<sup>25</sup> The occurrence of the object in heavy metal is well described through Weinstein's category of chaos. Chaos, as one of the embodiments of power, is uncivilized, lacks order and is destructive. War is one example of such a recurring chaos motif in heavy metal. The grotesque in itself further disembeds heavy metal chaos from reality, while constantly referring back to its materiality.<sup>26</sup>

Marcus Moberg points out that the omnipresent religious topics within metal culture also serve as a source of inspiration and a resource for the recipients to create world views and religious identities. He notes that "the majority of these accounts have directed particular attention to metal's interest in what is variably referred to as 'Satanism,' the 'Satanic,' or the 'figure of Satan.' Because of this, most of them have focused on the extreme and 'Satanic' black metal sub-genre in particular."<sup>27</sup>

Many examples demonstrate how a satanic visual programme is primarily used as a means of transgression and as an expression of anti-Christian attitudes and is integrated overall into the visual programme of black metal on a bold scale – in this context the satanic visual programme now refers primarily to black metal itself and not essentially to satanism. Most satanic imagery and iconography are themselves dependent on bricolage. According to Dyrendal, "Satanists seem to construct a sense of individual, satanic identity as much or more from media consumption than from collective activities."<sup>28</sup> Satanism and black metal emerge as image producers that operate very similarly. The recourse to popular media and reciprocal exchange fuels their bricolage, and both can be said to strongly orient their aesthetic decisions according to transgression. In heavy metal, there is no shortage of black metal imagery that uses Baphomet, upside-down crosses and pentagrams. The pentagram is rendered nearly meaningless by its abundance in metal visuals. Blasphemy in this context orients itself to the in-group's idea of blasphemy but not to any blasphemous effect on the scene internally. Although a global phenomenon, extreme metal uses transgressive practices that are mostly aimed at Western targets. What is

25 *SABBATH MATER* (Behemoth, Grupa 13, PL 2019).

26 Halnon 2006.

27 Moberg 2012, 122.

28 Dyrendal 2008, 93.



perceived as transgressive in one culture or context may not be transgressive in another.<sup>29</sup>

Comparing specific religious symbols and images in extreme metal music videos shows many modes of application: (1) to produce visual transgression as blasphemy, expressing a religious programme, be it satanic<sup>30</sup> or occult, as is the case in ritual black metal,<sup>31</sup> (2) to produce visual transgression for the sake of transgression, expressing a heavy metal programme and invoking scene tradition, (3) to reproduce religious symbols to talk about a specific religious narrative as allegory, or (4) to recombine religious iconography without apparent defilement<sup>32</sup> to represent various NRM (new religious movements) and an alternative spirituality. The last point is applicable to occult rock, but also to many forms of doom metal. More possibilities for the utilization of religious symbols and images exist, and the specific motivations blur, just as the genre boundaries do. But religious imagery that does not refer to a specific religion or philosophy is just as intriguing. Still, this category of image has its hidden past in religious thoughts and discourses such as metaphors of transcendence or the sublime. We are accustomed to associate certain patterns with contingent notions of “religiousness”. Thus the boundaries between generally religiously inspired images and religious symbols cannot always be drawn clearly.

## Religionized Imagery

Bricolage depends not only on what’s “at hand”, but also on what conceivably can be understood and is appropriate according to the scene for inclusion in the bricolage. Outside the focus on apparent religious images, we find other repetitive movable motifs. The genre boundaries within heavy metal are fuzzy, and a certain aesthetic or iconography cannot be ascribed to a

29 Kahn-Harris 2007, 48.

30 Petersen 2011, 91: “Although satanic practices of transgression are many, they frequently target the popular holy cows of sexuality and the body, religion and politics, and violence, channelling self-work through ritual, performance, and art.”

31 Granholm 2013.

32 Partridge (2014, 243) concludes that many religious discourses outside hegemonic sacred forms are easily integrated into popular music. They are capable of being perceived as transgressive themselves rather than being the starting point for transgressive distortion.

certain style of music, yet tendencies are emerging that clearly differentiate certain styles from others.<sup>33</sup> The same motifs can appear in different combinations and with different functions at the level of meaning in several metal styles. Black metal shares a basic aesthetic structure with death metal, from which it emerged, although satanic content and iconography are considered identity markers of black metal. In both, desaturated colours and black-and-white images are dominant. In both, misty forests and ruins can be found repeatedly, be they urban ruins or archaic castle ruins, abandoned chapels or cemeteries.

