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ESSAY

Making Sense of the World Through Metal: Karl Spracklen, Communicative Leisure and Late Modernity

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Like many writers I have encountered in my capacity as Chief Editor of *Metal Music Studies*, Karl Spracklen's interest in metal does not stem from scholarship alone. As he recounts in *Metal Music and the Re-imagining of Masculinity, Place, Race and Nation* (2020), his fandom predated his academic research. Karl's teenage years were, like mine, often filled with listening to bands like Iron Maiden and Black Sabbath, although in my case, I probably started on the heavier stuff a bit later, having been enticed initially by hard rockers like Whitesnake and Bon Jovi. After slightly drifting away from metal during time at university, Spracklen's interest was re-ignited by more extreme metal acts like Opeth and Enslaved (Spracklen, 2019; 2020). At the same time, his scholarly interest in metal was emerging while he was becoming a sociologist of leisure and a prominent voice in leisure studies (Spracklen, 2020).

The coexistence of metal fandom and metal scholarship is, of course, not uncommon. Attendance at any metal music studies related conference is testimony to that. Band t-shirts, battle jackets and other subcultural iconography abound. Passion for the subject matter, though, does not preclude critical scrutiny. Although they may be predominantly insiders, there are outstanding scholars at such events who are careful to critically reflect on their own perspectives. To use concepts from ethnography, such scholars work to balance the emic with the etic. In other words, they leverage their emic insiders' perspective to yield insights into things like genre, music and culture, by developing and utilizing fan-derived knowledge and experiences. Yet, at the same time, they strive to take a step back and contextualize this fandom-derived knowledge in relation to broader etic knowledge derived from existing scholarly research, wider socio-cultural factors and analysis of empirical data.

Spracklen's research adeptly navigates the emic and the etic, partly through a rich grounding in sociological theory. Sharing similarities with autoethnographers, he leverages his lived experiences and sense of self as a 'vantage point' that affords access to data that is ordinarily difficult to access or parse—experiences at a live extreme metal gig, or the codes used to apprehend a specific metal sub-genre, for instance (Macnamara, 2021, p. 245). Yet it is lucid interrogation of theoretical debates that truly enrich his fandom-derived knowledge. For it is through this that the reader gains a clear sense of metal music culture's role in making sense of the world around us. To provide an

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example of this, I will now turn to his writing on metal and late modernity. After examining some of his work in this area, I will then provide an example of how his writing on this subject has enhanced my own furtive inquiry into the work of Swedish metal act, Katatonia.

Spracklen has written extensively on the relationship between leisure and society, asserting that late modernity inflects how people understand their everyday lives. Critically engaging with postmodern theory, he notes that from an epistemological perspective, our current period can be characterized in terms of *uncertainty*. Gone are the grand narratives of nationalism, class and religion, together with the fixed identities of gender, race and ethnicity, or so we are led to believe (Spracklen, 2020). Gone too are the certainties of science and logic, having been undermined by post-structuralist theories that stress how knowledge is related to subjectivity and power (Spracklen, 2020, p. 47). Considering social, economic and political change, notably things like deindustrialization in the West, Spracklen finds Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) work highly instructive. Phenomena such as the decline of heavy industry, with its concomitant impacts on many peoples' sense of community, together with the rise of neo-liberalism, contribute to what Bauman terms 'liquid modernity' (2000, p. 15). This is a term used to describe the current historical epoch which, as Bauman put it in an interview he gave near the end of his life, is characterized by 'liquid modern individualization' (cited in Dawes, 2011, p. 143). This, for Bauman, results in the following condition:

> It casts the individuals (and it means all of us) in the state of acute, and in all probability incurable, under-determination and uncertainty. All the views memorized and skills acquired are poor and all too often misleading or even treacherous guides to action, and as the available knowledge transcends the individual capacity to assimilate, whereas its assimilated fraction falls, as a rule, far short of what the understanding of the situation (the knowledge of how to go on, that is) would require – the condition of frailty, transience and contingency has become for the duration, and perhaps for a very long time to come, the natural human habitat (Dawes, 2011, pp. 142–143).

He goes on to stress that it is the role of the sociologist to engage in a dialogue with this kind of human experience.

