

Sounds of Origin in Heavy Metal Music

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Edited by

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PREFACE

The skeleton of this book was formed from the 3rd edition of the *Modern Heavy Metal Conference* (MHMC)¹ held in Helsinki, Finland, on June 28–30 2017. I have been hosting this international academic event at Aalto University School in Business annually since 2015. The first edition of the conference—realized in collaboration with numerous academic and music industry partners—also served as the second bi-annual conference of the International Society for Metal Music Studies (ISMMS) and gathered in total some 150 visitors from academia, industry, and media. The core academic programme was built around keynote speeches and a big number of peer-reviewed full papers illustrating metal music studies from various different angles and countries. All papers were compiled in the Conference Book of Proceedings² and selected ones were further developed to a special issue on “Metal Business and Markets” of *Metal Music Studies* journal³. Based on the great success and impact of the original conference, a smaller MHM Conference followed in June 2016, scheduled and arranged in collaboration with Tuska Open Air Metal Festival⁴, the major annual metal music event in Helsinki.

These two conferences formed the foundation of MHMC 2017. In addition to a variety of topics within and around metal music studies, we witnessed a range of presentations addressing the special conference theme of “Music and National Identities”. This was strongly motivated by the 100th Anniversary of Finland’s independence in 2017—MHMC 2017 was part of the Centenary of Finland’s Independence programme⁵—as well as by the 20th Anniversary of Tuska Festival. MHMC 2017 consisted of a research seminar with thirty research and practice presentations from over ten different countries, plus keynotes and interviews, as well as a metal industry panel with international music industry representatives. A

¹ For more information, see: <http://www.modernheavymetal.net>.

² *Modern Heavy Metal: Markets, Practices and Cultures*, eds. Toni-Matti Karjalainen and Kimi Kärki (Helsinki: Aalto University, 2015).

³ *Metal Music Studies* 3, no. 3 (2017), eds. Toni-Matti Karjalainen and Kimi Kärki.

⁴ For more information see: <http://www.tuska-festival.fi>.

⁵ For more information see: <http://suomifinland100.fi>.

few panel discussions were also held for general public at the premises of Tuska Festival that directly followed the conference days.



Fig 0-1. MHMC 2017 Conference Poster (designed by Miika Saari, Tuoni Studiot)

In the Conference, a great variety of topics were touched upon concerning the connections of metal music with national and locational identities, and the metal music scenes in different parts of the world. While in Helsinki, we naturally heard a number of presentations dealing with cases and interpretations of Finnish metal. The programme also included a special artist interview with Niilo Sevänen from the Finnish melodic death metal band Insomnium, sharing thoughts concerning the Finnish identity

of his band in addition to many personal insights from Finnish metal exports. Furthermore, varied views into northern darkness were delivered in cases from Norway, England, and Ireland, as well as USA and Canada. We also took a headbanging journey eastbound and heard about metal scenes in Russia, Indonesia, and Australia. The southern hornraising session in turn included presentations from Italy, Greece, and Algeria. Furthermore, our special artist guest, Erick Avila from Chile, conjured hybrid rock tunes combining different Latin American influences from his guitar. We also witnessed a few band cases, as well as viewpoints on social and gender issues. At Tuska Festival, we had panel discussions for the general public, including topics like ethics and charity in metal communities, the aesthetics of the black, and the alliance of metal music and sports.

After the conference, some of the delegates were asked to take their ideas forward and develop their drafts into full-length essays. And here we are, eventually, with a book compiling six of them as individual chapters, accompanied with this preface, my own introductory essay and some closing words. The seven chapters vividly illustrate various different viewpoints and cases of local metal scenes; their specific identities manifest through various explicitly articulated and inherently emerging narratives and sounds of the origin.

Chapter One, “Tales from the North and Beyond: Sounds of Origin as Narrative Discourses”, explores the use and extend of country-of-origin references within metal music discourses, particularly focusing on localized narratives created and sustained by music media. In specific, the chapter discusses the case of Finnish metal and shows how a certain stereotyped narrative, with characteristics linked to the claimed Finnish natural and mental landscapes, the “northern” dimension, is consistently nurtured in the discourses. The chapter will also draft an overall picture of Finnish metal as a particular form of Finland’s culture export and country brand, unfolding as an encompassing construction reaching from the grass roots of the scene to the highest political level. Besides the Finnish ones, other illustrative examples of well-known scenes are included in the attempt to trace locational narratives and heavy sounds of origin.

Chapters two through four have a specific focus on particular black metal scenes. The cases indicate how the narrative constructions and aesthetic expressions of black metal are locally motivated, drawing inspiration from particular claims of authenticity in respect of the local heritage—often incorporating adversarial, protective, and nationalistic aspects. There, the sounds and narratives of origin often unfold as ideological and political statements, closing oneself in the articulated

uniqueness and excellence of the local expressive forms. This is contrary to the social and commercial picture painted in chapter one, in which the local specialities, even the grim narratives, are distributed in a more inclusive and candid fashion. We will learn about “Heritage Black Metal” in three rather different countries; echoing similar worldviews and fundamentals but adding elements of the local cultural heritage, social issues, and politics into the mix.

In Chapter Two, “True Norwegian Black Metal: Nationalism And Authenticity In The Norwegian Black Metal of the ‘90s”, Baptiste Pilo explores the ideas of authenticity (*true*), national affiliation (*Norwegian*), and a specific musical genre (*black metal*). He will show how nationalism in the Norwegian Black Metal of the ‘90s based its founding principles on the search for authenticity, through particularly narrated local heritage, being anachronistic in nature. This search involved deeply rooted criticism against the mainstream appropriation threatening the underground culture, and authenticity, of black metal. For example, the increasing popularity of death metal, particularly in Sweden, was seen compromising the authenticity of “true” metal. To date, as Pilo argues, Norwegian Black Metal has largely lost its anti-establishment load—and its internal authenticity—by dissolving itself into the national culture and turning into an integral part of the Norway’s country image.

