

RITUAL, TRANSGRESSION & THE SYMBOLISM OF EVIL:  
NORWEGIAN BLACK METAL 1991-1994

Thesis

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### Prefatory Note

This paper contains language, opinions, and descriptions of events that many people may find offensive, traumatic, or distasteful. The author would like to make clear that he does not condone many of the actions or opinions of the musicians discussed, and in many cases, he finds them totally abhorrent. At the same time, the author does not believe in a universal code of ethics or aesthetics, and thus does not feel comfortable condemning anyone on moral grounds, especially in the arena of an academic thesis.



*Me miserable! Which way shall I fly  
 Infinite wrath and infinite despair?  
 Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;  
 And in the lowest deep a lower deep,  
 Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide,  
 To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n.  
 -John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IV*

### Introduction

From 1992-95 a now-infamous wave of church arson terrorized Norway.<sup>1</sup> This vandalism, along with several murders and other acts of violence, was perpetrated by a relatively small, yet intensely devoted group of musicians performing a style of extreme music known as “black metal.” What would cause young people living in relative prosperity, in one of the least violent, most homogeneous nations in the world to adopt such extreme music and behavior? Black metal, and the extra-musical behavior of its creators, can be framed as a reaction against the stifling repression endemic to living in bourgeois capitalist society. By consciously breaking taboos and confronting the extremes of human existence through their music and lifestyle, the early Norwegian black metal musicians opened possibilities for thinking about alternative modes of living and different structures of human society. Black metal, through the symbolism of religious transgression, ultimately aims to confront secular society and recapture an immediacy of being, bridging the gap formed by the Christian-capitalist alienation of humanity from nature and asserting primordial chaos in its place.

A large part of the attraction to black metal is the extremity and “passion” its creators display in their approach to life and music. The famous Charlie Parker quote, “If

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Moynihan, Didrik Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of The Satanic Metal Underground*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Feral House, 2003), 83.

you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn,"<sup>2</sup> comes to mind when searching for a simple answer to explain the appeal of this music. Its creators not only endeavor to create music through exploiting extremities of volume, noise, timbre, speed, etc., but attempt to live (or at least to appear) in opposition to mainstream western society as much as possible. Only in more recent years has black metal come to be created by musicians not totally committed to the subculture. It is a testament to the power of this music that it has garnered interest outside its exclusive, underground scene despite the myriad controversies surrounding some of the most influential musicians' statements and actions.

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2 As quoted in: Robert George Reisner. *Bird: the legend of Charlie Parker*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 27.

## I. Background

A problem in dealing with much contemporary music is that traditional methods of musical analysis and theoretical tools are completely ineffectual in discussion. This is especially true with music stemming from very specific subcultures which often place themselves in direct opposition to mainstream society and culture (e.g. gangster rap, hardcore punk, or various strains of “experimental” music). Extreme metal is a difficult case, as it can only be discussed on its own terms (which requires a great deal of contextualization), or in negative terms relating to tradition and mainstream culture. We are beyond the point of the usefulness in describing how extreme or experimental music is “different” from mainstream culture, and thus must resort to an attempt at contextualization. In many ways, discursive analysis of extreme metal is anathema to the project of its creators, who seek to undermine rationalism, moderation, and, ultimately, modernity itself.<sup>3</sup> The language of transgression, as examined by Foucault<sup>4</sup> becomes useful where the dialectic fails. The truth of the matter, I believe, is that black metal must be experienced to be understood, and that an intellectual comprehension of this music and culture is impossible without “going into the sweat lodge,” so to speak. Nevertheless, a brief attempt at contextualization must be made.<sup>5</sup>

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3 cf. Benjamin Hedge Olson. *I Am The Black Wizards: Multiplicity, Mysticism and Identity in Black Metal Music and Culture*. (Thesis. Bowling Green State University, 2008), 26.

4 Michel Foucault. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U Press, 1977), 29-52.

5 This contextualizing ritual has been performed several times, more admirably and thoroughly than I have here, by other authors, most notably Moynihan and Søderlind, *Lords of Chaos*, and Olson, *I Am The Black Wizards*.



## The Black Circle

The term “black metal” was introduced in the 1980's and referred to a group of mostly unaffiliated artists performing extreme music (music of extreme volume, speed, and violence intended to shock or overwhelm; created for a relatively small, but devoted “underground” of the heavy metal subculture), grouped together mostly by shared influences and a strong tendency toward satanic, or otherwise mystically “evil” themes in their lyrics and image. This “first wave”<sup>6</sup> of black metal is commonly understood to include the groups Venom, Mercyful Fate, Hellhammer/Celtic Frost, and Bathory, as well as some of the more extreme thrash metal groups of the 1980's whose lyrics were primarily concerned with satanic themes. These groups referred to Satan mostly for shock value, attempting to capitalize on the controversies surrounding the (often imagined) occult leanings of earlier groups such as KISS and Led Zeppelin.<sup>7</sup>

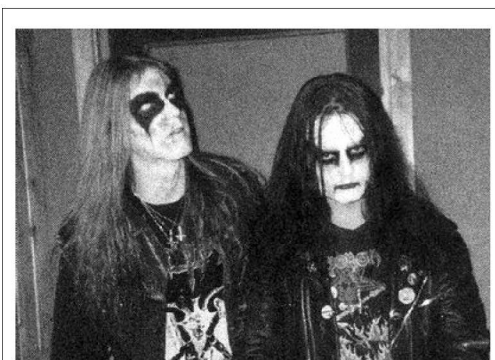
The “second wave” of black metal, which centered around a group of Norwegian musicians including Mayhem, Burzum, Darkthrone, Emperor, Immortal, Thorns, and a host of other groups (often sharing musicians between them), displayed a hitherto unseen extremity and unconventionality in their music, visual and performance styles, ideologies, and lifestyles. Black metal is often refreshingly heterogeneous and open in its musical elements, though most groups do possess certain common characteristics.

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6 Patterson makes the important argument that the now commonly referred to division between the “first” and “second” waves of black metal is misleading. A natural evolution can be traced internationally from Venom to Darkthrone, “and it was simply the sudden success, notoriety, and proliferation of bands in the early nineties that created the appearance of an entirely new scene. Norway’s Mayhem-the band at the center of much of this explosion-formed in the mid-eighties, a fact highlighting some of the confusion at work.”  
Dayal Patterson. *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult*. (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2013), 58. Nevertheless, the terms “first” and “second wave black metal” will be used in this discussion as a matter of convenience.

7 Moynihan, Söderlind, 16.

Originally (and still today, according to some purists<sup>8</sup>), the term black metal strictly applied to heavy metal groups who were active satanists, though some of the key groups in the early second wave, such as Immortal and Enslaved, do not employ satanic lyrics. The term has since come to define a (somewhat loose) set of musical and thematic aesthetics including a musical focus on atmosphere, brutality, extremes, openness to experimentation (within certain strictures), and a thematic focus on nihilism, misanthropy, depression, individualism, anti-Christianity (and organized religion in general), Satan, the occult, nature, and atavistic paganism. More specifically, black metal is often characterized by very dense electric guitar-based textures (“walls of sound”), rapid tempos, with the drums frequently employing double-bass pedals and “blast beats,” high-pitched, usually unintelligible, “shrieking” vocals (which can be contrasted with death metal's low, guttural “growling”), with singers often employing a variety of extended techniques, usually in an attempt to sound “inhuman,”<sup>9</sup> unconventional, often through-composed or highly repetitive formal structures, and a tendency to employ



*Illustration 1: Dead (left) and Euronymous of Mayhem, wearing corpse paint.*

extended orchestration such as synthesis or folk instruments native to the region of a group's origin. All of these characteristics can be found in the music of the early Norwegian musicians.

The beginnings of the explosion of Norwegian black metal can be linked to the circumstances surrounding the suicide of

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- 8 e.g. Infernus of Gorgoroth, "Gorgoroth: In honour of Satan." Interview by Jeff Maki. Live-Metal.net. 18 July 2006. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.
- 9 Mayhem and Sunn O))) vocalist Attila Csihar is perhaps the most virtuosic and accomplished black metal vocalist in terms of technique.