At the Gates's *KINGDOM GONE*,<sup>34</sup> Therion's *PANDEMONIUM OUTBREAK*<sup>35</sup> and Morgoth's *SOLD BAPTISM*<sup>36</sup> are all examples of a differentiated bricolage in contemporary black metal. These examples have the aforementioned elements but apart from general references to death, they do not have any religious motifs. Elements of (various) religious contexts may belong "to the fixed repertoire of the representation of black metal bands", but this intensive preoccupation with religious material is in contrast to the rejection of religious traditions, especially monotheism and religion in its institutionalized forms.<sup>37</sup>

The nature motif presents an opportunity for the romantic landscape to embody not only loneliness, but also the human-nature relationship. Far away from civilization, images of masculinity which recur to the types of the archaic warrior and the hermit are constructed through the context of nature.<sup>38</sup> In black metal especially, nature serves as a staging space for loneliness and archaism. Contemporary metal bands, which follow in a certain black metal genealogy, from blackgaze to doom metal, often use nature in their music videos. This nature may be spiritually enhanced (the archaic space then serves as a ritual space), and references to transcendentalism may be created through an overwhelming landscape. Good con-

33 In addition, in the extreme metal subgenres of death metal or black metal, innovation is also valued as a sign of authenticity. The tendency to follow tradition always clashes with the need to differentiate.

34 *KINGDOM GONE* (At the Gates, unknown, 1994).

35 *PANDEMONIUM OUTBREAK* (Therion, unknown, 1992).

36 *SOLD BAPTISM* (Morgoth, unknown, 1991).

37 Höpflinger 2010, 217.

38 Leichsenring 2011; Richard/Grünwald 2011, 45–47. They refer here in particular to Immortal's *BLASHYRKH* (*MIGHTY RAVENDARK*) (1994) as the foundation of further depictions of nature in this respect in black metal.

temporary examples are the music video for Schammasch's "Metanoia",<sup>39</sup> where nature becomes almost an abstract entity in which one loses oneself, or the music videos for Uada's "Devoid of Light"<sup>40</sup> and "Cult of a Dying Sun".<sup>41</sup> In the latter two, a ritual motif is embedded in the nature scenery. The landscape and ruins in the video for Eluveitie's "A Rose for Epona",<sup>42</sup> by contrast, evoke more references to the past, which fits the folk elements of the band.

Many bands, productions and music videos refer intertextually to fantasy and horror genres (film and books). An early example is Iron Maiden's *THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST*,<sup>43</sup> in which horror film material is interspersed as set pieces between scenes of the band performing.<sup>44</sup> Even if no film material from existing horror films is used, the genre is often referred to through compositional and production aesthetics. Rob Zombie's *LIVING DEAD GIRL*<sup>45</sup> and Ghost's *SQUARE HAMMER*<sup>46</sup> make strong visual references to the cinema of German Expressionism. Some bands from the occult rock genre extend their musical references to the occult-flavoured bluesy psychedelic rock of the Sixties and Seventies. For example, the video for Blood Ceremony's "Goodbye Gemini"<sup>47</sup> imitates the visuals of this period through its use of colours and blurring. The music video for Jess and the Ancient One's "Astral Sabbath"<sup>48</sup> illustrates how modern image technology is used to create similar psychedelic music videos. More obvious references to the band's location in the occult milieu as well as the musical orientation of the band and the contents of the specific song are indicated in this music video through the fade-in and fade-out of alchemical symbols.<sup>49</sup>

39 METANOIA (Schammasch, Patrick Häberli, CH 2016).

40 DEVOID OF LIGHT (Uada, Tim Keenan Burgess, US 2016).

41 CULT OF A DYING SUN (Uada, Jake Superchi, Occultus Visum, US 2018).

42 A ROSE FOR EPONA (Eluveitie, Grupa 13, PL 2012).

43 THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST (Iron Maiden, David Mallet, UK 1982).

44 King Diamond's *SLEEPLESS NIGHTS* (King Diamond, US 1989) also contains short scenes from old horror movies in addition to the band's performance at a cemetery.

45 *LIVING DEAD GIRL* (Rob Zombie, Joseph Kahn and Rob Zombie, US 1999).

46 *SQUARE HAMMER* (Ghost, Zev Deans, US 2016).

47 *GOODBYE GEMINI* (Blood Ceremony, Rouzbeh Heydari, CA 2013).

48 *ASTRAL SABBAT* (Jess and the Ancient Ones, unknown, 2013).

49 Granholm explains the band's place in the occult milieu at the end of his article on ritual black metal; see Granholm 2013, 27.

