'Wildlife': Ecstatic Practices of Hardcore Football and Music Fans During Czech and Slovak Post-Socialism

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Abstract

This study aims to begin to fill the relative gap in research into ecstatic practices in subcultural scenes. To this end, it focuses on two more hardcore groups of football supporters (ultras and hooligans) and two extreme music scenes (black metal and crust punk). Its research methodology relies mainly on participant observation. It considers the ecstatic states of hardcore football supporters and extreme music fans with an emphasis on key contexts, practices and meanings. The study proposes to apply a model of Dionysiac ritual to interpret all these practices and discusses them in relation to the transgression of social norms and commodification in the context of late capitalism.

Key words

ecstatic practices, football ultras and hooligans, extreme music, black metal, crust punk, violence, violence transformation, transgression, Bacchanalia, commodification

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'Fire does not burn them. No weapon of iron can wound them, and the snakes harmlessly lick up the sweat from their heated cheeks.' (Walter Friedrich Otto, Dionysus: Myth and Cult)

One Saturday afternoon in the late summer of 2011, I caught sight of something that became if not an obsession then certainly a major interest. I had gone to see a First Czech League football match between Sigma Olomouc and Baník Ostrava. Standing in the terraces of the home team, kept only half an eye on the game that was decidedly low in exciting moments. Instead my gaze drifted to the section reserved for away fans. Several hundred of them had made the 100-kilometre trip to Olomouc from their home town of Ostrava. During the second half of the game, I was increasingly drawn to their monotonous chanting and the whirling of scarves above their heads. I understood I was witnessing a kind of ritual parallel to what was happening on the field. Even as Baník lost to Sigma 3:0, the rhythmic foot-stamping and cheering of the Baník fans continued at a more feverish pitch. By the end, almost all of them were on their feet, shouting their chants ad nauseam. Their faces were hot and red; some were sweating, visibly affected by something that transcended their everyday lives. After the match, several of them were clearly 'gone'. This might have been the result of alcohol or drugs but I believe it was more than that. Something bigger had happened, overriding the individual egos of the Baník supporters. It felt like a kind of communion.

In his illuminating work Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, Mircea Eliade considers the archetypal ecstatic experience that consists of a journey from the sky or the underworld. This journey is not necessarily reserved for shamans (Eliade 1964: 8) and indeed similar trajectories can be found in the Orpheus myth in Greek mythology and stories of visions of Jesus in Christianity and Muhammad in Islam. In this study, I aim to discuss ecstatic practices that might be described as secular ecstasies (McBride 2014) but which in many ways resemble religious mystical experiences. Like religious rites, subcultural rituals are performed publicly. Making sense of them, thus, requires considering group social cohesion and identifying liminal spaces and practices. As practices that simultaneously involve body and soul, individual and collective action, internal experience and outward displays and the widening and narrowing of consciousness, these rites are sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly taken to be mystical experiences. Subcultural rites are rich in symbolic meaning. And though they may be dismissed as foolish by outsiders, they are anything but senseless.

'It's going off, it's going off'

Research into altered states of consciousness remains a relatively marginal area of subcultural studies. The work of Barbara Major (2013: 136–138) partly addresses the ecstatic practices of metal music audiences. Nevertheless, though her book's title may suggest otherwise (*Dionysus in Boots. Ecstasy in Metal Music*),¹ Major's informants provide only limited information about the goals of their deep listening techniques (for example, 'relaxation', 'mystery', 'spirituality' and 'trance'). Moreover, her project opposes the sacred function (*sacrum*) of metal music with everyday listening (*habit*) to the same music. Departing from this model, my study focuses on the ecstatic practices associated with two extreme music genres – black metal (BM) and crust punk (CP) – as well as with football ultras and hooligans. While there has been considerable research into hardcore forms of football support, the ecstatic practices of ultras and hooligans have at best been mentioned in passing, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

