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Eso-kitsch in Czech Folk Metal: A Case Study of the Band Odraedir

*Let it decay and crumble into clay
human culture every act.
I am a barbarian from the deepest shadow,
who towers over everything.*

(R. E. Howard, taken from Ivan Adamovič:
Robert E. Howard – The Last Cimmerian)

Introduction – Theoretical Background and Objectives

Popular music researchers often discuss the commercial dimension of music, namely the ways that an artist is marketed within mainstream musical trends. This is, of course, true for metal music (e.g., Ježura 2012; H. 2012). Both cultural studies (Gunster 2004; Osborne, Laing 2021) and popular music studies (Frith 1996; Moore 2002) have established that cultural and artistic artifacts can be treated just like any other type of commodity intended for profit-making. However, a closer analysis reveals that the term “commercial” has another meaning in the context of popular music. In the traditional sense of the word, the work of amateur artists who earn their living in other ways and make music in their spare time can hardly be considered commercial music. Our hypothesis, which we elaborate on in this study, is based on the conviction that the use of the adjective “commercial” is, at least in some cases, an aesthetic judgment that we believe cannot be examined solely through a sociological, musicological or ethnographic perspective. We present arguments that show that aesthetic theories dealing with the work of art and aesthetic judgments can be profitably used for a deeper understanding of “Pagan aesthetics”. These arguments are based on Tomáš Kulka’s thinking about the concept of kitsch as strictly analytical term, lacking the dimension of values or judgments.

Our hypothesis is based on the following premises: 1) Listeners identify as commercial those works (albums or songs) that they consider to be less valuable. 2) In this case, they understand this quality (or value) in terms of aesthetics and artistic

value (despite other possible types of value: social, political, economic, religious, etc.), even if they do not articulate it. 3) The concept of profundity is an important component of aesthetic value (Kivy 2004). 4) In agreement with Tomáš Kulka's theory of kitsch, we are convinced that certain types of folk metal music can be thought of as esoteric¹ kitsch, which we call *eso-kitsch*. In the following pages we explain these premises in more detail and answer two questions: 1) Does the analytical-aesthetic concept of kitsch, which Kulka formulates especially for visual art, also work outside the area of visual culture, in our case within the subgenre of metal music? 2). Can we use Kulka's concept of kitsch as a more analytically precise tool within the theory of art criticism?

We examine our hypothesis on a subgenre of metal inspired by Paganism called folk metal which is part of broader stream of popular music inspired by Paganism. In the context of this study, we use "folk metal" to refer to a branch of death and heavy metal with Pagan lyrics, and we use "pagan metal" to refer to black metal with Pagan lyrics. Folk metal is a subgenre of metal music where the spiritual identity of the individual plays a very important role (Strmiska 2005: 39–58; Strmiska 2012: 349–398; Weston, Bennet: 2014; Vrzal 2017: 173–204; Weston 2018: 184–198). The study focuses on the work of the Czech band Odraedir from the period of their demo album *Pagan Forest* (2011).² The band represents a good example of folk metal, especially since Paganism figures prominently in their lyrics, music, and overall stylization. Moreover, they explicitly describe themselves as a folk metal band. In the past, music reviewers heavily criticized Odraedir, accusing them of blindly following the folk metal trend in the period of 2008–2012 and the band's lackluster songwriting skills and production quality (Ježura 2012). Our analysis is based on the study of Odraedir's music, lyrics, and aesthetics in light of interviews with the band and reviews of their music.

What is Kitsch?

Contrary to common understanding of kitsch as cheap, spectacular eye-rolling form of art aesthetic and philosophic thinking about kitsch is more complex and elaborated. Kitsch has been an important concept for aesthetics since the 1930s,

¹ The word esoteric is used in the popular meaning as a surrogate word for "religion", which accentuates its subjective element which is focused on inner experience. Our study is centered primary on current "popular" esoterism using also kitschy aesthetics which is part of the alternative spiritual/New Age milieu. We are not interested in esoterism in the sense of secret and intellectual orders. For more discussion on the history of the concept of esoterism see Hanegraaff (1996: 384–410). We were inspired to use the prefix *eso-* by the article "Eso-Bitches" on the server Prigl.cz, in which its authors comment on the rise of seekers of spiritual happiness at any price in the words of a song by the singer Hana Zagorová: "It is absolutely important that I be happy." Prigl.cz: Ezopiče, <http://prigl.cz/brnaci/ezopice/> (access: 30.10.2022).

