

Mattia Merlini

How to Create a 'Second of Structured Chaos'

Meshuggah's *Catch 33* and the Representation of Paradox

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Years before djent music became a relatively popular musical phenomenon, the Swedish extreme metal band Meshuggah ('crazy' in Yiddish, Capuzzo 2018: 121) put the typical stylistic traits of the genre under the spotlight for the first time, with a style notably featuring the supremacy of minor second intervals and distorted eight-string guitars, a ridiculous amount of odd time signatures and polyrhythms, beastly vocals and a continuous process of thwarting the listener's expectations. These features were exploited in a very interesting way in Meshuggah's 2005 classic album called *Catch 33*, possibly the most meaningful instance of intertwining between djent stylistic features and semantic level of the music. The reason of this claim lies behind choice of paradox as the main theme of *Catch 33* as a concept album.

Before starting the exploration of some of the paradoxical aspects of the album, let me briefly present the segmentation on which my whole analysis is based. The album features one forty-eight-minutes long suite divided into thirteen movements. Within it, it is possible to detect three 'ambient' sections taking place approximately once every fifteen minutes, thus dividing the song into three sections of almost identical length. Actually, a similar segmentation has been proposed by Oriol Nieto (2013: 4), but my version differs from his for one crucial point: the movement 'Mind's Mirror' and the experimental codas of 'In Death – Is Death' and 'Sum', all mainly featuring moody and minimal dissonant clean guitar sounds, work in my vision as actual bridges linking the three main sections, instead of being included in the sections themselves. This allows me to further underline the symmetries that can be

found in the album structure and to give a common discrete function to sections that are so outstandingly different from the rest of the album, yet so alike one to the others. A further specification has to be made about the presence of some sub-sections, particularly within section A. There, two main riffs, employing very different playing techniques, are distinguishable, thus dividing section A into at least two more sub-sections. Furthermore, the long movement 'In Death - Is Death' from section B could be divided into several sub-sections as well, as it features a variety of riffs, and also 'Sum', from section C could be divided into three parts. Actually, every single movement in section C could be considered as a sub-section, as each one is very different from the others and is sometimes even separated from them by a brief pause.

So, *Catch 33* is as a concept album about paradox, employing contradictory elements on many levels. Let me introduce some structural and extra-musical aspects first.

1. It is an album *and* a single song at the same time – but it is also thirteen different more or less self-sufficient songs simultaneously (and, at least in my interpretation, three sections with several sub-sections). The structure is all but unequivocal and can change depending on what aspect you choose to highlight, yet the segmentation I proposed shows how the ambient sections emphasize the symmetries present in the album as an ordering principle, in opposition to the labyrinthine fragmentation of the suite.
2. The creative process behind the album started from tracking the drums, which were actually programmed by all the band members together remotely, in a completely digitalized context afforded by the employment of the software 'EzDrummer' by Toon-track. The parts for the remaining instruments were added later, over such basic (and structural) compositional work (Smialek 2008: 61n, 98), thus challenging the contradiction (typical of most metal music) between 'authentic' performative ability and the reliance on tools typical of electronic music programming.

3. The strong presence of rationality and calculation in the music is contradicted by a compositional process that – according to the authors (Alex Dysphoria 2008) – is actually very intuitive. But how can calculation convive with intuition (Smialek 2008)?
4. The complex and somewhat serious and cryptical music played by Meshuggah contradicts the dense layer of irony that often surrounds it. I am thinking of the grotesque ‘Meshuggah Face’, or of the music video for ‘New Millennium Cyanide Christ’, in which the band plays air guitars and drums in the tour bus, while singing in a pen.

Things become even more evident as we move on to the lyrical aspect of *Catch 33*:

1. The album’s title is a reference to the idea of *Catch 22*, taken from the eponymous novel by Joseph Heller (1961). In this novel, paragraph 22 of the regulation entrusted to some WWII bomber pilots puts them in a situation of apparent choice, a paradox from which the characters of the book cannot escape. As the expression ‘catch twenty-two’ proves, this idea is now associated with something like a vicious circle and in general with a paradoxical situation from which it is not possible to evade.
2. The reason why Meshuggah turned 22 into 33 is hard to determine, but maybe such a transformation was necessary in order to turn the even (22) into odd (33), as often happens in the rhythmically complex music played by the band. Nevertheless, this adds to the recipe a new dichotomy between two irreconcilable opposites.
3. Frequent oxymorons can be found among the lines of the album’s lyrics – perfectly in line with the desire, expressed by the band’s lyricist and drummer Tomas Haake, of writing ‘abstract’ lyrics that remain open to interpretation (Smialek 2008: 72).

Non-physical smothering. Asphyxiation by oxygen hands (‘The Paradoxical Spiral’).

Mute and blinded, is to really see (‘Mind’s Mirrors’).

I float through physical thoughts. I stare down the abyss of organic dreams (‘Shed’).

