

Soundgarden's "Black Hole Sun": Creation, transformation and metamorphoses, challenging a social ideal

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ABSTRACT: American rock band Soundgarden's song "Black Hole Sun" is analyzed in an intermediary context of the encounter between music, video and painting. This strategy allows us to understand how the process of creation, transformation and metamorphosis simultaneously reveals a personal perception of the world and a social critique, eventually challenging a social ideal. In a first moment we analyze the lyric text, as a space of projection of the subject, and the music, and the context in which they emerge. In a second moment we analyze the way in which the transposition of music to another aesthetic mode - video -, based on a process of metamorphosis that owes money to painting, allows for a critique of a certain social ideal based on stability and family harmony. Our conclusion shows how the initial lyrical dimension extends into a wider field of questioning a traditional American ethos in which the family stood as a place of social harmony through a process of aesthetic metamorphosis.

Keywords: Creation, Criticism, Metamorphosis, Music, Painting

1 INTRODUCTION

This essay stems from an intermedia field of encounter between music, video and painting, having as starting point a theme of the American rock band *Soundgarden* entitled "Black Hole Sun", through which we intend to observe how a process of creation, transformation and metamorphosis eventually leads to the challenging of a social ideal. Thus, in a first moment we will proceed to the analysis of the lyric text, and the context in which it emerges, as well as of the musical aesthetic, with the aim of delimiting the field of meaning from which the intermedia dialogue is raised. In a second moment we will proceed to the analysis of the process of appropriation by the visual register, the video-clip, in which we should identify another intermedial dialogue, that is, the relationship with painting, namely surrealism. Through this process of aesthetic metamorphosis we intend to demonstrate how the initial lyrical dimension expands into a broader field of questioning of a conservative American ethos in which the family stood as a space of conformity and social harmony.

2 THE THEORETICAL AXIS AND THE SONG'S BACKGROUND

As explained above, the central analytical axis of this reflection is the concept of metamorphosis,

which, according to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, means "change of form or structure, action or process of changing in form." Either from the Latin *metamorphosis*, and from the Greek *metamorphōsis*, this word implies a transformation. The Greek origin also means "to be transfigured," from meta, here indicating "change" + morphē "shape, form," a word of uncertain etymology."¹ (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, nda) The Portuguese philologist José Pedro Machado in his Etymological Dictionary of Portuguese Language confirms this information, although he puts Greek genealogy first (MACHADO, vol. IV: 119).

The transformative dimension that we find in the etymological genesis of this word is at the basis of its appropriation by a specific scientific domain, biology. This does not mean, however, that this is a consensual concept even in this discipline, as Bishop et al clarify in the introductory essay to the volume that brought together the papers at the symposium of the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology held in 2006 within a comparative context (Bishop et al 2006).

Among the various definitions proposed in the aforementioned essay, there are generic aspects that seem to be somewhat generic and consensual, and

1. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=Metamorphosis>. Portuguese philologue

others that are more specific and depend on particular analyses. The generic aspects are based on the consensus regarding the transformative process and the change of an identity that takes place within a temporal thread - "Metamorphosis in the strict sense describes a particular life history transition in multicellular organisms, from a larval to a juvenile (or adult) stage, accompanied by dramatic morphological, physiological, and ecological changes." (Bishop, 2006) Besides "Such changes typically include a major restructuring of morphology, and often involve a transition from a non-reproductive to a reproductive state, dispersal and settlement to a new habitat." (Bishop, 2006)

This definition is endorsed by Holstein and Laudet in their essay *Life-History Evolution: At the Origins of Metamorphosis* when they associate the transformative process with that of life cycle (2014). With this contribution we already begin to identify the aforementioned specific aspects; in this case, the life cycle. To this topic should be associated others mentioned in Bishop like "sequence of developmental adjustments", and "shift in habitat" (Bishop, 2006).

As will become evident later on these concepts will be relevant for understanding the deep meaning of metamorphosis and its semantic implications in the lyrics of "Black Hole Sun", and eventually in the video-clip conceived about this song. However, before proceeding to the analysis of the text, we should point out, even if synthetically, the context in which it arises.