² The band's profile is available on bandzone.cz with the following information about its lyrical orientation: "The band Odraedir was founded in 2009. The lyrics deal with nature, battles, Nordic deities and heroic deeds". Odraedir: About the band, <https://bandzone.cz/odraedir?at=info> (access: 17.05.2019).

when several studies on the harmfulness or immorality of kitsch were published (Greenberg 1986; Calinescu 1987; Broch 2002; Adorno, Horkheimer 2009). Kulka refuses to deal with the motivation of the author of the artifact, about which we know nothing (Broch 2002), and he also considers the contextual definition of kitsch to be insufficient (the properties of an image remain the same no matter where it hangs, he suggests, contrary to Calinescu 1987). Kulka's (1994) primary focus is on artifacts and their properties. He formulates three necessary conditions sufficient to identify kitsch (and thus define a class of works able to be categorized as kitsch).

According to Kulka, the first condition relates to the subject of the work: "Kitsch depicts themes that are generally considered beautiful or have a strong emotional charge" (Kulka 1994: 41). This typically includes nature, the elements, wild untamed animals, children, and so on. The second condition relates to the form and the way the work is executed: "The theme depicted by kitsch must be immediately identifiable" (Kulka 1994: 47). In other words, for kitsch, too much complexity, including complicated metaphors, is harmful. Finally, the third condition: "Kitsch does not substantively enrich the associations connected with the subject" (Kulka 1994: 52). In other words, kitsch has no profundity, no deeper meaning hidden behind what we see.

The fundamental problem with kitsch is its lack of complexity or depth, or better yet, profundity. A kitschy work is shallow; what you see, hear, or experience is all you get and there is nothing more hidden deep inside. In this context, Roger Scruton suggests the concept of "non-consumability" to describe a kitschy work of art: the artifact does not lose its attractiveness and ability to offer new impulses even through repeated consumption (Scruton 2000: 117–119). Kulka echoes this sentiment:

Kitsch is essentially parasitic... it does not create beauty as such. Its appeal is not due to its aesthetic qualities, but to its emotional or sentimental intrusiveness. 'True' artists today generally avoid emotionally charged subjects, and if they do choose them, they treat them in such a way that the effect of their work is not entirely dependent on them. A true artist is not interested in a guaranteed effect (Kulka 1994: 56–57).

What is Eso-kitsch?

Even though Kulka's analysis is intended as a critique of visual art, it remains a useful frame for exploring issues of authentic vs. commercial in other areas including literature, music, religious art, etc. We rethink Kulka's characterization of kitsch by replacing "beauty" with the aesthetics of popular esoterism which is observable in popular culture and its communication channels such as visual art, television, magazines, social networks, and so on.³ The prefix *eso* refers to the religious

³ For example, Odraedir does not have its own website and is only active on bandzone.cz, Youtube and Facebook.

function of a given work, which according to Mukařovský, is superior to work's other functions, even while the entire work is commodified.⁴

In our understanding, eso-kitsch refers to a class of works of popular culture whose primary aim is to evoke esoteric emotion by aesthetic means. In this context, one may recall Kivy's understanding of the depth of music as a treatise on serious moral and philosophical themes (Kivy 2004: 463–469); that is, questions related to traditional religious discourse on the meaning of existence, moral life, death, and the afterlife. The answers to these questions are presented in an instant, easy-to-read form that offers one and only one correct interpretation. Moreover, it is handled with a certain inadequacy in the relationship between the subject and the manner of execution. Eso-kitsch can therefore be identified in three components of the artifact:

1. Through themes: the work has a strong emotional-esoteric charge, possibly using established religious iconography, whether linguistic, visual, or acoustic.
2. The means of representation: the artist works with stereotypes to express a theme that the consumer can quickly identify and understand with a minimum of interpretative effort.
3. The subjective "profound" associations that the work evokes and presents to the audience as the only possible interpretation; as suggested by Umberto Eco, a pre-made feeling that is ready for immediate consumption (Eco 2006: 76).⁵

In a similar way, eso-kitsch can refer to flattening of religious life. This is similar to David Lyon's concept of Disneyfication, which is the metaphor for how Disney parks commodify Disney cartoons through thematization, the leveling of consumption, advertising images, and the work with feelings. Similarly, religion can be subject of commodification. (Lyon 2002) It can be argued that eso-kitsch, as a product of pop culture can be understood as part of an indistinguishable stream of entertainment. To say it another way, the profane and esoteric layers of culture coalesce in eso-kitsch as an indivisible unity.

Christopher Partridge observes the emergence of a new, non-Christian cultural milieu, which he calls the "occulture" that consists of a reservoir of thoughts, ideas, practices, and symbols that flow in and out of Western pop culture, transformed into references to other works in animated series or as music stripped of its original context (Partridge 2004: 62–86). Partridge understands popular music (including Pagan music) as one of the main vehicles for the resacralization of the modern world, helping to spread the ideas of alternative spiritualities on a global scale. This process perhaps also encourages deeper involvement in the activities of modern Pagan groups.

⁴ Jan Mukařovský argued that each artefact can have several different functions, but only one is dominant in each moment and context. The aesthetic function dominates in works of art, but not necessarily in works of popular culture (Mukařovský 1936).