Mayhem's vocalist, Per Yngve Ohlin, who went by the pseudonym "Dead." Dead is often credited with pushing the nascent black metal subculture into some its most extreme tendencies. He had severe depression and mental illness, with Mayhem's guitarist and central figure in the Norwegian scene Øystein Aarseth (known by the pseudonym "Euronymous") once remarking: "I honestly think Dead is mentally insane. (He knows I am writing this!) Which other way can you describe a guy who does not eat, in order to get starving wounds?"<sup>10</sup> Dead is cited as the first black metal musician to wear "corpse paint"<sup>11</sup>, and is also noted to have engaged in other bizarre behavior as part of his performance ritual, including burying his stage clothes for several days before a concert so that they would begin to rot, carrying a dead crow in a plastic bag for an entire Mayhem tour, which he would sniff before going onstage to "perform with the stench of death in his nostrils,"<sup>12</sup> and cutting himself onstage to study "how people react when [his] blood [was] streaming everywhere."<sup>13</sup> On April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1991, Dead committed suicide while alone in the house he shared with band-mates Euronymous and Jan Axel Blomberg (Mayhem's drummer, who goes by the pseudonym "Hellhammer"<sup>14</sup>), using a shotgun owned by the house-mates, possibly with ammunition that had been given to the group by Varg<sup>15</sup> Vikernes (who, early in his career, used the pseudonym "Count Grishnackh,"<sup>16</sup> and

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10 "Morbid Magazine No. 8: Euronymous interview." Interview. TheTrueMayhem.com. 9 Mar. 2009. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

11 Black and white face paint designed to make its wearer look corpse-like or demonic. Corpse paint has become a universally recognized symbol of black metal.

12 Campion, Chris. "In The Face Of Death." The Guardian. 20 Feb. 2005. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

13 Quoted in Moynihan, Söderlind, back cover.

14 In reference to the highly influential Swiss band of the same name, who metamorphosed into the legendary Celtic Frost, discussed below.

15 Vikernes' birth name is, ironically, Kristian. "Varg" is the old Norse word for "wolf."

16 A reference to an orc from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings*, seemingly chosen only for the sound of the name, as the orc in question is not a very inspiring figure by any metric. "Burzum," by the way, is also a Tolkien reference. "Burzum" means "darkness" in the black speech of Mordor. This love of fantasy literature is important to understanding Vikernes' character and bizarre, unsettling ideology.

now lives in rural France, having legally changed his name to Louis Cachet) of Burzum as a gift the previous Christmas.<sup>17</sup>

Dead's body was discovered by Euronymous, who, before calling the police, rearranged the scene and took several photographs,<sup>18</sup> one of which would later be used as the cover for Mayhem's 1995 album *Dawn of the Black Hearts*.<sup>19</sup> Euronymous exploited Dead's suicide "in order to cultivate a further mystique of catastrophe surrounding the band."<sup>20</sup> He also kept parts of Dead's skull and fashioned them into necklaces which he distributed to several musicians within the scene.<sup>21</sup> Euronymous was "oddly inspired"<sup>22</sup> by Dead's suicide, and many claim that the event changed him and the Norwegian scene a great deal, pushing the extra-musical thoughts and actions of its participants into escalating extremities.<sup>23</sup>

Euronymous "almost single-handedly founded"<sup>24</sup> the Norwegian black metal scene through his opening of the record shop Helvete<sup>25</sup> in Oslo, and his creation of the record label Deathlike Silence Productions, based at the shop. In his history of Swedish death metal, Ekeroth sums up the effect that Euronymous, aided by the publicity his exploitation of Dead's suicide provided, had on the Norwegian metal community through his new business ventures:

Within just a few months [of Helvete opening], many young musicians had become obsessed with Euronymous and his ideas, and soon a lot of Norwegian

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17 Moynihan, Söderlind, 62.

18 Ibid., 49.

19 The album features live recordings from 1990, while Dead was still with the band.

20 Moynihan, Söderlind, 59.

21 Ibid., 59.

22 Ibid., 63.

23 *Once Upon A Time In Norway*. Dir. Pål Aasdal and Martin Ledang. Grenzeløs Productions, 2007. DVD.

24 Moynihan, Söderlind, 119.

25 Norwegian for "Hell."

death metal bands transformed into black metal bands. Amputation became Immortal, Thou Shalt Suffer turned into Emperor, and Darkthrone swapped their Swedish-inspired death metal for primitive black metal. Most notoriously, Old Funeral's guitar player Varg Vikernes had already left the band to form his own creation, Burzum.<sup>26</sup>

At various points, Euronymous, Vikernes, Tomas Haugen (“Samoth,” guitarist of Emperor), and Bård Guldvik Eithun (“Faust,” drummer of Emperor), lived in the shop.<sup>27</sup> Most of the musicians in the Norwegian scene congregated there, and it was, from its inception, the central hub of the community. Euronymous invented the name “Black Circle,” for the people who gathered at the shop.<sup>28</sup> Sensationalist media reports made this “black metal inner circle” out to be an organized, cult-like entity, but it was essentially “just a name that was invented for the people who hung around the shop ... there wasn't anything like members and membership cards and official meetings.”<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of black metal ideology, and the one thread that seems to link nearly all black metal musicians, despite the massive gamut of political and philosophical views of its creators, is a bitter opposition to Christianity and modern secular Christian society. The most famous events in black metal history, and the key impetus for black metal's worldwide notoriety, are the arson attacks on at least 44 Christian churches in Norway between the years 1992-1995, of which, in every solved case, black metal musicians or fans were found to be the culprits.<sup>30</sup> The first successful arson was the burning of the Fantoft stave

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26 Ekeroth, Daniel. *Swedish Death Metal*. Brooklyn, NY: Bazillion Points, 2011., 247.

27 *Until The Light Takes Us*

28 Ibid.

29 Faust, quoted in Moynihan, Söderlind, 68.

30 Moynihan, Söderlind, 106.



church in Bergen (originally built in 1150 AD and considered to be a national treasure) on June 6, 1992.<sup>31</sup> Varg Vikernes is strongly suspected to be the culprit, and used a photograph (it is suspected that he took the photo himself) of the burnt church as the cover for the Burzum EP *Aske*,<sup>32</sup> but was not prosecuted for *this* arson. The idea for these acts of terrorism seem to have originated with Vikernes, and he takes a great deal of pride in the arson attacks, while simultaneously denying culpability (he was convicted for 3 burnings, but it is generally accepted that he personally took part in many more, as well as inspiring probably *all* of the attacks through example and public statements). Euronymous, and several of the members of Emperor and Thorns are also confirmed to have taken part in the attacks, and it is likely that musicians from other bands did as well, though not convicted.<sup>33</sup>

In Lillehammer on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1992, Faust murdered Magne Andreassen, a gay



*Illustration 2: A macabre fan-made faux tour poster for Vikernes' project Burzum, listing the locations and dates of arson attacks as mock "tour dates."*

man who had apparently propositioned him while walking home at night.<sup>34</sup> Faust is equivocal about whether or not the murder was motivated by homophobia, but claims that the identity of the victim was irrelevant to him. When asked if he had

31 Ibid., 82.

32 "Aske" is Norwegian for "ashes."

33 Moynihan, Søderlind, chapter 6.

34 Ibid., 111.

any remorse for the killing, Faust replied: “No... I have to stand up for what I've done and do my time. There's no remorse. I took his life and I paid for it. It's not a big deal, at least not in my opinion.”<sup>35</sup> Faust claims the murder “had to happen,”<sup>36</sup> and seems to view the event with a genuine attitude of total nihilistic fatalism. The day after the murder, Faust returned to Oslo and burned down the Holmenkollen Chapel with Euronymous and Vikernes.<sup>37</sup> In 1994, Faust was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment for the murder, which he confessed to, despite not being suspected by the police.<sup>38</sup>

In January 1993, Euronymous and Vikernes arranged for Vikernes to give a now famous anonymous interview with *Bergens Tidende*, one of Norway's most widely circulated newspapers, apparently in an effort to increase record sales and attract customers to Helvete. In the interview, Vikernes, on behalf of the black metal community, claimed responsibility for the church fires as well as alluding to an unspecified murder (that of Andreassen). In the interview, Vikernes claims that black metalers are Devil worshipers and states: “Our intention is to spread fear and evil ... that is why we are telling this to Bergens Tidende.” This article was black metal's first interaction with mass media, and was seminal in spreading the musicians' fame and infamy. Before the interview was printed, Vikernes had already been arrested in suspicion of connection to the church fires, however, he was released after 6 weeks due to lack of evidence. After the article was printed,

Euronymous decided to shut down Helvete, as it was drawing attention from the

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35 Ibid., 114.

