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ALTERNATE DISCOURSE: BEES, BIODIVERSITY AND FINNISH METAL

Haralambie Athes

Assist. Lecturer, PhD, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract:Against the background of an increasingly complex popular culture, the environmental discourse has undergone significant changes, its architecture including novel means of expression – besides the rigorous norms of scientific knowledge, it has included popular culture among its tools. The present paper focuses on the multifaceted connection between the agenda for biodiversity, the shifting realities of the contemporary environmental discourse and music as a prominent medium of expression in today's cultural space, showcasing a recent release by the Finnish band Amorphis.

Keywords: biodiversity, ecology, music, popular culture, environmental discourse.

The contemporary media culture has reached a level where concepts such as ecology, environmental protection, pollution and sustainable development are included in its most basic vocabulary, whereas environmental ethics is going through a cultural metamorphosis with negative implications, marked by subtextual anthropocentrism and a collective need for spectacle. However, when it comes to displaying the tenets of the ecological discourse, it is difficult to express its ideas against a background of general comprehension and adequacy. The philosophy of sustainable development is often disorienting, as the audience is either unprepared or unwilling to grasp the main facts because they interfere with modern comfort and culturally-enhanced social needs. The essence of the interaction between man and nature is to be found in a constant choice of the artificial over the natural, and a fragmented display of pseudo-reactions which try to mask a lack of authentic concern and adequate intervention.

On the background of excessive and often disorienting information, media culture theorizes its own version of an ecological utopia, dissolving scientific facts and cultural myths to create an entirely new projection of the interconnectedness man – nature. Instead of promoting a holistic picture of the real ecological issues with which humanity is confronted at present, the rating-oriented philosophy of the media dictates the opposite: it builds a complex bricolage of cultural myths about nature, camouflaged by fake signifiers and a provocative reiteration of the seemingly timeless humanity-versus-nature conflict.

Scientific studies are clear about the risks of technologization and the implementation of economical approaches focusing exclusively on the modern version of progress[1]. These

[1]Here, progress is regarded as the sum of the purely economical and social advances rather than a part in a holistic vision, adequate for sustainable development.

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phenomena have had, as most obvious "side-effects"[2], the destruction and pollution of the natural environment, as well as the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species and the endangering of numerous others. Even though environmental slogans are already clichés through their prominent display in the media, the role of nature itself is reduced to that of limitless provider, a mere source to nourish humanity's progress. The rate of deforestation is already dangerous for the very survival of most of the world's natural habitats, and the dangerous effects of pollution can be felt on land, in air and in water, having a destructive effect on all living species.

The unprecedented demographic expansion is also a more and more obvious threat to the planet's resources, in contradiction with the tenets of sustainable development. With an ecological footprint that threatens the quality of life and even the survival of numerous species, humanity has become an increasingly heavy burden for the planet as a whole. The patches of wilderness that have remained relatively free from human interference are getting smaller, a process that is simultaneous with the accelerated expansion of urban conglomerates that eventually create various instances of the media-acclaimed megalopolis.

On the one hand, there is science, warning humanity about its destructive effect on the natural environment. The mass of sometimes contradicting items of information on the present state of the natural environment is not easily comprehensible, since any valid report implies cross-references from different fields of study, an aspect which only adds to the inherent subjectivity in (re)presenting it. And even though the development of a genuine ecological consciousness is turning into a phenomenon of planetary proportions, its evolution competes with other global trends, such as consumerism, over-industrialization and commodification. Thus, environmental ethics inevitably gets mixed with these trends, so that the final result of combining scientific research with the media-produced image of the ecological status usually swings between the paranoia of imminent environmental disaster and completely ignoring the signs of ecological degradation, at a global level.

On the other hand, there is the sum total of individualities melting in a vast global consciousness. And because neither the individual, nor the community is directly connected to the realm of science, popular culture functions as an interface between science and humanity, and it exhibits all the traits mentioned by the most radical postmodern theories about man, nature and evolution.