'It's going off, it's going off.' Everyone around ... was excited. It was an excitement that verged on being something greater, an emotion more transcendent—joy at the very least, but more like ecstasy. There was an intense energy about it; it was impossible not to feel some of the thrill (Finn cited in Giulianotti – Bonney – Hepworth 1994: 116)

Similarly, case studies of altered states of consciousness inside subcultural scenes have focused almost entirely on electronic dance music (EDM), looking at clubbing (Malbon 1999), rave (St John 2004; Sullivan 2005) and trance (Guerra 2015; Papadimitropoulos 2009; St John 2008; 2009). Rave scenes often feature explicit references to New Age and other religious practices. 'Techno psychonauts' (Berger 2005) are known for mixing ecological theory with neopaganism, 'Taoism (Tai Chi), Sufism, Hinduism (Yoga), Buddhism (Meditation), Cabalism (the tree of life), Shamanism (navigating consciousness)' as well as the '[m]ysticism of all religions and tribes of aboriginal people' (Landau 2004: 107). This *bricolage* may relate to the emic 'quest for [the] true self' (Tramacchi 2004: 138) and/or classbased aims of self-perfection (Altglas 2008). Individualism has been part of rave since its very beginnings (Hill 2003; John 2015).

Furthermore, participants' accounts of 'ecstasy' often refer to 3,4-Methy-

¹ Major, B. (2013). *Dionizos w glanach. Ekstatyczność muzyki metalowej*. Kraków: Księgarnia akademicka.

lenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), a preferred drug in several subcultural scenes (Reynolds 1997; Turner 2014). The word 'ecstasy' is, thus, very common but it describes the drug in question rather than a particular state of consciousness (see, for example, Milkgenyo 1997). Clearly, in the psychedelic trance scene – sometimes known as psytrance or 'spiritual techno' (St John 2009: 42) - the widespread use of psychoactive drugs complicates research into states of altered consciousness that are not necessarily drug-related (Guerra 2015; Papadimitropoulos 2009). Altered states of consciousness, emically described as 'flying away' (Guerra 2015), 'danc[ing] like nobody's watching' (Sullivan 2005), 'going hard'/'losing it'/being 'out there' (St John 2008: 153) and 'surrender[ing] to the vibe' (St John 2008: 158), can certainly be related to the use of psychoactive drugs. However, this need not be the case. As Takahashi (2004) shows, even among ravers, a 'natural high' is valorised. Similarly, Malbon (1999: 116-133) proves that 'oceanic and ecstatic experiences in clubbing' can be reached with or without the use of MDMA or other drugs.

This study aims to begin to fill the relative gap in research into ecstatic practices in subcultural scenes outside EDM. To this end, I focus on two more hardcore groups of football supporters (ultras and hooligans) and two extreme music scenes (BM and CP). My research methodology relies mainly on participant observation. Aside from my experience at the Sigma Olomouc home match outlined briefly above, I draw on my attendance of over twenty football matches in the period 2008–2018. Most of these matches took place at Ďolíček, the home stadium of Bohemians Prague or at Generali Aréna, the home ground of AC Sparta Prague. Having lived near the latter stadium since 2013, I have had the chance to observe the neighbourhood during most home matches. As for extreme music, I started listening to BM records while still a primary school student at the end of the 1980s and attended CP concerts over the following decade. At the time of writing (the late 2010s), I still occasionally attend live BM and CP shows at venues in Prague and Brno.

In the course of my research, I also conducted six email/instant message interviews with participants in different Czech and Slovak BM scenes. Two of these interviewees were part of the first generation of Czech BM bands originating in the late 1980s. Another two came from the second generation of bands that has been active since the mid-1990s; one was based in the Czech Republic and the other in Slovakia. The final two interviewees belonged to the youngest generation of Czech BM fans and musicians who have been active since the mid-2010s. Unfortunately, these interviews did not generate material relevant to the current research topic, a problem possibly linked to the difficulty of finding a language adequate to ecstatic experience. I therefore held no interviews with participants in other extreme music scenes or football supporters. Instead I explored the content of one Czech and two Slovak fanzines retrieved from the *Czech and Slovak Archive of Subcultures* after searching for references that might contain descriptions of ecstatic experiences. Additionally, I examined references to – and observations of – ecstatic states on two major Czech and Slovak football websites, *Hooligans.cz* (for hooligans) and *Supporters.cz* (for ultras), which also include discussion forums.