36 Ibid., 115.

37 Ibid., 117.

38 Ibid., 116.

police and media, and, according to Vikernes, due to pressure from Euronymous' parents, who had helped fund the shop.<sup>39</sup>

Early in 1993, for reasons that are still unclear, “bad blood” arose between Vikernes and Euronymous.<sup>40</sup> On August 10, 1993, Vikernes and Snorre Ruch (who uses the pseudonym “Blackthorn;” guitarist of Thorns, who had also joined Mayhem shortly before Euronymous' death), drove from Bergen to Euronymous' house in Oslo. There Vikernes stabbed Euronymous to death. In court, the murder was judged to be premeditated. The motivation for the murder is still a matter of speculation. Vikernes claims, to this day, that the killing was in self-defense, and that Euronymous had planned to kidnap and torture Vikernes to death, but this claim is disputed by nearly everyone connected to the two men. The potential motivations put forth are many: the conflict arose from a financial dispute over money owed to Vikernes from Deathlike Silence's release of the first two Burzum albums, it was the result of a “power struggle” (Vikernes being jealous of Euronymous' centrality in the scene), an attempt to “outdo” Faust's murder (if this was the aim, it succeeded: Vikernes is now probably the most famous [and definitely the most notorious] black metal musician in the world), or even that Vikernes murdered him because Euronymous was a communist. In May of 1994, Vikernes was sentenced to Norway's maximum prison sentence of 21 years for the murder of Euronymous, the arson of four churches, and the possession of 150kg of explosives.<sup>41</sup>

The rest, as they say, is history.

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39 Ibid., 95-97.

40 Ibid., 117.

41 Ibid., Chapter 7.



## Precursors

If one delves deep enough, the roots of Norwegian black metal (like most other musical traditions) can be uncovered as far back in music history as one would like. It is tempting to begin a discussion of the history of black metal with Wagner's treatment of Norse paganism in the *Ring* cycle, or with the legends surrounding Robert Johnson's pact with Satan (as many historians of this music indeed do<sup>42</sup>), but it is more constructive to keep analysis of the historical roots of this movement within the strictures of the “heavy metal” tradition. Even then, although it must be acknowledged that Black Sabbath, in addition to laying the sonic groundwork for heavy metal, also created the thematic foundation on which a vast majority of metal music builds (with respect to black metal, the themes of Satan, death, war, and the occult are of particular relevance), it is not particularly useful to dwell too long on such an obvious influence. Indeed, once it is accepted that Black Sabbath is the foundational influence for *all* contemporary heavy metal (essentially without exception), it becomes more useful to deal with increasingly specific and direct influences. In tracing the musical and thematic genesis of Norwegian black metal, three musical groups<sup>43</sup> stand above the myriad of influences in their contributions to the scene: Venom, Hellhammer/Celtic Frost, and, most importantly,

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42 cf. Patterson, 1.; Moynihan, Söderlind, 21.

43 This is contentious and subjective. Different histories include or omit certain groups from the proto-black metal pantheon. Motörhead was incredibly influential both for Venom, and on the second wave black metal bands themselves, and I would be remiss if I didn't mention Mercyful Fate and its leader King Diamond as highly influential to the visual style of black metal (in particular the use of “corpse paint”) and the fact that King Diamond was publicly a serious, committed satanist. Also of note are many of the more extreme thrash metal bands, particularly Germany's Sodom, Los Angeles' Slayer, and the Bay Area's Possessed, though it could be argued that these groups' influence on death metal is just as strong as their influence on black metal.

Bathory.

Venom, formed in Newcastle, England in 1979,<sup>44</sup> in addition to being highly influential on all forms of “extreme” metal (e.g. thrash, death, doom, and black metal) and hardcore punk, are perhaps most notable in this discussion for providing the name of the style of music under examination with their 1982 album entitled *Black Metal*. Venom publicly referred to their music as “black metal” as a way to set their extreme music apart from that of other groups, and to avoid being associated with any particular style of heavy metal music.<sup>45</sup> The early work of Venom, particularly their first two albums *Welcome to Hell* (1981) and *Black Metal* (1982) were revolutionary in their emphasis on relentless speed, heavy distortion, guttural, shouted vocals, and aggression. There is very little subtlety in the music of Venom, and their ability to create music of such immediate, obvious power, without much traditional technical facility, opened up a path to musical expression for many young musicians. The lo-fi quality of Venom's early work proved to be influential on many musicians, not only because its success (musically, if not entirely financially) provided them the liberty to create and release music without being self-conscious of a paucity of resources or lack of polish, but the abrasive and cacophonous qualities that the rough recording methods amplified came to be actively desired and sought out by the early second wave black metal musicians.<sup>46</sup> Also of note is Venom's use of many of the tropes which would become endemic to black metal: overt satanic imagery<sup>47</sup>, and the use of mythically “evil” pseudonyms by the band members (Cronos,

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44 Patterson, *Black Metal*, 6.

45 "Lords of Metal interview with Cronos of Venom." Interview by Ramon Van H. Lords of Metal. Accessed March 22, 2017. <http://www.lordsofmetal.nl>.

46 cf. Varg Vikernes' detailing of his recording process on the first Burzum album; *Until The Light Takes Us*. Dir. Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell. Variance Films, 2009. DVD.

47 e.g. the lyrics to *Possessed* (1985):

Mantas, and Abaddon), being the most obvious examples. Key members of the Norwegian black metal scene were frequently photographed in Venom t-shirts, and Venom memorabilia adorned the walls of the record store Helvete. A quote from Mayhem's bassist Necrobutcher illustrates the enthusiasm felt for the group by much of the scene: "...[Venom] was of course the best thing I'd ever heard; the rawest, the toughest, the coolest, everything- the music, the lyrics- was cooler than anything else at the time."<sup>48</sup> A story related by Varg Vikernes indicates that whether or not someone "liked Venom," could be a deciding factor on their acceptance to the "inner circle" of the cult-like scene.<sup>49</sup> Though Venom's music and ideology is still distant from fully formed black metal, their influence is absolutely undeniable.

Though the members of the band see it differently, I don't find it useful in this narrative to separate the groups Hellhammer and Celtic Frost, as they are comprised of the same musicians and continued without interruption despite a name and concept change. Formed in Nurensdorf, Switzerland in 1981, in many ways Hellhammer picked up where Venom left off. The poor recording quality and primitive sound was, according to leader Tom G. Warrior, the product of limitations on the band in terms of financial support and a general lack of interest in the band's musical aspirations by the public.<sup>50</sup> Influenced primarily by Venom and British punk group Discharge,<sup>51</sup> Hellhammer delved

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I am possessed by all that is evil  
 The death of your God I demand!  
 I spit at the virgin you worship  
 And sit at my lord Satan's left hand.

48 Patterson, *Black Metal*, 6.

49 *About Dead & the Dead*. Varg Vikernes. Youtube. October 21, 2016. Accessed March 22, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yw5Z-e872XA>.

50 Dayal Patterson, *Black Metal*, 40.

51 *Ibid.*, 39.



into more extreme territories. Their music is unrelentingly fast and extremely distorted. Warrior's vocals are notable for their barking, inhuman quality, which provided the foundation for both the soon to be ubiquitous death metal growl, and the sexless, wraithlike shrieking of black metal. Similar to Venom, the lyrics and artwork of Hellhammer dealt primarily with themes of Satan, death, and the occult.