Its semantics rid of logic. Nothing is all. All is contradiction (from ‘Dehumanization’).

So imminently visible – this cloaked innocent guilt | Sentenced to a lifetime, a second of structured chaos (from ‘In Death – Is Life’).

Meshuggah's music might indeed be described just as that 'second of structured chaos': it is the result of an incessant dialectical process between *chaos* and *kosmos* – disorder and order – that is even possible to state in the most seminal material of the music, which is basically a destabilizing mixture of order and disorder, of symmetry and asymmetry, of bewilderment which a single constant – and almost hypnotic – rhythmic element tries to fight back, taking on the role of a primary and very simple ordering principle for a multiplicity of remarkably complex fragments.

In order to better understand what I mean by this, we must start analysing some music. Let me start with some general examples explaining how Meshuggah's music is usually structured – and which are its 'paradoxical factors'. The band's mature style does not simply employ polyrhythmic structures, but also tends to evade the natural convergence of the multiple time signatures via metric variations which anticipate or postpone it according to repetitive patterns, which are, at a first listening experience, basically unpredictable. Typically, rhythmic guitar, bass and kick drum play a riff in odd time signature, while lead guitar and cymbals – but sometimes also the snare – perpetuate a 4/4 hypermetre, which in turn constitutes a hyperbar made of four hyperbeats, usually coincident with a larger repetitive pattern at the core of the whole song or at least a section of it. Guy Capuzzo (2018) describes it as the opposition between the 'metric standard' and the 'deviant riff'. Jonathan Pieslak (2007: 220-223) uses a paradigmatic example from the album *Nothing* – the album in which this process is developed in a complete way for the first time – to explain the process. Yet the same procedure can also be spotted at the very beginning of *Catch 33* (in the movement 'Autonomy Lost'), as soon as the riff at the core of most of the suite's section A kicks in.

Here, the 5/8 metre that takes the place of the 9/8 allows a premature realignment of the two parallel metres (4/4 and 9/8). When this happens, the whole hyperbar is then repeated. If we consider each bar following the hypermetre in 4/4 as an hyperbeat, we will have a hyperbar in 4/4 that coincides with the entire pattern, which in fact repeats itself over

and over again in the first minutes of 'Catch 33'. This allows Meshuggah to put some order in the chaotic micro-structure of the song, by creating repetitive patterns and also maintaining a constant 4/4 pulsation – held by the cymbals and, in this case like in many others, by the lead guitar that plays its dissonant melodic line in tremolo picking. This makes it easier to immerse ourselves in music, as it acts as a hypnotic reference point for the listener, as well as for the headbanger (Nieto 2013: 9-10). A similar procedure (though not necessarily implying polyrhythms) is also highlighted by Gregory McCandless' analyses (2010, 2013) of Dream Theater's music. He names such a process 'Additive Metrical Process ABAC' (AB and AC are, briefly said, two metrically varied versions of the same riff). He also compares it (2013) to processes typical of minimalist composers like Steve Reich and Philip Glass, who surely had a great influence on Meshuggah – probably mediated by King Crimson's albums from the 1980s. Thus, the Swedish band seems to desperately want to build its own *kosmos* (first of all in the sense of 'order') starting from an original matter born under the sign of *chaos* (disorder), in an on-going dialectical process that flows into a music that has to be conflictual, restless and oppressive.

Now I would like to briefly bring to your attention some 'paradoxical' musical solutions featured in the album. Each macro-section of the piece, in facts, is a sort of musical essay about the *kosmos/chaos* dialectic, every one of which is developed in very different ways. Section A features the typical Meshuggah polyrhythmic process from the very beginning, but something more happens, as well: the initial riff is repeated throughout the first three movements and from time to time it is slightly changed by a process of minimalist variation that shifts the polyrhythmic structure and changes the perceived accent within the rhythmic cell, until the riff is permanently incardinated into a 5/8 metre, leading to the end of the section. So, the very destabilizing minimalist variation acts as the chaotic factor, while the ordering factor is the quantitative reduction of the material to the very minimum: a handful of notes and a single rhythmic cell. The opposite should be said of the following movements

off Section A, where the new riff features a less predictable and metrically more diversified structure: at the beginning of 'The Paradoxical Spiral', for instance, versions of the riff in 5/4, 6/4, 7/4, 6/4, 8/4 can be heard. It uses more discrete pitches, but it is exclusively based on eighth notes followed by a single note of variable duration (depending on the metre). There are less complex polyrhythmic overlaps, without any phasing that changes the basic structure of the riff; on the contrary, there are some segments where all the instruments actually play in 4/4 or 6/4. Since the riff's metre and that of the cymbals share a common denominator, one often has the sensation that rhythm guitar, bass and drums all play in the same metre, and the only element that sounds more evidently superimposed is the guitar that actually goes on portraying its dissonant 4/4 tremolo picking melody. So, here rhythm is generally simpler, with not many odd time signatures and with a reduced feeling of poly-rhythmicity; yet the alternating time signatures (and so the actual lengths of the last notes of the riff's various versions) do not seem to follow any predictable pattern, and also the notes that are present in the riff do not always appear in the same order, although their intervals usually have something to do with the minor second.