Chapter Three, “Son(g)s of Darkness: Identities in Italian Black Metal” by Tommaso Frangioni, Filippo Masina, Giulio Pieroni, and Mario Venturella, presents the first results of an on-going research project that, in the Authors’ view, is the first notable exploration of the black metal scene in Italy. The chapter outlines the contours and structure of this artistic field that is perceived to involve re-imagining and re-shaping of the (“original”) Scandinavian black metal narrative. Similarly with the Norwegian bands, adhering to the “back to the roots” theme, Italian bands began to dig into the historical origins of their native territories. As argued in the chapter, some of them re-elaborated the cultural, geographical, folkloric and historical heritage by adding some specific Italian traits into their narratives: such as the “jagged archipelago of praxes and cultural orientations” and specific socio-political history. It is however shown that Italian Black Metal is a diversified musical field, consisting of at least five different branches presented and discussed in the chapter. Even though a specific representation of western modernity is one of the common elements in most branches, they also incorporate (black metal’s “typical”) heritage and anti-establishment themes; in the case of Italy, including return to the pre-Roman origins of the places, and conflict against Catholic religion and bourgeois morale. The scene, despite its variety, has also been

represented as a satanic-esoteric magma with strong links to fascist or neo-fascist movements, especially in the mainstream public discourse.

Chapter Four, “Javanese Black Metal: Towards a Definition of Post-Heritage Music” by Gianluca Chelini, explores a culturally unique scene that has its origins in Java, Indonesia. On this large island, a number of musicians and bands began to explore new artistic possibilities in the mid-1990s, combining their own musical, literary, historical and spiritual traditions with the globally emerging and recognized genre of black metal. Chelini will show the variety of cultural characteristics, ranging from the use of Indonesian or Javanese language in song lyrics to inclusion of musical sections and passages that are typical for traditional Javanese music. Some artists have even attempted to create completely new musical aesthetics by combining certain ideological peculiarities of black metal with philosophical concepts drawn from Hindu or Kedjawen, the traditional Javanese religion. The Javanese case illustrates how the process of heritagisation can involve novel musical material—“post-heritage” music—that goes far beyond simple re-elaboration or revival of a previously existing traditional musical repertoire.

In Chapter Five, “From the Bogs of Aughiska: Dark Ambient, Folklore, and Irish National Identity”, Joseph Norman writes about an Irish concept/band From the Bogs of Aughiska that also has specific “Heritage Black Metal” connections but incorporates a truly unique approach that musically expresses (the west of) Ireland and its way of life, as well as pride in the local heritage, history, culture, and environment. Norman instigates academic critique of Bogs’ releases to date, discusses the nature of their live performance, and analyses their engagement with Irish history, politics and folklore. As he proposes, the aesthetics of Bogs are as complex Ireland itself, comprising bits of Irish and Celtic history, heritage and folklore, in the construction of personal and collective identity. Bogs’ work is located in the Irish Gothic tradition, conveying similar effects of the Weird, the uncanny, and the sublime through sonic means. Norman argues that the ideologies, worldviews, and belief systems of the work are however full of contradiction and idiosyncrasy; for instance including tensions between black metal elitism and nihilism, and folk populism and optimism.

Chapter Six takes us down under, and to a very different cultural and musical context, as Matt Sage and Caelli Jo Brooker explore “Manifold Intensities: Musical Identities in Contemporary Antipodean Metalcore and Post-Hardcore”. Through a focus on performances of intensity and authenticity, Sage and Brooker position these connected musical scenes as an increasingly significant segment of Australia’s national cultural music

identity. Australia has seen an unprecedented rise in the popularity and visibility of metalcore and post-hardcore as allied alternative music subgenres, with increasing mainstream media attention. The chapter forms a larger picture of metal musicianship and fandom that is specifically Australian and also supports the diversity, operation and cross-pollination of distinctive local scenes. Sage and Brooker further suggest that there appears certain “Australianness” in the Antipodean metalcore and post-hardcore musical platform; comprising certain qualities of performative intensity and positioned authenticity.

Chapter Seven, “Love Breed or Hate Haven? Localized Narratives of Identity in Heavy Metal Scene of New Haven, Connecticut” by Amanda DiGioia, presents an interview-based scene review from the U.S. East Coast. DiGioia’s study indicates, interestingly, that instead of shared cultural roots, many New Haven residents have an identity of shared civil rights. This is echoing the strong political undertone revealed in the study, as several participants addressed contradictions between the values of the New Haven metal scene and the values of the current U.S. President Donald Trump and the overall political climate of the country. The chapter also discusses the perspectives of gender, issues of race, as well as the roles of marginalized groups, that are all strongly apparent not only in the New Haven scene but also in metal genre discourses overall, particularly in the United States.

Before diving into the chapters, I want to express my gratitude for my fellow content creators of this book, the respective authors of the chapters. Editing this book has been an educational journey. I also want to thank the participants and collaborators of Modern Heavy Metal Conference 2017 for great presentations and discussions, and the team of Cambridge Scholars Publishing for smooth and professional collaboration.