⁵ Roger Scruton comments: "Music feigns emotion in a way it could never express on its own" (2000: 119).

Folk Metal and Eso-kitsch

According to Kulka, the first necessary condition of kitsch is the immediate identifiability of the subject matter. What, then, are the basic characteristics of folk metal that listeners immediately associate with this kind of music? We suggest two separate but related possibilities here: a) the origins of folk metal in metal discourse, and b) contemporary Paganism.

From the perspective of metal discourse, folk metal carries the tendency towards transgressivity, which we understand as a conscious transgression of the socially constructed boundaries of the society with which it functions in a symbiotic relationship (Foucault 2016: 7–34). For example, the transgressive nature of death metal is expressed in conscious denial of the established rules of metal music of the 1980s (the absence of guitar solos, the unmelodic nature of singing), while the lyrical component often flirts with shocking themes such as violence, death, and disgust (Kahn-Harris 2007: 5). Folk metal emerges also from death metal, placing more emphasis on the melody. It features folk instruments to a greater extent, such as wind (flutes, bagpipes) and string instruments (violins, cellos) that complement typical metal instrumentation: electric guitars, bass guitars, and drums. The vocals mix death metal growls with pure male or female vocals.

Popular Pagan folk metal bands can be divided into two groups – religious and dionysian. The first category understands music as a vehicle for expression of their Pagan faith and interest in pre-Christian European religion and mythologies. This leads to lyrics inspired by values important for modern Paganism (environmentalism, praise of nature, return to the values of Pagan ancestors, critique of consumerism, and institutionalized religions) or by pre-Christian European mythology. The most popular examples of bands in the first category are Eluveitie and Amon Amarth (Pospíšil 2018; Mařanová 2019). The second category of folk metal bands are searching inspiration in pre-Christian European religion and mythologies as well, but adds to this a dionysian dimension of enjoying oneself. Perhaps represented most quintessentially by the band Korpiklaani, this second category has roots in the “rock’n’roll lifestyle”, a concept characterized by lyrics and attitudes emerging from hard rock and heavy metal centering on partying, having a good time with music, and getting laid (Weinstein 2000: 35–38). In the context of folk metal, this translates to songs connected to ideas about folk feasts and village parties, since folklore is the most important source of information about Pagan religious practices of times past (Simpson 2012: 1137). Folk metal bands incorporate elements of folk music in their sound and lyrics. Moreover, folk metal conceptualizes the drinking of mead and other traditional alcoholic beverages as an appropriate folkloric socializing activity adapted to make sense in the context of rock and metal discourse.

Contemporary Pagan discourse about Paganism has greatly enriched the themes of folk metal, as many musicians (but not all) are interested not only in mythologies but also in modern Paganism (Mařaňová 2019; Pospíšil 2018, 2019). Graham Harvey, one of the best-known scholars in the field of Pagan studies, suggests that modern Paganism is a representation of an ecological, polytheistic, and sexually relaxed spirituality that sees itself as something innate, natural, and indigenous

in contrast to the consumerism of contemporary society (Harvey 2013). Nature is a key concept for the understanding of modern Paganism. Nature is seen as sacred, divine, alive, and beautiful (Sage 2009), and is often personalized as “Mother Earth” or “Gaia”. Contemporary Paganism is strongly connected to pre-Christian European religions, which have been attracting more and more adherents in modern society. According to Michael Strmiska, we can distinguish two big subgroups of contemporary Pagans (Strmiska 2005). The first is referred to as reconstructionists, and their goal is to revive and recreate Paganism as close as possible to pre-Christian Paganism as gleaned from primary sources. The second group is more eclectic in its approach, deliberately combining elements from different Pagan traditions and contemporary alternative spiritualities, occultism, and magic. In both cases, they share positive perceptions of pre-Christian European religion and value the spirits of their ancestors. Contemporary Pagans generally follow the Wheel of the Year celebrations which they have revitalized from folk tradition. Pagan festivals are often wild, with lots of dancing and singing. There is also a strong anti-modern ethos in many streams of contemporary Paganism (but not in all of them). Such is evident in the rejection of Christianity as an unnatural hegemonic religion, the rejection of consumerism, or the return to a self-subsistent, ancestral lifestyle. Importantly, in comparison with “modern” living, there is a strong element of transgression embedded in the lived social norms of contemporary Paganism. This transgressiveness fits well with the rebellious nature of metal.

In summary, we can collate the elements above into the following “Pagan” thematic cluster:⁶

- a) a strong emotional charge or sense of beauty associated with nature;
- b) the clash of the “natural” (in the sense of original, primordial) order with the chaos of modernity;
- c) personification of nature as a living Mother Earth;
- d) a return to the faith of pre-Christian ancestors;
- e) celebration of the Dionysian way of life;
- f) deliberate transgression of social norms.