The individual finds out about the latest scientific discoveries from brief television shows, from bits and pieces of press releases or from the pseudo-realistic movies presenting state-of-the-art technology. In a repeatedly self-parodic fashion, postmodern rhetoric alters visions, changes perspectives, and abandons clichés only to create new ones. Whether confuse or super-theorized, postmodernism is, as a sum-total of such a variety of heterogenous contributions, a functional discourse that causes an aftermath. The substance of the postmodern perspective is to be found exactly in the difference between its basic concepts and the modern vision, marked by the functionality of totalizing narratives.[3] The two basic assumptions which had constituted the foundation of modernism were the continuous progress of humanity, on the one hand, and the triumph of science, on the other. Scrutinized with suspicion by the postmodern cultural mechanism, both narratives gradually lose their credibility, to such a degree that they cannot

[2]The quotation marks point towards a generalized attitude regarding the natural environment, an attitude that places human needs on top of any list and the preservation of habitat at the bottom

[3] François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge,* trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 34

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function as means of legitimation (having lost their own legitimacy, in the light shed by the renewed vision) or as sources of validating the ideology based on the good/ bad, positive/ negative, order/ disorder dichotomy. Postmodernism brings along and enacts a relativization of boundaries, an eradication of any totalizing principles; any strict delineation serves this only purpose, to create new suspicions, to raise new question marks. Modernism exhibited a tendency to perceive the world and humanity in a fragmentary fashion, grieving the lack of unity and coherence. In the modernist vision, art is the only relief for the disruptive loss of the ability to comprehend the vital, ultimate truths and meanings. The same loss is contemplated by postmodernism not with the somber attitude of lament, but rather with the detachment – if not even with the superficiality – of a game. Moreover, several views are simultaneous, according to Lyotard[4]: realism, modernism and postmodernism coexist, at any given moment in time, in each and every culture, abiding by various modes of representation. The degree of relativism provided by the deconstruction theory only added energy to the already effervescent manner in which these concepts were metamorphosized, fragmented and eventually reconstructed so as to unravel new meanings. Deconstructivism, in this respect, took it as its mission the demolition of one of the most important functional myths of Western philosophy, the one holding reason as the ultimate condition of accessing knowledge and providing an appropriate, adequate relationship with reality. For Jacques Derrida, reason, permanently marked by what he calls "the metaphysics of presence",[5] is altered by logocentrism, by the belief that there is an immediate, indisputable connection between language and reality, acting as a foundation for thought and, consequently, for knowledge. Refusing to accept the existence of absolute truth in the word, deconstructivism denies the totalizing claims of language as an efficient tool of an ideal – or at least objective – representation. The fundamental thesis of deconstructivism is based upon unravelling the word (and language in general), upon stripping it from the conventions and ideologies that construct a certain meaning, simultaneously identifying the multitude of novel possible meanings, hidden behind the apparent, but subject, in their turn, to unsubstantiality, contradiction and relativity.

However, deconstruction is not equivalent to the abolishment of the semantic functionality of language, but seeks to surpass the conceptual mechanisms that are too rigid, of internal contradictions that do not enable the elaboration of innovative contextual significations.[6]

The basic argument employed by Derrida to support his theory was that of the perpetual relativity inherent in the concept of "truth" – of primary importance in any critical interrogation. Reality, tangent to truth, cannot be defined in a direct manner, since its possibility of referentiality is ultimately based upon a particular hypostasis of language. With language being of essentially human design, the relationship between language and reality is not direct, but mediated and constructed, multiplied by a complex cultural mechanism and reproduced as an alphabet of understanding for each generation, as norm. Derrida's ideas can also be applicable to music, since music is often referred to as an universal language; music is also one of the most prominent elements of mass culture – the best argument for this is the status offered to musicians and the impact their words and actions have on their fans. Musicians are revered as role models, moral authorities and life coaches. Hence, the influence music has on the individual is inherently much more significant than the one held by science and scientists. Moreover, music can

[4] François Lyotard, op. cit., p. 60
[5] Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles,* trans. Barbara Harlow, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, p.73
[6] Steven Best, Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, Guilford Press, New York, 1997, p. 82