Whilst this book is going through the final legs of the production line, the 2018 edition of Modern Heavy Metal Conference—with the special theme of “Live Scenes, Sound Business?”—is being delivered at Aalto University School of Business in Helsinki. For sure, the event will again gather a diversified group of metal music scholars and professionals from a wide variety of countries to share their insights and ideas. Some of which will end up in future publications as well. Hence, we will continue contributing to the growing body of Metal Music Studies and our multidisciplinary and multicultural community—some may even call it a *field*. Due to the transnational nature of this field, as well as our empirical platform, the heavy metal practice, national and locational identities will remain as a central theme also in future explorations. Heavy sounds of origin shall be heard and localized narratives shall be written.

Enjoy the ride, accompanied with loads of great music!

Espoo, Finland, March 26, 2018.

Toni-Matti Karjalainen

CHAPTER ONE

TALES FROM THE NORTH AND BEYOND: SOUNDS OF ORIGIN AS NARRATIVE DISCOURSES

TONI-MATTI KARJALAINEN

Introduction

In this chapter, exhibiting some initial ideas from my on-going research, I discuss the appearance of country-of-origin references within different metal music discourses. In particular, I will illustrate how specific symbolic references, country representations, and localized narratives are created and sustained by music media, focusing predominantly on the expressions of Finnish metal in international magazines. As will be argued, localisation occurs in media both through rather casual use of simple place labels and in the form of more narrated descriptive references.

The chapter shows how a certain stereotyped narrative, with characteristics linked to the claimed Finnish natural and mental landscapes and their “northern” dimension, gets interwoven on the keyboards of journalists. Despite the existence of rather different stylistic genres within the Finnish metal scene, the overarching narrative of Finnish Metal is surprisingly consistent. However, as will be shown, there are also many deviations from the script. The chapter will also draft an overall picture of Finnish metal as a particular form of Finland’s culture export and country brand, unfolding as an encompassing construction reaching from the grass roots of the scene to the highest political level.

Along the way, I will also throw in other illustrative and well-known examples, especially to illustrate the fascinating topic of a claimed sound emerging from a particular scene and how it gets formed in different discourses—thus attempting to trace the heavy sounds of origin within particular scenes. Finally, comments from a few artists are also included to hear about their own intentions in terms of country representations.

Overall, the approach of this chapter is that of a speculative essay, even though many arguments are based on structured media analyses and literature search. But instead of a solid research report, the pages of this chapter unfold as initial contemplations, from a Finnish perspective, on national and locational identities in metal and rock music. I aim to give some food for thoughts, draft some underlying explanations and conceptual notions that can, could, and will be explored in further research. Moreover, I hope to lay some foundations on which the illustrative cases of the remaining chapters of this book can build on.

At the Magazine Booth

Grab a magazine like British *Metal Hammer*, a leading traditional medium of the metal music scene, and take notice how most feature stories, album and gig reviews, and contents overall, are full of references to the bands' and artists' home countries, cities, and areas of various kinds. For example, the vast majority of album reviews in the magazine include a place-bound reference forthwith in the subtitle or in the first sentence. When writing this piece, I took a look at the album reviews section of the *Metal Hammer* December 2017 issue¹ and found subtitles like these:

Britain's metal behemoths document their latest global jaunt
 (Iron Maiden, *The Book of Souls: Live Chapter*)
 Italian prog metallers even out their aggression
 (Adimiron, *Et Liber Eris*).
 Knoxville hard rockers give themselves little room to manoeuvre
 (10 Years, *(How To Live) As Ghosts*).
 Norway's eclectic metalcore bruisers hit too many shades
 (Atena, *Possessed*).
 US tech metallers dine out on their dystopian world
 (Entheos, *Dark Future*).
 Aussie hard rockers celebrate 10 years of high-powered silliness
 (Airbourne, *Diamond Cuts*).
 Canada's thrash veterans continue their recovery effort
 (Annihilator, *For The Demented*).
 Swiss tech oddballs unleash an eccentric first round
 (Kill The Unicorn, *Prism*).
 Finnish hard rockers fail to fulfil their classic remit
 (Santa Cruz, *Bad Blood Rising*).
 Dark, symphonic majesty from the Iberian shadows

¹ "Reviews. Albums. Lives. Merch." *Metal Hammer* no. 303 (December 2017), 82-91.

(Moonspell, *Napalm*).

Holland's prog/doom princess returns to get heavy

(Vuur, *In This Moment We Are Free*).

Swedish speed thrashers get some illustrious friends onboard

(Witchery, *I Am Legion*).

The list would continue, but these colourful examples illustrate the point I am after. These place-bound annotations and accompanied “narratives of origin” may often have little to do with the musical contents or style of the album in question, but they can be powerful means to generate some meaningful and vivid associations in the reader's mind. At least they can provide the reader with some additional facts about the band that may be new or unknown.

Besides distinguishing the band in question, a location-bound remark may also help the metal-conscious readers of the magazine to position it on the larger map of metal sub-genres—incorporating narrative prefabs to historically constructed genres and locational styles. Or it can help to associate the band with a bigger cultural picture by rendering some generally recognized characteristics or peculiarities of the respective countries and areas. Just get inside your own personal associative cobweb and retrieve the connotations of “Italian prog metallers” or “Swiss tech oddballs”, for instance, or trace the imaginary differences between “Knoxville hard rockers”, “Aussie hard rockers”, and “Finnish hard rockers”. Perhaps some compendious images and pre-assumptions are being processed in your head right now?

Furthermore, reviews in the *Metal Hammer* issue at hand express remarks like “West coast shredders” (Witherfall), “West coast metallic hardcore bruisers” (Winds of Plague), “New York post-hardcore kingpins” (Quicksand), “Motor City's punk-fired metalcore crew” (We Came As Romans), and “Columbus, Ohio metalcore outfit” (Like Moths To Flames). These notions quite likely comprise eclectic references to the various locational scenes and styles in the historical metal map of the US. At least they do in my own head.

