

“NO FAN OF COPY/PASTE MUSIC”: HARDCORE, NOSTALGIA AND MUSIC PRODUCTION IN OFF-MODERN METAL

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Abstract

This article offers an analysis of the production of the semi-DIY album *Facing the Imminent Prospect of Death* (2012), by the hardcore (metal) band The Kandidate (DK). The band's mistrust in digital production formats reduces digital software to a tape recorder, which brings discussions of analog/digital sound and nostalgia to the fore in relation to modern metal. I argue that the production of this album can be meaningfully understood in terms of a playground (i.e., Svetlana Boym's "reflective nostalgia") where the band articulates a particular way of being off-modern: The aesthetic of fuck up, as I call it, is the messy, harsh (sincere) sound, in which the music's intensity and personal experience of life as "fucked up" is communicated.

Introduction

*Memories lost, memories gone,
dead! Fucking dead!*
("Let the Maggots Have It,"
The Kandidate, 2012)

The way an album is produced matters profoundly in some parts of the metal scene. A case in point is the production of *Facing the Imminent Prospect of Death* (2012), the sophomore studio album by Danish hardcore (metal) band The Kandidate. The initial idea was to make the record on analog equipment, yet, for practical reasons, the album was recorded digitally, but without the use of the copy/paste-function and other short cuts, which the band finds repulsive and result in fake music.

The Kandidate is a quartet based in Aarhus, Denmark, with Jacob Bredahl (vocals), Allan "Tvede" Tvedebrink (guitars), Kasper Boye "KB" Larsen (bass), and Niels Peter Nielsen (drums), and was formed in 2009 on the basis of the earlier band, The Downward Candidate (2005-2009).

Intensity and sentiment in music can be communicated in several ways: semiotically (the lyrics), vocally (the voice's materiality), and aesthetically and sonically (the *timbre* or the *sound*). And further ways to convey the message, I propose, are in terms of music production (the equipment and how it is used) and in the visual aspect of the album (artwork). I investigate how these are all involved in constructing a convincing sense of intensity in The Kandidate's music through notions of the analog and meanings of sound described as "harsh" and an "in-your-face"-expression. The discussion is informed by the work on nostalgia by Svetlana Boym (2001) and others, and by studies on the analog/digital complex by Trevor Pinch and Frank Trocco (2002) and Jonathan Sterne (2006).

The article includes a variety of material: an interview I made with Jacob Bredahl and KB from The Kandidate at the annual metal festival in Copenhagen, *Copenhell*, on 14 June, 2014; as well as the studio album, *Facing the Imminent Prospect of Death*, various online materials such as the music video “All Fucked Up,” interviews with band members made by others, and album reviews. Generally, I also draw on many short and longer conversations with musicians and fans in the metal scene in Denmark the past six months.

Hardcore in Denmark

A few introductory notes on hardcore in Denmark might be useful. In an introduction to their latest live show in Copenhagen, at the small venue Beta, The Kandidate was presented as offering “first class death/punk/thrash-asskicking.” To those who know The Kandidate’s music, the designation, “asskicking,” clearly makes sense. But genre categories are notoriously unclear and unwieldy: it is old news (at least in musicology) that audiences often associate genre categories with different musical experiences, bands and styles.

It is the wild bodily gestures and the screaming quality of the vocal that make most listeners identify The Kandidate with hardcore, whereas their heavy riffs and grooves typically are elements identified with thrash and death metal, though not foreign to hardcore – both subgenres to have constructed explicit “underground” styles of metal in opposition to a “mainstream” (Hutcherson & Haenfler 2010, p.104). Being inspired by the work of the American hardcore act, Trap Them (2011), and early Swedish death metal productions, such as the first albums of Dismember (1991) and Unleashed (1991), The Kandidate aims at producing metal that differs from “the heaps of records out there that all sound the same” (Interview with Jacob Bredahl and KB of the Kandidate, Copenhell, Copenhagen, Denmark, 14 June, 2014 [Interview, 2014]).