In 1984, disheartened by their lack of critical and commercial success, but still determined, Hellhammer decided to revamp their concept, and formed a detailed plan for a new band by the name of Celtic Frost.<sup>52</sup> Celtic Frost had a different influence on the second wave of black metal than Hellhammer. While black metal is perhaps musically more indebted to Hellhammer's sound, Celtic Frost's focus on conceptual elements, atmosphere, and experimentation with orchestration and form mark them as one of the first groups to influence black metal specifically, rather than extreme metal generally.

Sonically and conceptually, no other band influenced black metal nearly as much as Sweden's Bathory.<sup>53</sup> Bathory's influence can be seen in nearly every element of the black metal milieu, from sounds to thematic concepts, and even logistics.<sup>54</sup> As Moynihan and Söderlind state:

Bathory managed to create the blueprint for Scandinavian Black Metal in all its myriad facets: from frenzied cacophony to orchestrated, melodic bombast; reveling in excesses of medieval Devil worship to thoughtful explorations of

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>53</sup> Named after the Hungarian countess Elizabeth Báthory, who is famous for her 16<sup>th</sup> century atrocities. The name may have also been inspired by the Venom song "Countess Bathory."

<sup>54</sup> Bathory was essentially a "one man band," who never performed live at any point during its 21 year lifespan. The concept of a hermetic, solo recording project is alien to most heavy metal subcultures (and to "popular" music in general, which is generally viewed as a space for social interaction), but is quite common in black metal (e.g. Burzum, Leviathan, Xasthur, Panopticon, etc.). The existence of these projects is an important clue to the analysis of the anti-social and rabidly individualistic nature of black metal, as well as to the side of its schizophrenic personality which can be conceptualized as non-academic avant-garde electronic music. Olson devotes a significant portion of discussion to the complicated interaction and conflict between individuality and group membership in black metal.

ancient Viking heathenism; drawing inspiration from European traditions to deliberately flirting with the iconography of fascism and National Socialism. Bathory's first six albums encapsulated the themes which would stir unprecedented eruptions from the youth of Scandinavia and beyond.<sup>55</sup>

Mirai, leader of Japanese black metal group Sigh (who released their 1993 debut album *Scorn Defeat* on Euronymous' Deathlike Silence Productions label) said of Bathory's influence: "It was Venom who created black metal [but] the prototype of today's black metal was created by Bathory."<sup>56</sup> Formed in 1983 in Vallingby, Sweden, by 17-year old Tomas Börje Forsberg (known iconically by the pseudonym "Quorthon"), Bathory's early work was lo-fi, very fast, heavily distorted, and dealt with primarily Satanic themes. This work was clearly indebted to Venom and Hellhammer, yet there is a distinct feeling of a significant evolutionary step in terms of the extremity and noisiness of the music.

Possibly the most obvious and influential aspect of Bathory's sound, distinct from that of Hellhammer's, is Quorthon's vocal work. Instead of the growling, low frequency singing of Tom G. Warrior, Quorthon's voice is often a shrill, arhythmic screech. Bathory's first

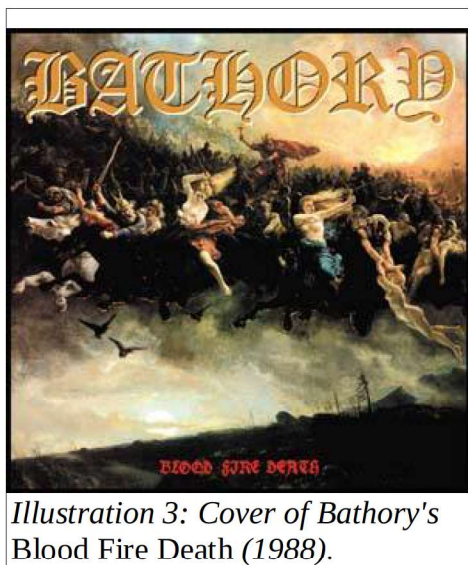


Illustration 3: Cover of Bathory's *Blood Fire Death* (1988).

three albums,<sup>57</sup> in terms of sound, structure, thematic content, and artwork, look and sound much like the first wave of satanic Norwegian recordings, the difference being almost purely a matter of degree rather than content.

1988's *Blood Fire Death*, while for the most part continuing the sound of the early satanic

55 Moynihan, Söderlind, 21.

56 Quoted in Patterson, 25.

57 1984's eponymous debut, *The Return....* (1985), and *Under The Sign Of The Black Mark* (1987).



records, was a harbinger of Bathory's next major conceptual contribution to Nordic black metal. The cover art, instead of dark, "evil" imagery, consists of a romantic painting by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Norwegian artist Peter Nicolai Arbo, depicting the god Odin leading a group of viking warriors and Valkyries on a "wild hunt" across the sky of a battlefield. This signaled a thematic and musical shift toward a focus on Norse paganism and ancient, pre-Christian Norse culture. Quorthon's commentary on the thematic shift and its relation to an anti-Christian ideology parallels that of the Norwegian groups who have come to be referred to as "viking metal" bands,<sup>58</sup> who, while still playing music that is sonically and culturally firmly within the black metal scene, eschew satanic imagery, instead focusing on ancient Norse culture and the natural Scandinavian landscape of dark forests, mountains, fjords, and ice. Burzum's early albums, for instance, contain the normal satanic, evil themes, but as *Vikernes* became increasingly anti-Christian, the place of Satan in his lyrics came to be occupied by Odin, and the transgressive ethics of "evil" came to be replaced by an ethical system inspired by pre-Christian Norse society.

While *Blood Fire Death* is the pivot chord in this thematic modulation, 1990's *Hammerheart* is the authentic cadence in the new key. The pieces on the record are slower, the vocals more anthemic, and the orchestration more varied, featuring traditional Nordic folk instruments, large vocal choruses, synthesizers, sound effects of natural soundscapes, animals, and medieval battle, and acoustic orchestral instruments. The highlight of the record, and probably Bathory's most famous piece, is the closing track, "One Rode To Asa Bay," a 10 minute epic detailing the arrival of Christian missionaries to a small Norse village, and the subsequent forced, violent conversion and exploitation

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58 e.g. Burzum, Immortal, Enslaved, etc.

of the population.

With all the musical elements ready to be employed, and the young Norwegians forming their aesthetic and ideological base at Euronymous' record shop, the explosion of musical creativity, transgression, and violence would truly be sparked by the 1992 release of Darkthrone's classic first black metal album *A Blaze In The Northern Sky*.

## II. The Symbolism of Evil

### Darkthrone

Originally formed in 1986 under the name Black Death, Darkthrone began life as a technical death metal band, and their debut album, 1991's *Soulside Journey*, is an admirable foray in that style. Since 1993, Darkthrone has consisted of Gylve Nagell (who is known by the pseudonym “Fenriz”<sup>59</sup>) and Ted Skjellum (known by the pseudonym “Nocturno Culto”). Shortly after the release of *Soulside Journey*, Darkthrone made a very conscious decision to significantly shift their sound and image to a raw, primitive black metal style.

Though there had been several demos and EP's by Norwegian black metal bands circulating the underground (most notably those of Mayhem), Darkthrone's 1992 record *A Blaze In The Northern Sky* is generally regarded to be the first Norwegian black metal album, and its impact musically and stylistically



*Illustration 4: Cover of Darkthrone's Transilvanian Hunger (1994) album.*

is still pervasive in the worldwide black metal community. Darkthrone's stark, monochromatic album covers featuring the band members in demonic corpse paint have become emblematic of black metal. This style of artwork, which was originally intended to be the band's visual trademark, has since become de rigueur for black metal releases.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> In reference to the monstrous wolf of Norse mythology.

<sup>60</sup> Patterson, chapter 21.

The illustration shows three staves of musical notation for the piece "Unholy Black Metal". The top staff is for Electric Guitar, the middle for Electric Bass, and the bottom for Drum Set. All are in 4/4 time. The guitar part features a series of chords and single notes, primarily using a minor second interval. The bass part follows a similar rhythmic pattern with single notes. The drum set part consists of a highly repetitive, rapid 16th-note pattern, represented by 'x' marks above the staff.