Fundamentally, such references even activate some auditory rudiments and presentiments in my memory—echoing the heavy sounds of a particular origin.

These examples are excerpts from only one magazine and one issue, but would as such suffice for multifaceted analyses of narratives that depict different geographical spots on the metal world map. One general observation is that, with the notable exception of the Iron Maiden example above, geographical markers are of less value and less often used to describe the most popular and well-known bands whose background is

already known for most readers. Especially, if these bands do not particularly stand out by embodying certain locational references in their musical, visual, or lyrical profiles—as Iron Maiden does, which may partly explain the reference in this caption. But in general, bands from the UK (of course, the home base of *Metal Hammer*) and US, both of which have been traditionally dominant metal countries, are not editorially affixed to their geographical grounds as often as bands from “smaller” and “newer” countries.

Another remark is that such a wide use of place references seems to be more common in the UK version of *Metal Hammer* than for example in their German edition. Or when riffling *RockHard*, another salient German heavy music magazine, country labels do not appear so upfront there either. The same also applies for example to *Sweden Rock Magazine*. To say anything definitive in this regard would undoubtedly require more extensive and nuanced comparisons, and differences might in any case be partly explained by differences in the editorial approaches of the magazines. However, we might speculate that extensive use of country-of-origin notes is regarded more important and informative in the UK media, simply because their main body of British readers follow the history and volume of their domestic music scene more closely and regard British bands as “the standard”. Whereas bands from other countries still appear more unusual, perhaps even exotic.

Labels and Descriptive References

To continue, let’s look at another illustrative example, again from the British rock media. *Prog* magazine² recently featured an interview with Finnish progressive rock group Von Hertzen Brothers, phrasing “Finnish Rockers Von Hertzen Brothers” at the very beginning of the article. This example and many of the previously illustrated quotes represent a custom in which the band’s home country—or area, city, or other location—is used as a mere *label*, a (mostly) single-word description (“Finnish”, “Finland’s”, “Finns”, “Northern”...) that functions just like a genre/style marker (“Rockers”) or other aid of classification. Labelling references appear as pieces of factual information that might create some sense of differentiation between the bands, without any particular contents provided.

Nonetheless, in many case the underlying idea in mentioning the country is to enable the readers to attach additional pre-assumptions to the band in question, linking it to the country-of-origin’s scene, possible

² Paul Lester, “Family Affair”, *Prog* no. 303 (December 2017), 50-53.

specialities, general identity and characteristics, or other associations. In the above list, describing Santa Cruz as “Finnish hard rockers” perhaps makes a subtle reference to Finland’s own emerging hard rock scene, or heavy metal reputation in general, differentiating the band, for example, from American hard rock bands.

The reference of Von Hertzen Brothers as “Finnish rockers”, in turn, is more of a factual information type, in my view at least. To mention Finland and rock in this connection may not provide the reader with much additional information about the musical qualities of the band. Firstly, there may not be anything specifically *Finnish* in their sound. Secondly, “rock” is not particularly describing the style of Von Hertzen Brothers in any ways and, taking the context of the *Prog* magazine into account, neither is this classification referring to any internationally known scene or history of Finnish progressive rock. Hence the Finnish label here does not bring along any strong additional associations to the band’s music in specific or scene in general. Of course, the Finnish connection may mean a lot for individual readers, but such personal experiences may not echo any wider narrative discourses prevailing in media texts or within music communities. In any case, the line between *informative* and *associative* labels is very subjective.

In addition to simple labels, there are numerous cases of references that function as auxiliary storytelling means. Such *descriptive references* unfold in form of longer descriptions and stories concerning some claimed country-specific characteristics and stereotypes, features of the local scenes and cultures, natural environments, geography and weather, cultural mentality, and other contextual portrayals. Such descriptive references are used to contextualize and characterize the band in terms of its sound, song structures, lyrics, visual identity, behaviour, or other representations.

The Finnish Metal Tale

Descriptive references may also be called as *narrative references* inasmuch as they reveal and fabricate particular narrative discourses that designate the symbolic “sounds of origin” of a particular country or scene.

In my own research project³, I have been exploring the narrative discourses of Finnish metal. In the media context, the focus has been on explorations of how—and what kind of—place-bound and scene-specific

³ “Trade of Cultural Narratives in Rock Music Industry”, Research Project 2014-2019, funded by Academy of Finland.

references are used when metal and rock bands are written about. A good example of descriptive referencing is the characterisation of *Songs from the North* album by the Finnish band Swallow the Sun, formulated by *Metal Hammer* in their article titled as “The Long Winter”:

Winter is approaching. The Naïve optimism of summer has once again been brusquely flattened by the icy whoosh of nature’s progress, as autumn’s serene winding down morphs inexorably into winter’s cold, dark languor. For those of us in the north of Europe, the next few months promise to be long, hard and bereft of light and cheer. A suitable soundtrack is required, and Finland’s Swallow the Sun have generously provided it.⁴

In addition to an individual band like Swallow the Sun, the very same description could smoothly function as the grand narrative of Finnish metal music overall. Just take a look at the features and interviews of Finnish metal bands to find out how often—and how consistently—the journalists refer to Finland’s northern location, harsh weather, isolation, forests and wilderness. And how repeatedly the claimed melancholic, closemouthed and coarse mental nature of the Finnish people are mentioned. For example, the special “Finnish Metal Issue” of American *Decibel* magazine describes Finns as “a people of few words” and depicts further:

There is perhaps no environment on the planet better suited to the creation of this music. Isolation plus bountiful natural splendor and prolonged periods of torturous weather couldn’t equal anything but metal.⁵

As in these examples, descriptive references emerge in the form of characterizations, stories, and side remarks that are rather generic, and often stereotypical. Such descriptions can well dress the generic narrative of Finnish metal and may fit well a number of individual bands and artists, but are certainly not directly adaptable to all Finnish metal bands. Probably not even to the majority of them. And as generic and stereotyped tales, they rarely tell anything specific about the described scene, band and their musical profiles or qualities.