Superunknown, Soundgarden's 1994 album, became widely known beyond American borders, seeing its hit single "Black Hole Sun", and the somber atmosphere prevalent on it, become a standard of its time. This album would prove to be one of the most popular records of that year, generating a genuine crossover with the psychedelic pop agility of "Black Hole Sun" selling over three million copies and winning two Grammys, and being a constant presence on radio stations.

Regarding the creation of this song, Kim Thayil, in an interview in 2014, argued that it was characterized by a certain naturalness and fluidity that contrasted with what was usual about the band:

I had a problem with parts of "Black Hole Sun," especially the little delicate, arpeggiated parts at the beginning, the guitar part that kind of is reminiscent of a piano part. I think that part and myself, we were stylistically at odds. What does that sound like? Like a ballerina in her tutu kind of tiptoeing on a piano? And then I played that on guitar. That wasn't really my style. It's a lot of fun to play now, obviously. (Anderson, 2014)

Regarding the theme and creation of the song, Chris Cornell mentioned, in an interview on Howard Stern's show, the simple way it came to him,

showing that even a song, in our opinion, of such an iconic character, can come out in the simplest moments and in the most unexpected way:

I was in a car driving home at like 4 am when I wrote that song ("Black Hole Sun"). I tried to keep it revolving so I wouldn't forget, went inside kind of whistled it into a tape recorder which I never listened back to, but just in case I forgot it. And then the next day I kind of wrote out the lyrics, but I had the lyrical idea and everything. (Gorra, 2019: DrunkOnBumWine, [06/08/2009])

Indeed, this single topped the most popular rock sales charts, reaching the top 24 of US radio songs, making the album from which it was taken, *Superunknown*, five times platinum, and selling over 5,000,000 million certified sales.

We must bear in mind that this was not typical radio music, with its guitar tuning in drop D minor, giving the sound a darker, more distinctive sound, going against typical pop rock music and therefore incorporating the alternative sphere into a broader, more global one.

The subtlety of this melodic tone which introduces a different nuance to that which is usual in the context of rock music is relevant because of the impact, albeit subjective, it has on an audience used to certain melodic structures. Although we are in a more abstract domain than the verbal one, it is still significant, as Rudolf Arnheim reminds us when analysing the presence of music in the filmic context:

Music transmits such ideas more purely and forcefully, but its interpretation which can do without depicting objects, is also more abstract and generic since it excludes the multitude of concrete things and happenings. (Arnheim, 1957)

It should also be remembered that *Soundgarden's* debut album, *Screaming Life*, the EP released in 1987 when grunge was not yet a recognized movement or aesthetic as such. There were then a few other bands releasing the noisy sound that would soon be known to the world as grunge, but these groups, including *Green River*, and the *Malfunkshun and Melvins*, *Soundgarden's* neighbours in Washington state, who nonetheless shared few characteristics with them. *Nirvana* and *Alice in Chains* were in their infancy.

The most striking feature of this band, which set it apart from other rock groups, was their commercial viability, due, in our opinion, to three factors: firstly, their catchier songs; secondly, the image of their lead singer, Chris Cornell and, above all, his unmistakable voice; thirdly, the more conventional approach to making music. Image, sensuality and conventionality were everything that grunge opposed, and, albeit briefly, pretended to refute. From the outset, however, *Soundgarden's* music foresaw a *nation of enclosures filled with people dressed in flannel shirts*.

3 "BLACK HOLE SUN", A TURNING POINT

However, "Black Hole Sun" paves the way for something deeper. The once oblique references to John Lennon have given way to a tribute of this beautiful ballad that can be seen as a kind of "Lucy in the sky with diamonds", turned upside down, and, like Alice, falling into a huge abyss of darkness. (Berman, 2015)

The song is sung from a first-person point of view, therefore it unveils the way the subject sees the world, namely the changes that take place around him, and its contemplative attitude towards this space in constant transformation. The lyrical voice starts by declaring: "In my eyes/ indisposed/ In disguises no one knows/ Hides the face/ Lies the snake/ And the sun in my disgrace/ Boiling heat/ Summer stench/ Neath the black, the sky looks dead/ Call my name Through the cream/ And I'll hear you scream again"² In these opening verses emerges the topic of the mask, of a persona, under which hides a snake. This identity actually lies concealed, hidden behind a mask. Yet this sign unveils how he regards himself, how he looks at the world, and the way he is affected by what he sees around him; this aspect will become clearer some lines later.

