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„Metal Studies in Central/Eastern Europe: 1st (online) Workshop“ on Extreme Music and its Academic Studies

JANA NENADALOVÁ – TEREZA MENŠÍKOVÁ

Metal Studies in the Czech Republic has begun a new era by establishing an official network of central and eastern European researchers: Metal Studies in Central/Eastern Europe (MSCEE). To demonstrate a shift in local metal studies towards international cooperation, Miroslav Vrzal – the head of Czech Metal Studies – recently organized MSCEE’s first online workshop. Academic studies of metal music are still a young and relatively small field of research, centering its interest not only on the music itself (and on the bands playing it) but also on rich related issues concerning sociology, religion, semiotics, folklore, gender, mythology, art, etc. Specifically, MSCEE’s first workshop aimed to cover five major topics: a) the development, current status, situation, and prospects of metal studies in central and eastern Europe (CEE); b) current/previous research of CEE scholars interested in metal studies; c) metal scenes in CEE; d) the specifics of CEE metal considering communist and post-communist history; and e) religion and metal in individual CEE countries. Thus, shortly before Christmas, participants from Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland met online with Czech researchers to discuss extreme music, present various perspectives on its study, and strengthen their future collaboration.

Morning panel

The workshop officially began in the early morning on 8th December 2021 with a warm welcome to the participants and a festive presentation of the newly established network “Metal Studies in Central/Eastern Europe” by the organizer Miroslav Vrzal. After the introduction, the floor was turned over to a keynote speaker, Professor Karl Spracklen from Leeds School of Sciences at Leeds Beckett University. In his very per-



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sonal speech, “The Genesis and Evolution of Metal Music Studies”, Professor Spracklen introduced the history of metal music studies in the context of his academic journey towards the study of metal. He noted the changes that the studies have undergone in recent decades, the resurgent interest in this musical genre, and its connection to the study of subcultures and capitalism, and also paid attention to the issues of racism and sexism. As one of the co-founders of the International Society for Metal Music Studies and the first Principal Editor of the journal *Metal Music Studies*, Spracklen shared his views on the overall evolution of the field and its possible future directions. The lecture inspired a fruitful discussion about the personal approach to metal fandom and the need to elaborate on methodological approaches that are (more or less) prevalent in metal studies.

The keynote lecture was followed by a paper by Miroslav Vrzal from the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University, focusing more specifically on the development of metal studies in the Czech Republic. In his contribution “Czech Metal Studies: Overview, Challenges, Perspectives”, Vrzal presented the origination of metal studies from the research of music subcultures in the Czech Republic and discussed both challenges facing the field and its future goals with respect to public presentation, local and international cooperation, and the effort to extend the research focus beyond the study of black metal and its relation to religion.

The next paper, “Pagan metal in the Czech Republic: An Introduction” by Michal Puchovský from the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University, retained its focus on the Czech Republic but examined the connection between metal studies and local Neopagan communities. Puchovský introduced his analysis of two influential Pagan discourses (scientific and neopagan) and a general overview of the Czech Pagan black metal and doom metal scenes. In conclusion, he highlighted various strategies of using Pagan motives in contemporary metal music that suggest important interconnectivity between pagan and metal discourses and culture.

The last contribution of the morning panel was dedicated to musical semiotics and the philosophy of music. Vojtěch Volák from the Department of Electronic Culture and Semiotics at Charles University, in his paper “Heaviness: Key Concept of Metal Music Through Lenses of Deleuzian Philosophy”, examined the concept of heaviness and its quality as one of the main elements of metal music. He aimed to create a possible interpretation of the concept based on the philosophy of difference and the notion of intensity by Gilles Deleuze. The panel later concluded with a discussion regarding the subjectiveness of listening experience and musical expression.