*Illustration 5: "Unholy Black Metal" primary instrumental material*

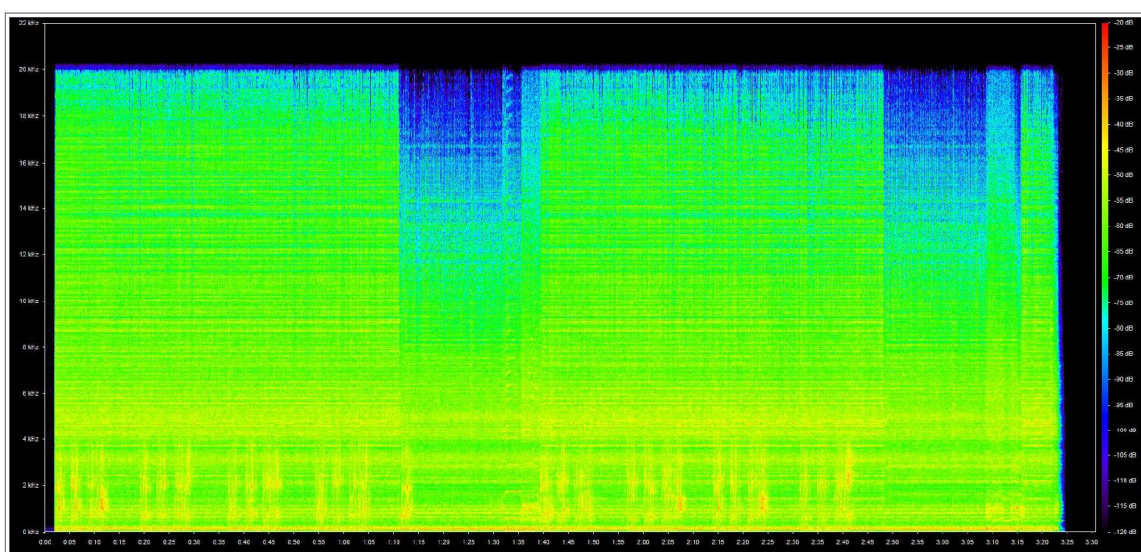
Darkthrone's black metal music is highly repetitive and fairly simple in its use of musical material. The piece "Unholy Black Metal"<sup>61</sup>, for instance, consists of only three riffs, all built around a minor second interval. The material for the verses is illustrated above. The instrumental bridge is constructed of two different minor seconds with a brief noise-based guitar solo,<sup>62</sup> essentially devoid of harmonic or melodic significance. The raspy, shrieking, vocals are for the most part incomprehensible without the aid of the text, though the lyrics are highly symbolic and thoughtful. Everything is heavily distorted, and the vocal track is saturated in a reverberant delay. The drums, which unflinchingly beat extremely rapid 16<sup>th</sup> notes through the duration of the piece, betray the underlying virtuosity of Darkthrone, which they actively attempted to excise from their music when they switched from the highly virtuosic technical death metal of their early work to the raw black metal sound. Black metal, and Darkthrone in particular, seek to strip their music of superfluous virtuosity and traditional recording sensibilities in search of the primeval kernel of pain and catharsis, which they view as the primary attraction of heavy metal, but which is usually reserved to certain "release" sections in other forms of extreme music. In this respect, the virtuosic drumming often present in black metal is

61 From 1993's *Under A Funeral Moon*.

62 Rare for black metal.



more a form of physical violence than an exhibition of skill. Due to the often non-harmonic, uniform texture of black metal compositions, the essence of the music cannot be located through its pitch content or even rhythmic cadences, which are often absent,<sup>63</sup> but in its sound (or perhaps more often, its *noise*) content. In this light it can perhaps be viewed as a form of contemporary electronic music laden with subcultural signifiers.



*Illustration 6: Darkthrone's "Unholy Black Metal" Spectrogram.*

As can be seen from the spectrogram of “Unholy Black Metal,” the piece is essentially an extended blast of loud, compressed noise: an unmitigated, relentless act of cathartic sonic violence. The only significant change in texture can be seen at the two bridges, with the attenuation of some of the higher frequencies due only to a change from the crash cymbal to the ride, still maintaining a constant eighth note pattern. Black metal deals mainly in subtle textural shifts to provide form, with larger, more complicated forms emerging through the length of an album. Tension is the norm, with pieces

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<sup>63</sup> As is the case in much of the music of Burzum, discussed below.

generally starting in full blast and maintaining a constant rhythmic drive with instrumental parts constructed of primarily non-harmonic dissonant or minor intervals (minor seconds and tritones are ubiquitous in black metal). In the case of “Unholy Black Metal,” the bridges are merely a state of heightened tension which only return to the crushing monotony of the verse: “In the lowest deep, a lower deep.” This structural tendency reflects the worldview of black metal: there is no hope and no respite, only strife.

Black metal is for the most part a recording-based style, with a significant portion of its practitioners never performing live, as is the case with Darkthrone. The recordings issued by black metal musicians are not representations or realizations of their compositions (as is the case with nearly all other styles of heavy metal), but the compositions themselves. Thus, the recording quality (or, more precisely, the lack thereof) is intrinsic to the music, and not an affectation. In the case of Darkthrone, the reclusiveness of the musicians and the illegibility and “rawness” of the recordings and their packaging were an attempt to create a mysterious, otherworldly, occult space in search of the abyssal sublime, based on their experience of discovering the rough, dark, recordings of Hellhammer and early Bathory.

Fenriz, who, since the mid-2000's has become one of the most outspoken members of the black metal world, echoes the views of Euronymous on the importance of a theistic belief in the Christian concept of Satan to black metal:

“Certainly the belief in a *real* hell and a *real* devil would be one of the things that pushed black metal to become what it became, and make it worshiped. I think if everyone thought it was really cartoonish...it would have no one *worshipping*, say, a Bathory album. You get a good demonic feeling in a lot of



this stuff. I don't think that, say, a really high-level *atheist* would start off something that would end up coming as black metal, there had to be *something* there.”<sup>64</sup>

While much of the media, and some scholars<sup>65</sup>, take statements like this (and some of the more flamboyant statements by Euronymous, e.g. expounding on a blind belief “in a god creature just like a Christian”<sup>66</sup>) at face value, black metalers generally seem to be more nihilistically atheist in outlook. As discussed above, black metal can be broadly divided into two camps in terms of the use of religious symbolism, though they frequently overlap and intermingle: artists who focus on satanic imagery, and those who deal with pre-Christian pagan themes. Both sets of symbols are used by black metalers in acts of transgression in opposition to the repressive, messianic culture of capitalist social democracy; for them, symbolized by the humanistic cult of Christianity. This is not to say that black metal is inherently political (in fact, it is far from it), but in contemporary society, the existential has become deeply intertwined with the political, especially with regard to praxis.<sup>67</sup>

It is interesting that an ideology which is, perhaps above all else, vocally opposed to organized religion constantly uses religious imagery. The shift to sublime themes reflects a general dissatisfaction with the boring mundanity of contemporary western society and its increasingly secularized institutions, as well as a direct reaction to hardcore punk (with its pretentious, empty political sloganeering) and the American-

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64 Patterson, 199.

65 Olson is insistent on the importance of authentic mystical experience in black metal, devoting an entire chapter to this aspect of the culture.

66 Quoted in Olson, 28.

67 Divorced from an instinctual existence centered purely on subsistence, politics are now concerned with the “ideal” existence. The question of “how to act” in order to survive has been replaced by “how to act” in order to live a “good” life, or, in more reflective or depressed individuals, the question is often “why to act,” whether or not it is necessary or ideal to act at all.

dominated death metal scene.<sup>68</sup> Black metal scorns mundanity, with its practitioners stylizing themselves as dark gods of death and evil. However, the symbolism used by the satanic groups is thoroughly Christian in nature. French protestant philosopher Paul Ricoeur delivers a thoughtful treatise on the nature of evil in Christian iconography in his work *The Symbolism of Evil*. Ricoeur identifies the primal, spontaneously formed, symbols of evil as defilement, sin, and guilt; the three being analogous to stain, deviation, and accusation, respectively, with defilement/stain being the most primordial and leading to sin and, finally, guilt.<sup>69</sup> The symbol of defilement is readily apparent in black metal culture. Using the analogy of the stain, we see it in the very name of the project *Darkthrone*<sup>70</sup>, as well as Darkthrone member's pseudonym *Nocturno Culto*. Defilement and the darkness of the stain are made visible in the application of corpse paint, further accentuated in Darkthrone's iconic high contrast, monochromatic album covers. Corpse paint can be viewed materially, with the applicant staining and defiling their features, or symbolically, as Dead used the paint in an effort to appear as a rotting corpse, an unclean thing.