## A Comparison

An example can be found of almost every combination of religious and religionized images, even if we restrict ourselves to music videos. Based on their typological similarity, individual images can be assigned to one motif category for later analysis of its variations through comparison. To exemplify the variety in which the same motifs with more or less religious connotations can be placed in bricolage, I will look at two music videos of the same period with comparable footage. The two videos were chosen for the striking similarities in visual motifs even as they are situated in fundamentally different scenes within extreme metal – hardcore and black metal respectively.

Venom Prison is a British death metal/hard core band founded in 2014. Their themes and lyrics examine social injustice, misogyny and rape culture, homophobia and racism.<sup>50</sup> They primarily use religious allegory to explore socio-political issues.<sup>51</sup> The music video for the single “Asura’s Realm”,<sup>52</sup> from their second album, *Samsara*, mixes two scenarios against the backdrop of a single landscape: a musical performance by the band and a narrative with archetypal figures. Some of the individual pieces of visual staffage are red water, moving with the tides, figures in black and red cowls, a woman in white, a knife, a crown of thorns, a desolate landscape and church ruins.

Uada is an American black metal band formed in 2014. Like their fellow Portlanders, Wolves in the Throne Room,<sup>53</sup> Uada bring a dark romanticism of landscapes and gloom to the table, rather than the gorefest of other black metal bands. Black metal as a generally misanthropic scene is far more pre-occupied with personal or interpersonal strife than with societal systemic problems. In short, cultural pessimism and the symbolic rejection of the music industry are typical for black metal.<sup>54</sup> The themes of black metal echo

50 Everly 2019. Ruskell (2019) writes, “What Venom Prison have done is humanised this music by holding up a mirror to a cruel world and viewing people as more than simply walking dummies full of guts, but sentient beings worthy of life, rather than a grisly, gory death.”

51 Guitarist Ash Gray has stated, “No one ever wants to say anything about religion [...] It’s the same when you talk about rape culture”, see Mills 2019.

52 ASURA’S REALM (Venom Prison, Tom J. Cronin, UK 2019).

53 Pöhlmann 2012.

54 Hagen 2011, 196.

a yearning for some kind of archaism, be it fantasy-guide imaginations of the Middle Ages, neopaganism, Vikings or the solitude of the “old forests”.<sup>55</sup> In a similar vein, religion can be understood as anti-modern, as an irrational relic of the pre-Enlightenment. The Book of Revelation and the Apocalypse are generally part of the fixed repertoire of the representation.<sup>56</sup> Finally, the assembly of religious imagery is more concerned with possible spiritual or philosophical assertions than with political allegory.

The music video for the single “Cult of a Dying Sun”, from Uada’s album of the same name, combines, much like Venom Prison’s video, a performance and a fictional plot amidst nature. The individual pieces of visual staffage are tree trunks and ravines, the woods, candles and fire, and a deer skull mask. The latter is worn by a devilish figure, acting as the priest figure at the end and also as the singer, but in the montage the figure is separated from the performance shots.

Ritual and nature are the two paradigms which determine the general structure of the video analysis.

## Ritualism

The religious charge of the staffage lies in the trope of the lonely hooded figure travelling through the landscape with a bundle. In one case it is an old man in a cowl; in the other a young woman with a head scarf (figs. 1 and 2). The deindividualization serves to mythologize.

A reading of the figure in light of a religious narrative is reinforced by their interactions with figures of seeming authority. In both cases I refer to the authority figures as “priests”, as we have no more suitable term. From the symbolic gestures to the staff and mask, they are marked such that they can be recognized as the (literary) archetype of the evil priest (figs. 3 and 4). In both cases the initial exposition surrounds the main figure with religious imagery. In *CULT OF A DYING SUN*, candles and a centred fire associate the female figure with ritual, which can be compared to the dialogue of the main figure with the priest figure at the beginning of *ASURA’S REALM*. Both place the figures in a clear religious context, which turns out to be a sacrificial pilgrimage. The rising tension consists mainly

55 Ghonghadze 2017, 369–377.

56 Höpflinger 2010, 217.

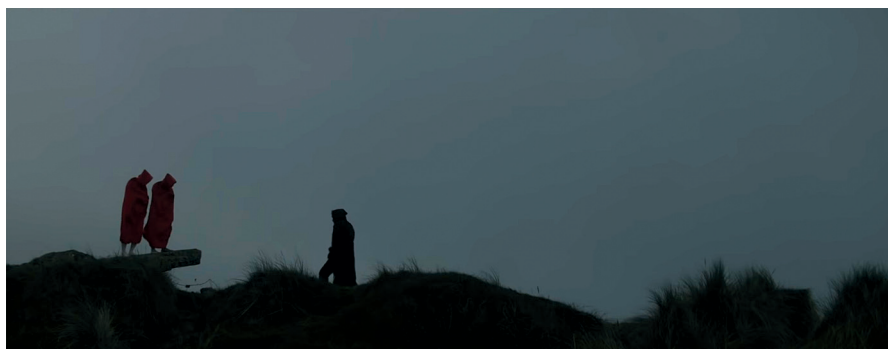


Fig. 1: Music video still from *ASURA's REALM*, Venom Prison, 00:02:01.