When such associative equity is constructed within a narrative discourse, like in the case of Finnish metal, the difference between associative labels

⁴ Dom Lawson, “The Long Winter,” *Metal Hammer* no. 277 (December 2015), 118-119.

⁵ Andrew Bonazelli, “The Finnish Metal Issue” (Foreword), *Decibel* no. 134 (December 2015), 15.

and descriptive references is mainly technical; labels function as shortened keywords to a multifaceted construction of features and stories, extend and width of which depend on a person's prior experience with the discourse. Labels can be strong descriptive triggers for certain pre-assumptions concerning not only country-bound stories but perhaps also particular qualities of music that the readers are expected to recognize. In fact, labels are rarely fully neutral for readers, especially those who know the history of the scene. For example, labelling a band as "Swedish death metal", "Norwegian black metal", or "Dutch symphonic metal" is suggesting much more than just informing the reader about the home country of the band members—intentionally or not. And the better and the more widely the generic narrative of a particular country or scene gets known among the magazines' readership and global metal audiences at large, the more contents-rich the simple labels become. They serve as representations of the narrative and scene in itself. "Finnish metal band X" can be a heavily loaded notion for many.

The emergence of the Finnish metal tale during the last two decades has been a peculiar development. Finland that once was only a small and distant country in the world music map, has become one of the hot spots of 21st Century metal music and is largely recognized within the global metal community for its active metal scene⁶. The wider international breakthrough took place in the early 2000s, following the first steps of internationalization—and the narrative positioning and negotiations concerning domestic versus international metal—in the 1980s and 1990s.⁷

It seems that the established view of Finnish metal in the international media partly results, as a reflection really, from the early discourses in Finland, both within the scene and local media. In our review of the early 2000s metal discourse in Finland, in particular, and also in my more recent interviews and observations within the scene, there has existed a shared view that may even be seen as a sort of a "canon" of Finnish metal in

⁶ Based on the extensive data base of *Encyclopaedia Metallum* (<https://www.metal-archives.com>), an online archive of metal music, Finland has the biggest number of bands per inhabitants. For a synthesis, see for example: Frank Jacobs, "A World Map of Heavy metal Density", April 9, 2012, <http://bigthink.com/strange-maps/560-a-world-map-of-heavy-metal-density>.

⁷ See: Toni-Matti Karjalainen and Eero Sipilä, "Tunes from the Land of the Thousand Lakes: Early Years of Internationalization in Finnish Heavy Metal," in *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies*, eds. Andy R. Brown, Karl Spracklen, Keith Kahn-Harris and Niall Scott (New York: Routledge, 2016), 209-226.

media, literature, and the scene.⁸ This discourse contains suppositions that Finnish metal generally speaking is rather unique and original, has an essential connection to Finnish culture and folk music, represents the Finnish mental landscape—including stereotypes like melancholy, gloominess, and sorrow—and embodies high technical quality and proficiency. This canon has been quite consistently adopted also in the international media.

Even though it has not been that uncommon anymore, for the last fifteen years or more, to stumble upon a Finnish metal band in the international context, the home country of Finnish bands is still regularly and visibly referred to in media texts. Often coloured with remarks of aforementioned nature- and culture-driven “Finnish” characteristics. But the focus has shifted. If the purpose of country labelling was more to inform and astonish in the early years, nowadays it’s more used as a mark to certain narrative plot, perhaps a label of certain quality guarantee. Namely, as reflected by my many interviews with the metal fans, bands and other music representatives, Finnish metal is generally considered a positive notion referring to high technical quality and talent. This view is visible also in media; comments like “Finland certainly does have a ridiculous amount of metal talent in residence”⁹ are not uncommon. The perceived quality also accompanies connotations of the widely distributed cultural stereotypes of Finland, most of which are appreciated by the metal fans and match well with the general appearance of metal music culture.

Finnish This, Finland’s That

To highlight the extent of country-of-origin references in media writings on Finnish metal bands, let’s take a concrete example and look at the sample of 25 issues of *Metal Hammer* (UK) from February 2015 (no. 266) to February 2017 (no. 292).¹⁰ In this set, I located altogether around 110 texts¹¹ concerning Finnish bands. There were two or more Finnish bands featured or reviewed in every issue. These were mostly short album or concert reviews, but also a dozen of feature or long stories on eleven Finnish bands, artists, or scenes were published. The most often featured

⁸ Karjalainen and Sipilä, “Tunes from the Land of the Thousand Lakes”, 221.

⁹ Dayal Patterson, “10 of the best metal bands from Finland”, May 17, 2016, <http://teamrock.com/feature/2016-05-17/10-of-the-best-metal-bands-from-finland>.

¹⁰ There were altogether 27 issues published, but issues no. 273 and no. 279 were missing from my analysis.

¹¹ Exact number is hard to give, as there are some compilation articles and reviews including numerous bands and country references.

band was Nightwish with five longer stories (including a cover feature in no. 278). Of these 110 texts, only one fourth did not include any references to Finland (majority of them being short festival gig reviews). Roughly, there were country references in 75% of the texts, most typically upfront, that is either in the title, sub-title or in the first sentence of the body text. Further, one fourth of these references could be categorized as including descriptive references— notions referring to Finland’s specific sound, style or aesthetics, natural environment and weather, culture and history, stereotypes, and other—but three fourths, so the large majority of references appeared as simple labels without any further descriptions.