Sound: How Does Paganism Sound?

Inspired by Robert Walser’s (1993) discursive analysis of the sound of metal, in the following section, we describe how Odraedir constructs “Pagan” sounds on their demo album *Pagan Forest* (2011). We further discuss how and to what extent the album can be described as eso-kitsch. We draw inspiration from Mark Mynett’s study on how the authenticity of the sound of metal is constructed (Mynett 2020). Mynett suggests four necessary criteria of metal: clarity (intelligible production), heaviness (sounds evoking power, energy, intensity, aggression), sonic weight (use of heavy high or low-frequency sound), and performance precision (playing in rhythm, instrumental virtuosity). In case of folk metal we can add fifth criteria – evocation

⁶ See Berys Gaut’s cluster concept regarding the characteristics of a work of art. Elements within a cluster can be present in different combinations, in different numbers, and the list is of course not exhaustive (Gaut 2010: 377–402).

of “Pagan” feeling (use of folk instrument, inspiration in the music structure of folk music).

Pagan Forest (2011) features five songs (“Pagan Forest”, “Asterix and Obelix in Pagan Forest”, “The Dawn of Odin’s Horde in Pagan Forest”, “Fine Odraedir Mead” and “Occultism and Mystic Practices in Pagan Forest”), ranging in duration from four to almost six minutes. The instrumentation consists on guitars (solo and rhythm), singing, bass guitar and drums. Following Mynett (2020) criteria of authentic metal sound, Odraedir struggles with clarity on their self-produced demo. Most notably, growl vocals of singer Dub sound especially under-produced and together with his strong Czech accent it is very difficult to understand his lyrics (Odraedirofficial 2011). The heaviness of music is constructed by use of distorted guitars (and bass guitar) and in singer’s aggressive death metal-styled vocals, which are screamed. Sonic weight of Odraedir’s sound is created by frequent use of rhythm guitar riffs in every songs and low sound frequency sound of bass guitar, as can be seen in song “Pagan Forest” (Odraedirofficial 2011). Performance precision seems to be partially a problem for Odraedir on their demo. Several playing out of tune have been reported in music reviews (Ježura 2011). Paganism is embodied in the sound of *Pagan Forest* (2011) only in few places. Odraedir is following more the example of bands like Ensiferium, which are guitar-based and their Pagan layer is expressed in their lyrics. Nevertheless, folk instruments appear in the song “Fine Odraedir Mead”, where is the metal sound enriched by flute and drumble (jaw harp). The sound of folk metal is also associated with frequent use of distinctive melodies, what is also the case of Odraedir in songs line “Pagan Forest” or “The Dawn of Odin’s Horde in Pagan Forest”.

In summary, *Pagan Forest* features a sample of easily recognizable, folk-metal songs that are sonically anchored in the folk metal aesthetic, though with only minimal use of traditional folk instruments. In this way, Paganism is not immediately apparent in the sound of the music. Nevertheless, the frequent use of melodies inspired in tradition of folk music melodies, growling vocal style, and heavy guitar sound suggest a folk metal aesthetic. Reviews of the album were not kind, as can be seen in the following example:

The core of an Odraedir’s composition lies in the endless repetition of *kitschy* [authors’ emphasis] passages, which, when the composer gets tired of it are replaced by similarly awful ones. True, the utterly disparate mix of wannabe catchy song is enriched by a riff here and there, but in vast majority of the cases, it’s either similarly bad or stolen – whether consciously or unconsciously. There are no more than three, at most four at least somewhat interesting motifs to be found in the entire demo and even these are immediately stomped into the ground by misery. Besides, I have the impression that I registered several playing mistakes and at least once perhaps playing out of rhythm. (Ježura 2011).

Critical reviews claim the band’s biggest problem at this early stage was their failure to master the basic elements of folk metal, especially precision and clarity. They fail technically (rhythmic errors, players’ clumsiness), in amateurish vocal delivery (intonation issues and unintelligible vocals), and compositionally

(unoriginality, repetitiveness). The critic quoted above quickly identifies Odraedir's music as "kitschy" from aesthetics perspective, in reference to the music's uninventiveness and uncertain execution.

We suggest the sound of Odraedir's music can be identified as eso-kitschy as it was unoriginal and rather mimicked the bands that were Odraedir's primary inspirations. With little interpretive effort, listeners can easily identify some common tropes in the sound of folk metal music.

Lyrics: on the Waves of Pagan Metaphors

The most common themes associated with Paganism are usually found in the textual component of folk metal (Weinstein 2014: 65–67). Czech Pagan oriented metal bands approach lyrics in two ways: a) use of the native language, especially for Slavic themes (Obereg, Silent Stream of Godless Elegy); b) use of English, either to reach a broader audience (Cruadalach) or for greater authenticity related to the themes of the lyrics (the now-defunct Tears of Styrbjörn). Odraedir fits into the second category since their music has always featured English song texts.

