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COMD Theory Paper #1



KMFDM are a German Industrial band known for its hardcore political lyrical content and their rock-inspired pulsing beats. Often credited with introducing the masses to Industrial music, the band quickly became known for their intense artwork that perfectly matches the sound. Enter Aidan Hughes, otherwise known as 'BRUTE!', who is responsible for all but two of KMFDM's album covers. Hughes himself has credited Futurism and Constructivism as inspiration for his jarring and striking work.

The band's 1997 album, known as "SYMBOLS" (with the album title consisting of five symbols that have no meaning), is arguably the most well known album cover of KMFDM's discography. Unfortunately, this isn't exactly for a good reason, as it's hard to talk about this album's popularity without acknowledging its connection to the Columbine shooting. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were huge fans of the band, and this album in particular caught the attention of the media due to the song "Stray Bullet".

The idea for the album title, which is technically not meant to represent anything, was something that lead member Sascha Konietzko had wanted to do for a while. However, he and other members of the band have pointed out that the idea can be traced to comic books using symbols to censor curse words. If we take it a step further, we can even trace the idea of symbols replacing letters and words back to hieroglyphics, but more recently to Lupton and Miller's essay "Modern Hieroglyphics" and the idea behind Isotype. Now, since the album title doesn't actually represent any words, it's hard to exactly say what they were going for in terms of a title- but we can look at the symbols and what they mean in our society, and the society at the time.

The five symbols chosen for the title- an explosion, a skull and crossbones, a bomb, a spiral, and a pounding fist- all have violent connotations. Explosions and bombs can represent destruction. A pounding fist can represent the threat or even the action of violence. Spirals have often been used in cartoons and comics to replace eyes for characters when they are dazed and confused. The most striking is the skull and crossbones- an obvious reference to death. While the idea behind symbols as an album title could have been random, two things remain the same; the symbols are always the same and in the same order, and the symbols they chose stick to the violent, pounding, and controversial lyrical content of the music.

The artwork for the album sleeve also fits into the aesthetic ideas of the band. Group photos of the band seem to be taken in front of a cold, metal backdrop. The band wear outfits that are outlandish, with large goggles and flamboyant, almost superhero-like costumes. The main spread of the album sleeve is a large image of multiple TV screens, some show images of the band members while others show bleak images of screaming mouths and mock ups of pill bottles. The introduction to Rodchenko's Manifesto says "His distinctive style of geometric letterforms, flat color, diagonal composition, angled photography, and striking photomontage helped give visual voice to constructivism", and I think that definitely shows in the album sleeve, in both the photography and the lyric sheets. It's worth noting that, for the album sleeve, Hughes worked with Karen Moskowitz, Philip Richardson, and Justin Gammon, with other outside help.

The album cover shows a woman violently striking a man. The motion of her hand is heavily implied by the use of linework in the composition. The visual representation of motion is actually a big part of Futurist work, and can be attributed to their obsession with going full-speed

ahead into the future (“We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed”). With its striking color palette and razor sharp design, the cover contributes to the violence and chaos of the album content- and maybe in hindsight, the album cover design also represented and is attributed to the violence and chaos that the music was unfairly accredited to.

SYMBOLS’ cover is violence in motion, whereas KMFDM is violence in sound. The album artwork is entangled with the album content when it comes to KMFDM and for good reason- Hughes can create compositions that capture and materialize the pounding and chaotic sounds of the band. It doesn’t surprise me that the morals and ideas of the band correlate to the morals and ideas of movements like constructivism and futurism, and how the music and art have become inseparable due to how each element compliments each other. Perhaps when Manetti said “We want to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and rashness”, KMFDM took it literally.

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