In the following discussion, I consider the ecstatic states of hardcore football supporters and extreme metal fans with an emphasis on key contexts, practices and meanings. I then present the results of my research and venture some conclusions.

'Going hard'

Most extreme metal genres merge elements of the punk ethic with a heavy metal, glam rock or hard rock aesthetic (Kahn-Harris 2007). In punk as in metal, loudness is a key element. Whereas in the metal scene, loudness equals power, in punk it is about noise (Waksman 2009: 165). Extreme metal genres manage to combine both these elements. During the early 1980s, thrash metal (TM) was a technical breakthrough that harnessed the aggressive energy of hardcore punk while retaining most of its force as a social critique. Later, in the second half of the 1980s, death metal emerged as a more radical response to TM: the music was faster and more distorted with lyrics that often quoted pathology textbooks and accounts of mass murders and sex crimes (Kahn-Harris 2003; Phillipov 2006; Purcell 2003). A significant factor in this context is the extreme virtuosity of metal musicians whose highly advanced technical skills have sometimes led to their near deification (Till 2010: 126-128). BM, an extreme metal genre that emerged before and developed in parallel with (and sometimes even opposition to) the other styles outlined above, counts not only punk and metal among its influences but also horror movies and comic book culture.

The first BM bands of the early 1980s set out to shock and provoke in performances that referenced the occult. Later-forming bands took the provocation a step further with documented episodes of sectarian violence in the early 1990s. Since the 2010s, BM has re-emerged in new forms and also begun to be appropriated by lifestyle-focused young urban professionals. Most scholarly attention has focused solely on this often over-exposed second BM wave (Introvigne 2017; Moynihan – Søderlind 2003; McWilliams 2015; Olson 2008; Reyes 2013). Only a handful of authors have considered the genre over the *longue durée* of its soon to be four decades of existence (Chaker – Schermann – Urbanek 2018; Patterson 2013). Though largely influenced by the first BM wave, CP cannot be understood as simply an extreme metal genre. Nevertheless, it is linked in many ways to BM, not least because of its rough sound and anti-social ethos, with lyrics often describing apocalyptic and dystopian visions (Roby 2013).

BM and CP performances involve specific bodily practices and are confined to specific places, two traits that link these subgenres to a wider set of extreme music genres. A typical hand signal among extreme metal fans is the sign of the horns. This gesture is usually directed at a band's lead guitarist or front-person and in non-metal contexts would be understood as a threat or a curse. 'Headbanging' is common among extreme metal musicians and fans and tends to be more effective when the headbanger has longer hair (ex. NikkiDancesOnGraves 2009). 'Stage diving' and 'crowd surfing' are also seen in extreme metal scenes though they are generally confined to performances of hardcore punk or its derivative CP. Stage diving entails leaping from the space reserved for the band, which is usually above the audience. Crowd surfing may follow, with the successful diver being passed from one person to the next over the heads of audience members. At most extreme music performances, a space is reserved in the audience for the most dedicated fans who dance with maximum energy and bodily contact. The 'mosh pit' is a carefully defined space that tends to be near the stage (MTV 2009; Riches 2011). Dancers form a sort of circle ('circle pit') or stand on two distinct sides ('wall of death') while slamming into and knocking each other.

Charles Tilly (2003) notes that such violent rituals follow known interaction scripts. This is accurate for both extreme music audiences and hardcore football supporters. Like fans in the mosh pit, ultras and hooligans form well-defined and coordinated groups that compete for priority within a recognised space. The behaviour of football fans has been studied extensively by scholars from different social sciences (ex. Guilianotti – Bonney – Hepworth 1994). These commentators have considered this behaviour in relation to the commodification of the game (Redhead 1997; Williams 2013), social movements and politicisation (Testa 2009), masculinity (Hodges 2014) and criminology (Spaaij 2007). They have also conducted detailed ethnographic research (Armstrong 1998). Recent publications include comparative works (Doidge – Lieser 2017) and case studies from some countries in post-socialist Europe (Kossakowski 2015; Perasović – Mustapić 2013).