The lyrics of folk metal bands often have an esoteric dimension. How does the band Odraedir describe their approach to lyrics? In a discussion forum on Bandzone.cz, Odraedir explained their way of understanding Paganism:

Walmen 22.4.2014 at 22:53

I guess we have a slightly different take on Pagan music. I don't think it's necessary to growl in the songs.

Odraedir 23.4.2014 at 14:57

Hi, well I'm not surprised that there are different people with different opinions. I looked at your profile and I understand your different view. Your music sounds to me like, shall we say, meditative. We are individuals who prefer music that is brisk, energetic, with many musical lines, where each one awakens the senses. Thematically, we focus on the Nordic themes of the so-called Viking period. If I had to give a demonstrative example, I would not be able to describe the plot of a battle or the saga of Beowulf accompanied by your calm tones... On the contrary, you can use calm music to evoke harmony with nature, in short, everyone wants their own thing.⁷

Based on the lyrical component only, Odraedir's style points to a folk metal aesthetic with a strong emphasis on Viking tales and mythology, following the example of the band Amon Amarth (Weinstein 2014: 61–64). In the case of Odraedir's *Pagan Forest*, the Viking theme is most apparent in the song "The Dawn of Odin's Horde in Pagan Forest", especially in the chorus that is full of references to Norse mythology. The song tells a story about a fight between Vikings and their foes in the forest. The Pagan faith of the Vikings gives them strength to fight since there is the promise of eternal life in Valhalla for the bravest warriors. The Romantic concept of the Vikings as true masculine warriors who fight without fear is one of the most common Pagan tropes in folk metal (Heesch 2010).

⁷ Odraedir, <https://bandzone.cz/odraedir?at=postList> (access: 26.11.2018).

The Dawn of Odin's Horde in Pagan Forest

As a thunder from clear sky,
 Came the war and some must die.
 Let's face the fate with haste,
 let's fury of the battle tase.

It is kill or to be killed.
 Take your axe and hallow the field.
 Bury it through, under the shield.
 Today more blood will be spilled.

Break through... Deep into enemy rows.
 Break through... Let them feel your steel.
 Break through... I hear the crack of bones.
 That makes the foolish bastard kneel.

Fallen... Now death in his eyes.
 Fallen... He squeaks like a goat.
 Fallen... How slowly he dies.
 So, finish him and go.

Endure... Another featherbrain's on.
 Endure... Odin blessed to kill.
 Endure... Soon the battle is won.
 Grab the axe and do at your will.

Odin chose which one win
 Chosen fallen will follow him.
 Regale in Valhalla is inevitable-
 Sæhrímn's bacon and Heiðrún's mead.

When the time of war arrive,
 The war between gods,
 Warriors set off as one,
 To fight for others that fall.

540 gates,
 Each unleash 800 men.
 There are enough chairs
 For those that have fallen.

As a thunder from clear sky,
 Came the war and some died.
 We faced the fate with haste,
 Tried the fury of the battle tase.

It was kill or to be killed.
 Pagan forest was battlefield.
 Let' s bury our friends, with sword and shield.
 Like brave warriors, who's live is sealed.⁸

⁸ Odraedir, *Pagan Forest*, https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Odraedir/Pagan_Forest/341938 (access: 26.11.2018).

This example provides a good opportunity for discussing how the concept of eso-kitsch can provide a better understanding of artistic vs. commercial art. Eso-kitsch music does not add any new substantive association to the artifacts. Also simplifies the reading the lyrics to one preferred a decontextualized meaning. This can be manifested in the way musicians interpret motifs drawn from mythology. As in the case of Odraedir's *Pagan Forest*, there is a simplification, a flattening of interpretation, of the foundational themes of Pagan myths. In "The Dawn of Odin's Horde," for example, Vikings are reduced to brute warriors who "kill or are to be killed" and wait to ascend to Valhalla to sit with Odin at the same table.

Another example is "Fine Odraedir Mead", in which Odraedir explores how the mythological Odin's poetic talents are directly linked to mead and how the gift of mead to humanity, therefore, carries with it the gift of poetry. Mead is thus seen in mythology as a symbol of inspiration and creativity (Kozák 2017: 75–110). However, the complex mythological story of Odin's sacrifice is, in the song, reduced to a story about how it is right and proper to have a good time with alcohol. Mead relieves anxiety and fear. The ritualistic dimension of drinking alcohol disappears, and what remains is an appeal to enjoy the pleasures of life while having fun with like-minded individuals, which in the context of the song is emphasized in the chorus by the singer's repeated cries the word "Mead!"

Fine Odraedir Mead

He was hanging on a tree.
Wind was blowing, mastered branches
and dark clouds on the sky.
Brigit flashes raging.