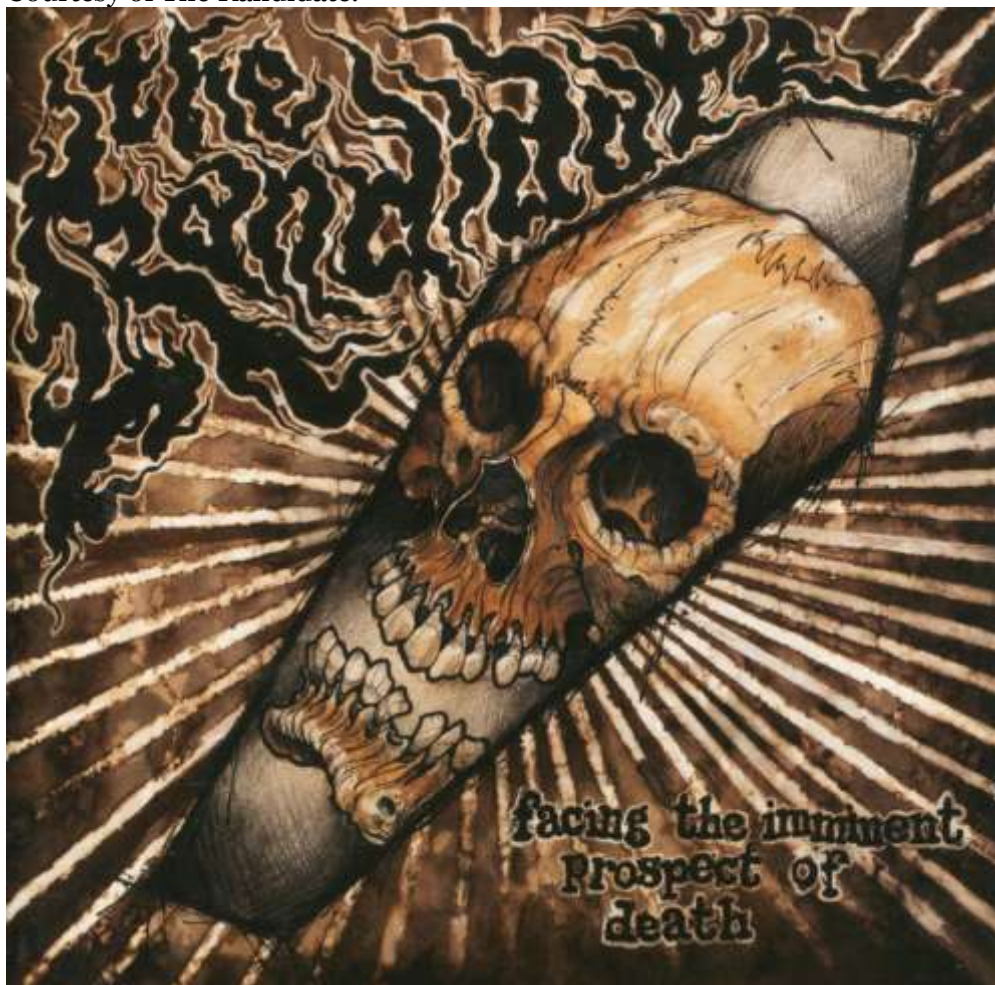
To define hardcore and the hardcore scene in Denmark is complicated. My preliminary research into this matter reveals at least two major strands. To some, hardcore in Denmark is a punk scene in and of itself, primarily associated with the punk-milieu (“punkmiljøet”) at The Youth House (Ungdomshuset) in Copenhagen, since the 1980s, as part of a self-proclaimed underground culture. Historically, the punk scene, too, consisted of various strands (but that is a story to be told elsewhere). Heirs to the so-called “K-Town” style (“K” for Copenhagen hardcore), such as Direct Youth and Night Fever, thrive in a vivid DIY-practice. K-Town hardcore is seen as an extreme variant of punk rather than metal, and includes various kinds of hardcore styles such as D-beat, crust and others, often favoring rapid sequences of parallel chords. A few hardcore bands, such as Night Fever and Halshug (though not as such a K-Town band), surface on ground level as well: both bands are lined up for this year’s Copenhell (annual metal festival in Copenhagen organized by Live Nation), and Halshug (2015) has just released a record at the Southern Lord record company.