In this sample, country referencing seemed to be widely spread among the contributors; there were over twenty different writers behind these texts. Of course, it is hard to say if this reflects the editorial policy or is a symptom of widely spread culture within the magazine. Namely, country referencing is not unique to Finnish bands only; the same approach is adopted for most others bands as well, with the aforementioned exception of many British and American cases¹².

Features and long stories naturally employ richer descriptive references, but characteristics are not typically discussed more in detail there either, as such magazine texts tend to be fairly short. Overall, descriptive references are by definition more descriptive than explorative; they may describe the Finnish cultural stereotypes but do not explain them in a more deliberate manner. Again, the familiar narrative of Finnish metal is very prevalent; country referencing often repeats the same scene- or culture specific notions. For example, black metal band Kyy is described with characterisations such as:

...the band’s passion and fury exemplify a Finnish scene has set a high standard of barbaric quality control... Finns are often regarded as being tight-lipped and bluntly direct in conversation, and this quality is very much evident in the band’s music and ruthless dedication to their craft... the same icy atmospheres and crude characteristics that make op this recognizable ‘Finnish sound’.¹³

¹² We could pick up *Metal Hammer* no. 267 as example and discover that in album reviews, place-bound labels (country/state/city) appear in the title 17/34 times, typically not for many British/US bands, but almost every time for the ones outside these.

¹³ Liam Yates, “Kyy, Fiery Finns forge a route to Satan”, *Metal Hammer* no. 290 (December 2016), 121.

In addition to this generic narrative discourse, the mark of Finnish metal also refers to an acknowledged Finnish scene and sub-scenes. Many reviews and stories include references to other Finnish bands, in general, and representatives of the same suggested sub-genre, in particular. For example, the feature story of Korpiklaani comprises reviews of Finnish folk metal bands, and describes Finnish folk metal as its own scene, with particular common traits:

The Finnish folk metal sound has some variations to it, but the basis is essentially the Hammerheart era of Bathory... and early Amorphis... Finntroll, Ensiferum, Turisas and Wintersun all cite it as influential... mingled with humppa (a Finnish form of polka from the 1920s) and various other strands of folk music. The whole thing is also given an adventurous, tale-telling character.¹⁴

Comparisons are often included also to other Finnish bands outside the respective categories, either to “import” fragments of the Finnish metal narrative or, in many cases, to highlight deviations from the customary. Like when Ranger, blending influences from speed, thrash and “old school” metal and not fitting in the rigorous Finnish metal mold, is described:

Finland’s metallic prowess has been beyond dispute for a long time now, but this young tribe of diehard metalheads exhibit no interest in conforming to templates laid down by hugely successful fellow countrymen like Nightwish and Children of Bodom.¹⁵

Overall, Finnish metal in many instances is primarily a generic cultural notion used for narrative purposes, enhancement of a band’s own story; it does not aesthetically describe the actual music scenes in Finland. For sure, there is a geographically defined scene of Finnish metal, but the sound and aesthetics of bands under this “umbrella brand” vary heavily. For example, the different sub-genres of metal—folk metal, melodic death metal, black metal, and the whole bunch of others—that mostly exist in Finland too are naturally affected by the local surroundings, perhaps bearing some similarities in the sound and in aesthetic details with each other, but more likely resemble more their foreign counter parts than any shared Finnish qualities. Moreover, there are also different local metal

¹⁴ Tom Dare, “Korpiklaani, Breaching Out”, *Metal Hammer* no. 271 (July 2015), 56-58.

¹⁵ Dom Lawson, “Ranger: Speeding Liberties,” *Metal Hammer* no. 269 (May 2015), 118-119.

scenes, like those in the Helsinki region, and the cities of Tampere, Jyväskylä or Oulu, with their own specific influences, also blending in with other rock and popular music scenes and genres, and cultures. And of course, there have been different stylistic and narrative periods in the Finnish music history as well.

The Northern Dimension

The “northern dimension”, as a specific symbolic characteristic, forms an overarching theme in the narrative discourse of Finnish metal. It is widely apparent in media writings: *Metal Hammer* for example titled their cover story on Nightwish “Tales from the North”¹⁶. And multiple similar specimens could be displayed to exhibit the appearance of the North in Finnish metal.

The Northern dimension is of course not a feature of Finnish metal only; it is a symbolic sphere spanning long beyond country borders. Certain northern atmosphere and mythology designates the genre of heavy metal at large, if looking at the genre’s discourses, imagery, or lyrics; darkness, melancholy, and other stereotypically northern qualities are widely represented in the global metal narrative. It is especially visible in certain sub-genres, perhaps most strongly in black metal—as we will discover in the proceeding chapters of this book—but also in the domains of folk, or battle, and Viking metal, quite obviously. Depending on the territory, there are differences in embodied mythical spheres and narratives of the north that also metal bands draw lyrical and symbolic inspiration from. For instance in northern England, many extreme metal bands express particular “heritage narratives” many of which are associated with the north.¹⁷

North designates also the metal narratives of Finland’s neighbours Sweden and Norway. Besides a question of latitudes, the north unfolds as a cultural notion in the Nordic Countries, also including Denmark and Island. Nordic countries form a geographical and cultural community with lots of similarities, including strong metal cultures in most parts. The development paths of local scenes in Finland, Sweden, and Norway, in particular, although represent through their own individual trajectories, have had their connections and consistencies. The 1990s impetus that

¹⁶ Dave Everley, “Tales from the North,” *Metal Hammer* no. 278 (January 2016), 36-43.

