

Frost (Satyricon): Black metal is a unique genre

With “Deep Calleth Upon Deep” Satyricon recorded admittedly one of the most interesting albums of 2017. Despite the presence of several intriguing tracks, just to mention “Ghost of Rome” or “To Your Brethren in the Dark”, they weren’t everything listeners paid attention to. It was the cover art – a widely unknown lithography by Edvard Munch, “The Kiss of Death” – that aroused bigger interest. As Frost, Satyricon’s drummer, told me before the band’s gig in Dresden, the visual aspects have always been as important as the musical ones. That’s why we focused on these elements in our conversation.

Alicja Sułkowska: The things I’d like to start with are Satyricon’s music videos. You’ve actually managed to go the whole way from a traditional video clip (“Mother North”), through live and lyric videos, to short movie like “To Your Brethren in the Dark”. Do you think that evolution was needed?

Frost: Absolutely, particularly because we ourselves wanted this kind of development. We wouldn’t have bothered to make a music video if we felt it was meaningless – we don’t make music videos just for the sake of making music videos (laughs). We want them to be part of the art that Satyricon creates because we care a lot about aesthetics and visual aspects of being a band. Furthermore, black metal itself is a very visual and special genre. These were the aspects we wanted to explore and exploit and make the best out of it. As we started with “Mother North”, it wasn’t just Satyricon’s first serious music video, but also one of the first black metal music videos in general. It was a new territory for us, and we just had to feel our way into it. You also have to remember that we have a very limited budget, so we couldn’t execute all of the ideas we had. And because the money we had at our disposal back then was so limited, we had to accept what we had. Hence, we financed it ourselves, and finding a professional who would work with us was difficult enough. But it all started there – obviously, from today’s point of view, the results of our work look incredibly amateurish, and it’s very far from something we would have done today, but, as I said, it was just a start. That made it possible for us to gain experience and to understand the whole format we were working with. It all brought us to the point that we were able to film “Fuel For Hatred” with a fantastic director who understood our music well and could build a powerful team with Satyricon. These experiences literally showed us a new world. Since then we based on a fix combination of the band, performing and trying to make the energy and vibe of the band come true with the music video while being linked with some striking visual elements that emphasize the atmosphere of the song. Lastly, with “To Your Brethren in The Dark” we have had enough of that ancient concept we were using. Also, because of the topic of the song itself, we would have rather not had the band performing in the video, as the song calls for something being closer in form to a short movie. It’s something that carries a very artistic spirit and also something melancholic and dark, a bit raw and naked, just as a song does – therefore we decided on that particular form.

Despite visible differences, “Mother North” and “To Your Brethren in the Dark” share some common motifs, such as rituals, important roles of women, or scenery. Did you notice these analogies as you were working on your newest music video?

I’d rather say it’s a kind of coincidence. “Mother North” obviously needed some kind of female element due to the lyrics, like nature elements in a female form. Actually, these are present in “To Your Brethren in the Dark” as well, as it contains the feminine manifestation

of the spirit of nature. Makes sense and it happened to be in both songs, although they are of course very different in terms of feeling, expression, and style.

You've mentioned that the visual aspects have always been important for Satyricon. Would you say that during all these years you've managed to create kind of the set of certain aesthetic associations connected with your music?

Certainly, and I hope the listeners of our music see it in the same way as we do (laughs). We used to care about that a lot when we were younger. When we were listening to old Bathory or Celtic Frost albums the visuals mattered a lot. What you picture in your head while listening to music intents to be a cover motif. We come from the era of vinyl when visuals tend to be much more impressive than in case of CDs or digital files – the cover was bigger, sometimes there were posters and other things inside, there was much more to it. It mattered a lot to us, and as we were drawn to actually performing this style of music ourselves, we brought the experience with us because it was part of our upbringing and the idea of the whole thing. We have always wanted to do the same when listeners get a Satyricon record. The cover art should suit the music, having the cover in front of you or just picturing it in your head as you listen to music, should be compatible with artwork that belongs to the album. Music and artwork should connect in a way and it is something we've always cared about. And because Satyricon's sound has been developing that much through years, so did the artwork and the album covers.