Afternoon panel

After the lunch break, Ondřej Daniel from Charles University and the University of Music and Performing Arts (Austria) opened the second part of the workshop with his talk “Metal Denim Jacket: Fans through the Lens of Material and Immaterial Culture”. His broader interest in post-socialist youth subcultures led him to study metal audiences, particularly their specific DIY product: jeans jackets sewn with badges and patches of fans’ favorite bands. According to Ondřej Daniel, these jackets can be understood as a bridge between the material and spiritual/mental dimension of culture and seen as a specific human practice, inscribing common items with culturally significant content. And since his research is still ongoing, he introduced more specific questions regarding metal denim jackets and opened them up for discussion at the end of his contribution.

Reinhard Kopanski from Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg in Germany then presented his paper “German Metal Studies: (Inter-) National challenges”, which mapped the current situation regarding metal studies in Germany. The actual extent of German metal studies was – for many listeners – surprising, notwithstanding the fact that according to Reinhard Kopanski, metal music was, for a long time, largely overlooked in German musicological studies. The situation today is very different, with Kopanski reporting the existence of over 40 academic books, anthologies, and monographs on metal. Thus, German metal studies represents a large field with great potential for international discussion, although due to its limitation to German speakers, it currently remains a rather niche interest. Thanks to Reinhard Kopanski’s talk, however, and the lively interest of the workshop audience, this limitation may soon be overcome.

The following talk, “Polish Metal Music Studies. The Current State of Research and Future Directions”, was delivered by Jakub Kosek from the Pedagogical University of Cracow. Similarly to the previous talk, he introduced the current situation with respect to Polish metal studies, its history, and future possibilities – including the enlargement of international cooperation, apparently needed for any local metal studies. To reinforce and further push such cooperation, Kosek presented a call for papers for the special issue of *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Cultura* 14/2, 2022, on “Metal Music Studies in Central and Eastern Europe. Subject Areas, Research Methods and Perspectives”. Let’s see how many MSCEE workshop attendants will contribute with their papers!

Following a short break, Karolina Karbownik from the Polish SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities opened her talk, “Black Metal Guarding Folk Culture. Rituals, Symbols and Gestures in the Work

of Batushka”. As might be expected from the title, she took us deep into the folklore world of rural Poland, closely connected to the rituals, teachings, and aesthetics of the Orthodox Church. According to Karbownik, the black metal band Batushka heavily borrows inspiration from rural orthodox folklore (after all, the band’s name Batushka is originally a name for an Orthodox priest), combining blasphemous motives with positive (romantic) affirmations of the Orthodox Church. These influences are strongly present in Batushka’s work, from the album cover art to the typical scents and other ritual tools used during mass-like concerts. Therefore, Karolina Karbownik believes that the band somehow preserves old folk and Church traditions and fills them with new meaning.

János Fejes from the Hungarian Pázmány Péter Catholic University gave the final talk of the workshop. His paper “‘Mythological Occult Metal’ – Towards a Quantitative Understanding of Mythology Driven Metal Lyrics” opened a window onto his current project, focusing on the quantitative analysis of mythological motives in metal lyrics using the *Encyclopedia Metallum* online archive. Besides classical Viking mythology, he also tracks Greek/Hellenistic, Celtic, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Old Testament narrative motives (while keeping in mind the possibility also to track mythologies from the rest of the world, e.g., from Africa). Since János Fejes wrote his Ph.D thesis on the quantitative analysis of mythological metal lyrics, he presented his qualitative analysis as the backbone of his planned wider volume, in which older qualitative studies should serve as illustrations for newly gathered quantitative summa.

The future of “Metal Studies in Central/Eastern Europe”

The workshop – comprising individual contributions – concluded with an expert discussion on the future of metal studies in central/eastern Europe. The participants unanimously agreed on regularly holding metal studies workshops and organizing a conference on metal and religion in 2022. Future challenges facing metal studies and future directions for the field were presented in terms of the need to make research connections to studies of popular culture and to expand to other eastern European countries. The last information presented at the workshop was a detailed Call for Papers for a special issue of *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Cultura* 14/2, 2022. Overall, through its open format and engaging content, the workshop introduced the academic network “Metal Studies in Central/Eastern Europe” to the local and international academic community and created an inspirational space where community, collaboration, and friendship can thrive in the future.

We are looking forward to its further development!