Examine the lyrics to Darkthrone's piece "Unholy Black Metal":

When the sun has died  
When the angels are blind  
When the fog lies thick  
Over the Palace of god

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68 In *Until The Light Takes Us*, Abbath of Immortal explains that the sublimity of black metal was conceived in direct reaction to Tampa death metal's increasingly mundane image: "These bands called themselves death metal, and there was nothing grim about it, you know? There was just these guys playing in their sneakers and shorts and banging their heads and, okay, playing brutal, cool music, but so fucking what?"

69 Ricoeur, Paul. *The Symbolism of Evil*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.)

70 And Burzum, which, again, means "darkness" in Tolkien's black speech of Mordor.



When the fullmoon lights the earth  
 When the wolves gather in the open  
 When blood rains from the heaven high  
 And from the pearly gates

When Jehovas hordes are slaughtered  
 When disciples twelve are dead  
 When beliefs of easter land  
 Are raped and raped again

When the whore of Babylon rides  
 When pity turns to hate  
 When all sons of Satan  
 Sodomise the lambs of Christ

When the gates have all been opened  
 When the funerals never end  
 When Satan's power paint our hearts  
 And satisfies our souls

When witches burn the priests  
 When the Ancient Ones return  
 When demons ride the nuns  
 With their horns of dark desire

The progression of evil symbolism in the lyrics parallels Ricoeur's order of primacy. The imagery of a fog and blood-stained palace of God strikes at the heart of the ancient, spontaneous symbolism for which Ricoeur reserves the spot of the most basic of evil symbols: defilement. Defilement does not necessitate activity; it is analogous to disease (the blinded angels), the stain (the dark sun), and nature's encroachment on humanity<sup>71</sup> (the wolves return to the open). "Sin," the next symbol, which can be defined as defilement of the sacred, clearly permeates the following verses. The murder, rape, and inversion of Christianity's beliefs and symbols of the sacred are exploited here in an escalation of the symbolism, progressing from subject-less defilement, to active sin: the

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<sup>71</sup> This symbol of evil is interesting in its anthropocentrism. In Christianity, ecology is evil. Christianity is predicated on humanity's exploitation and destruction of the Earth: the line of Cain.

sons of Satan defiling the sacred lambs of Christ. Ricoeur links the symbol of guilt to the concept of the “servile will,” often defined as will held captive by itself; in other words: lust (the “horns of dark desire” satisfying an earthly [atheistic] conception of the soul). Thus guilt must be avoided by resisting one's urges, allowing one to be “free” from the bondage of nature. This exercise of free will in the service of piety is paradoxical in that, while freeing oneself from nature, one places themselves under the impossible interdictions of a vengeful god. It is here that black metal shows its true face by refusing and inverting Christian guilt: The priests are punished by the witches, and the “Ancient Ones,” the “gods” of the natural world, are returned. In this way, as Ricoeur notes, the symbols are circular: by allowing the will to follow its own nature, we are returned to the defilement of the concept of “humanity” as separate from nature: the wolves gather in the open.

The symbol of the wolf deserves a brief discussion, as it appears so frequently and with such significance (in the present discussion, the most obvious examples are the names chosen by Darkthrone's Fenriz and Burzum's Varg Vikernes). Fenriz's name is inspired by the wolf Fenrir, the monstrous child of Loki and the giantess Angrboða.<sup>72</sup> Due to a self-fulfilling prophecy of the danger Fenrir posed to the gods, Odin decided to bind Fenrir for eternity in special fetters meant to be unbreakable. At Ragnarök, the end of all things, Fenrir will break free from his fetters, swallow the sun, and slay Odin in revenge. This “breaking free” is emblematic of the Stirnerian anarchism at the heart of black

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<sup>72</sup> The original sources for this myth can be found in the medieval Icelandic lore compendiums, the “Poetic” and “Prose” *Eddas*.

metal.<sup>73</sup> Shedding the “spooks”<sup>74</sup> of Christian, capitalist ideology and recapturing the immediacy of being in returning music to its unalienated, ritual state is central to the project.

To what end are these symbols used? Why appropriate Christian symbolism? Why try to be “evil”? I've hinted at the aim to undermine the dominant culture and political economy, but why not use dialectic and political rhetoric if this the goal? The answer can be found in the concept of “transgression,” as explored in Foucault's analysis of the philosophical language of Bataille.<sup>75</sup>

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73 cf. Stirner, Max. *The Ego And His Own: The Case of the Individual Against Authority*. Trans. Steven T. Byington. Ed. James J. Martin. New York: Dover Publications, 1973. Print.; & Noys, Benjamin. 'Remain True To The Earth!': Remarks on the Politics of Black Metal. Printed in Masciandaro, Nicola, ed. *Hideous gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium 1*. San Bernardino, CA: Black Metal Theory Symposium, 2014. Print.

74 Stirners term for what Zizek now often labels “pure ideology;” concepts so entrenched in the dominant ideology that they are devoid of self-knowledge.

75 Michel Foucault. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U Press, 1977), 29-52.

### III. Transgression

#### Mayhem

Mayhem was formed in Oslo in 1984 by Euronymous. They experienced several lineup changes due, in many cases, to their position at the center of much of the violence and crime discussed above. Their notoriety stems from the controversy surrounding the lives of its members as much as from their strikingly original and seminal music. They released a highly influential demo tape titled *Pure Fucking Armageddon* in 1986, and a legendary 1987 EP titled *Deathcrush*, but their classic debut album *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas* would not be released until 1994, after the death of Euronymous, and, due to the imprisonment of both Mayhem's bassist and second guitarist (Varg Vikernes and

The illustration shows the musical score for the intro of Mayhem's song "Funeral Fog". It is presented in four systems, each containing staves for Electric Guitar (E.Gtr.), Electric Bass (E.B.), and Drum Set (D.S.). The music is in 4/4 time. The first system features a complex guitar riff with chromatic movement and a driving bass line. The second system continues the guitar riff with a more melodic bass line. The third system shows a change in the guitar part, becoming more rhythmic and chordal, while the bass line remains steady. The fourth system concludes the intro with a final guitar chord and a consistent bass and drum pattern.

*Illustration 7: Mayhem's "Funeral Fog" Intro*

Blackthorn, respectively) for the murder of Euronymous, after the first incarnation of the band ceased to exist. Several years later, drummer Hellhammer reformed Mayhem and



they continue to make music and tour to this day, with many of their more recent releases being highly experimental in nature.

The first track of *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas*, “Funeral Fog,” begins with a lengthy instrumental introduction. In contrast to the pounding non-harmonic repetition of Darkthrone, this section is fairly melodic, progressing through the tonal centers A, G, and F, employing modal interchange to create dissonant melodic cadences. The third system in the above transcription reflects an intervallic language more akin to that of Darkthrone's “Unholy Black Metal,” dealing with the minor second as way to carry the rhythm, rather than a melodic device.