Karl Spracklen's work on metal music takes up this challenge, albeit in less obvious ways. For instance, in his prolific writing on extreme metal Spracklen is interested in how artists and fans compensate for the uncertainty and loss of meaning in liquid modernity by constructing metal as 'communicative leisure' (Spracklen, 2019, p. 280). In other words, metal music culture becomes a resource people use to find 'meaning and purpose' when the 'structures of modernity' no longer appear meaningful (Spracklen, 2019, p. 280).

Spracklen's work on black metal progenitors, Bathory, is a salient example. Through analysis of the Swedish band's lyrics, he outlines how their Viking-inspired imagery articulates an anti-modern romantic, conservative nationalism rooted in an imaginary pre-Christian Scandinavia (Spracklen, 2020, p. 117). Such nationalism, he also notes, is appealing to some audiences (including white supremacists) who are attracted to the lyrical themes depicting the negative consequences of outsiders "tainting" the racial and national "purity" of a pre-Christian Viking land. Thus, for some, Bathory's appeal is as a resource for understanding social change; their romantic narratives of 'noble' Vikings offer a stable imagined national, masculine 'order', which provides a contrast

to the realities of late modernity with all its uncertainties, especially in terms of gender, race and ethnicity (Spracklen, 2020, p. 117).

Katatonia, as I will now illustrate, is another Swedish band that provides imagery articulating a discomfort with late modernity. However, as we will see, they do so in a more oblique fashion that owes some debt to another interest of Spracklen's: gothic rock. Goth is a subculture that Karl and Beverley Spracklen describe as having emerged from 'post-punk and positive punk' as a 'space for communicative alternativity' (2018, p. 68). It, too, then, offered a means for people to deal with the sense of a loss of meaning in the midst of late modernity, in this instance during the 1980s when profound social changes were being wrought by the deindustrializing policies of Margaret Thatcher.

Formed in 1991 by Stockholm-based duo Jonas Renske and Anders Nyström, Katatonia started life as a death metal project. After releasing their debut album, *Dance of December Souls*, in 1993, they were hailed as a distinctive band that had 'exaggerated the growling brutality of the '90s' death/doom metal movement' pioneered by the likes of Paradise Lost 'into vast prog songs' (Mills, 2023). At that time, the band were heavily influenced by Goth rock. As Nyström recalled in the liner notes to a re-release of *For Funerals to Come…*, an EP that followed *Dance of December Souls* that was originally released in 1995:

> 'Somewhere around that corner we got tired of the metal sound and decided that our second album was going to be full on goth (not to be mistaken for goth metal). We had been listening more and more to the pioneers of the genre such as Fields Of The Nephilim and Sisters Of Mercy and The Cure's influence was immense. We were thrilled to explore this different and dark musical path' (Nyström, 2011)

The strong Goth rock influence on the band at this time was encapsulated in the eleven-minute song 'Scarlet Heavens', originally recorded in 1994 and eventually appearing as a bonus track on a re-release of the *Discouraged Ones* album in 2007. Although their dalliance with Goth was part of what Nyström (2011) described as a short-lived 'detour' at a time when they were 'confused' about their identity, it is instructive to note that the genre was a clear formative influence on Katatonia's music and themes. Vocalist and longest serving band member, Jonas Renske, has resisted straightforwardly categorizing the band as 'gothic', but in an extensive interview with *Chronicles of Chaos* webzine in 2001 he conceded that:

> I mean, it's goth-related, but I don't really call it "gothic". I can understand people wanting to put a label on the music, and that's totally okay with me, but I don't know what to call our music… but it's kind of "goth-related", as you say. I mean, that's the closest you can get. (Rocher, 2001)

While the band's music (especially after 1998s *Discouraged Ones* album) quickly moved away from the kinds of Gothic death-doom metal epitomized by British acts like My Dying Bride to take on broader influences from genres like progressive rock and post-metal, as we will see Katatonia's lyrical and visual themes have often cohered with a broader Gothic tradition.