¹⁷ Karl Spracklen, Caroline Lucas and Mark Deeks, “The Construction of Heavy Metal Identity through Heritage Narratives: A Case Study of Extreme Metal Bands in the North of England,” *Popular Music and Society* 37, no. 1 (2014), 48-64.

initiated Finnish metal as a larger phenomenon, first as a local small-scale scene, was accompanied the birth of specific underground scenes, and at that time more influential ones, in Sweden and Norway; specifically the Gothenburg Melodic Death Metal scene and Norwegian Black Metal movement.

As a general observation, Nordic metal narratives seem to share similar ingredients such as strong nature connection and particular northern melancholic mood. Sometimes, Nordic countries represent one uniform entity, a distinct cultural family, in the metal discourses. The Nordic image can even overrule the country narratives. For example, in my interviews and discussions, Japanese fans of Nordic metal bands have not always been able to tell the difference between a Finnish or Swedish band in terms of their country-bound narratives. As a matter of fact, the image of Nordic metal bands often blends in with other “Hokuo”¹⁸ phenomena and products. And generalisations occur in media texts too. Like when Leprous are called “Nordic prog metallers”¹⁹ in a review that does not mention their home country Norway.

Despite this Nordic unity, the narratives of different Nordic countries also embody some differences in terms of their contents and emphases—a topic which would once again require more rigorous contemplation. However, as an interesting anecdote, I discussed the image differences between Finnish and Swedish metal narratives in my interview with Jonas Renkse of Katatonia²⁰. He admitted the presence of a specific Nordic undertone intertwining melancholy and the nature connection and my jokingly made annex that while the stereotype of Finnish metal portrays a lonely man standing miserable in the wilderness, his Swedish colleague, although as lonely and sad, would find himself mourning in a city park. A frivolous remark or not, it is interesting to ponder how very similar accents are designated also in the generic narratives of Finland and Sweden, for example in the history of industrial development and product design²¹: Finland has woods, Sweden urban industries.

Sometimes there appear anecdotal confusions between the Nordic countries, such as when the Finnish band Whispered is described to be “on their way from the sleepy fjords of Finland to spread their monumental

¹⁸ Japanese word referring to Northern Europe, Nordic countries in particular.

¹⁹ Tom Dare, “Leprous: Congregation review,” *Metal Hammer* no. 271 (July 2015), 88.

²⁰ Jonas Renkse, Interview by Toni-Matti Karjalainen, September 20, 2014.

²¹ See for example: Charlotte Fiell and Peter Fiell, *Scandinavian Design* (Köln: Taschen, 2002).

carnage across Europe”²². Norway may be well known for their “sleepy fjords”, but they don’t really exist in Finland, and the metaphor is anyway somewhat weird for a band getting their narrative inspiration from ancient Japan. And another review snippet illustrates how Finland is also typically counted in the group of (Scandinavian) “Viking countries”, even though their sphere of influence only marginally touched the areas and shores that would later become the country of Finland:

Finnish Vikings get their battle and booze base... London is invaded by the ‘Finnish folk metal mafia’: two bands who take inspiration from the traditions of their homeland.²³

This is how *Metal Hammer* wrote about the London concert of Korpiklaani and Moonsorrow. Of course, perhaps this notion merely reflects the overall Viking “appearance” of the musicians and the general Viking discourse apparent in metal music, possibly even barring some references to the aesthetic sub-genre of “Viking Metal” even though it would not clearly describe either of these bands.

Concerning Viking-inspired metal bands and Norway, von Helden conducted an extensive study on the Norwegian cultural identity and how it is narrated through “Norse-themed” metal music, particularly within Viking-related metal genres.²⁴ In her analyses, nature occurred as the most repeated narrative category, including the related sub-categories of landscape descriptions, geographical references, climate and weather, “being in nature”, and animals. Even though the Norse mythology and Scandinavian heritage are not widely apparent in Finnish metal music, these same general themes seem to appear widely in the nature narratives of Finnish bands too. The Viking heritage will also be discussed in the context of Norwegian black metal in Chapter Two.

The Finnish “Heavyweights”²⁵

Despite the variety and complexity of Finnish metal in real life, the media is sustaining a fairly consistent symbolic narrative of what is *typically*

²² “Shogun’s Heroes,” *Metal Hammer* no. 285 (August 2016), 16.

²³ Hannah Max Kilroy, “Korpiklaani, Moonsorrow, Islington Academy, London” (concert review), *Metal Hammer* no. 284 (July 2016), 106.

²⁴ Imke von Helden, *Norwegian Native Art: Cultural Identity in Norwegian Metal Music* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2015).

²⁵ Term ‘...the Finnish heavyweights’ is used in a Nightwish article: “Symphony of Creation,” *Metal Hammer* no. 267 (March 2015), 10-11.

Finnish in metal, and this typified view seems to be a meaningful notion for many metal fans as well. In many discourses, the Finnish metal tale unfolds as a set of generalized characteristics, beliefs and stereotypes of the Finnish culture, natural environment and geographical position, reaching over different sub-genres and local scenes.

Obviously, the most successful Finnish bands have carried the heaviest symbolic position as “cultural ambassadors”, and one could imagine that they are the ones most responsible for the grand narrative of Finnish metal in the media discourse. But as a matter of fact, this is clearly not the case. The biggest bands have naturally impacted the discourse a lot, but the stereotypical narrative stems from a wider and longer-term comprehension of Finnish music and culture.

