

Retro influences in the digital age: From the circus to early cinema, the visual identity of the band Avatar

Elise Girard-Despraulex

As stated by Nick Prior, technological innovations, such as MTV and music videos, merely intensified the music industry's mass mediation process (2012: 74). As technology became more available as a means for artistic expression, musicians had to adapt to the possibilities it offered, as doing so could lead to financial gain. Although the technology impact on the music industry could be explored in depth, this article will focus on the importance that the aesthetic aspect through multiple media has gained for several bands, by considering how the band Avatar uses retro aesthetics as a part of an identity that makes them recognizable.

Avatar is a metal band from Sweden that was formed in 2001. They released three albums before 2011, when a change in their line-up occurred. The band members have been the same ever since, and Avatar released five albums between 2012–2020. The release of *Black Waltz* in 2012 is important when studying the consistency and coherence of the band's identity, as it marks the creation of the Clown, a character embodied by singer Johannes Eckerström wearing face paint.

The idea of a recognizable identity primarily draws on the ethnomusicological notion of the singular signature of artistic performance, as theorized by Monique Desroches. Desroches (2008) used the term to describe how the Krik-krak storytellers in the Creole-speaking area of the Caribbean put their signature on the stories they narrated by choosing which elements of storytelling they use, what parts of the story to tell and by their interpretation of a story (Desroches 2008: 114). In *Quand la musique prend corps*, Desroches developed the idea of the body as a musical signature; even when artists are part of a cultural identity and tradition, they can still develop their own identity and singularity (2014). Thus, the recognizable identity of a metal band, specifically Avatar, is the elements that make the band recognizable while perpetrating artistic traditions—in this case, artistic traditions from popular arts.

Avatar develops their visual identity by using retro influences in a modern way. However, what are these artistic heritages from retro popular arts, and how do they contribute to creating the band's identity?

Following the work of Sabrina Sielke, this article distinguishes between 'retro' and 'nostalgia' because 'there is no nostalgia without retro, yet plenty of retro without nostalgia; for retro works, and more importantly it sells, without nostalgia' (Sielke 8). Nostalgia, therefore, is a culturally and individually constructed affect that depends on retro. Retro will be used to talk about aesthetics and the constructed elements that are linked to an artistic heritage.

I - The circus

In Avatar's aesthetic, the influence of visual elements from the circus began with the album *Black Waltz* in 2012. These elements are evident in the album cover, where the previously mentioned character of the Clown appears above an admission ticket with cut edges, as if inviting the listener into the album. The back cover depicts a dark red curtain, such as indicates the end of the show or, here, the end of the album.

On stage, the singer takes on the role of frontman, a part inspired by circus ringmasters, introducing the different 'acts' of the show by presenting the songs. This role also inspires the costumes he wears. The influence of the circus can also be found in the aesthetics of other elements of scenography, notably the illuminated sign depicting the band's name. This sign appears in the music video *Black Waltz*, as well as on stage during concerts, where it is positioned behind the drummer—a reminder of the signs used on the street to attract spectators. The sign also participates in the forging of the band's identity by being associated with on-stage performances in the same way, for example, that specific stage lighting may be associated with a song.

Another visual element worth noting is the appearance chosen for the merchandise stand—a circus wagon with visible wheels. The stand is painted red, decorated with molded wood, and has a luminous sign. Although merchandise stands are always present during concerts, it is rare for them to be this elaborate. Alongside this stand is the Wheel of Death, which fans can spin to try to win something. The Wheel of Death is also featured on one of the band's shirts. The name comes from a device used in acrobatic circuses, but it can also refer to the rotating target to which the person assisting the knife thrower is generally attached.

By selecting visual elements reminiscent of the circus, Avatar creates an identity based on a retro aesthetic. The goal is to prolong the spectator's phantasmagoria by extending the band's aesthetics to a visual presence—a substitute for the tangible presence of the band itself. Together, the image and the music contribute to an illusionist desire. Thus, not only does the merchandise stand's appearance attract fans' attention, but it takes the scenography, which is generally restricted to the concert hall, outside. It stimulates spectators, invites them into Avatar's world before the concert begins, and keeps them in it after the concert ends.