We should also bear in mind the snake's symbolic dimension both as "symbol of evil and biblical synonym of for Satan, but also signified fertility, wisdom and the power to heal" (Hall, 1979), and as a psychological element:

... Homme et Serpent sont les opposés, les complémentaires, les **Rivaux**. En ce sens aussi, il y a du serpent dans l'homme et, singulièrement, dans la part de celui-ci que son entendement contrôle le moins. Un psychanalyste ... dit que le serpent est *un vertébré qui incarne la psyché inférieure, le psychisme obscur, ce qui est rare, incompréhensible, mystérieux*. (CHEVALIER, GHEERBRANT, 1982: 867)

This image is thus very powerful, since it reminds of the duality that the lies at core of the subject's identity, and consequently of an ongoing and everlasting inner struggle which yet remains concealed from the world. Besides it shows how the mask creates a feeling of personal unwillingness: How he stands by seeing time changing, the seasons passing by, and how this social mask makes him ill at ease.

In a contemplative mode the subject points out an unexpected answer, because he waits "something black" to take everything around him, to "take all the rain away". Since these lines belong to the chorus, they somehow emphasize a mood, thus wrapping up the whole song/lyrics. On the other hand these lyrics enhance a powerful, graphic image, and the listener feels like s/he witnesses the singer pleading for the return of this opposite of (sun)light, the "Black Hole

Sun". Underneath this symbolic change of color another change is suggested, the one of an inner struggle. As we will show ahead in the video clip this inner change becomes a visual metamorphosis, and eventually social criticism.

In a second moment, the contemplation of what is happening, of what is occurring, leads the speaker to question his own existence, and he feels estranged: "Stuttering/ Cold and damp /Steal the warm wind, tired friend/ Times are gone /For honest men/ Sometimes, far too long for snakes /in my shoes /Walking sleep/ In my youth, I pray to keep/ Heaven send/ Hell away"³ Times fade for those who follow ethical principles – "honest men", but, in his view, the lack of an ethical dimension prevails. It is within this context that the snake emerges again, now as a sign of evil, and the real me comes out while the speaker assumes his own identity.

A deeper change takes place at this stage; the self no longer needs to hide who he is, for time has come for change, for his own metamorphosis, in which his mask falls off, and his inner self becomes his outer self. He prays for "Heaven will take Hell", and that in the end there may be the ultimate change, that everything will disappear, and at last he can rest his head, while his fears vanish - "Hang my head/Drown my fear/Till you all just disappear"⁴

4 AN ULTIMATE METAMORPHOSIS, THE VIDEO CLIP

It is exactly this oneiric dimension, with approximations to a surrealist aesthetics that becomes dominant in the performance of "Black Hole Sun" that we have chosen, that of its recording in the homonym video-clip.⁵

We should start by clarifying that the video-clip that often accompanies the song, usually with the intention of promoting its dissemination and sale, does not necessarily duplicate the narrative that may underlie the lyrics, as if it were a visual version of it. This may occur but there are also other forms of relationship between the image and the text that precedes it, or, if we resort to an intermedial taxonomy, between hyper- and hypo-opus (Paul, 2016).

In this sense the video-clip can develop either a parallel narrative - another narrative - or raise a reflection on aspects, namely existential ones, that emerge in hypertext signs. This latter feature will be evident in the visual appropriation of the "Black

2. See <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/soundgarden/black-hole-sun>

3. See <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/soundgarden/black-hole-sun>

4. See <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/soundgarden/black-hole-sun>

5. See, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mbBbFH9fAg>

Hole Sun” video-clip, namely following the oneiric dimension mentioned above.