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complete the message of language, adding new dimensions of significance, as it activates most of the brain's regions, making the individual more prone to connect to the ideas expressed by it. So, besides exercising an easily identifiable form of cultural leverage, music also affects the individual at an organic level. Reality eludes direct experimentation, it cannot be directly interiorized, but rather needs the intervention of subtle linguistic games, the use of pre-established codes. Meaning is not simply decoded, it is permanently negotiated on the basis of certain systems of a cultural construct – language. Reality is not perceived, but interpreted by way of the logocentrical arsenal of each culture, a system of codes systematically modified. Music readily supplements a certain perception of reality, adding intricate layers of significance and further metamorphosizing views.

One of the dominant mechanisms of postmodern representation is the pastiche, implying the imitation of various styles and surprising combinations. Pastiche is also identifiable across the entire music scene, with different genres borrowing elements from others and influencing each other, with the same themes altered according to the structural norms and means of expression characteristic to each genre.

Postmodern society is based on models other than objective reality. These models – defined through an analogy with Borges' fable, in which the map precedes the territory – have ceased to reflect reality: the relationship between original and copy is revearsed. It is reality which tries to mimic the copy, it is the real which attempts to reproduce the dimensions of imitation.[7] The ecological discourse and the principles of environmental protection are being left to swim in the sea of contradictions, question marks and half-truths filled by globalization, hypertechonologization and the explosive development of communication systems.And even though the development of a genuine ecological consciousness is turning into a phenomenon of planetary proportions, its evolution competes with other global trends, such as consumerism, over-industrialization and commodification. Thus, environmental ethics inevitably gets mixed with these trends, so that the final result of combining scientific research with the media-produced image of the ecological status usually swings between the paranoia of imminent environmental disaster and completely ignoring the signs of ecological degradation.

Neo-pragmatism and postmodernism have developed a critique of the ecological ideology, but from a rather anthropocentric position, as they first considered politics, democracy and social dynamics, theorizing the laws governing social evolution and interaction, and not the ways in which humanity relates to its environment. Not even ecophilosophy[8] – the very field that was supposed to assess the solid connection between humans and nature, and the dissemination of information back and forth between these two different, but interconnected, dimensions, has failed to leave the anthropocentric view aside completely. Again, stress fell on economics and technological issues – the disappearance of natural environment and its gradual replacement by technology-bound elements, not the possible solutions to prevent this from happening. The

[7] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1984, p. 3

[8] Professor Arne Naess, who coined the term, defines it as "a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of sofia (or) wisdom, is openly normative, it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe. Wisdom is policy wisdom, prescription, not only scientific description and prediction. The details of an ecosophy will show many variations due to significant differences concerning not only the 'facts' of pollution, resources, population, etc. but also value priorities."(in *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology,* eds. Drengson, Alan and Yuichi Inoue, North Atlantic Publishers, Berkeley, 1995, p. 8)

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academic medium itself has manifested a calculated indifference towards the ecological issues brought up by the scientific community. The growing public awareness regarding the ecological crisis has consumed significantly less ink compared to purely philosophical debates, compared to formal ideological controversies.

The clash between attempts to raise public awareness and the anti-ecological propaganda, misrepresented in the media and intentionally modified by political, economic or national interests, did not have the adequate representation in popular culture, and what happened was that humanity increasingly lost contact with nature. The relativism that has been so present in the whole postmodern ideology also had another effect, besides questioning universal narratives: it eventually led to a crippled understanding of ecological and ethical discourses.