The melodic content of “Funeral Fog,” is referential, treated more as a sound object than an exposition of tonal composition. The melody is referencing the musicians' conceptions of devices used in classic horror film scores: the tension created through major and minor modal interchange and often unresolved chromaticism. The horror soundtrack connection is apropos the theme of “Funeral Fog,” with the lyrics referencing classic horror tropes: detailing the story of a deadly mist in rural Transylvania which annually rises from the cemetery to claim the life of the local priest. Divorced from the lyrical content, the melodic nature of “Funeral Fog” can be viewed as an attempt to create an atavistic, martial atmosphere. In This respect, a parallel can be drawn between Mayhem and the music of American saxophonist Albert Ayler. Ayler sought to create simple, anthemic themes in an attempt to capture the subconscious “rousing” aspect of a melody that feels as though you've known it your whole life, as if it were carved in stone. This was combined with chaotic, cathartic, “energy” playing, with the ultimate goal being

the achievement of a transcendental experience. In parallel fashion, “Funeral Fog's” anthemic introduction segues into a chaotic thrash influenced verse, with vocalist Atilla Csihar issuing arhythmic, tortured gasps of inhuman song.

While “Funeral Fog” may contain a more traditional melodic character than the Darkthrone piece, the violent, unrelenting rhythmic drive is in fact amplified, due in large part to the virtuosity and physical prowess of Mayhem's drummer, Hellhammer, who, through the length of the track performs a non-stop sixteenth note pattern at a very high volume, increasing intensity through the piece by gradually adding more complex 32<sup>nd</sup> note fills, while never dropping the sixteenth notes on the kick drum. Likewise, the guitar parts maintain a constant tremolo, with only the harmonic rhythm shifting.

The frustration of expectations by maintaining intensity and tension through the length of the piece is an act of musical transgression: engaging with, breaking, and defining the limits of traditional musical forms of tension and release. After the introductory section, we are given only the briefest respite in textural change, with the guitar being left alone for a few seconds. We quickly realize that this is not a respite at all, but in fact a signal for a more intense, dense texture than the one that preceded. This aspect of near constant density and intensity again reflects black metal's opposition to more utopian forms of composition. Even extreme death metal deals in the flux of tension and release, if only to make the “brutal” sections more brutal in relation to sections of decreased intensity. Black metal, however, deals only in chaos and strife: “Infinite wrath and infinite despair.”

Euronymous was central to the formation of the black metal ideology which

inspired the transgressive actions and music of its adherents. Conscious transgression is a vital concept to extreme music, and nowhere is it more central than in black metal. Perhaps the most influential theorist in dealing with transgressive art is Michel Foucault, who, in his *Preface to Transgression* examines the work of Georges Bataille and conceptualizes a language of transgression as a “nondialectical form of philosophical language,”<sup>76</sup> a language that is employed where dialectical language fails. Foucault also ventures a definition of transgression as “profanation in a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred.”<sup>77</sup> In this sense, Olson's argument that black metal is primarily occupied with mystical experience, and that the true object of the black metal ideologue's scorn is not, indeed, organized religion, but secular society, and that black metal seeks a more fundamentalist religious institution concerned with sublime wrath, is given credence. This fundamentalist institution is truly a return to the worship of chaos/nature found in the old testament and Norse paganism.

As Foucault notes, to attempt an understanding of transgression, it must be detached from ethics, “liberated from the scandalous or subversive.”<sup>78</sup> The church burnings were symbolic acts, as much a defilement of the sacred symbol of Christianity as a defilement of the sacred symbol of secular society in the churches' role of national landmarks. By engaging the limits of capitalist society, the violent transgression of the limit explodes into the limitless, the sublime. According to Foucault, this is not, however, a triumph over limits, but a clear delineation of the limit and the condition which causes it to arise.

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76 Foucault, 48.

77 Ibid., 30.

78 Ibid., 35.



Transgression “[signals] the void from which it arises and...addresses everything it illuminates and touches.”<sup>79</sup> The violent acts committed by the members of Mayhem, and the violent transgression of their music, is in no sense positive: it asserts nothing and signals nothing other than the absurdity of itself, however, in illuminating both the absurdity of the limit it transgresses and the abyss which surrounds it, it opens the existence of the limitless possibilities and differences in the space it creates. Thus, it illumines different possibilities in the musical, the mystical, the political, and the ethical. In this way, black metal is again turned toward the existential question of humanity's divorce from nature.

This is the true target of black metal's wrath, and the true object of its project. The fundamentalism and atavistic yearning for a return to ancient tradition are in fact a yearning for a return to the immediacy of being. Black metal seeks to return music to its pre-capitalist ritual existence. This drive, and nearly all of the convoluted, paradoxical, and controversial strains of the black metal ideology reach their apotheosis in the music of Varg Vikernes' Burzum.

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79 Ibid., 44.



#### IV. Ritual

##### Burzum

In examining the story of Norwegian black metal, Varg Vikernes is seemingly an ever-present malignant force of nature. His existence and the nature of his personality and biography are enough to almost make a nihilist believe in a cosmic force of evil. At the least, he is the quintessential enfant terrible. In any case, the striking originality and power of Burzum's early music stands above all other black metal to this day, and Burzum's influence on the tradition is perhaps rivaled only by Darkthrone.

To the casual listener, it may be difficult to connect the highly idiosyncratic music of Burzum with that of its more bellicose contemporaries, and, truly, there is no other music in the world which sounds quite like it. This may be due in part to Vikernes' position as somewhat of an outsider in the heavy metal subculture. He lists as primary influences:<sup>80</sup> electronic music (particularly French composer Jean-Michel Jarre), Russian folk music, German marches, underground techno and house music, and, especially, Tchaikovsky.<sup>81</sup> Though untrained, Vikernes' introductions to music were recordings of Romantic composers, and this more “compositional” approach to music is clearly evinced in the nuanced sonic structures of Burzum's early recordings, as well as the bizarre duo of recordings<sup>82</sup> Vikernes released while incarcerated, which are entirely synthesized and consist mostly of general midi orchestral sounds, yet still maintain the same unique compositional logic of their predecessors. Burzum's magnum opus, however, is

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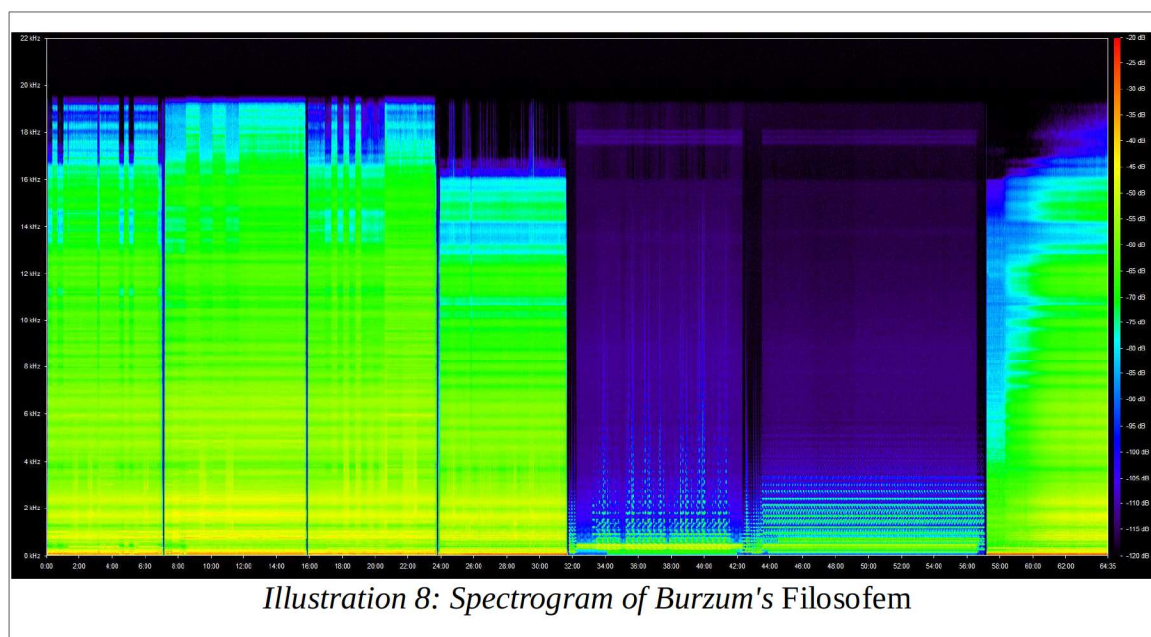
80 Aside from metal groups such as Bathory and Iron Maiden.