For nine days and long nights,
he was speared and bleeding.
Suffering for better future.
His own victim, Oden.

For those days had no food
no beverage tested his lips.
Just staring into darkness
foggy depths down below.

Sacrifice fulfilled purpose,
when wise Odin behold ruins,
with effort released them.
And he was freed for way back home.

It is said that you have godlike powers
of rhyme and singing if drinking from Odraedir.
The more you drink the better you sing
So taste, this fine mead untakes your fear.

Odraedir, the mead vessel.
Kvasir's blood with honey.
Guarded by Bolthorn's son.
Two dwarfs mixed the potion.

Once Oden found the shelter.
As in haste drunk all mead,
a few drops fell to Midgard.
Poetism unleashed...

It is said that you have godlike powers
of rhyme and singing if drinking from Odraedir.
The more you drink the better you sing
So taste, this fine mead untakes your fear.⁹

We suggest that all three aspects of eso-kitch are apparent in Odraedir's lyrics. First, lyrical themes are easily recognizable for fans of folk metal and deal with genre clichés such as masculine Viking warriors. Second, they feature a strong emotional dimension complete with bloodthirsty Vikings as an example of how Odraedir works with established romantic notions of Pagan culture and mythology. Third, the lyrics' esoteric dimension is simplified and decontextualized inside metal discourse, where for example an old mythological story of the origin of mead serves as an encouragement to drink alcohol at metal concerts.

Image: We Look Like Folk Metalheads, We Are Folk Metalheads

Pagan aesthetics can also be observed in the visual style of Odraedir. The image of the band combines the classic metal "masculine" look (long hair, beards, leather accessories, black T-shirts) with "natural" Pagan elements (white blouses with embroidery made of linen or cotton, clothing made of fur, folkloric jewelry, and other ornaments) (Weinstein 2014: 68). An appropriate "Pagan" image is very important. Why? It increases a band's credibility with fans who actively profess Paganism, while for non-Pagan fans it makes it easier to categorize the group's visual and sonic aesthetic.

The promotional photograph of Odraedir included with *Pagan Forest* features a combination of referents to the aesthetics of folk metal discourses. The musicians are depicted with long flowing hair and wearing clothes of natural earthy colors. Here again, the motif of the forest appears, referring to the connection with nature and the values it represents. The musicians look like typical folk metal musicians with all clichés and stereotypes included.

Another important part of the visual identity of metal bands is the album's covers. How does the cover of *Pagan Forest* (Image no. 2) emphasize Pagan motives? On the cover we find a photograph of a mist-shrouded forest, evoking a sense of wilderness far from civilization, in which the printmaker has inserted the figure of a faceless grey pilgrim accompanied by a horse. Both these motifs – the forest and the pilgrim – are very common within folk metal discourse. In this context, the forest can be interpreted as an ideal place for man to live in harmony with nature, or even with a personalized goddess, Mother Earth (Sage 2009). The figure of the pilgrim refers to archetypes of the sorcerer, the druid, and the tarot card of the Hermit who is depicted in a dark cloak with a lantern.

⁹ Odraedir, *Pagan Forest*, https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Odraedir/Pagan_Forest/341938 (access: 12.6.2019).



Image no. 1. CD Booklet by Odraedir: *Pagan Forest*. Prague – Beroun – Hořice: self-release, 2011.



Image no. 2. Cover of the album *Pagan Forrest* by Odraedir. Praha - Beroun – Hořice: self-release, 2011.

Images of forests are especially common on the covers of folk and black metal¹⁰ albums. The forest is seen as the epitome of nature, a place connected to pre-Christian Paganism and possessing the quality of wild beauty (Sage 2009). It is also a symbol of an idyllic peaceful place in contrast with the “loud” and “noisy” modern

¹⁰ Black metal is characterized by an increased level of misanthropy, individualism, and separation from the mainstream, all of which is embodied by the forest (Kahn-Harris 2007: 29–30).

city. In other words, the use of the forest motif on the cover of *Pagan Forest* represents Odraedir's explicit affiliation with the folk metal scene. It is also important that the word "forest" not only appears in the title of the album but also in the title and subject matter of four songs on the album.¹¹

The band's logo is also important for our analysis of the album cover. The logo is located directly above the figure of the pilgrim, and its stylization refers to the war theme of Odraedir's songs (two swords and two halberds). The weapons are intertwined with a floral element, which reminds us of folk metal's fascination with wild and untamed nature. Together these elements frame the band's name, which is rendered in an archaic-looking font suggesting a stylistic connection to ancient times. The sacralization of the ancient is considered one of the most widespread Pagan reconstruction strategies (Simpson 2012: 11–37). The gothic typeface is widespread in metal iconography (Rossolatos 2015: 633–655), including in the visual elements associated with the black metal band Bathory, often cited as one of the first Pagan metal bands who popularized Viking themes. Odraedir's chosen typographic treatment thus emphasizes the synthesis of modern Pagan and general metal aesthetics.