This is where the Finnish metal music comes into play. Being the result of a national folklore extremely rich in nature-related symbols, with totemic animals and a deeply ingrained belief in the interconnectedness man – wild, on the one hand, and of the fast evolving realities of the (post)modern world, on the other, Finnish metal is nothing short of an institution, spreading its influence at a global level and continuously gaining recognition in mainstream popular culture. In this context, when a band like Amorphis, one of the most renowned Finnish bands, releases a single titled "The Bee" as musical and conceptual introduction to the new album "Queen of Time" (out on May 18th 2018), the seeds of an ecological discourse becomes obvious, especially when we take into account the band's perpetual use of Kalevala as a source of lyrical inspiration, and the omnipresence of Finland's national animal, the bear, and Finland's national bird, the swan, among the band's frequently used motifs. The vast majority of Amorphis songs approach monumental themes, the universe of man and nature and the unseen forces that bind them through space and time, and "The Bee" is not different. Among the possible interpretations of the lyrics, one which is directly connected to the concept of biodiversity – this particular interpretation is backed even by Tomi Joutsen, the vocalist of the band.[9]

The idea that pollinators in general – and bees in particular – are a vital component of the natural environment is central in all theories regarding biodiversity, the sustainability of ecosystems and species survival. As bees travel several kilometres on their foraging trips for nectar, they represent an essential facet of maintaining and restoring plant populations.[10] Consequently, the absence of bees does not only affect the natural environment, but also crop production and human welfare. "The Bee" displays a monumental close-up to the flight of a conceptual bee, one which represents the totality of bees and their significance; majestically dominating mortality – played by humans, with their dreams of riches and fame – the bee brings life back to a lifeless world. Viewed from a human perspective, the lyrics[11] portray a universe where human destinies have already perished, and the only source of awakening is nature, symbolized by the bee.

[9] In an interview, Tomi declared: ""Of course, the lyrical inspiration is a bee, also in a metaphoric way. The tiniest thing can sometimes be the most important thing. A bee can bring life or if we destroy all the bees, life will stop here. It's a very beautiful animal, that's why you can find it on the album cover too."

[10] Krystyna M. Urbanska, Nigel R. Webb, Peter J. Edward, Restoration Ecology and Sustainable Development, Cambrige University Press, 1997, p. 114

[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf_4uvymwRw - The official lyric video posted on youtube by Amorphis.

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A fire in the sky
Ablaze the spark beyond the stars
Its gleaming wings will cut their way
Through the silent paths of space

Planets whirl, suns are lit
Mountains fly, stars are dimmed
Its golden sabres tear through time

In the night of the river of death
Fly the silent prince electors

On the banks of Tuonela
Bleach the skeletons of kings
Their skulls of sugar sickly sweet
Their bones piled up on the shore

On bed of mottled rocks
Amid flowers cold as ice
Pray the weak, the old, the poor

And when the tiny one from heaven comes
Crawls inside the chosen skull
And when the tiny one it summons the others
To crawl inside the chosen skull

They build their castles in the heads of kings
Bring life to the empty halls
They build their castles in the heads of kings
And honey will flow once more, once more

In the night of the river of death
Fly the silent prince electors

And when the tiny one from heaven comes
Crawls inside the chosen skull
And when the tiny one it summons the others
To crawl inside the chosen skull

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Along the line of interpreting the lyrics according to the principles of biodiversity and sustainable development, the meaning is a somber one for mankind: nature can survive without humans, but humans cannot survive without nature, as they fail to understand the cosmic dynamics of the intertwined fate between Man and Wild. All that was once defined as the greatness of the former, the absolute symbol of human supremacy – the kings – is now obliterated and ridiculous, while the only real constructive energy belongs to a seemingly irrelevant creature that in fact holds the key for resurrection. Amidst an often confusing cultural landscape, with ecological discourses dissolved in anthropocentrism and consumerism, where environmentalism is more often than not reduced to pseudo-involvement on social media, a powerful message sent by a highly acclaimed metal band can reach a much broader audience compared to the unsubstantial one of science. Drawing attention upon an imminent ecological crisis seems a task for scientists, but since the (post)modern individual is inevitably lost in the Nature versus Culture dichotomy, popular culture seems to have picked up the glove thrown by environmentalism, and mainstream Finnish metal – through Amorphis and "The Bee" – has become an adequate vehicle for meanings. Music functions here as discourse, and the voice of ecology and environmental protection sounds a lot like growling.

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Internet resources

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf_4uvymwRw

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