I believe you've somehow sensed that I'll ask you about the album cover... On "The Kiss of Death", similar to other Munch's works, the fact of "being in between" plays an important role: whether between love and hate, life and death, or literary in form of bridges, which often appear on the artist's paintings. In which way do this idea and other main guidelines in expressionism and neoimpressionism find their reflection in the album?

"The Kiss of Death" is one of the Munch's pictures that are less known to the wide public. Quite exclusively the art connoisseurs or those who particularly enjoy his art were familiar with this lithography. But to others "The Kiss of Death" is more unknown, or perhaps even an obscure picture. Satyr has always valued Munch, has been to Munch Museet several times and is very fond of his artwork. And still, he hasn't seen that graphic until last spring when he got hold of the digital catalogue of the less known Munch's artwork, which were supposed to be the part of the upcoming exhibition. As he was searching through different pictures in the catalogue, he noticed "The Kiss of Death" and, according to him, he immediately felt connected with it. He seemed to realize that he was looking at an album cover, as it connected with him personally, and it connected with songs on the album and its general vibe. If he had ever hired an artist to make a cover motif for an album, it couldn't have been better in any way. It's such a coincidence that two artworks exist within such a strong and striking parallel.

Munch had a very physical style in his pictures. He painted with rough edges, you can see a lot of texture, but still in not such an extended way as in "The Kiss of Death", which is very raw organic, and direct. It caused some controversies back then when Munch painted it, mostly because of the style, but that how Munch wanted it to be and later also how we wanted it to be. For us, it fitted perfectly because it's exactly how we feel about "Deep Calleth Upon Deep" as an album. Like the picture, it's very expressive, but also raw, naked, direct, and sometimes simpler in form towards greater expression and strong emotional record. Basically, everything you'll find in that picture, you can also find musically on the album. Its themes suits the artwork perfectly as well, it's a parallel to where Satyricon is as a

band. This sense of drama in the picture is also preserved in the feel of the music. Of course, last but not least, "The Kiss of Death" is also a beautiful work of art!

It's quite common to use words from the world of visual arts while describing or naming music genres – like colors in black, white, or bleak metal. Do you think the visuals and aesthetics can define the music while being exchangeable with it?

It would be a bit too far, I suppose. Black metal is unique by being defined first and foremost by the atmosphere in the music and emotions it evokes. Everything further in the understanding of a genre is based on that rather than on technical definition. It's really not about lo-fi production, shrieking vocals, blast beats, and heavily distorted guitars, it's even not about the corpse paint or use of satanic and occult symbols. It's about energy, attitude, and feeling of it, more like in blues or punk. I guess basically all other types of metal have a technical definition. Death metal is about the particular type of sound, particular kind of vocals, typically also string by string themes, thick sound... If it doesn't have these elements, you can't really put it in the death metal genre, it just doesn't belong there. Sometimes the lyrics also should revolve around death, but it can be done in a very unserious way, without bothering much about it. But black metal is different. For instance, I consider Mercyful Fate a black metal band, and they based their music on straightforward heavy metal sound or even on a good dose of rock'n'roll. The very first black metal bands, in general, were very rock'n'roll based, later the bands have more typically belonged in the extreme metal genre. But it's not really about the pace or sound, it's about the atmosphere. There are many ways of expressing it, and hence there is something very unique about it, which is important to preserve if the genre is supposed to have its meaning at all.

(because I've already exceeded the time limit for the interview, I looked at the door)

Do you think they'll kick me out or should I just leave by myself?

No, no, it's okay, keep asking.

Similar as the picture, music can be interpreted in many ways as well. While promoting "Deep Calleth Upon Deep", Napalm Records released a few short films in their "Track by track" series, where Satyr talked about every song on the album. Would you say that kind of interpretive approach is needed today?

Not at all, but interesting for sure. Certain people may even enjoy the album more by gaining some insight into the composers' plans, and perhaps will then listen to it in a different way. It can be an interesting element or something that sparks interest. But needed? Not at all. Like all types of art, music has to be open to interpretation. Whatever I tell you our songs are about, it still can differ from your personal perception of it. If it doesn't hit you in the first place, well, it probably won't change your mind just because I'll tell you how great a certain interpretation is or that you should stick to it. But if you're open to it and interested to hear something new, it may perhaps arouse even more interest. Then you'd maybe listen to the album in a different way and experience things you'd otherwise wouldn't have.

Thank you for the interview!