Many bands, such as The Kandidate, who play hardcore outside this punk-milieu, are conscious about being part of the larger metal scene in Denmark. Hardcore/metal bands in this part of the scene are The Psyke Project, JustInHate, Hexis, No Fealty, Czar, Barricade, Ruined, Piss Vortex, Anti Ritual, and many others, all of whom in various ways mix hardcore with extreme metal elements (heavy riffs and grooves are frequent). It would seem that the two scenes are organized in distinct networks, arrange different concerts, and only

few musicians relate to both scenes. Most of the musicians I have been talking to suggest a hardcore epicenter in Copenhagen, but they all emphasize the strong musical ties to bands and DIY festivals in the province, cities like Fredericia, Aarhus, Odense, Aalborg, and many others, as well as strong ties to bands and scenes in Sweden and Germany.

Both strands share a prominent anti-mainstream rhetoric in terms of musical aesthetics, and many bands produce and distribute their own music (as a DIY-production). Some bands (in both scenes) make professional studio arrangements, or practice a mix of the two, and occasionally help each other out (as a sort of DIWO-production: do-it-with-others). For example, *Facing the Imminent Prospect of Death* was recorded, mixed, and mastered by Jacob Bredahl himself, and then released at the Austrian record company Napalm Records.

Figure 1: *Facing the Imminent Prospect of Death* (2012).
Courtesy of The Candidate.



Something Alive

The initial plan was to make an analog recording. But as Jacob Bredahl does not have a tape recorder of his own, and renting one proved too expensive, the band recorded the music digitally as if the Pro Tools programme was a tape recorder, performing two and two live, for example, the guitar with the drums (Villumsen, 2012).

Vocalist of The Kandidate, Jacob Bredahl, is also a music producer, and has his own studio in Aarhus, Dead Rat Studio. Many Danish bands, such as By the Patient, Pet the Preacher, and The Psyke Project, have recorded albums here. At Dead Rat Studio's homepage, Bredahl seems to position his studio-ethos in opposition to the widespread use of digital technologies in studio productions: "I like live recordings in the studio with full band [...] Beat Detective and Auto Tune: I hate it. I never used it and I never will. And I am no fan of copy/paste music either. Music should be played by human beings – not computers. I use my Pro Tools – I don't abuse it" (Dead Rat Studio). Bredahl also uses the terms "disgusting" or "nauseating" (equivalents to the Danish "vammel") when speaking about digital tools, and he strongly opposes over-expensive, nitpicker productions:

"When all snare drum beats sound the same, the real music is gone! I know guitarists who concentrate intensely on getting a rhythmic figure perfect. And when they've got it, they copy/paste those few bars to the rest of the track. Some musicians believe that this is what everybody wants, but to me it's fake; it destroys everything that relates to dynamics, sincerity, the sense of something being alive – all those important things [...] Slowly, you teach your brain that the beats in the music should sound like a perfectly balanced sound editing program. Man, it's a bummer" (Interview, 2014; translations mine).

KB adds that "the practice of recording musicians actually holding the instruments in their hands is on the wane" (Interview, 2014). They point to the widespread use of the copy/paste-function on modern metal records and one of its consequences: the computer is playing the guitar. To KB, this studio practice clearly identifies a loss, but a loss coupled with a desire for imperfect musical sounds, played live by imperfect musicians, unlike the sounds produced by a machine.