Scholars in this area generally agree on the existence of two distinct

groups of hardcore football fans: ultras and hooligans.² Nevertheless these groups may collide at times and in certain situations their members may overlap. While ultras can usually be found supporting their teams at matches with highly coordinated and often complicated chants, flags, banners and choreography, the ecstatic rituals of hooligans consist of violent clashes with opposing hooligan groups ('firms') or the police or attacks on ultras and other fans (sometimes in order to steal their club badges as a fetish). This violence often involves carefully staged battles that happen outside the stadium and may even be completely independent of the game.

'Bruséééél'

In the late 1990s, I took part in a small local festival of extreme music bands that was held in a pub hall in a tiny village in south-east Czech-Moravian Highlands. I was a drummer and back-up singer in a math rock band. After our show, I watched the other bands perform. One of them was a second-wave BM band whose frontman's face was smeared with corpse paint. Over a single 20-something-minute track of guitar tritones, distorted bass and diabolical rhythms, he seemed to endlessly repeat a series of phrases in broken English: 'I am Satan. I am Lucifer. I am [the] devil.' I had never witnessed a performance of this kind before. It felt weird and I was somehow reluctant to take part. At the same time, I saw the audience around me reacting enthusiastically by forming a mosh pit and gesticulating frenetically towards the singer. I found myself pulled into the scene, and by the end of this short minimalist show, had started to enjoy myself. Afterwards we were all sweaty and happy. It had been a kind of catharsis.

As central elements of BM shows, shock and horror have recently received some academic attention (Wallin – Podoshen – Venkatesh 2017). Unfortunately, it remains difficult to access fuller insider accounts of similar

² While the ultras' mentality can be linked to the political turbulence of Italy in the 1970s, football hooliganism peaked in the mid-'80s in England. The ecstatic rituals of ultras tend to be confined to certain sites in the football stadium, i.e. spaces akin to the mosh pit. At Bazaly, the home ground of Baník Ostrava, for example, these rituals occur in the *curva* to the right of the main terrace (*Bazal* 1991: 2). The term *curva* likely comes from the *Curva sud* at AS Roma Stadio Olimpico, a symbolic site for Italian ultras since the late 1970s (Testa 2009: 55). In some other countries, ultras adopt the name of a particular entrance 'gate' that marks their location in the stadium; fans of the Greek team Panathinaikos A.O. are, thus, associated with Gate 13 ($\theta \psi \rho \alpha 13$). Other ultra groups take on the name of a particular terrace. SK Slavia Prague is, thus, linked to *Tribuna sever* (North Terrace). Interestingly, in Czech, the word (*kotel*) can describe a *curva* or a mosh pit.

ecstatic experiences in other subcultural contexts. BM fanzines describe and celebrate listening to music as an extreme experience. In the Slovak fanzine *Hallelujah*, for example, accounts of these experiences include specific terms drawn from the work of H. P. Lovecraft, the cult dark fantasy novelist of the 1920s and 1930s. The mystical realm is explicitly invoked through a term of praise for the cosmic entity Cthulhu (*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn'*) in Lovecraft's 1928 short story 'The Call of Cthulhu' (*Hallelujah* 1995: 3). Much of the descriptive language in *Hallelujah* also comes from translations of Lovecraft's texts. This language is highly specific and the writer's influence is, thus, readily apparent in adjectives like 'abnormal', 'accursed', 'amorphous', 'blasphemous', 'daemoniac', 'hideous' and 'shunned' (Ruth 2011). Similarly, the zine's motto, 'a new psychotic dimension of dark matter' (*Hallelujah* 1995: 10) suggests a Lovecraft-esque altered state of consciousness.

