

OPTICAL DISILLUSION

by Justin M. Norton

Gorgoroth

Black Mass Kraków 2004
Metal Mind



Four crucified models onstage. Their heads covered with black hoods; their wrists wrapped with rope. Sheep's heads on spikes. A barrier lined with barbed wire and countless gallons of sheep's blood. And a group of musicians that look like they jumped out of Clive Barker's transgressive fantasies. These are a few of the visuals from Gorgoroth's now notorious *Black Mass* concert shot in Kraków, Poland in February 2004 and finally available on DVD via Metal Mind Productions. The roughly one-hour concert is perhaps the most talked about metal show of the new millennium — not because of Gorgoroth's workmanlike performance, but because the band was threatened with two years in a Polish jail cell for the over-the-top Satanic visuals. The DVD includes the full show in 5.1 surround sound and while the features are slim (grainy video footage from a 2000 show in Leipzig, a band biography and a few extras) black metal fans are likely to check it out because they've heard so much about the show during the past four years.

Why did a concert attended by a few hundred Polish metal fans attract so much attention when members of Norway's black metal scene have done far worse things (murder and arson, for example) than stage risqué show? Part of it was the disproportionate amount of mainstream news coverage the show received in a staunchly Catholic country. News of the *Black Mass* show was released via newswire, television and newspaper. An Associated Press story distributed worldwide noted that "Polish prosecutors were investigating whether a Norwegian heavy metal band's concert, which featured crucified live models covered in blood, offended religious feelings." Authorities told reporters that they were analyzing recordings of the concert and song lyrics before considering charges (which may have been difficult, considering that Gorgoroth has never printed a single song lyric and actively discourages fans from posting interpretations).

Inflammatory headlines were more common than measured reporting: Norwegian daily *Aftenposten* noted that "Norwegian black metal band Gorgoroth staged a special concert that made Janet Jackson's breast-baring look like nursery school antics and left Catholic Poland outraged." One distressed onlooker said that some people taping the show were "terrified."

While the concert probably helped Gorgoroth's sales figures, it made their life difficult in almost every other conceivable

fashion. Police considered charges of cruelty to animals and offending religious beliefs. The band was dropped from Nuclear Blast (although they quickly resigned with Regain). And while black metal bands are generally greeted with derision by the uninitiated, the show turned Gorgoroth into a strange hybrid of celebrities/social pariahs; this status was cemented even further when Gaahl and Infernus served jail time for more serious offenses several years later. Gorgoroth escaped criminal charges for the concert but the promoter was eventually fined almost \$5,000 for not telling the band that their concert would break Polish law. The footage ended up locked up until recently. But the show was inevitably a publicity bonanza for Gorgoroth, so much that the controversy is being used to market the DVD.

Just how offensive is the show? Well, if you are a Sunday school regular or an evangelical it's likely to scare the living shit out of you. Then again, if Gorgoroth is a regular part of your playlist you likely don't fall into either of those categories. Gorgoroth certainly knows how to get the outside world to sit up and pay attention: Staging a concert with pentagrams serving as a backdrop to crucified models with copious bovine blood flow is going to ruffle more than a few feathers in the country that produced the last Pope. Considering the amount of stories generated it's a safe bet frontman Gaahl and bassist King Ov Hell could open up their own public relations firm when they've finally hung up the spiked armbands and put away the corpse paint.

The Kraków performance, however, won't faze anyone who has attended a metal show in recent years, in part because metal fans have seen elements of the show in other performances. Mayhem has used pig and sheep heads during their show for years. A Mayhem fan was even hospitalized with a fractured skull and sued after they were hit by an errant sheep head; the one casualty of Gorgoroth's Kraków show was a model that fainted onstage. Watain is known to fashion microphone stands out of road kill bones and perform drenched in blood. Deicide tossed animal innards on crowds in their early years. And onetime Mayhem vocalist Dead sniffed a decomposing bird stuffed in a jar before a performance to get ready for shows; his grisly suicide photo was later featured on the Mayhem bootleg *Dawn Of The Black Hearts*.

So while the Kraków concert may have caused an outcry, far



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more aberrant practices and behaviors have taken place within the black metal scene. What made the concert stand out more than other black metal shows was the fact that it was recorded by a Polish state television station and seen by people who were almost guaranteed to be pissed. The Kraków performance is efficient and powerful at times and Gaahl in particular gives a bordering on possessed performance; he dispenses entirely with between song-banter and pleasantries and screams with unrivaled fervor during "Procreating Satan" and "Destroyer." I've never seen Gorgoroth live and considering the band's legal issues, chances are they won't be visiting America any time soon. So at the very least the DVD will allow Stateside fans to see their live show. But the main reason this video has attracted so much attention becomes secondary and almost inconsequential after you watch the DVD for more than five minutes.

In Norway, the DVD was ranked fourth countrywide upon its release — an anomaly for a band while is still far from any sort of mainstream renown. So a four-year-old controversy hasn't died down. But what might be the interesting part of the show is that it's probably the last time you will see Gaahl, King and band founder Infernus together, unless they are in court fighting over who owns the name Gorgoroth. [metal-mind.com.pl]