Casper Villumsen (2012) from the online metalzine *Devilution*, describes *Facing the Imminent Prospect of Death* as an album produced digitally but with analog sound production as an ideal. But what does that mean? The sound quality of garage rock from the mid 1960ies was relatively unsophisticated or raw due the first fuzzboxes, which created the *sine qua non* metal effects such as *distortion* and *overdrive*. Obviously, The Kandidate's music does not sound like garage rock of the mid-1960ies. But the way of talking about The Kandidate's music resembles the garage rock revival discourse. For example, the White Stripes' contribution to the revitalization of rock music speaks volumes: "Their [White Stripe's] sound is raw, stripped right back to the primal fury and alienation of bluesmen like Son House and protopunks like the Stooges and MC5" (True, 2004, back page). And this turn-of-the-millennium wave of revival was preconditioned by a much broader revival in the 1980s (see Johnson, 2010, p.585-586), celebrating the style of the original garage recordings, described as "amateurish, energetic, and filled with attitude" (Johnson, 2010, p.585).

On the aesthetics of Fuck-Up

The video "All Fucked Up" (The Kandidate, 2013) is uploaded on Dead Rat Studio's homepage. It shows still-pictures of *live* performances as background for the introductory text to the video: "It's live, and recorded as harsh as we could. Done in 1 day – mixed in 1 hour. That's how it goes." The main message is then shown on the video: "Fuck It All. Fuck Everything. All Fucked Up!" I see the expression as a *Sinnbild* on Bredahl's work as a musician as well as his

studio-ethos: the music should be played live and the sound should be “harsh,” a word Bredahl uses frequently in the meaning “real” or “sincere” (“ægte” in Danish), and “raw” (“rå”) (Interview, 2014). The Kandidate’s music is “not fantasy metal,” or about satanic invocations, as Bredahl describes *Facing the Imminent Prospect of Death*: “This album is very real, dealing with everyday stuff [...] Music should fuckin’ tear you apart. After all, music is feelings. And sometimes you feel pain” (Interview, 2014).

To be sure, there is nothing “fucked-up” about The Kandidates album, quite the contrary: the pictures are of professional black/white quality, and they portray the energy of photogenic musicians in action. The presence of the f-word in the music serves aesthetic means. The music video “All Fucked Up” (2013) is illustrative of how the expression is part of an affective discursive practice that not only describes the experience of disappointment in life or of being pissed or stoned, which the hardcore audiences might in some way share or identify with emotionally. It is also used as metaphor for the adequate production practice for music that communicates these experiences. It is the aesthetics of fuck-up – perhaps this particular kind of modern hardcore’s way of celebrating, romantizing and professionalizing the “amateurism and energy” that described the early garage recordings? Perhaps the sense of modern life as chaotic or fucked up is communicated in the buzzing and roaring guitar sound often associated with the early 1990s Sunlight Studios in Stockholm – this is where Dismember, one of The Kandidate’s inspirational sources, used to record their music.

The Kandidate (and Dead Rat Studio) makes it clear, that they make raw recordings, and make the right decisions fast. They are decisive. It is not supposed to sound “nice.” The music with its pain and anger is supposed to sound as being thrown right in your face. At live shows, frontman Bredahl often jumps down from the stage and get face to face with the audiences, literally inviting them to scream with him, performing a “floor show,” as is common practice in hardcore performances in the Danish scene.

Reflective nostalgia

To understand how rock music’s past can be a resource for renegotiating what it means to be produce a sincerely “harsh” sound today, I find Svetlana Boym’s use of “reflective nostalgia” (2001) particularly useful. Unlike restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia does not signify a return to some original stasis; it is not engaged in reconstruction work, or to rebuild a sense of home. Reflective nostalgia is concerned “with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude” (Boym 2001, p.49), and allows for longing and critical thinking a coexistence, rather than separating affective memory with critical reflection (Boym 2001, p.49-50). It is a type of nostalgia that is inconclusive and fragmentary, and opens up for the human virtual imagination, a “multitude of potentialities” (Boym 2001, p.50) that relates profoundly to human creativity.