At the same time, it must be noted that the BM genre tends to aestheticise and valorise negative feelings, emotions and concepts. Among the main topics featured in the lyrics of the most important second-wave BM band, Mayhem, Jesse McWilliams (2015) identifies darkness, pessimism, misanthropy and irony. Terms like 'hell', 'holocaust' (Hassgesang 2004: 3), 'ultra-bad atmosphere' (Hassgesang 2004: 12), 'pathological nature', 'frozen atmosphere' and 'hopelessness' (Hassgesang 2004: 16) are used freely. The transgressive aims of this language, which inverts traditional values, can be understood more broadly in relation to the aesthetics of extreme metal. A close reading of the Slovak CP fanzine Crust as Fuck also reveals several neologisms and words that have been appropriated and identified with extreme states of musical enjoyment. The latter exaltations included 'wildlife', 'totally brutal' and 'maximum pigswill' (Crust as Fuck 1995a: 4).3 Nevertheless, outside these statements there is no mention of the emotions associated with enjoying music and accounts tend to be limited to very technical descriptions of musical style and similar-sounding bands. This contrasts starkly with the lived experience of CP shows. In the mosh pit, it is not unusual to let oneself go to the point of losing a shoe or glasses if not a tooth.

The violent ecstasies of the mosh pit may resemble those of the football stadium during an important match where the electric atmosphere is reinforced by a police presence. The sounds of police helicopters and barking dogs and the smell of explosives and sometimes even tear gas, are key ingredients in this formula. These 'states of exception' (Agamben 2005) are also often documented visually in what is sometimes nicknamed

³ The Slovak terms are *zverina* ('wildlife'), *úplne brutálne* ('totally brutal') and *maximum prasopal* ('maximum pigswill') (*Crust as Fuck* 1995a: 4).

'riot porn' (Rasza 2013). The *Hooligans.cz* site, for example, features such visual records from across Central Eastern Europe along with descriptions of fights between local firms. One section of the site memorialises fights that happened more than a decade ago. As in the case of BM and CP fanzines, there is much attention here to technical details of the context including the number of fighters, their club and firm affiliation, any weaponry, the presence of police or its fortunate absence and the place of the encounter.

At the same time, writing by hooligans and ultras contains very few direct references to ecstatic states. Some of these references may take the form of emic expressions such as 'spasm of berserk frenzy' (Berserk 2010) or 'fucking good mood' (Adolf 2010). 'Dementedness', another term used positively by hardcore fans, seems to conflate ecstatic experience with transgressive acts. It describes highly valorised liminal moments that may involve a ritualised breach of social norms or ecstatic chanting (Stránky slávistů ze Severovýchodních Čech 2011).⁴ Another slogan made famous by the 1987 Czechoslovak movie Proč? ('Why?') is 'Bruséééél' ('Brusseeeels'), the shouted name of the Belgian capital. When used at Generali Aréna or at away matches of ACS Sparta Prague, this is a call to enter a state of ecstatic frenzy and refers to the 1985 tragedy at Heysel Stadium. Entering an ecstatic trance state at the stadium is a goal for ultras, some of whom even use a vocabulary linked to mystical experience. One contributor to Supporters.cz, thus, comments enthusiastically on a video of San Lorenzo ultras: 'This is ecstasy. I know exactly what I felt at the Delije [Red Star Belgrade ultra] stand during the Eternal derby' (Rusty 2014) (emphasis in original).

The same commentator continues: 'It's also funny that in Latin America several thousand fans sing a song about marijuana.' Drugs, while not