Robert Mighall (1999) has usefully identified the Gothic as a mode, rather than a genre. This is a useful distinction because it points to the idea that gothic texts do not have a stable set of generic conventions but rather are defined by their emotional

affect. Mighall argues that this mode has at its heart a clash between modernity and the legacies of the past (Mighall, 1999, p. xx). Indeed, as David Punter and Byron (2004) suggest, Gothic texts work to foreground the uncertainties of modernity. In a summary that is interesting to consider in relation to the earlier discussion of Karl Spracklen's writing on late modernity they write:

> The Enlightenment conviction that man can understand his own circumstances has never, indeed, disappeared from the history of ideas; but what Gothic does is to entertain the fear or rather…the terror that such an enterprise may not in fact be possible, that there is something inherent in our very mortality that dooms us to a life of incomprehension, a life in which we are forever sunk in mysteries and unable to escape from the deathly consequences of our physical form (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 12).

Gothic texts, therefore, highlight the uncertainties amidst the apparent certainties of human progress. During periods of profound social change such as the Enlightenment period in the eighteenth century, Gothic literature articulated anxieties about humans' role in the modern world. Similarly, during the Victorian era that saw a massive rise in urbanization, it is striking that in Gothic fiction, cities like London became the preeminent sites of terror. The castles and abbeys that were portrayed as uncivilized and barbaric in eighteenth century novels were gradually replaced by labyrinthine city streets, opium dens and filth-ridden slums (Punter & Byron, 2004, pp. 21–22). The cities often seen in Mighall's terms as 'the very epicenter of the civilized world' began to be portrayed as uncivilized and dark (Mighall, 2007, p. 54).

Such portrayals resonate with the themes apparent within Goth rock. Discussing 1980s' artists such as Bauhaus and Southern Death Cult, Simon Reynolds points out how they expressed through their musical and lyrical themes 'the romance of old things' (Reynolds, 2005, p. 423). They also conveyed the idea that timeless human experiences of 'love, death, despair, awe and dread' are significant even within eras of apparent modernity and progress (Reynolds, 2005, pp. 423–424). Returning now to Katatonia, we will see that their lyrics and artwork, especially after 1998, both cohere with the Gothic mode and articulate anxieties with late modernity that were discussed in the earlier part of this essay.

Unlike the transgression that is featured in other sub-genres such as death and black metal, which as writers like Kahn-Harris (2007) suggest, is much more traditionally centered on unambiguous themes of death, violence and Satanism, Katatonia often explore transgression in a more introspective manner. Their late 1990s and 2000s work frequently focuses upon the darker sides of human life, obliquely conveying notions of inner turmoil, depression and despair. As co-founder and guitarist Anders Nyström remarked in a 2009 interview: 'We've always been fascinated by life's darker side; it finds its way into everything that Katatonia does' (Nyström cited in Ling, 2009, p. 51). Of most interest for this essay, is the way that this interest in bleakness is manifest through representations of urban decay and alienation. During interviews in this period the founders of the band consistently stated that what inspired their writing was everyday life in general; as guitarist Anders Nystrom put it when asked about his inspiration: 'Just living. Just looking around you. Seeing everything. I think I'm very easily put down by stuff I see around me. It doesn't have to be topics like global warming but just attitudes I see in people, their state of mind is very discouraging and it increases every year for me' (cited in Mikkelson, 2009, p. 33). In both the band's lyrics and album

artwork, especially on records such as *Viva Emptiness* (Katatonia, 2004), *The Great Cold Distance* (Katatonia, 2006) and *Night is the New Day* (Katatonia, 2009), it is telling that it is the urban everyday that is transformed into something bleak and menacing.

Album artwork portrays highways as desolate, grey and polluted (*Viva Emptiness*), railway bridges as faded relics that trap the sun (*The Great Cold Distance*), and dark, red hued buildings as shrouded by a graveside statue (*Night is the New Day*). Lyrics sometimes provide a more general portrait of modern capitalist societies as creators of emotional desolation: 'our wealth breeds emptiness' ('Wealth', 2004). Other lines represent urban environments as darkly sanitized spaces: 'The city lights are fading still/The coming sky so white/And I'm the dark of this our new day ('The Longest Year', 2009). Other songs portray such urban environments as bewildering: 'Who brought me here this place is familiar/Where houses are black under the sun/Strangers pass on streets with strange names/All I can think is how soon they have come' ('Will I Arrive', 2004). While, similarly, the loss of a sense of place is also, in some instances, conveyed more directly: 'You displace me' ('Displaced', 2006). Alternatively, such spaces are portrayed as alienating and dehumanizing: 'Standing by a building/Leaks out information/Passive death of freedom gets me' ('Walking by a wire', 2004).