Nostalgia as playground and critique

The reference to analog sound and technology makes issues of nostalgia hard to ignore, let alone a discussion of what “analog” means in this particular case. Nostalgia is often seen as an irrational or romantic longing for some more or less remote past, differing from dominating late capitalist ideologies of growth and progress. In this light, nostalgia is seen as counterproductive. Yet, nostalgia can be a point of departure for creative musical practice which might also express a timely and necessary critique of contemporary society, which

shouldn't go unnoticed (Abbey, 2006, p.140). In this sense nostalgia is a complex projection of idealized vintage gear and past practices that "mergers with a dissatisfaction with the present" (Abbey, 2006, p.148). Nostalgia as collective critique of progress can prove to be a changing point – a playground, where to try out new possibilities and practices (Boym, 2001, p.54). And where Trevor Pinch and Frank Trocco (2002) in their detailed study of the moog synthesizer see "salient criticisms of how the synthesizer has evolved and expressions of genuine feelings of loss" (p.318), I argue that something similar might be the case in the metal scene as exemplified with *The Kandidate*.

The kind of nostalgia implied in critical reflection on the modern condition, Boym calls "off-modern." "The adverb *off* confuses our sense of direction; it makes us explore sideshadows and back alleys rather than the straight road of progress; it allows us to detour from the deterministic narrative of twentieth-century history" (Boym, 2001, p.xvi-xvii, italics original). This idea contains a paradox: it offers critique of the modern fascination of everything new, which might include digital sound production. Yet, simultaneously, it is itself fascinated with objects and practices of the past. Creative nostalgia is thus more than an artistic device; it is a survival strategy, a way of making sense in an alienated present, rather than returning to the past. We might understand Bredahl's studio as a *playground*, where *The Kandidate's* "creative self" (Boym, 2001, p.354) is unfolding.

The hardware that matters because it brakes

Old media are resurfacing in the metal scene. Many of the bands I mention spend a lot of time and energy in designing their albums and distribute them on LP or cassette tapes even when the music is also streamed. As Reynolds has it, "[tape] was the ultimate in do-it-yourself, because it could be dubbed-on-demand at home, whereas vinyl required a heavier financial outlay and contractual arrangement with a manufacturer" (Reynolds, 2011, p.349). To release music on LP and the cassette tape (No Fealty, 2013) is one of the ways that hardcore bands position themselves as an elitist "other" in the music business: To the average mainstream music listener, the cassette tape and the LP are obsolete technologies, and the cassette tape is hardly DIY anymore, as only few owns a cassette player these days.

The tendency of reintroducing old electrical hardware is shared with many other kinds of music, where they are used together with digital equipment. In *Analog Days*, Pinch and Trocco (2002) speak of "the analog revival" (p.317), referring to the reentering of older electronic musical equipment, including vintage synthesizers and tape recorders, into sound studios and the live scene. The revitalization of pre-digital music recording equipment is nurtured by the audiophile conviction that an analog sound recording is an accurate (another word for authentic) representation of the original sound (Strickland, 2008). This is often coupled with a longing for the "warm, fuzzy, dirty analog sound," opposed to digital sound experienced as "clean" and "cold" (Pinch & Trocco, 2002, p.319). Also today's software, such as Pro Tools, mirrors visually the (fascination with the) outdated technological equipment it is meant to replace. The software itself "creates an effect of 'instant nostalgia'" (Reynolds, 2011, p.351).

For band members of *The Kandidate* it is not really a matter of digital versus analog sound: "Afteral, it's only a question of sound," as KB argues, "somewhere in the process, the sound will go digital no matter what if you want to

stream it or get it on CD” (Interview, 2014). So, the meaning of “analog” is not a concern about sound quality, rather it relates to a wider complex of musical practices, where the hardware itself is important. It is therefore not a matter of technological evolution, but rather a question of materiality, musical practice and practicalities, and aesthetics (Barlindhaug, 2007, p.76).

