

Norwegian Native Art. Cultural identity in Norwegian metal music. Imke von Helden. 2017. Münster: LIT Verlag. 200 p, softcover. ISBN 978-3-643-90880-3. 39.90€.

I must have walked the earth somewhat blindfolded (or ignorant, for that matter): having listened to metal music for more than 25 years it has only rather recently come to my attention that there is an entire field of studies devoted to the analysis of heavy metal: Metal Studies. And the present dissertation is but one example of the scholarly analysis of this genre – or as von Helden puts it “community”. As the title of the book implies, this study is not about heavy metal *en gros*, but rather about black and Viking metal—or “Norse-themed metal music”—performed by Norwegian bands.

The reader unfamiliar with this topic may wonder: why Norway? The answer is rather simple: because extreme metal is one of Norway’s main musical exports, and the marker “True Norwegian Black Metal” has become a (self-made) label for bands fulfilling certain criteria for ‘true’ black metal.

In *Norwegian Native Art* the author analyses the lyrical, visual and sonic elements of Norwegian Norse-themed bands to decipher how the bands’ understanding of the North or Northernness is produced. Based on a qualitative analysis, which also includes interviews with bands themselves, von Helden has generated an insightful study of narratives attached to the North—such as nature, climate, animals and mythology—and how these are further interpreted and used by bands. To paint a comprehensive picture, the author goes beyond contemporary music, albeit this being the main body of her work, and provides a brief backdrop on the Viking Age, the emergence of a national consciousness in Norway, and how the contemporary image of the Vikings has found its way into popular belief. Moreover, von Helden engages in a discussion on identity and culture, which, in my opinion, poignantly summarises key points in the discussions surrounding these concepts without overly dwelling on them. The reader, potentially unfamiliar with both the theory and the historical backdrop of this study, is thus well prepared to enter the substantive part of the analysis.

The material von Helden has reviewed is indeed expansive, allowing her to paint a picture of what being Norwegian means in this socio-cultural and historical context. What struck me very positively is the mentioning of the Sámi people (p. 46) and their in principle non-existent role in (Norwegian) metal culture. While von Helden is surprised by this fact, I would claim that Sámi issues are quite generally rather little considered in popular culture in Scandinavia. Metal music is thus no exception to this. In light of the introductory chapters concerning identity and culture, a more thorough investigation of why Sámi issues are not part and parcel of Norwegian metal would have been extremely interesting and relevant in order to determine the normative standing of the Sámi within this subculture. This being said, the Sámi are not the main focus of von Helden’s work and my comments in this regard are not to be seen as a criticism of the present book, but rather as an inspiration for further research.

Concerning the focus of the work, I am, however, a little uncertain as to how the bands were chosen. The analysis essentially centres around three bands from which the author has drawn most of her material: Enslaved, Helheim and Glittertind. Even though the author notes that she focuses on five bands in her analysis (p. 22), two of them remain essentially unexplained, and bands such as Einherjer, Dimmu Borgir, Burzum, Satyricon and Wardruna also constitute part of the analysis. Moreover, whereas Enslaved and Helheim are given a brief introduction to the reader (pp. 24–27), Glittertind is not. Instead, the Oslo-based band Solefald is introduced (p. 27), which I personally would not have linked with Norse-themed metal, and which does not contribute more to the narrative than the other aforementioned bands. In a way, the bands whose material is analysed appear to have been chosen arbitrarily, particularly with the insertion of female-fronted Leaves’ Eyes as a source for analysis (p. 138), but given the vast number of bands that are Norse-themed a degree of arbitrariness is probably unavoidable. And for a single researcher to analyse *all* Norwegian bands concerning their Norse theme is too huge a task to be accomplished. Moreover, by referencing Leaves’ Eyes, von Helden proves an important point: it is hard to find a Norwegian Norse-themed metal band that has female members, and by including this band she “tried to expand the perspective on gender” (p. 165)—itself an interesting and relevant field of research for a better understanding of metal culture.

There are indeed many findings in this book that are worth discussing on their own and I’m sure that each reader will find his or her own subject of interest. For me as a long-term metal

listener it was particularly interesting to read von Helden's summarising findings, which show that there are essentially five elements that Norse-themed bands make consistent use of: the Norwegian nature; their own interpretation and portrayal of history; religious aspects relating to northern Germanic polytheism and the 'intrusion' of Christianity onto Norwegian lands; Norwegian identity; and, ultimately, the overall aesthetics of the metal culture. For me, these findings have always intuitively been there, but to see them empirically proven is an eye-opening result of the study of this book.

In the last part of the book, von Helden allows five bands, including Enslaved, to reflect upon their own stance on Norse issues. Apart from Enslaved, the other bands remain anonymous, following the wishes of the bands themselves. This part I found extremely insightful, as it sheds light on the different motivations and self-understandings of the bands in question. Particularly relevant—also for other contexts in which images, imageries and narratives play a role—is the question of where the musicians got their information from. Here, "self-study" (p. 151) of the Viking Age and mythology appear to be the main source of knowledge. For the consumer of the music, this is, of course, not evident, and similar to movies, Norse-themed metal bands convey messages of the Viking Age based on their own interpretations, not necessarily corresponding

to historical fact. Ultimately this bears dangers concerning the romanticisation or transfiguration of the Viking Age, particularly for mere consumers of the music, but on the other hand Norse-themed metal is an art form and does not follow restrictions other than those that are self-imposed by metal culture itself.

Norwegian Native Art is a fascinating study of the rich world of heavy metal. It is not only a source of a wealth of information for those interested in metal itself, but also for those *not* interested in the genre, as von Helden's writing style is both personal and informative, making the music, the musicians and the imagery understandable and accessible. One does not need to like the music to find *Norwegian Native Art* a fascinating read. The occasional typo and editorial glitch (such as a reproduction of the same paragraph on p. 161 and in footnote 570) do not impair the flow of the book and I can only applaud Imke von Helden for her work. I say this both as a scholar and a listener of heavy metal and I would wholeheartedly recommend this book to scholars and consumers of music, culture and the arts. (Nikolas Sellheim, Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science (HELSUS), University of Helsinki, PO Box 4, 00014 Helsinki, Finland (nikolas.sellheim@helsinki.fi))

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