81 *Top 10 Non-Metal Albums that influenced Burzum*. Varg Vikernes. Youtube. January 24, 2017. Accessed April 20, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yO-SQsie2eU>.

82 *Daudi Baldrs* (1997) and *Hlidskjalf* (1999).

undoubtedly the album *Filosofem*.<sup>83</sup>

Orchestrationally, *Filosofem* employs the standard core of vocals, guitar, bass, and drums. From the outset, however, it is set apart from its contemporaries in the prominent use of a synthesizer, and, later, processed concrete sounds.<sup>84</sup> The way Vikernes handles the drum kit in *Burzum* is unique in black metal. The latter 5/8ths of *Filosofem* is notable for containing no drums at all, and the former section contains extended passages without drums. Equally remarkably, only *one* track employs the use of double kick pedals to perform a sixteenth note pattern. However, this drum part is not a blast beat due to the fact that the snare plays only on two and four, with the cymbal beating eighth notes. Though this may seem insignificant in the grand scale, it is a major departure from the black metal formula of *Burzum*'s contemporaries, and an indication that Vikernes is one



of the few second wave black metal musicians to draw primarily from Bathory's “viking metal” albums rather than the earlier Satanic releases. Though Vikernes is a skilled

<sup>83</sup> Recorded in 1993, but not released until 1996, due to Vikernes' imprisonment.

<sup>84</sup> Possibly recordings of falling rain, but it is impossible to tell.

drummer, his playing is purposefully metronomic and free of ornamentation and fills

Examining the spectrogram of *Filosofem*, the most striking feature differentiating it from the normal black metal composition (as exemplified by the Darkthrone piece discussed above), is the lengthy section in the latter half, which appears to be a completely different, far less bombastic mix. This section is a repetitive piece of synthesized minimalist “ambient” music. This bold compositional choice is due in large part not only to Vikernes' interest in experimental electronics, but also to his conception of Burzum as trance-inducing ritual music, with the records being conceived of as occult spaces meant to instill a state of non-being in the listener.

Burzum is perhaps the prime example of black metal's aspect of being truly abyssal music. The concept of noise in its most basic definition as interference preventing the reception of a signal, is central to the music of Burzum. The paradox of the artifice and craft put into the creation of black metal music, which is then subverted by purposely obfuscating recording and production techniques, is linked to the paradox of black metal's insistence of the importance of the individual and personal strength, while simultaneously holding intensely nihilistic beliefs and maintaining an insistence of the meaninglessness of existence. By making all the elements involved in the creation and conception of the sound clearly known (printing lyrics in the record jacket, using basic, easily identifiable rock instrumentation) and then obscuring these elements through the massive amount of noise content (incomprehensible, screamed, distorted vocals, extremely heavy guitar and bass distortion, the use of primitive recording equipment, and [in the case of Burzum] processed, unidentifiable sounds), black metal attempts (through artifice) to negate itself.



It is as if the core of the music (the “intended” signal [the illusion of ego]) doesn't exist; it has been usurped by noise (chaos). By asserting the human ego, then symbolically obliterating it, black metal, and especially Burzum, creates ritual music for communing with the “natural” state of ego-less non-existence: the abyss.

Although Vikernes is highly vocal about his controversial<sup>85</sup> political views, he never used Burzum as a medium to express them, and seems to have viewed his music as separate from the political, and instead purely focused on the existential and ritual aspects. The ritual aspect of black metal is, to many, as important as the music. Fenriz relates how the application of corpse paint, the donning of costumes, and engaging in solitary rituals was essential to some in the Norwegian scene to the production of their music: “You fucking dress up...and just, like, walk in a fucking forest. I did that, Varg Vikernes did it. It's part of the deal.”<sup>86</sup> In fact, the tension between the importance of the production of the music itself versus the ritual aspects of the scene has been posited as the central issue in the Vikernes-Euronymous case.<sup>87</sup>

Attali locates the origins of the musician before capital as a sorcerer, a channeler of violence, “whose aim is to make everyone's misfortune tolerable through the derisory designation of a god to sacrifice.”<sup>88</sup> Vikernes has taken on the role of the sorcerer and the scapegoat, the sin-eater. The sin-eating aspect of black metal can be paralleled to some of the practices of the Aghori, an ascetic Shaiva sect who dwell in charnel grounds and have been reported to engage in the ritual consumption of the flesh of human corpses in an

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85 (Insane)

86 *Until The Light Takes Us*, deleted scenes.

87 cf. Interview with sociologist Katrine Fangen; Moynihan, Söderlind, 373.

88 Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA: University of Minnesota, 2014., 2.



effort to engage the impure and strengthen their bodily and spiritual purity. Vikernes, an ascetic himself, seems to have always striven to be reviled not only by the dominant culture (as all of black metal does), but even by his own subculture, seemingly taking the ritual sublimation of hatred, fear, and misanthropy more seriously than the production of his music. Paradoxically, this has resulted in music far more idiosyncratic and groundbreaking than that of his peers.

Above all else, Vikernes reviles capitalist globalization and the alienation of humanity from nature. He currently lives a self-sufficient “survivalist” lifestyle in the rural woodlands of France, having effectively retired from music. Vikernes views the “light” and “good” of Christian ideology as deceptive symbols. He conceives of “darkness” and “evil” as symbolic of the natural world (chaos). Examine the lyrics of “Decrepitude I” from *Filosofem*:

Tears from the eyes so cold, tears from the eyes, in the grass so green.  
As I lie here, the burden is being lifted once and for all, once and for all.  
Beware of the light, it may take you away, to where no evil dwells.  
It will take you away, for all eternity.  
Night is so beautiful (we need her as much as we need Day).

The key line is “Beware of the light, it may take you away, to where no evil dwells.” Here, Vikernes is inverting the idea of evil in the Christian sense in an act of Batailleian transgression. It delineates the limits of Christian ethics, exposing the conditions which caused them to become the dominant ideology. The “evil” in Christian-capitalist society, as stated above, is the encroachment of the chaos of the natural world upon the repressive structures of contemporary society. Vikernes' atavistic paganism and desire for a return to “traditional” values can be viewed (through a sideways glance) as a yearning for a return

to a pre-Christian state of “freedom,” in which the limitless possibilities of the structuring of human society are again opened.

## V. Conclusion

Ultimately, black metal expresses nothing positive in its transgression. Like all nihilistic and anti-humanist philosophies, it is self-negating in nature. As Thomas Ligotti notes, there is no imperative to understand or engage with the reality of meaninglessness and non-existence, only that certain personalities feel compelled to deal with the subject.<sup>89</sup> It is clear, however, that the abyss is omnipresent in the depths of the aberrative human consciousness. Consciousness of the void is the source of all ideology; religious, political, and philosophical. The Norwegian black metal musicians felt a deep inadequacy in the ability of the dominant ideologies to cope with the chaos and strife of existence and sought to violently confront these ideologies. Noting the failure of the language of dialectics in pseudo-revolutionary musical movements such as hardcore punk, black metal resorted to the “language” of transgression. Given the focus on religious symbolism, their target was ultimately not the political, but the existential. However, the nature of transgression is such that it illuminates everything near the limit it transgresses, thus religious transgression opens to the void of limitlessness not only the mystical, but the political. In the end, black metal asserts nothing other than the existence of the void from which it originates. Perhaps the reminder of the existence of this chasm is necessary, however, when living in the constantly oppressive, mutable culture of messianic capitalist salvation.

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<sup>89</sup> Ligotti, Thomas. *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*. New York, NY: Hippocampus Press, 2010. Print.

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CD Track List

1. "Black Metal" by Venom  
*Black Metal* (1982)
2. "The Third of The Storms" by Hellhammer  
*Satanic Rites* (1983)
3. "Hades" by Bathory  
*Bathory* (1984)
4. "One Rode To Asa Bay" by Bathory  
*Hammerheart* (1990)
5. "Unholy Black Metal" by Darkthrone  
*Under A Funeral Moon* (1993)
6. "Funeral Fog" by Mayhem  
*De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas* (1994)
7. "Decrepitude I" by Burzum  
*Filosofem* (1996)