Cassette tapes and vinyl are perishable, they brake, and the stock of limited editions runs out. And what is more: analog recording is understood to have a “destructive reproduction process” (Barlindhaug, 2007, p.77), in the sense that it allows a limited number of copies (unlike a digital recording). This finity, this imminent prospect of termination that characterizes analog sound recording and musical equipment, is an important part of how musical intensity and proximity is produced in hardcore, such as The Kandidate’s music.

Quantities of life and death in the analog question

The analog/digital complex is not only a technical matter, but relates profoundly to issues of death and metaphysics. It is a widespread idea that the live and natural quality of analog sound brings the music (and hence the performers) “closer” to the listener because natural sound is (believed to be) analog, the one moment flows into the next. The superiority of analog sound was notably celebrated by the indie-culture that influenced the 1980s alternative rock scene (Bannister, 2006). By contrast, it is a common understanding that because a digital sound recording quantifies sound, the music is characterized by a chain of disconnected units.

In his article, “The Death and Life of Digital Audio,” musicologist Jonathan Sterne (2006) problematises the metaphysical idea of the time-sound relation in analog media as continuous: the quality of sound, Sterne insists, is not meaningful without a listening body (p.342). Sterne is sceptical towards the idea that the “distance” between musician and the listener is greater in digital media than in analog, and that this should create a greater loss of being somewhere on the way. If this was the case, analog recordings would be less mediated than digital ones, which is nonsense. As Sterne (2006) argues, behind these questions “lies the premise that a recording contains a quantity of life, and that as a recording traverses an ever larger number of technological steps, that quantity of life decreases, essentially moving it (and perhaps the listener) toward death” (p.338). In other words, a digital recording is as lively as any analog recording ever were, and maintains that the context of specific listening situations must be taken into account: “The question of ‘life’ in a recording is a social question, not an ontological or metaphysical one” (Sterne, 2006, p.339).

The experience of sound concerns what happens inside the listener’s body and not only outside of it: With the standard sample rate for a CD at 44.1 KHz, a second of sound is divided into 44.100 data-segments, and these will be converted to a stream of sound when played on a CD player. That the human ear cannot experience this as other than a continuous sound, understood as a cohesive musical event, is not an illusion, it is a bodily experience (Sterne, 2006, p.341).

A kick in the balls

The reviews of *Facing the Imminent Prospect of Death* univocally emphasized the musical intensity of the record. Kent K. Jensen (2012), a critic of the webzine *Devilution*, describes the music as “organic,” and the songs in terms of “short, compact and potent [...] and a kick in the balls of those who expect to

relax while listening” (translation mine). And when he emphasizes that Bredahl “screams his lungs to shred,” it points exactly to an appreciation of the effort and labour invested by the vocalist (cf. Tatro 2014). The phrase “a kick in the balls” points to the demand of a physical response of the listener (presumably, the listener is one with a pair of balls).

Figure 2: The Kandidate at Copenhell, 15 June, 2012. The backdrop shows the logo for the DR metal music radio program, “Sort Søndag” [“Black Sunday”]. Courtesy of Frederik Trampe/DeadBeatMonkey.



A critic on a local newspaper in Aarhus, Kasper Kudsk (2012), compliments the production of the album, when emphasizing that “there is no compensation for the eventual shortcomings in the studio. It’s the real deal flowing out of the loudspeakers. Like it, or leave it” (translation mine). And at the webzine *Metal Underground* an enthusiastic review of the album goes as follows:

“This is a mean, unforgiving arsenal of thrashy death-tinged songs that pulverizes you not with a constant high-speed frontal charge [...] but through the raw, genuine rage embedded in the very essence of the playing. No posturing, satanic black metal wannabes can hope to terrify on this level when frontman Jacob Bredahl [...] bellows: “Memories lost, memories gone, DEAD! FUCKING DEAD!” over the grooving crunch of the “Let the Maggots Have It” [...]Produced neither too much nor too little, “Facing the Imminent Prospect of Death” sounds exactly as its makers believe it should: like four expert musicians playing a tight, precise liveshow, where the digitized soullessness of excessive effects and overdubs is off the table” (OverKillExposure, 2012).