In the current media texts, the most famous Finnish bands seem to have become more international, in that their background is not emphasized anymore. In my *Metal Hammer* extract, this seems to be typical for the most featured Finnish bands like HIM, Children of Bodom, and Nightwish, to a degree; there is no need to repeatedly mention their Finnish origins, as they are probably well known for the readers anyway. For example, the regular *Metal Hammer* guest HIM and the band’s frontman Ville Valo was interviewed for the cover story of the same *Metal Hammer* issue²⁶ that we started this chapter with. Finland is briefly mentioned in the story but does not come across explicitly or include any strong descriptive locational references. In fact, in this particular story—that also briefly reviews the history of the band in the eve of their final shows and closure—their emergence is contextualized within the general streams of world metal, with a seemingly distant reference to the “original” thrash scene of the US West Coast, not within the Finnish scene. Describing the start of the band, Milas and McMurtrie write:

When HIM first appeared on the scene, heavy music was refining itself. It was the 90s, and the Big 4 of thrash and the lumbering gods that had preceded them had given ways to myriad new forms of extremity, hybridisation and uncharted progressive territory.²⁷

HIM nurtured consistently their narrative of “Love Metal”, based on the 2003 album with the same name, and the distinct “Heartagram” logo that Valo himself created to visually describe the underlying concept of HIM and their universal narrative of love and death. Despite the

²⁶ Alexander Milas and John McMurtrie, “There Will Be Tears”, *Metal Hammer*, no. 303 (December 2017), 32-40.

²⁷ Milas and McMurtrie, “There Will Be Tears”, 35.

stereotypical Finnish melancholy, perhaps, any particular Finnish characteristics have not been visible in the band's lyrics or aesthetics, and neither has the media emphasized them, at least not to the same extent as with many other Finnish bands. The narrative of HIM is more universal in terms of the expression.

Another example of a Finnish band whose background is not constantly stressed is Children of Bodom. Also in their case the more general approach is explained partly by the band's international success, but also by their rather universal lyrical and aesthetic appearance. Even though their larger narrative, and the band name, connects them to a specific place in Finland, the Lake Bodom in Espoo, narratively representing the stereotype of Finland as the "Land of the Thousand Lakes", it is not visible based on the Finnish characteristics per se.

Furthermore, Finnishness is arguably not present in the sound or song compositions of HIM or Children of Bodom either; there are no particular allusions to Finnish folk music or the local scene. The grand Finnish narrative is very differently present in the case of the "folklore-based" bands like Korpiklaani and Amorphis, for example.

And still, even if the explicit Finland reference is not always used in the connection of the heavyweights, the narrative is casually thrown in here and there. Like when a Nightwish snippet appeared in the 30 years review issue of *Metal Hammer*, the title read: "Led by their talented maestro Tuomas, the Finns are a true force of nature".²⁸

Metal Export and Cultural Diplomacy

The grand narrative of Finnish metal sustained by the media is a rather romantic one and involves mainly positive connotations, altogether rendering a more fictional than realistic image of the Finnish metal scene and its actors. The positively charged Finnish metal narrative is realized, in an anecdotal fashion though, also in Hevisaurus, a friendly monster-costumed Finnish metal band for kids, a concept that is expanding to international markets²⁹.

With the emerged success of Finnish metal bands abroad, metal music has become a prominent part of the Finnish narrative, and the positive

²⁸ "Nightwish", *Metal Hammer* no. 288 (October 2016), 50.

²⁹ Katherine Dunn, "What Combines Iron Maiden, Dinosaurs and Play Dates? Hevisaurus, the Heavy-Metal Sensation for Children," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-combines-iron-maiden-dinosaurs-and-play-dates-hevisaurus-the-heavy-metal-sensation-for-children-1488214557>.

overtone has helped Finnish metal achieve eminent eligibility as a mode of authoritative culture export in the “cabinet circles”. Metal is regarded as acknowledged means of fostering Finland’s country brand even at the political heights.

A wonderful example of the political discourse was put forth in May 2016 when a delegation of Nordic leaders, including President of Finland Sauli Niinistö, was visiting the White House and meeting US President of the time Barack Obama. In his speech, addressing each of the visitors and their home countries, President Obama greeted Finland with an interesting note:

I do want to point out, that Finland has perhaps the most heavy metal bands in the world per capita and also ranks high on good governance. I don’t know if there’s any correlation there.³⁰

The comment got wide attention in the media, including metal press. *Teamrock.com*, the home of *Metal Hammer*, even went a step further in their report³¹ saying that “Obama paid tribute to Finland’s death metal culture”, even though he actually said nothing about *death* metal or metal culture in particular. Perhaps the journalist just wanted to sharpen her punch line, or unconsciously referred to the many death metal bands from Finland? Anyhow, obviously this surprising remark of Obama was not created by accident; it probably resulted from some lobbying or at least some edgy information search by the person assisting Obama’s speech writing. We don’t know if he personally knows or has listened to any Finnish metal music.

Over the years, also many Finnish top politicians have sympathized with the metal phenomenon of our country. Furthermore, albeit as a somewhat biased remark, “Finland’s metallic country brand” was also described a part of the larger Finnish narrative in the Finland’s Centenary Year 2017 project³² as well as in promotional articles³³.

³⁰ Joe Divita, “President Obama commends Finland’s heavy metal culture,” *Loudwire*, May 14, 2016, <http://loudwire.com/president-obama-finland-heavy-metal-culture/> Feb 5 2018.

³¹ Christina O’Neill, “President Obama hails Finnish death metal culture,” *Teamrock.com*, May 16, 2016, <http://teamrock.com/news/2016-05-16/president-obama-hails-finnish-death-metal-culture>.

³² “Finland’s metallic country brand,” *Suomi Finland 100*, April 7, 2016, <https://suomifinland100.fi/finlands-metallic-country-brand/?lang=en>

³³ See for example: James Weaver, “Now trending globally: Finnish metal music”, *This Is Finland*, June, 2015, <https://finland.fi/arts-culture/now-trending-globally-finnish-metal-music/>