II - The 'made freaks' from freakshows

The circus is not the only performance that influences Avatar's aesthetic. In an interview, the singer said that the idea for the album "Black Waltz" came to them while observing the artists of the Hellzapoppin Circus Sideshow (Salmeron), a modern travelling troupe that mixes circus arts and freakshows. The performers from Hellzapoppin Circus Sideshow can be seen in the Black Waltz music video, and they were also the opening act of the Black Waltz tour. To better understand how Avatar uses the legacy of the freakshow, it is important to distinguish between exclusionary versus inclusionary legacies. The band uses the term 'freakshow' in an inclusive, empowering way, claiming the word 'freak' as a means of self-identification rather than as an insult, and claiming the artistic legacy of 'made freaks' and novelty acts.

The first meaning of 'freakshow' referred to the exhibitions, which were common until the middle of the 20th century, of humans and sometimes animals with characteristics extraordinary enough to shock the public. These non-standard bodies were often presented to the public as anomalies, and the exploited people were deemed 'inferior' because of their difference. It should be remembered that freakshows sometimes exhibited people of different ethnicities, and are the predecessors of what would later be called 'human zoos' (Sánchez-Gómez 21). The ethnic shows in the Western countries were related to the presentation of 'exotic' human beings and the displaying of the colonizing countries' power (Sánchez-Gómez 10), and contrary to freakshows, were mostly rooted in racism. Ethnic shows and freakshows were associated with ableism, and sometimes with racism and misogyny. They were exploitative and, in most cases, dehumanizing the participants.

The second legacy of the freakshow is to be understood in an inclusive way, such as can be seen in the 1932 movie *Freaks* by Tod Browning. In addition to the positive representation and humanization of characters with disabilities (Towson 25), the display of community amongst those rejected by society is linked to the inclusive heritage that Avatar reclaims. According to Bogdan (3), society builds freaks, whether or not this social construction is initially based on physical differences. Historically, because they were rejected by the larger community while being accepted by the community they had built, freakshows were based more on the relationships between the performers than on their physical particularities (Hill 2005, xi.). The stigma that the participants were victims of prevented them from finding a place outside of the freakshows, but the community of so-called freaks they were a part of allowed them to be accepted.

Fordham (211) distinguishes different categories within freakshows. The 'gaffed freaks' are fake acts. People born with disabilities were often called 'born freaks'. The 'made freaks' are those whom Fordham defines as the people who, through actions such as tattooing their bodies, can shock the public. Finally, the novelty acts are people who perform unusual and impressive acts, such as sword swallowing. In this sense, Avatar uses the legacy of the 'made freaks' as a way to reclaim the creation of an inclusive community, while the Hellzapoppin Circus Sideshow also reclaims the legacy of the novelty acts.

It is necessary to recall the differences between the ethnic shows and the different types of freakshows to underline that Avatar uses the legacy of made freaks when referencing freakshows, especially because bands like Avatar advocate for social justice, tolerance, and ecology. The influence of freakshows is in no way related to racism or ableism. The made freaks, as a retro aesthetic, are the people who, by their physique, attitude, or performances feel different but decide to embrace it. The key element of this empowerment is the relative choice they have in the matter.

To a lesser extent, claiming the feeling of ‘otherness’ can be linked to the genre of metal, within which distinctive external signs of belonging to the community are used by metal enthusiasts (Roccor), and sometimes lead to voluntary stigmatization. Choosing a distinguishable aesthetic and creating a sense of belonging within a group allow recognition among members of this community.

III - The early and silent cinema (1880s–1920s)

In its early days, cinema was a popular form of entertainment for the working class, even if historians nowadays tend to demonstrate that it rapidly appealed to all social classes in the United States (Montebello 114). In the United States, nickelodeons, the early motion-picture theatres, were popular among the working class, particularly immigrants, as they were one of the financially affordable leisure activities. Criticisms of the cinematograph, the cinema at its beginnings, were related to its audience and sometimes revealed a certain class contempt. Critics, at the time, have noted the immediate effect of cinema, and early cinema has long been associated with ‘attraction and monstration, [...] both equally “opposed” to narration’ (Strauven 17). In its beginnings, the cinema had ‘more in common with fairground attractions’ (Chapman 58). Cinema later acquired its status as an art by associating with recognized arts, such as literature and theatre, and seeking to disaffiliate itself from its origins linked to street performances.