⁴ See, for example, one ultra's account of an event: 'The trip there was full of dementedness and fun, and of course, we stuck to our drinking regime. [...] The journey home was full of dementedness (like the tifos we made with napkins), but it also went well even with our car problem. [...] There's been some dementedness on the train, and the conductor doesn't like it too much. [...] On the way there, there was none at all because there weren't enough of us, we're not in the mood. [...] We got to Prague after various kinds of dementedness without being arrested etc. In the first half we had quite decent support, tifo after tifo and so the dementedness continues:-)' (Cesta je plná demencí a srandy a jistě i dodržování pitného režimu. [...] Cesta domů byla plná demencí (jako choreo z ubrousků) ale dopadla dobře i s naší svařenou poloosou v autě. [...] Ve vlaku probíhají trochu demence, a to se nelíbí průvodčímu. [...] Cestou žádné demence, v tomhle počtu na to není nálada. [...] Do Prahy se za různách [sic] demencí dostáváme všichni bez zatčení apod. V prvním poločase rozjíždíme docela slušný support, choreo střídá choreo a probíhají demence :-) (Stránky slávistů ze Severovýchodních Čech 2011)

central to the experiences of Czech and Slovak hardcore football fans, are by no means unknown. The smell of marijuana permeates the northern terrace of Ďolíček where the ultras of Bohemians Prague gather and it is familiar even to supporters who have shown their right-wing tendencies. According to Kaňas (2014), an avant-garde musician and member of the Torcida Boby ultras, during the 1990s, marijuana could be smelt behind Brno Lužánky stadium. In the last decade, I have witnessed AC Sparta Prague fans smoking the drug before the game outside pubs and in parks near Generali Aréna. As for other substances, literature on the 'second summer of love' documents the spread of MDMA among English hooligans from 1988 to 1989 (Mark Gilman cf. par Redhead 1997: 99). Together with state repression, this led to a radical turn away from violence. In contrast, in the mid-1990s, this generation embraced alcohol and cocaine, the same aggression-promoting drugs that are prominent in the Czech and Slovak contexts in the late 2010s. For completeness, we should also mention pervitin, a local version of crystal meth in wide use since the early 1990s. Use of these drugs may amplify the ecstatic experiences of football fans and also BM and CP listeners. On the other hand, as the editors of Crust as Fuck point out, drugs can curb enjoyment: marijuana may disable a person so that they can't enjoy music (Crust as Fuck 1995b: 6) and drunks dance too aggressively (Crust as Fuck 1995b: 8).

Conclusion

The ecstatic practices discussed in this article may not be the magic flights described by shamans, prophets and Christian mystics. Even so, they can be understood as forms of controlled liminality based on a Bakhtinian concept of carnival. Some BM insiders may claim to reinvent themselves by invoking Lucifer and Satan in a continuation of the Prometheus myth. Nevertheless, I would propose that we apply a model of Dionysiac ritual to interpret all these practices. Like the violence of the mythical maenads, the violence – or at least potential violence – of subcultural groups resonates in a discursive realm where it ultimately shores up social norms. While these ecstatic practices are all transgressive and violent, they do not effectively disrupt the state stronghold on violence. As Georges Bataille notes, transgression never fully succeeds in displacing a norm and does not negate a taboo but merely reinforces it. Shocking anti-humanist BM and CP creeds can, thus, only be understood as being in dialogue with humanism. Similarly, the hooligans' credo 'all cops are bastards' is testament to the important role of police. Even the ultras' motto 'Against modern football' suggests an ill-fated plan to reclaim a working-class sport now colonised by capital.

As a mode of production, capitalism has been efficient in integrating many practices that were originally meant to challenge it (Boltanski -Chiapello 1999: 99–165). There is, thus, considerable scope for examining the (potential) commodification of ecstatic transgressions. While the ecstatic chanting of ultras may be annoving or disruptive, some variants could easily be integrated into football as a mass-marketed spectacle. Clothes companies have already succeeded in commodifying ultra-, hooligan- and extreme metal-inspired fashion. On the other hand, key elements - the explosives sold on *Ultrasshop.cz* (linked to on *Supporters.cz*), some streetwear advertised on Hooligans.cz, the BM and CP bootlegs and memorabilia sold through DIY distro shops and the organisation of most concerts - seem to remain economically rooted inside these subcultures. Despite the successful commercialisation of certain products and the colonising of many activities by urban professionals, it is hard to imagine the marketing of practices like those described in this study. Much like the Bacchanalia, the ecstasies of hardcore football and music fans remain confined to the already initiated.

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