To summarize, we can observe the first two aspects of eso-kitch: the work centers on appropriate themes and Odraedir represents these themes using easily understandable motifs. Examples include the forest as a representation of untamed nature on the cover of the album and Odraedir's warrior logo as a representation of the Viking raiders cliché.

Discussion: Religious Versus Cultural Paganism

We suggest that eso-kitch is a useful concept for better understanding the construction of the difference in pagan and folk metal aesthetics. This is indeed a tricky task since it is difficult to know when a band is using folk metal tropes in meaningful ways and when a band uncritically evokes folk metal tropes because it is just the thing they do. We believe that the analytical concept of eso-kitch can at least partially help us identify folk metal music that relies on thematic clichés, strong emotional metaphors, and a flattened esoteric dimension.

We argue that eso-kitch in folk metal is part of the wider phenomena of the intertwining of religious and cultural notions within contemporary Paganism. Religious Paganism is essentially synonymous with contemporary Paganism, one stream within a set of new religious movements that focus on the reconstruction of ancient pre-Christian Pagan beliefs. On the other hand, cultural Paganism can be defined as a contemporary Pagan subculture made apparent in dress, music, movies, television, literature, and other media with a strong emphasis on deep ecology, love of nature, pre-Christian European mythologies, and European folk culture. What is important is that cultural Paganism does not require adherents to be Pagan in a religious sense. On top of that, cultural Paganism is a much older phenomenon than the current Pagan religious revival. Perhaps the most illustrious example is the growing interest in Celtic, Old Norse, and Slavic mythology that has been gaining popularity

¹¹ Another possible explanation is that the heavy use of the word "forest" is Odraedir's inside joke on overuse of nature motives in folk metal.

since the second half of the 18th century among British, German, and Slavic intellectuals and artists (Simpson 2000: 49–67; Horák 2018: 90–117). Through this interest, various elements from Paganism “penetrated” popular culture, namely literature (e.g., *Lord of The Rings*), movies (e.g., *Wicker Man*), comic books (e.g., Marvel’s *Thor*), and music (e.g., *Manowar*). In recent decades, music has become a popular medium for cultural Paganism. As Strmiska notes, a modern non-religious Pagan musical subculture coexists alongside modern ritual Pagan music made by contemporary Pagans in the Baltic region (Strmiska 2012). To put it simply, to enjoy the music of *Amon Amarth* you don’t have to be a member of the *Asatru* kindred. Similarly, you can be very deeply invested in contemporary Paganism and still enjoy *Odraedir’s Pagan Forest*.

We suggest that it is modern cultural Pagans together with the non-Pagan consumers of popular music inspired by Paganism in general who are the main composers and consumers (but not exclusively) of eso-kitch folk metal, in which Pagan motives are decontextualized, essentially reduced to ornamentation (Partridge 2004: 62–84). We argue in our analysis that *Pagan Forest* is an expression of cultural Paganism that betrays a certain (eso)kitschiness in the ways that *Odraedir* deploys references to Pagan iconography and myths in their sound, lyrics, and aesthetics. To be clear, the truth of Pagan music or religiosity is beyond the scope of this study. Rather, our research aims to suggest ways to deal with identifying and classifying different qualities of folk metal production.

The fundamental objection that our study must contend with is the validity of the concept of eso-kitch. Is it yet another construct in the tradition of defining “true” art against “pseudo-art”? Is it just another normative idea about the form and character of the artwork? We believe not. We present the category of eso-kitsch as an aesthetic term, one that makes no claims to a work’s value. From our perspective eso-kitsch denotes a specific type of artifact that lacks the quality of profundity, a specific context in which the artifact is located, and a specific way this artifact is used by its consumers.

A second objection may be directed towards the role of the fan of folk metal music and their perception (or use) of these works. While we have included some perspectives from fans and critics in our study, our focus was on analyzing *Pagan Forest* from the perspective of eso-kitsch. To investigate fans’ perceptions of *Odraedir’s* music would require a more sociological and ethnographic approach. Such is the work for future research.

The third objection, concerns with the choice of the material for our analysis namely *Odraedir*, a group that is neither well-known nor the most characteristic example of folk metal. We chose *Odraedir* because the band is, in a word, typical in terms of music, lyrics, and visuality. The focus on the early phase of their work is justified precisely because one possible way of looking at the esoteric is to understand it as a natural developmental stage of spiritual life within the field of Pagan oriented folk metal.

The fourth objection is that we have misread the band’s approach. *Odraedir* may be approaching Pagan clichés with irony, as is suggested in the title of their song “*Asterix and Obelix in Pagan Forest*” and, later in their career, in the music

video for “Back to the Void” from 2021. We believe that humor could have important in the music of Odraedir, but it is not tantamount to mockery or parody of metal in the style of Steel Panther, Spinal Tap, or Gloryhammer. Interviews with band members indeed suggest they are sincere, citing their main influences as Viking culture and love for heavy, melodic metal (Savapip 2017; 2020).