Sonically, Katatonia's output complements this visual and lyrical depiction of an urban dystopia in that it features certain similarities with dystopian trends that Tagg and Collins (2001) identify in industrial music. Jonas Renske's vocals in particular have a resigned, monotone timbre that is consonant with the stifled distorted guitar riffing, especially during verses on tracks such as 'Journey Through Pressure' (2006) and 'Consternation' (2006), the latter track featuring distorted, echoed vocals that evoke a sense of bewilderment and unease. During such tracks, then, the vocals struggle to elevate themselves above the mix and, although there is overall a much stronger emphasis on melody than in industrial music, the lines sometimes tend to be subsumed by the 'total texture of the music' (Tagg & Collins, 2001, p. 4). If, as Robert Walser (1993) suggests, a central tension articulated in heavy metal music is that between control and freedom, in several Katatonia songs control is conveyed through the deployment of guitar riffs that are somewhat strangulated. 'Soil's Song' (2006) is a striking case in point; the slowed down, chugging riffs of the chorus evoke the sense that an overdriven transcendent guitar lick is being smothered and wrapped in an elegiac fog, causing it to splutter and eventually die. Freedom is hinted at through the presence of a higher pitched brighter guitar note within the chorus, but it is ultimately frustrated *via* more oppressive lower pitched notes and Renske's ever-present resignation, delivered through almost whispered words.

Having identified some of the core themes and imagery represented within Katatonia's music during the 2000s, it is here that we can return to Karl Spracklen's examination of extreme metal as communicative leisure in late modernity. For the band and their fans in this period, perhaps the appeal of representations of the urban as alienating and dystopian lay in their capacity to function as metaphors of an uncontrollable and unknowable liquid modernity. The fact that members of the band were based in Stockholm in this period also sheds light on their portrayals of the everyday urban as something alien and unsettling. The widespread social changes that had occurred in Sweden since the early 1990s would have had a profound influence on that sense of everyday life.

There was a deep recession in this period, and when coupled with the demands for meeting the entry requirements of the EU's Economic and Monetary Union, this placed tremendous pressure on governments to carry out structural reform. Moreover, the recession devastated small businesses and created high unemployment. The impact of this for a country like Sweden that had aimed for full employment for several decades was profound. As Allan Richard Pred has argued, throughout the 1990s Sweden underwent a series of 'identity crises' as anxieties about job losses collocated with debates about Swedish identity within the EU and debates about rising immigration (Pred, 2000, p. 17).

It was during this period that Stockholm, the home city of the Katatonia band members, gradually became as Lars Nilsson describes it: a 'post-industrial city characterized by de-industrialisation, heavy expansion of producer services, telecommunications and high-tech industries, and increasing social, economic and geographical segregation' (Nilsson, 2006, p. 106). Furthermore, Stockholm had also faced a rapid increase in its population due to immigration, which increased strongly between 1991 and 2001. Faced with the consequences of this, city planners were concerned about the social segregation and exclusion that such shifts had precipitated (Harsman, 2006).

Within such a context, it was significant that Katatonia drew on gothic themes that connected urban life with bewilderment, mental breakdown, death and social alienation. If everyday environments were inspiring such themes, then perhaps those places were felt as somewhat vulnerable, shifting and disturbing. This is, of course, not to impute that the band had a distinct political agenda that was anti-migrant, conservative, or that they were anti-change. Indeed, the above-mentioned interview extract would indicate that musicians like Anders Nyström were concerned about environmental issues like global warming. Rather, my concern here has been to emphasize the value of Karl Spracklen's insistence on connecting metal artists' themes and discourses with broader social issues faced within late modernity. This is because such an approach continues to offer ways to understand how particular kinds of metal music may become meaningful for particular people at specific historical moments. As I have illustrated, even with a band that has a somewhat oblique and introspective set of lyrical themes and associated imagery, utilizing Spracklen's thinking in conjunction with theorists on the Gothic helps to yield insights into how and why metal can be used as resource for understanding lived experience.

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