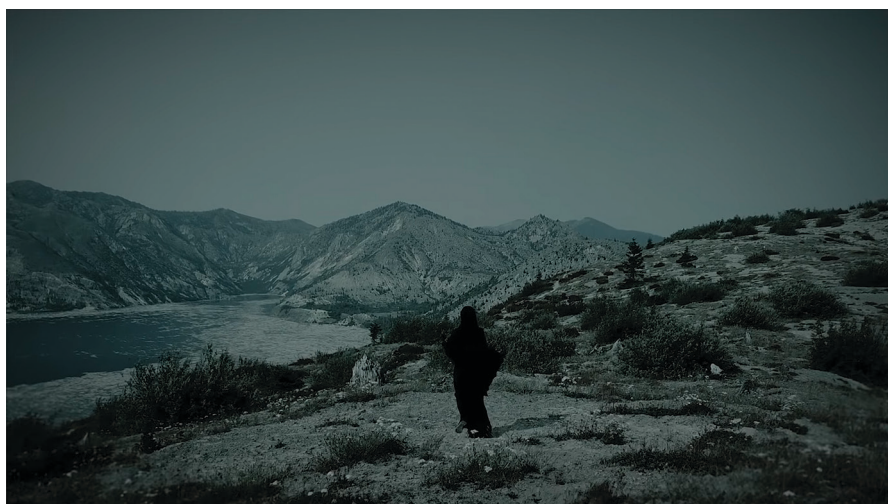


Fig. 2: Music video still from *CULT OF A DYING SUN*, Uada, 00:06:50.

of walking scenes. Both scenes situate hooded figures in a much larger landscape.

Seen side by side, the scenes lack the associative support of their individual framing bricolage and are only visual. While Uada's climax is a sacrifice that ends the video, the sacrifice in Venom Prison's video is less climactically staged and is followed by falling action. The closing scenes show the old man in a dark void, drawing attention to his crown of thorns. In *ASURA's REALM* the active participant – the “martyr” in light of the crown of thorns – seems to act under pressure. He is given orders and later the knife by other figures. The unnatural authority figure in the church keeps himself free



Fig. 3: Music video still from ASURA's REALM, Venom Prison, 00:00:42.



Fig. 4: Music video still from CULT OF A DYING SUN, Uada, 00:02:49.

from guilt or consequences. A connection can be made between the idea of religion as oppressive and social systemic compulsion, with the motif of a priest-like cultic figure framed to accentuate authority. Beyond the visual support, the lyrics provide an allegorical reading of corrupt authority. Contrastingly, the priest figure in Uada's video is the sacrificing participant and enacts violence through the implied burning of the child (the bundle). The narrative of sacrifice turns into a "deal with the devil". The video description<sup>57</sup> names the figures as Mother/Ritualist and Djinn/Ritualist. Although

57 CULT OF A DYING SUN (Uada, Occultus Visum/Jake Superchi, US 2018).



the landscape and montage do not reinforce this association with djinns, there are a few corresponding visual set pieces, primarily the head scarf and an oil lamp. The Islamic, or pre-Islamic, motif of the djinn is re-embedded in the motif of the deal with the devil, but this association is not self-evident in the visual bricolage itself – the oil lamp and head scarf could easily be overlooked alongside the overwhelming symbolism of the landscape. Awareness of these individual pieces heightens the supernatural element. The “Mother” in *CULT OF A DYING SUN* is herself a “Ritualist”, but the reading of the sacrifice as power exchange seems probable even without these designations. Likewise, in the case of *Venom Prison* the Buddhist or Hindu links in the song and album titles (*Samsara* and *Asura*) are not reflected in the visual programme. The content of the Cyrillic transcriptions of dialogue in the video is difficult for most viewers to access – the added value is once more visual.

The same visual language is used to shape the sacrifice motif, but in one instance with a focus on disempowerment and in the other with a focus on power exchange. In *Venom Prison*’s video, the Christian references in the chapel and the crown of thorns direct the associations towards (religious) authority in the form of the Christian Church. The allegory of institutional oppression relies on the recognition of these paralleling power structures. In *Uada*’s video, however, the same position within the pattern, the priest, is coded as “devilish”, more archetypal and less a reference to social positions of power. Both priest figures act as authorities and they perform similar functions to denote the whole as a story of sacrifice, but “power” is not set in the same associative networks in these videos. The visual repertoire of sacrifice is limited, and the most straightforward and recognizable versions will be implemented more often. But these movable parts provide many starting points for extending or directing meaning in a particular direction.

