Applying Habermas to Culture

Reflection

The Norwegian black metal band Mayhem have come to Rio’s, a club on the edge of the city centre in Bradford. Fans of extreme metal have come from all over the north of England to see the band, attracted by the history of murder and violence associated with Mayhem as much as the music they play. Watched by a handful of men standing next to their parked cars, the white, mainly male metallers with their long hair, black band tee-shirts, studs and spikes wait politely to get inside to see the Norwegians. The club is directly opposite the new extension of Bombay Stores, a South Asian themed retail outlet, and a Barelwi mosque housed in an old school. The men by their cars are Asian, older than the white metal fans, wearing a mixture of Western clothing and traditional shalwar kameez. Just round the corner is a local authority funded recreation centre controlled by volunteers from the Kashmiri community who live in the terraced streets stretching back from the night club.

Inside the club, there is nothing to suggest this is Bradford. The venue is dark. The beer is made by a multinational corporation. Only the accents of the pale people give any indication of where we are. I am in the middle of the crowd, dressed in a metal compromise: I’ve got a leather jacket and a tee-shirt with the logo of a popular but safe Swedish death metal band. Back in the early 1990s, the guitarist of Mayhem attacked death metal for being a trend, for not being serious about death, about the Devil. But that was before he was murdered by Mayhem’s bass player, before most metal fans realized how violent the scene was becoming, and I don’t feel in any danger. Most of the people around me are wearing black metal tee-shirts, and a
significant minority have gone for the full black metal uniform of bullet belt, spikes, and, most importantly, black and white corpse paint. Some of them look more like badgers than demons.

There are a handful of people here, all men, wearing Burzum shirts: Burzum is the solo project of Varg Vikernes, the bass player from Mayhem who murdered Euronymous, the guitarist. Since his imprisonment, Vikernes has become a neo-Nazi, a nationalist pagan, a believer in his own destiny: he has fallen out with Mayhem and most of the Norwegian black metal scene, and the fracture has divided black metal fans all over the world. But here in Bradford, despite the presence of skinheads in Burzum shirts, there is no tension, no sense of danger, only a sense of collective solidarity, a sense that here there is belonging, against the rest of the world outside.

Then the mood changes. All of a sudden the crowd bristles and jeers. On the stage, a roadie has appeared. But the crowd aren’t excited by him. They are excited by what he is carrying: what appears to be a pig’s head, fresh from some butcher’s shop. He shows it to the crowd, who wail and shout, then he sticks it on a spike at the front of the stage. The crowd pant with anticipation. The skinheads in their Burzum shirts push forward to the front. It is at this point, even before I have seen the singer of Mayhem cut the head with a knife and throw it to the crowd, that I realize this music, this tribe, this place, is very real. I have chosen to come here as, it seems, have the rest of the crowd. We are all consumers expressing our choice of leisure. But being here raises another question: why this, and not some other thing?

Theoretical frameworks

Critical studies of leisure have explored the way in which leisure activities construct identity, belonging and exclusion (for example, the studies by Woodward, 2004; Urquia, 2005; Scraton and Holland, 2006). The work of cultural theorists such as Bennett (1999a, 2001) and Cohen (1991) have examined the paradoxes of rebellion and cool inherent in popular music consumed by young people. Black metal provides an opportunity to continue work within this neo-tribe framework (Bauman, 1992; Maffesoli, 1996; Bennett, 1999b); however, this chapter intends to critically analyse the discourse of consumption (Poster, 2004) within black metal circles to shed light on the epistemological problem addressed at the beginning of the book, associated with the history of Leisure Studies as an academic discipline: the problem of freedom and constraint.