In the music video *Hail the Apocalypse*, Avatar uses the form of a short film from the silent film era. Johannes interprets an organ grinder, preaching the coming of the Apocalypse. The music is extra-diegetic, but intertitles are used to enhance select lyrics that fit the narrative of the video. The bodily reactions of the characters are exaggerated, which may refer to the burlesque genre. In this genre, the actor’s body is placed at the center of attention, and becomes the vector of all situations on the screen, whether accidents or prowess filmed in a spectacular way. For most actors in silent films, make-up was used to enhance facial expressions, just as Johannes does with the character of the Clown. The acting during the silent movie era was designed for the sturdy cameras (Nielsen 88), but it did not prevent changes in scale (Gaudreault).

The singer preaches in the street while rotating the barrel organ crank, and the mechanical movement he conveys is perfectly in sync with the music: quarter note, four sixteenth notes in semitones, repeated. This forms a ritornello, visually represented by Johannes. A longer shot reveals the other band’s members in the organ, in place of the pipes; the luminous sign mentioned previously can also be seen, now shattered in front of the drums. Despite the absence of wires, the band’s members move with jerky and cadenced movements reminiscent of puppets. Whether they are swinging back and forth or turning right and left, the way their movements harmonize with one another and with the downbeats reinforces the song’s rhythm. The singer is despised by the two workers who share the frame with him—one even hitting him—and by the wealthier couple with whom he never shares the frame but who throws a projectile at him from off-screen. Despite his excessive attitude—as evidenced by the few extreme close-ups of his face, which disrupt the continuity by taking on the role of inserts—the predictions written on the sign he holds are accurate. Busy mocking him, the other characters realize too late that the apocalypse he is announcing is about to happen.

Conclusion

Avatar’s interest in cinema, freakshows and the circus is related to the retro forms of these arts. Their influence is in the form they were known before the middle of the 20th century. The appeal of these influences can also be seen in the pictorial representations that create a strong aesthetic associated with these arts, from the costumes to the sets. These retro fairground influences, such as in the form of images, drawings, and posters, can feed the imaginations of metal bands. Moreover, the itinerant traditions of many of these artists, which at the time caused them to be marginalized, can in some ways be related to the musicians touring nowadays, perpetuating some aspects of this tradition.

Circus, made freaks, early cinema, and street performances in general represented a moment and a place where wonder and violence mingled, where the beautiful rubbed shoulders with the shocking, and, more precisely, where what was seen as transgressive became attractive. Although some of these genres are being renewed, the notion of obsolescence is important to be able to perceive the influence of these art forms in the creation of an identity inspired by retro aesthetics. While retro aesthetics and nostalgia are two separate concepts, a feeling of nostalgia can be associated with retro aesthetics.

During the pandemic, Avatar performed four different concerts in a month, each representing a period of the band's existence, with songs from two to three albums played at each concert. The concerts were recorded and could be watched online. The band members' on-stage presence could be felt, while the lighting and the few staging elements used served as reminders of their identity. The costumes and the luminous sign, mentioned earlier, were featured in the Covid virtual concerts as part of the band's aesthetic. The choice to make all four concerts available to the public for less than 30 euros was remarkable and well received by their fans. The Covid concerts made a different concert experience possible; it was a way for the musicians to continue performing for an audience.

However, the experience was different from that of a traditional concert. Just as the energy from the band members' shared movements was transmitted through the screen in the 'Hail the Apocalypse' video, in the virtual concerts, spectators could see the movement, but they could not feel it. The prerequisite for spectators' phantasmagoria mentioned in the first part of this article was linked to their physical presence in the concert hall. However, the Covid concerts could not recreate the experience of a live show, especially in a genre that prides itself on a sense of belonging within a group. The creation of environmental continuity for the spectator cannot be recreated digitally, no matter what technological prowess can do. For a band whose singular identity signature is the retro aesthetic, the Covid concerts transformed concerts into nostalgic events—nostalgia for previous periods, as represented by the four different shows, but also nostalgia for a time before Covid, when a concert could be a shared experience, a moment when metal fans could come together as a group. This possible nostalgia is linked with a live experience that cannot be replicated digitally, with songs that have been and will be played less and less often in live shows, and with upcoming albums.

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