



# Morrissey made me do it!

## Popular music and extremism Views from Italian kitchens

by Giacomo Bottà Images by Marlies Pöschl



*We are in an Italian kitchen on a Sunday in 1985 and a typical Italian mother is serving a roast for lunch to Stefano, her son. Stefano says: “Mamma, I’d rather not eat this. I decided to become a vegetarian. Can I have some boiled cabbage instead?” Stefano’s mother is shaken and hurt. She doesn’t know what a vegetarian eats. She only knows her son listens to too much music and she is scared of the satanic backward messages you can find on records.*



A few days before, Stefano had bought The Smiths’ LP *Meat is Murder* and was impressed, deciding never to eat meat again. Going vegetarian in the land of prosciutto crudo and mortadella was an extremist decision. It was well beyond the borders of the ordinary, in regard to the cultural trait that is food, which was/is at the heart of Italian-ness.

However, what is interesting for us is that Stefano became a food extremist because of a record. The extreme act of depriving himself from animal proteins makes him feel a bond to a band, to a group of fans and to a certain lifestyle; he adopts it as the signifier of who he really is. This is the secret of much extremism connected to popular music, it is adopted as an individualisation process; it makes young people feel real.

Let’s now time travel to an Italian kitchen in 2012, Stefano is still vegetarian and he is sitting next to his teenage son, Luca. Luca is 16, has long hair, a pentagram hangs on his neck and he is wearing a t-shirt from his favourite band, Burzum, from Norway. The singer of Burzum served time in prison for murder and for church burning. Luca has some basic notions about Satanism, mostly from Wikipedia and from some interviews with Burzum he found on the net and he doesn’t consider himself a real Satanist. He just finds black metal to be really good music and he likes the goat skulls imagery and the ancient Nordic connections. He wants to study old Norse when he gets to college. Despite listening to extreme music and sharing the look, Luca has some ironic distance towards its extremist ideology.

When we talk about “extreme music”, the sound in our head is always close to a distorted and confused noise. This has been there since the beginning: in the 1950s Elvis sounded like a screaming monkey to the older generations and his supposed influence on juvenile crime and rebelliousness were openly condemned. New genres are born every day, keeping popular music extreme, and it is still clearly a sign of ageing when someone suddenly realises their inability to understand the new. To me, this happened with “Speedcore”, a sub-genre of techno, which rarely drops below 300 beats per minute (an average song has 120).

We talk of extreme metal, for instance, when we are referring to the fastest and most distorted variety of metal. Satanism and/or paganism are thought to be simply embedded in this sound; they are the fries that we always expect with the steak. Interestingly this doesn’t happen with classical music: the German composer Richard Wagner made wide use of thundering basses and complex gloomy orchestrations, however no one thinks of his music as extreme or as linked in any ways to extremism, even if – coincidentally or not – it was widely popular in Nazi Germany.

The association between extreme music and extremism is of course not a given. Young people definitely tend to identify certain extreme sounds with extreme feelings like hate, anger and frustration but this doesn’t necessary lead to extreme behaviours in society. Sometimes extreme sounds have a cathartic effect and young people immerse themselves in them to handle certain feelings, for instance when they use earphones, which build a “bubble” to defend oneself or create the right soundtrack for a hostile environment.

Popular music has also developed, throughout its history, deep relations with political extremism, whether of left- or right-wing connotation. This is mostly based on the weakness or better the malleability of music. Any kind of music can become a vehicle of political thoughts and ideologies. For instance, if not referring to some minor semiotic elements and sometimes to lyrics, it is very difficult to distinguish a neo-Nazi punk band from an apolitical one or a Christian emo from a proper emo. This uncertainty has been exploited widely by political groups: for instance in 2009 Nicolas Sarkozy used the song “Kids” by MGMT in his presidential campaign. “Kids” is a catchy, successful song that uplifted the spirits of UMP supporters and enhanced their political experience. MGMT later sued Sarkozy for the use of the song and there was a settlement of about €30 000.

Extreme political thoughts and ideologies in popular music also raise some major difficulties in terms of freedom of expression and censorship. The Polish

band Behemoth for instance has been sued for blasphemy in their country, but the European Commission issued a statement concerning freedom of expression as one of the values at the basis of the European Convention on Human Rights, advising Poland to follow this treaty to which it is a party. In Germany, a considerable amount of records are banned or indexed every year, mostly in connection to racial hatred, homophobia and sexism, while in the US the “Parental advisory explicit lyrics” sticker has been put on new releases since 1985.

It is surprising to see that extremist content can be available also in music genres that are considered to be somewhat harmless. For instance reggae is normally associated with a relaxed lifestyle in the sun or with positive political activism, but homophobic lyrics are also widely represented. Racist lyrics in country music are also widespread, along with more known texts about homesickness and love.

The main point however is that popular music nowadays is ubiquitous, you find it everywhere; it streams out of your mobile phone into your ears while you are commuting, from your PC when you are working; it’s in the shop where you buy food and in the bar where you’re having a beer while reading *Coyote*. You can easily access (legally or illegally) all the digitalised music ever created with a simple move of your finger. This of course also means that music’s power in conveying extremist or non-extremist meanings and in defining life, or life-threatening, choices weakens considerably, and not only in Italian kitchens.