## Landscape

Anti-modernity topoi and archaic fantasies manifested themselves in austere landscapes long before the first black metal bands took their first band pictures in the Norwegian woods. The isolating and misanthropic tendencies of the scene grant nature its own power apart from any human agent. Both ritual narratives are embedded in nature. The closeness to nature can





Fig. 5: Music video still from ASURA's REALM, Venom Prison, 00:01:39.



Fig. 6: Music video still from CULT OF A DYING SUN, Uada, 00:03:20.

be interpreted as anti-modern in two ways: modernity is associated with urbanization, mechanization and rationalization, while the turning away from modernity is associated with nature, myth and irrationality.<sup>58</sup> The reference to nature is also anti-modern when it arises from the connection between nature and paganism, specifically with the claim of (pre-modern, pre-Christian) originality. This claim is also fed by the Romantic conception of nature.<sup>59</sup> There is no industrialized landscape in Romantic-era *Kunstreligion*

58 Leichsenring 2011, 291–293.

59 Ghonghadze 2017, 369–371.

(art-as-religion), just as there are no urban landscapes in most black metal sensibilities. In some cases, the critical reception of American Romanticists, Transcendentalists, leads bands to frame their modern ecological concerns with matching visual conceptions of nature and spirituality.<sup>60</sup> nature is empty and vast, and infinity or divinity are located within this finite nature.<sup>61</sup>

Both music videos utilize the iconography of empty nature and both communicate religious images through “archetypal” images, in this instance less through religious iconography and more by way of “religionized” imagery. But the staging of a familiar austere nature is nevertheless varied, with the human figures of the band put in relation to this nature differently (fig. 5 and 6). Venom Prison stand out against the horizon line, above the camera view; Uada, masked and depersonalized, blur into the landscape.

Their silhouettes and the mountainous skyline merge. When we put these shots next to each other (see fig. 1–2; 5–6), we see the differing camera angles. The low angle in ASURA’S DREAM raises the verticality of its nature shots, while the high angle in CULT OF A DYING SUN keeps the viewer distanced. Isolation and mythification are mediated through nature in ASURA’S REALM, but nature itself is not an entity, unlike in CULT OF A DYING SUN. In the case of Venom Prison’s allegorical motif of sacrifice, the embedding in nature is a consequence of the preceding notion of ritual. Ritual as a motif seems incompatible with any form of modernity or urbanity, and nature is therefore the required backdrop.

Here we find two different scene traditions, fed by two different outlooks, one inward-facing, philosophical and misanthropic, and the other political and focused on interpersonal dynamics. The incorporation of nature reflects these differing propositions.

## Conclusion

The religious content of an image or bricolage can be manufactured through culturally learned aesthetic choices. The modus of transgression mostly rejects non-blasphemous repetition of hegemonic religions and their symbols. Heavy metal and, as we have seen, extreme metal have developed a visual language which reuses religious images according to its own tradition. This

60 Pöhlmann 2012, 269.

61 Schleiermacher 1878.

tradition overwrites religious symbols genre-internally. Even unintentionally, without directly addressing religion, the self-elevation and celebration of metal stylizes its own images according to the cultural parameters of sacred images. The building blocks for self-aggrandizing myth writing stem from accumulated religious imagery. Maintaining a recognizable visual language leads to a degree of uniformity, which in turn can support a sense of community and cohesion. A consistency of motifs arises from the fluctuation between compulsion and cliché. Religious images are no exception to this internal discourse of transgression and meaning making. Uncovering further oblique meanings requires attention to the details, in particular when obfuscation is in itself an aesthetic decision. Any repetition of a variation of religious imagery from the cultural repertoire that relies on the religious context to empower the bricolage solidifies this application in the visual language – even as this sedimentation further removes it from specific religious meanings. By analysing specific examples, I have sought to illustrate bricolage as a viable approach to describing the formation of heavy metal’s visual language as well as to analysing its products. In the heavy metal tradition, embedded motifs are used in differing bricolage and with differing intentions by means of associative links and contextualizing framings. I argue for a way of looking at image production that includes an intertextual view of constructed lines of tradition. “Blasphemy” is only one of many factors in the appropriation of religious images. The moving parts of the heavy metal bricolage are recycled in its own image-producing machinery, and through creative reproduction and new bricolage they return to popular culture as a whole.

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