The fifth objection may be that we use Kulka’s theory of kitsch without critical reflection. We believe this Kulka work best describes kitsch as an aesthetic category (regardless of its sociological or ethical implications). As a philosopher connected with analytic philosophy and the aesthetic tradition, Kulka offers an analytical description of kitsch that intentionally ignores the question of value and value judgments. Our study then evaluates if Kulka’s concept, which is based on analysis of visual artifacts, can be used for analysis of music, especially folk metal music.

Conclusion

Our key argument is that the label “commercial”, which appears in listener evaluations of folk metal bands, can also be an aesthetic judgment (not an evaluative one), pointing to the absence of certain qualities; in our opinion, it is about depth. Eso-kitsch can be understood as an analytical tool for definition of a group of artistic artifacts with certain properties.

In the case of Odraedir’s *Pagan Forest*, we meet with a musical form that lacks originality, has poor production values, and displays lackluster performance skills. *Pagan Forest* also heavily relies on clichés connected with folk metal: a heavy guitar sound, growling vocals, lyrical overuse of the word “forest”, and a Viking theme in the band’s album cover and persona.

Eso-kitsch empties the esoteric aspects of an artifact and works with a standardized and simplified form of it. It is also characterized by over-reduction, and is often indulgent and entertaining, without magical or religious aspects. The Czech philosopher Petr Rezek adds: “The nature of kitsch is nonpragmatic. Every nonpragmatic attitude is not kitsch, but every kitsch attitude is nonpragmatic. By that I mean kitsch does not turn towards the thing to which the thought or feeling refers, towards which it is directed, but away from it” (Rezek 1990: 1). Rezek suggests that his domain is primarily emotions. Yet, in the case of the eso-kitsch, his domain is not religiosity nor the search for deep esoteric knowledge, but the emotion of being esoteric.

In interpreting kitsch, there is another important aspect that Kulka mentions: according to him, kitsch can also be understood as a natural developmental stage (Pachmanová, Dvořák 2000: 23–29). It can therefore be considered within pop culture as a kind of early form of esoterism, as in the sense of folk New Age religiosity. It is a kind of stage in an evolutionary process in which one reaches through esoterism to empty spiritual phrases in order to give them new content (Pachmanová, Kulka 2000). In this way, an interesting area for further research concerns the ways that music moves from kitschy cultural Paganism to “profound” Pagan religiosity.

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Discography

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Odraedir, *Troll's Cave*, Independent 2013.

Odraedir, *Legends of the Dark Times*, Independent 2017.

Odraedir, *Treason*, Independent 2021.

Abstract

Some criticism Pagan oriented folk metal music as “commercial”, i.e., created primarily for profit. We are convinced that this distinction is worthless, unmeasurable, and unverifiable from an analytical point of view. However, within a given musical genre, music fans and critics still distinguish very different works in terms of quality. Therefore, we propose to replace the vague term “commercial production” with the term esoteric kitsch (eso-kitsch), which is based on Tomáš Kulka’s analytical-aesthetic theory of kitsch. Using examples from the Czechoslovak folk metal scene, we show that eso-kitsch is a suitable tool for identifying musical creations that are characterized not by economic, creative, or spiritual value but primarily by aesthetic value.

Ezo-kicz w czeskim folk metalu: studium przypadku zespołu Odraedir

Streszczenie

W niektórych mediach można spotkać się z zarzutem, że pogańska muzyka folk-metalowa jest „komercyjna”, tworzona przede wszystkim dla zysku. Jesteśmy przekonani, że takie rozróżnienie jest bezwartościowe, niemierzalne, nieweryfikowalne z analitycznego punktu widzenia. Jednak w obrębie danego gatunku muzycznego fani i krytycy muzycy nadal różnią się bardzo odmiennie pod względem jakości utworów. Dlatego proponujemy zastąpienie niejasnego terminu „produkcja komercyjna” terminem kicz ezoteryczny („ezo-kicz”), który opiera się na analityczno-estetycznej teorii kiczu Tomáša Kulki. Na przykładach z czeskosłowackiej sceny folk-metalowej postaramy się pokazać, że ezo-kicz jest odpowiednim narzędziem do identyfikacji utworów muzycznych, które charakteryzują się nie tyle wartością ekonomiczną, twórczą czy duchową, ile przede wszystkim estetyczną.

Keywords: contemporary Paganism, metal studies, folk metal, kitsch, Czech Pagan music scene

Słowa kluczowe: współczesne pogaństwo, studia nad metalem, folk metal, kicz, czeska scena muzyki pogańskiej

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