Bredahl’s way of handling digital music production seems not to have been a hindrance to the (critics’ experience of the) music’s “soul,” as OverKillExposure suggests, rather, The Kandidate uses the equipment in a manner that the software-manufacturers did not foresee or intend (Barlindhaug, 2007, p.80).

Hand Drawn

A flyer ("Flyer," 2012) announcing the release of *The Imminent Prospect of Death*, described the connection between the cover art and the music as follows: "The album's wrapper perfectly evokes the somber desperation in facing the imminent prospect of death." This was seconded shortly after by Bredahl in an interview: "we wanted to make a record that not only sounded this way, but also looked like such a record" (Villumsen, 2012, translation mine). Transferring Bredahl's opinion about copy/paste music to the visual aspect, it would seem that copy/pasted art work is just as sickening to him.

Tattooist Uncle Allan created the cover and text book without turning to digital processing (no use of Photoshop or the like), but by drawing and painting with Indian ink, coffee and chlorine ("Cover in the Making," 2011). The finished pages were then scanned for production. The cranium is an intertextual reference to the characteristic style of Pushead, as seen for example on Metallica's EP *One* (1988), a style that defined metal T-shirt aesthetics in the late 1980s.

The coffin is a well-known theme in cover art: The Kandidates first album portrayed a coffin as well, and the coffin that confines the cranium on *Facing the Imminent Prospect of Death* is close to the one found on another Metallica record, *Death Magnetic* (2008). In other words, the cover suggests a clear (wanted) relation to the translocal narrative of the big thrash tradition and community where skulls and coffins serve as common gothic-conservative denominators for "metal."

It is worthwhile noting that this relation does not come without a certain distancing irony. The Kandidate's cranium launches a grim laughter at the viewer as if the chlorine-white beams were the laughing Death coming at you. This art work practice might be seen as employing nostalgia in its reflective form, as Boym (2001) has it, "this type of nostalgic narrative is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary. Nostalgics of [this] type are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance" (p.50). The notion of irony is even clearer in Norwegian band Kverlertak's Pushead-inspired design on their EP *Mjød* (2010) in shades of green: the skull that replaces the half-naked young woman's head wears a bonnet. The distance at play here allows the musicians to project new narratives of the past into the future, and renegotiate what it means to be hardcore today.

Conclusion

The Kandidate invests in their music as well as discursively an in-your-face attitude with harsh and raw recordings, hand held musical instruments and hand drawn cover art. That the musicians can play it, and the artist can paint it, are markers of the non-fake. The desired intensity and experiences of modern life as being all fucked up, is produced through a predilection for metal sounds from before the era of digital production coupled with a mistrust in digital production formats that reduces digital software to a tape recorder. Simultaneously, The Kandidate enjoys the obvious technical and economic advantages of digital recording and production, which is less time-consuming. And this, of course, facilitates the practice of "doing a song" in one day and mixing it within an hour.

To be continued... (in Helsinki)

At the Modern Heavy Metal conference in Helsinki, I will develop the issue of intensity brought up only superficially in this article. I will discuss aspects of the lyrics of *Facing the Imminent Prospect of Death*, of which only fragments are printed in the text book. I ask whether this secrecy point to a primacy of vocal materiality or vocal excess to convey the intense affective experience in the songs. I engage with Roman Jakobson's (1997) concept of the poetic function of language, Michelle Phillipov's (2012) and others' study on growling and metal vocals, and notably Rosemary Overell's (2010, 2014) study of affective intensities in the metal scene.

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Interview material

Interview with Jacob Bredahl and KB (Kasper Boye Larsen) from The Candidate (band), at the *Copenhell* festival, Copenhagen, Denmark, 14 June, 2014; recording format: mp3; duration: 27 minutes.

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