In his essay on neurological perception and art, Zeki reminds that:

I find moving objects much easier to recognize, presumably because I see different and changing’s views... For that reason the TV screens enables me to comprehend far more of an outdoor scene than, for example, the drawings on my living room walls. (Zeki, 1999)

As can be seen in the images of this video, there is an option for the distortion of bodies and spaces, a kind of uncanny metamorphosis of the body. This facet intensifies the dramatic, even depressive, dimension of the lyrics. Besides this dimension is prefigured and hopefully emphasized by the dramatic focus provided by the diagonal point of view of the camera.

Moreover, the faces of the characters that stand at the center of the narrative are distorted, thus emphasizing the grotesque and revealing a surrealist aesthetic echo.

The video, due to its visual grammar and deep emphasis on signs distortion, creates a new world, which seems unreal, perplexing, and yet a less obvious link with the song remains. As Arnheim sharply reminds, “a number of inherent inconsistencies create a world that looks tangible but unreal, and changes shape depending upon where we look and which element we accept as the basis for judging the rest”. (Arnheim, 1997)

It is important to clarify that when we associate distortion with surrealist pictorial aesthetics, we have in mind not only classic works such as Salvador Dalí’s *The Persistence of Memory*, but also, in particular, the distorted photographs of faces by Man Ray or Jonathan Jiang. They all reverberate in the video clip of “Black Hole Sun”.

Yet this distortion must not be conceived within a mere aesthetic domain, since it brings along a radical social criticism, albeit symbolic. Through this distortion it is an entire White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant middle-class bourgeois ideal and ethos, whose daily routines stands at the center of the narrative which lies at the core of the video, that is questioned:

the new white middle-class living in the suburbs started to develop a common lifestyle that entailed several values as commodity, conformity and convenience. Everything around the suburbs was organized in order to guarantee the amenity of the families living there. (Cillero, 2018)

The house with “white picket fences”, that in the 1950s visual imaginary represented an ideal family life, and an American dream based on conformity, is debunked in the video through visual distortion. We must remember that a family hierarchy in which a traditional notion of gender prevailed,

reflected several layers of power in which the husband stood at the top, followed by the wife, and finally the children. These layers associated with an ideal *aurea mediocritas* prevailed at the beginning of the video clip in the image of the girl next to the family house.

However, the gradual distortion of the faces - their metamorphosis - disturbs social stability, introducing the grotesque and, finally, a revelation and an essence, that under a cloak of social harmony, ghosts prevail, they are the snakes that threaten the interiority of the self and, eventually, social reality itself. Actually what at first was the *inner serpent* that the speaker associated with his own ghosts, turns out to be more general: it is inherent to society itself; and thus it is its essence, that is revealed.

This justifies the grey sky that prevails at the end, replacing the initial solar dimension. Once again the visual metamorphosis symbolizes a deeper change and a revelation, that of the exposure of fears and inner ghosts, both personal and collective that so far remained concealed.

Music videos just like cinema “Cinema, then, is not just a ratio of sight and sound, but of images and words and of other differentiable parameters such as speech, music and noise”(Mitchell, 1998)

5 CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the way in which different forms of artistic expression dialogue with one another has allowed us to see the evolution of a creative process based on a process of metamorphosis and transformation which, starting from a lyrical and somewhat personal dimension, acquires a more general dimension, questioning the supposed stability of hierarchical notions of gender and class, namely that of an idealized middle class that forms part of the American imaginary. More so we come to the final thought that the music video presents ourselves with endless visual possibilities, that not only serve as a goal to present and sell the song, but also provides with new possibilities for conceiving it in addition to the listener’s original analysis. The video and the way the song connects with it, though the creative input of its creator, generates a new object a new creative art form where metamorphosis is not confined to an endogenous transformation process, since it stems from a process of social developments and adjustments that the individual is forced to make in the context of the place assigned to him/her in a social habitat.

Eventually, the visual representation and performance allows the construction of a critical and aesthetic dimension that amplifies the somewhat depressive lyrics and the melancholy of the musical tone itself.

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