Section B is by far the most chaotic section. But if we try to reduce everything to the simplest form, we can state that section B basically consists of five riffs, three of which are presented in the movement named 'In Death - Is Death' and mutated throughout the same segment. In this way, it is possible to divide section B according to the *aba-cdced'b'c'cd* riff sequence (where the *aba* string represents the movement 'In Death – Is Life'). But the most paradoxical elements lie within the single riffs. Some examples: riff *a* appears in 'In Death - Is Life' and consists of a highly unpredictable pattern based on the usual polyrhythmic structure by Meshuggah. The detailed analysis of this riff, carried out by Eric Smialek (2008: 54-56), allows us to identify six small recurrent rhythmic cells, which are blended together following a specific logic, in order to form the pattern at the core of the metamorphic riff. Smialek shows that the interpolation of those small musemes (Tagg 2012) produces peculiar

effects from time to time (e.g. anacrusis, interruption), playing with the listener's expectations. This time, the dichotomy is that opposing calculation to randomness. Although some ordering groupings can be made (Smialek 2008: 60-63), there is apparently no strict rule governing the concatenation of the musemes into bigger patterns. Nevertheless, the possibility of reducing the whole chaotic section to a handful of minimal cells is another *kosmos*-promoting agent acting in *Catch 33*. Riff *c* appears at the beginning of 'In Death - Is Death' and features cymbals and snare in 4/4, while all the other instruments follow a constant 21/16 metre with a fixed rhythmic pattern, but with variable pitches in the guitar line. The chaotic factor, here, is the apparent unpredictability of the notes that are played. But again, Smialek (2008: 63-71) has brilliantly managed to identify six recurrent patterns, the last three of which are the inversion of the previous three. The peculiarity of these patterns is that they are identified by Smialek by observing the shapes that have to be performed on the guitar fretboard in the concrete act of playing the riff. Only in this way it is possible to conceive three of the patterns as the inverse (at the level of the required movements on the fretboard) of the other three and to discover the sequence of patterns 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 5, 4, 3, 1, 4, 6 within the riff. That is: the three main patterns, then their inverses, then the inverses in retrograde order, culminating with a different triad of patterns that thwarts the listener's expectations. Riff *c'*, which appears later, is based on this same riff, but is played with a sort of jazzy feeling, which produces an entirely unique micro-section, meaningfully located at the exact centre of the album. One of the most recognisable riffs off the suite's second section is riff *d*, in which the high complexity of the pattern's metre (six bars in 21/16 + one additional eighth to balance everything and restart) is compensated by the absolute reduction of pitches to one (of course the lowest to be reached on the instruments) and by the unison playing of all the instruments, resulting in an odd yet regular and very effective wall of sound. If the main dichotomy featured in section A involved repetition and difference, here it involves calculation and randomness. The profusion of ideas and variations can be mapped back

into more or less definite schemes, in which even thwarting the listener's expectation is part of the ongoing balancing process acting within the *chaos/kosmos* dialectic.

Section C is apparently even more dispersive, since it is made of four quite heterogeneous sub-sections and in almost every case they are separated from each other by short breaks. The ordering factors are two here: the recurrence of elements and the structures of the movements. The main riff from 'Shed', for instance, returns in the middle of 'Dehumanization' and shortly after the start of 'Sum' and also recalls the very first riff of the album; but also the main melodic contour already featured in section A returns several times in section C (for instance in 'Personae Non Gratae'). These elements are among the most recognizable of the entire album, as they are also very simple and resemble material from Section A. As for the structure of the movements, it is more alike to that of a traditional song, an impression that is also reinforced by the presence of the aforementioned pauses separating most songs. This makes section C a sort of collection of small, diversified but simpler songs.

When talking about Meshuggah, it is hard to understand what is deliberate and what is not, what is serious and what is ironic, what is calculated and what is random. Yet I suppose that this brief analysis has proven how much the idea of paradox pervades the album way beyond its concept, to the point where it becomes the driving force for the structures we can find within the music, incarnated in an on-going struggle for balance that is typical of Meshuggah's most common compositional process and which involves two opposite forces that I metaphysically named *kosmos* and *chaos* here, but can be concretely found in myriads of compositional choices that aim at unsettling the listener without totally alienating him/her. Every part of *Catch 33*, on every level, portrays the battle between the two forces in different ways and, by doing so, delivers to the listener an album that will probably be remembered amongst the most important albums for the development of the djent style, maybe also because it was able to justify its stylistic peculiarities on a conceptual level.

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